

Simultaneous Fictions:
Reading Form and Attention in the Contemporary Novel

A dissertation submitted by
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in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy
in
English

Tufts University
May 2024

Adviser: John Lurz

ABSTRACT

In a time of shrinking attention spans, of constant distraction, phones with email and Instagram and TikTok in our pockets, how then should a person read? After all, reading seems to presuppose a certain engagement of attention: we need to be focused to really ‘get it,’ and more than that, we value being immersed, being unable to put a book down. In my dissertation, I track how contemporary novels respond to these questions, particularly the transformations of the digital era, internet culture, and anxieties over the widespread distraction they cause. I theorize the genre of ‘simultaneous fictions’—using texts by Ali Smith, Italo Calvino, Namwali Serpell, and Lauren Oyler—to name a body of work that sees overlapping bids for our readerly attention as overwhelming but also productive. Through experiments with spatial narrative form, these novels model ways to see the experience of distraction as one of invigorating simultaneity, a hyperconnection made possible by the technological advances of the internet age. Rather than accepting the widespread assumption that distraction is only ever a purely negative feature of twenty-first century life, I argue that attention is dynamic and simultaneous, an understanding that can generate new ways of thinking about what it means to navigate our highly textual moment. I trace the forms of simultaneous fictions that challenge our current ways of mapping attention, cataloging the shapes of the double helix, kaleidoscope, spiral, and parallel universe in the novels I study. And these formal models extend from the text to the world: I find that simultaneous fictions as a genre position themselves as teachers, privileging the reader as someone who is always present to the fragmentation of the text, someone who can learn to see the textuality inherent in both life and reading anew.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

My first and biggest thanks to John Lurz, my advisor, who provided crucial support to this project at every turn. I am very lucky to have such a supportive mentor and brilliant reader as an advisor: thank you for everything, John. Thanks also to the rest of my committee—Lee Edelman and Ichiro Takayoshi—for their thoughtful engagement and insightful feedback on this project.. Special thanks to my outside reader, Merve Emre, who read and thought about my work with such generosity.

I'm grateful for to have such wonderful friends and colleagues in the Tufts English Department, all of whom made the process of writing a dissertation much more fun: my biggest thanks to Emily Palermo, Nick Solly, Sam Norcross, Lee Nevitt, Charlie Clements, Paul Driskill, Neela Cathelain, and Brandon Wernette. Special thanks to Rebecca Aberle, who provided crucial support and care right when I needed it, and Maggie Boyd of Boston University, who has kept me reading and thinking in community since 2020. More thanks to Omid Bagherli, who read more drafts of these pages than anyone else, for his critical eye and friendship.

Outside of Tufts, I owe major thanks to my family and friends. Abby Pavelko and Emma Sargent provided unparalleled support and encouragement over the last four years, including and especially the pandemic. Thanks to Nicole Wilson and Kelly Williamson for being such steady friends. Thank you to Marcia Everett, one of my best supporters and cheerleaders, for many long conversations that shaped this project. Huge thanks to my siblings—Mike, Kara, and Haley—who all paved the way for a non-graduate student life: let's all be done with advanced degrees for a while. And a very special thanks to Duncan Nyland, who supported me during the worst parts of the writing process and celebrated every little moment along the way. I'll never read Calvino the same way again. Thank you for seeing the vision.

And finally, thank you endlessly to my parents, Scott and Michele, who have believed in me and my writing since my childhood. Your unwavering support and encouragement has made this process—and every other project I've ever embarked on—possible. All my love.

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INTRODUCTION

Simultaneous Fictions: Reading Form and Attention in the Contemporary Novel

“Words are more impalpable than bricks; reading is a longer and more complicated process than seeing.”
– Virginia Woolf, “How Should One Read a Book?”

“Out: narratives, coherence, linearity. In: vibes, atmospheres, simultaneity.” – Kyle Chayka, Twitter.com

In 1996, John Perry Barlow, founding member of the nonprofit Electronic Frontier Foundation (EFF) and former lyricist for The Grateful Dead, wrote his manifesto, “A Declaration of the Independence of Cyberspace.” He begins forcefully: “Governments of the Industrial World, you weary giants of flesh and steel, I come from Cyberspace, the new home of Mind. On behalf of the future, I ask you of the past to leave us alone. You are not welcome among us. You have no sovereignty where we gather.”¹ Barlow’s message, and the message of the EFF, was that the newly created digital world was one where almost anyone could belong, a place where community and politics could be redefined anew. His utopian vision was grounded in the sheer newness and ethereality of the internet: in its nascent stage, anything seemed possible online. The internet appeared, at least to Barlow and the EFF, to be a force that could free people from the determinism of embodied, political existence. Barlow writes that “Cyberspace consists of transactions, relationships, and thought itself, arrayed like a standing wave in the web of our communications. Ours is a world that is both everywhere and nowhere, but it is not where bodies live. We are creating a world that all may enter without privilege or prejudice accorded by race, economic power, military force, or station of birth.” Like other ‘techno-optimists,’ Barlow suggested that going online was a way to escape the ‘real world,’ or at least the world “where bodies live,” an interface that could reinvent ideas of connection and community.

¹ John Perry Barlow, “A Declaration of the Independence of Cyberspace.” <https://www.eff.org/cyberspace-independence>

In 2024, Barlow’s utopian vision of the internet seems at best unrealized, and at worst, naive.² Concepts of connection and community have been entirely redefined in the digital era, but not in the ways Barlow outlined. Cyberspace may still be a relatively unembodied place, but discourse around the internet does not tend to celebrate this sense of separation or disconnect as a good thing. For many people, being online does not seem like the horizon of new forms of community or democracy.³ While the internet may offer an individual a chance to escape from the rigidity of embodied life,⁴ or at least serve as a valuable tool for political organizing, as movements like Black Lives Matter and the Arab Spring show, the mainstream view about our relationships to the internet largely focus on what it has taken from us and what we can get back. I locate this “mainstream view” in the growing, popular genre of technological self-help/intellectual history of the internet which emerged largely in the late 2010s and early 2020s: Catherine Price’s *How to Break Up With Your Phone* (2018), Jenny Odell’s *How to Do Nothing: Resisting the Attention Economy* (2019), Cal Newport’s *Digital Minimalism: Choosing a Focused Life in a Noisy World* (2019), Johann Hari’s *Stolen Focus: Why You Can’t Pay Attention* (2022), or Gloria Mark’s *Attention Span: A Groundbreaking Way to Restore Balance, Happiness, and Productivity* (2023), to name just a few. These books are a dominant response to the way the internet seeps into our daily lives, making them ‘noisy’ and ‘unfocused,’

² As media historian Kate Eichhorn notes, even as early as 2000, Barlow’s utopian vision was critiqued for not considering the racial politics of access to the internet and participation in these revolutionary conversations. Lisa Nakamura’s *Cybertypes: Race, Ethnicity, and the Internet* (2002) makes the argument that, as Eichhorn summarizes, “even with people of color occupying a marginal role online, the internet was already a place where racial identities, divides, and inequalities were being produced and reproduced” (Eichhorn 45).

³ Some of the most glaring examples of how the internet makes community impossible of course have to do with the mechanisms of technological capitalism and companies who utilize users’ data for political and commercial means. For instance, when Cambridge Analytica illegally acquired and sold the data of Facebook users in advance of the 2016 election or the Facebook algorithm increased the spread of anti-Rohingya rhetoric in Myanmar.

⁴ One notable exception to my gloss here is the way the internet has operated as a liberatory space for queer and trans people. Legacy Russell writes in her manifesto *Glitch Feminism* that the “oblique romance of Internet-as-utopia...should not be dismissed as naïve. Imbuing digital material with fantasy is not a retro act of mythologizing; it continues as a survival mechanism. Using the internet to play, perform, explore still has potential. Giving ourselves to this space to experiment perhaps brings us closer to a projection of a sustainable future” (23).

giving readers advice and personal practices to resist these technological advances.⁵ These mainstream internet texts succeed in naming the technocracy of late capitalism as the ‘attention economy,’ a term that points to how companies monetize the attention of internet users.⁶ But these texts only name these conditions, as tech writer Joanne McNeil notes, resulting in “a vacuum of pointed tech criticism about surveillance, data mining, online harassment, and corporate power” since the media “talked about the internet in broad generalities,” concluding that “the supposed answer to any user’s problem was less internet rather than a better internet” (116).⁷

The internet in general and smartphones in particular present users with a never-ending stream of content, information, and text that is taken as dangerously absorptive. The central questions of mainstream internet discourse are easily distilled: what is the internet doing to us and how should we respond? An early account of these questions is Nicholas Carr’s *The Shallows: What the Internet is Doing to Our Brains*, which was published to great fanfare in 2010 and reissued in 2020. Carr’s argument is largely accepted as fact now: the internet makes its users less able to focus and concentrate. Carr laments that “what the Net seems to be doing is chipping away my capacity for concentration and contemplation. Whether I’m online or not, my mind now expects to take in

⁵ While most of the internet self-help books look to individual discipline and self-mastery as ways to deal with the attention economy, I want to note the presence of a wan Marxism in Jenny Odell’s *How to Do Nothing*. Coupled with her following book, *Saving Time: Discovering Life Beyond the Clock* (2023), Odell does suggest that resisting the attention economy is a task best paired with resisting the imperative to be productive and work around the clock, an imperative she does connect to late capitalism.

⁶ While the demands of late capitalism and their effect on novel form are beyond the scope of my project, Anna Kornbluh’s *Immediacy, or, The Style of Too Late Capitalism* (2024) offers one interesting take on how the aesthetic demands of contemporary texts mirror the complexity of what she calls “too late capitalism.” In privileging a lack of mediation and flow, she writes, “the work of art becomes indistinguishable from its installation and the corporeality of its spectators, while the aesthetic experience stretches toward total engagement, mixing miasmatic emanation, everything simultaneously without rest or distinction” (2). While most of the internet self-help books look to individual discipline and self-mastery as ways to deal with the attention economy, I want to note the presence of a wan Marxism in Jenny Odell’s *How to Do Nothing*. Coupled with her following book, *Saving Time: Discovering Life Beyond the Clock* (2023), Odell does suggest that resisting the attention economy is a task best paired with resisting the imperative to be productive and work around the clock, an imperative she does connect to late capitalism.

⁷ “According to the broader media narratives,” McNeil writes, “it was up to us, the users, to shape our own experiences online, even when the choice to opt out became itself a fantasy” (116). This sense of personal discipline resonates with Caleb Smith’s *Thoreau’s Axe: Distraction and Discipline in American Culture*, which considers the disciplinary compulsion to pay attention in 19th century American institutions like churches and prisons.

information the way the Net distributes it: in a swiftly moving stream of particles. Once I was a scuba diver in a sea of words. Now I zip along the surface like a guy on a Jet Ski” (7). In Carr’s hands, the metaphor of shallowness and speed (“zipping along the surface”) is far from Barlow’s “standing wave” of cyberspace, suggesting that the internet is not a place for deep attention or meaningful interaction. For Carr, the very form of the internet—or “the Net”—leads to a widespread sense of distraction. He writes that the internet “wasn’t built by educators to optimize learning. It presents information not in a carefully balanced way but as a concentration-fragmenting mishmash. The Net is, by design, an interruption system, a machine geared for dividing attention” (131). If the manifestos of 1996 asserted the internet’s radical lack of boundaries and hoped for new (and non-governed) communities, the manifestos of the 2020s see the “concentration-fragmenting mishmash” of the internet and in turn implore us to go offline and connect with ourselves and others “in real life.” The internet may still tie people together and make connections, but the early techno-optimism of Barlow has faded into a wider discourse of techno-pessimism, centering on how distracted, alienated, and shallow the internet makes its users, imagining ways they might respond to take their attention back. But resisting the ‘attention economy’ continues to imagine attention as a scant resource, one irrevocably eroded by the internet. These insistent ties between distraction and technology enact a moral panic, indexed by the genre of internet self-help, a genre that imagines not just a personal lack of focus but a deterioration of the entire social (and cultural) order.⁸ As psychoanalyst and writer Adam Phillips contends in *Attention Seeking*, “it is not unusual now for loss of attention to be equated with loss of culture itself...Nor is it unusual to assume that changes in

⁸ See Philip Maciak, *Avidly Reads Screen Time*, for more on this argument. Maciak usefully links the rise of ‘screen time’ as an app on the iPhone to the larger moral panic about screens, which he traces back to an essay called “The Primal Screen,” published in *Mother Jones* in 1991, where Tom Engelhardt coins the term. Maciak writes that the “screen that worried Engelhardt—and the one that shaped our sense of what we, too, should be worrying about—isn’t the screen that most of us spend our time with now. This is key for the feelings that surround screen time: the particular material, creative, and commercial structures of television gave form to an anxiety that attaches, in all sorts of strange ways, to a range of other devices” (11).

habits of attention portend larger changes; and that our morality or civility is somehow bound up in the ways we pay attention: in what we make of our attention, and what we make out of it” (12).

Consider the way smartphones are taken to alienate people who are proximate to each other. One prescient instance of this imagery is the November 27 2023 cover art of *The New Yorker*, a Thanksgiving scene. On the cover, called “Harvest,” cartoonist Chris Ware depicts a crowded table of people in a New York City apartment—a tall window shows the Empire State Building at night—who have clearly just finished their Thanksgiving meal. The table is messy, full of half-empty wine glasses and riddled with crumbs, and the apartment is candlelit and cozy. But what catches the viewer’s eye is not the coziness of this scene. Instead, we notice that each member of the table (presumably a family) has their smartphone in front of them, their faces illuminated by the light of their individual screens. In a *New Yorker* interview with Françoise Mouly about his cover art, Ware talks about how he “can’t ever seem to live in the moment,” and the scene reflects this anxiety. “Harvest” speaks directly to Carr’s worry about the “concentration-fragmenting mishmash” of the digital era, insisting that technology changes not just how we think or read but also how we live in community and how present we are to each other. Notice that it is the logic of the family and the holiday that develop the emotional stakes of this scene, that posit screens as an erosion of community and togetherness. The people in the scene, just like us, are not living in the moment—not being present—because of their phones. After all, the face of each person at the table is bathed by blue light, suggesting that they exist in their own little bubble. They should be talking to each other, or meditatively digesting in silence, maybe even reading a book or *The New Yorker* (in print, of course). Instead, they scroll alone on their phones instead of joining each other in conversation. How sad.

The widespread discourse about the internet and technology as irrevocably splintering our attention grows stale and tends towards moral panic. Whether by distracting us from each other,

reducing our memories into digital photos, shortening our attention spans, or suggesting that technology makes us self-centered, the internet is represented as a force that divides us from each other and from ourselves. The form of the internet is seemingly formless, dispersed through society, and inevitable, with no possible solution to the problem outside of the fantasy of logging off. And the alternatives to digital life and its distractions that writers like Carr present are not just sentimental and unrealistic, but are idealized ‘analog’ experiences like reading, an activity that these technopessimists never understand as an interface with a different mode of technology: the book.⁹ Perhaps an image like “Harvest” seems so tired because Ware has done extremely similar cover art for *The New Yorker* before, on a Thanksgiving 2006 cover, where a similar family forgoes their post-meal togetherness by orienting towards a TV showing a football game, and also on the cover of Halloween 2009, where shadowy faces of adults are illuminated in the dark by their smartphones. Ware’s repetitive interest in technology as socially divisive is not unique to the twenty-first century, but helps us see that anxieties about attention span and social fragmentation are a standard response to new technology, echoed in responses to the emergence of radio, TV, and even the novel.¹⁰ But Ware’s cover art, like the growing genre of internet self-help books, does not invite complex readings and instead seems to demand a single, nostalgic response to life in the digital era: isn’t it a shame that these people aren’t talking to each other? Do you remember when we used to just sit down and talk to each other after a holiday meal? Shouldn’t we try to be more present?

⁹ For more on this, see Leah Price, *What We Talk About When We Talk About Books*. She writes about the debate between reading on the printed page versus e-reader screen, noting that “One constant in the history of books is their power to take new forms, and to prompt new ways of reading as a result...For each of the book’s reinventions has prompted mixed, and strong, feelings. As cheap and portable print sold everywhere and read anytime replaced monumental volumes tethered to particular occasions, a new kind of object became a proxy for a new kind of self” (15). Price insists that reading is more adaptable than Carr’s account would have it: “Instead of tracing changes in reading habits to successive technologies, we can see styles of reading changing in step with the times and places carved out by new infrastructures” (97).

¹⁰ Natalie Phillips usefully discusses the role of distraction in eighteenth century literature and the rise of the novel in her monograph, *Distraction: Problems of Attention in Eighteenth-Century Literature*. In particular, her reading of *Tristram Shandy* provides a useful reframing of attention, as Phillips thinks through the Shandy’s narration as scattered, and, naming this as narrative rhythm, argues that this quality is the novel’s only constant, showing distraction as a key aspect of attention, not its opposite. Adam Phillips echoes a similar reading of *Tristram Shandy* in *Attention Seeking*.

This is the narrative of technological discourse that my project seeks to complicate, from the optimism of the early internet to the pessimism of the smartphone era, an era that suggests that being less focused is the crucial problem of contemporary culture. The central question of my dissertation is how this changing response to the internet—most particularly anxieties about attention—has come to affect the contemporary novel, and how the formal responses of the contemporary novel might in turn offer readers new ways to navigate the constant digital textuality of the contemporary era. I call this digitized textuality “simultaneity” as a way to name the overlapping, concurrent web of texts that confront users at every moment as a condition of the contemporary. I am certainly not the first to consider that, as Kyle Chayka’s October 2023 tweet (and my epigraph) glibly notes, simultaneity is “in,” along with “vibes and atmosphere.” (“Out,” of course, are “narratives, coherence, [and] linearity.”) But I seek to depart from diagnostic accounts of how very “in” these elements are and instead turn to show how the novels in my study offer concrete models of simultaneity through novelistic form. I call these novels ‘simultaneous fictions,’ since these texts respond to the diffuse textuality of the contemporary era by experimenting with forms that draw their readers’ attention to the material of attention itself. The four simultaneous fictions in my study are *How to Be Both* by Ali Smith, *If on a winter’s night a traveler* by Italo Calvino, *Fake Accounts* by Lauren Oyler, and *The Furrows* by Namwali Serpell, all published in the mid 2010s to early 2020s, with the notable exception of *If on a winter’s night a traveler*, published in 1979, which I read as an important anticipation of contemporary questions of digital life, reading, and distraction. As a genre, I find that simultaneous fictions experiment with nonlinearity as a way of reframing conversations about the distraction of the digital era. This nonlinearity does not depend on its readers being able to smooth the novel into linear order but instead draws its readers to see the overlap between life, thought, and reading that has always inflected the way we read. In this way, simultaneous fictions attempt to figure new ways that readers might navigate the multiple streams of

information and texts that make up daily life. And by considering the distractions that deflect reading—that sometimes give reading its purpose and meaning—simultaneous fictions provide a counter to the discourse of attention and distraction in the age of the internet. They show that focus is not the natural, primal mode of the reader, who is estranged from their original state of concentration by the rise of the internet and other sundry technologies, but that distraction is its own form of attention.

Simultaneous fictions point us to see distraction and attention as multiple and overlapping. Adam Phillips writes in *Attention Seeking*, riffing on the hobbyhorses of Lawrence Sterne's *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy, Gentleman*, that “There is a pattern even in our inattentions. Vacancies of attention are absorptions elsewhere, as intense as lusts and pastimes: which may themselves not be quite as different as they may seem. We are not divided from ourselves, but far more a piece than we know” (83). Attention and distraction are co-constitutive, since “vacancies of attention are absorptions elsewhere.” What we term distraction may just be attention to something else: to the past, to a loved one, to the internet, to the existential weight of life itself. Phillips, as a psychoanalyst, is invested in showing how distractions, like dreams, are operations of attention in nonproductive or transgressive directions, and how “individuals define and shape themselves by what they fail or refuse to pay attention to” (75). Attention is, like thought, an act that slides between reading and life. Our attention can make us into the kind of people that we wish to be, as well as expose the ways we can never live up to our own ideas. Simultaneous fictions, too, show reading, an engagement with attention, to be constituted of distraction.

In seeing attention and distraction as simultaneous, the novels in my study refuse both the tired nostalgia of the techno-pessimism and the utopian dreams of techno-optimism. Simultaneous fictions hope to teach their readers to recognize the radical possibility and the negative effects of

distraction as co-constitutive.¹¹ In the end, my project asserts that readerly distraction is not a fragmenting experience, nor is attention a mode that can make you whole. The social anxiety over digital attention and distraction serves as an occasion for simultaneous fictions to rethink dynamics of attention as they pertain to novel reading and structure today. Ultimately, I see simultaneous fictions as in conversation with readers about what reading is for: the formal experiments of this genre are not simply metafiction or experimental games but texts that seek to reframe the very act of reading for readers, foregrounding how reading exceeds and problematizes a linear progression through sentences.

I focus on reading because it is the mode through which we encounter both novels and the proliferating textuality—the content—of the internet.¹² In the contemporary era of what she terms ‘immediacy,’ Anna Kornbluh argues that “surely, the speed of flow of information and the velocity of discretization are making our internal processors run on very different stimuli. With algorithmized consciousness, we click, we uptake. Seeing is reading” (44). There is no digesting, no thinking, no reflecting—no mediation—in Kornbluh’s account of contemporary readers and users. We skim instead of deeply diving into reading. She asserts that “the superhighway acclimatizes perceptual faculties to racing, skimming, browsing, and other quick integrations” (45). But simultaneous fictions offer another way to see the trajectory of the contemporary novel, since their complex forms refuse

¹¹ We can think of the techno-optimism and techno-pessimism as following the lines of Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick’s famous formulation of paranoid and reparative reading in *Touching Feeling*. The paranoid reading of techno-pessimism accounts for what is going on ‘behind the scenes,’ and is, as Sedgwick notes, a dominant methodology: paranoid reading is, in her terms, a strong theory. Thus it is easier to make a case for the internet’s structures as a force that deteriorates the mind of their users, to look suspiciously. On the other hand, techno-optimism may be read as a form of reparative reading, accounting for what it makes possible. This is a much harder case to make, though critics like Legacy Russell and Philip Maciak do make strong arguments for what the digital era makes possible. For my argument, I seek to sidestep these debates by reading for form, and for formal affordances in particular, thinking about what the internet can do well for its user and what it cannot afford. This distinction allows me to examine the internet and discourse about attention without resorting to moral panic or blind affirmation, instead dwelling on the gray areas of these arguments: the internet giveth, and the internet taketh away, all at once.

¹² I explore the breakdown between literature and content in my third chapter, which focuses on *Fake Accounts*. My definition of content comes from Kate Eichhorn’s book *Content*, which defines it as “something that circulates for the sake of circulation” (5). Content is thus Twitter ads, web pages, memes, viral videos, listicles, writing engineered by SEO to appear early on Google’s search algorithms, etc.

immediacy, refuse to conceptualize reading as a straightforward or immediate process of sight. These forms ask their readers to see from multiple vantage points at once, mirroring Virginia Woolf's assertion in "How Should One Read A Book?" that "words are more impalpable than bricks; reading is a longer and more complicated process than seeing" (2). Simultaneous fictions are engaged in teaching their reader to see from multiple vantage points at once, opening up not just the time of reading but the kinds of presence we see encoded in the act: they do this through scenes of reading and overlapping textuality as well as using novelistic form to recruit the reader to experience new modes of reading.

But what does it mean to read simultaneously? Here I want to quickly turn to a passage from Ali Smith's *How to Be Both*, the subject of my first chapter and a paradigmatic simultaneous fiction. *How to Be Both* is a clear example of this genre because the text's unique twisting structure—which I show to be the double helix—meditates on simultaneity and its visual impossibility as a key question for (re)readability. The young girl George, one of two intertwined narrators, reflects "if things really did happen simultaneously it'd be like reading a book but one in which all the lines of the text have been overprinted, like each page is actually two pages but with one superimposed on the other to make it unreadable" (169). George thinks that simultaneity is unreadable, that it would be impossible to experience. This might be true if seeing and reading simply mean processing the literal information in front of you. But what *How to Be Both* insists through its double helix form, is that simultaneity is experienced through a different mode of reading: not by trying to see everything all at once on your own, but by experiencing or imagining another view outside of yours, a perspective that adds a layer onto your thought. This ethos of layering comes from the painterly vision of the other narrator of the text, Renaissance fresco artist Francesco del Cossa, who is enthralled by the prospect of learning to paint in perspective: "So things far away and close could be held together, in the same picture? So there were ways to learn to do such a thing?" (30). It is not realism or

verisimilitude in perspective that excites Francesco, but the prospect of holding two contrasting elements in relation. The layering in his art is not just his technique or display of virtuosity, but the way he wants his viewers to see the picture—he wants to “tell a story, but tell it more than one way at once, and tell another underneath it up-rising through the skin of it” (45). If simultaneity is a challenge to readability—what to focus on if everything is present?—here Francesco’s attention to painterly layering offers a new slant on the double vision of *How to Be Both*. He calls into question visual priority by asserting that he wants to tell the same story “more than one way at once” while also telling “another underneath.” This is not simply Renaissance perspective, which utilizes foreground and background as the means to focus on the main point of the picture. Francesco’s articulation of the both-ness here challenges the hierarchy of viewing: the story he wants to tell would require holding multiple, contrasting elements of a text in relation at once—“things far away and close...held together, in the same picture,” offering a model of relationality or togetherness that extends across distance and through space. Simultaneity is, in its most basic sense, an experience of the multiplicity of perspective and presence at different scales.

Simultaneous fictions are nonlinear, but I read this nonlinearity as organized into concrete forms that the novels in my study take on. These shapes show the possibilities of multiple, concurrent perspectives and repetitions with crucial differences.¹³ I see these narrative forms representing and responding to the anxieties of the contemporary era: I track the form of the double helix in *How to Be Both*, the kaleidoscope in *If on a winter’s night a traveler*, the spiral in *Fake Accounts*, and the parallel universe in *The Furrows*. While these novels are nonlinear and disrupt traditional

¹³ My concern for the spatiality of novelistic form comes in part from tech writer Joanne McNeil’s insistence that “As smartphones blurred organizational boundaries of online and offline worlds, spatial metaphors lost favor. How could we talk about the internet as a place when we’re checking it on the go, with mobile hardware offering turn-by-turn directions from a car cup holder or stuffed in a jacket pocket? IRL—‘in real life,’ a common acronym—revealed itself as a spurious notion, because life through the internet was very clearly, very purposefully real. The internet realm and the world outside your phone were—while not quite one and the same—interleaved, entwined, mutually dependent” (118-9).

chronology, their four distinctive forms allow us to see their novelistic projects as spatial, concerned with the possibility of navigating two scales at once, the close and distant. These scales are concurrent and overlapping, just like the operation of paying attention. The double helix of DNA, for instance, can be read on a microscopic level, as attention to the nucleobases of genetic material, and on a more global level, as attention to the face of a person standing before you, configured by these genetic codes. Simultaneous fictions thus give form to the idea that a reader can inhabit multiple perspectives and places at once. The four texts in my study disrupt ideas of focus, wholeness, and linearity, considering the layered, distracted experience of reading itself. Considering the spatial resonance of anxieties over attention helps us see that all reading—whether scrolling Instagram on your phone or reading Jane Austen studiously in isolation—is always a navigation and negotiation of two places, the text and the world, that are always bleeding into each other.

This dissertation proposes that simultaneous fictions are characteristically contemporary forms, forms that respond to the information overload and attention economy of the digital age, though a skeptical reader might wonder whether this is exclusive to the twenty-first century or not. Modernism, with all its novelistic fragmentation and formal experimentation, might be said to be doing the same thing that simultaneous fictions do, namely playing with form to teach readers how reading and the world are interconnected. For my project, differentiating from this typical modernist vocabulary of temporal fragmentation or breakage is crucial. Where a modernist text fragments, playing with time and linearity, it invites—sometimes demands—readers to put these texts back together. Fredric Jameson writes in “Beyond the Cave” that “all modernistic works are essentially simply cancelled realistic ones...they are, in other words, not apprehended directly, in terms of their own symbolic meanings, in terms of their own mythic or sacred immediacy, the way an older primitive or over-coded work would be, but rather indirectly only, by way of the relay of an imaginary realistic narrative of which the symbolic and modernistic one is then seen as a kind of

stylization” (429). A key feature of literary modernism, for Jameson, is that these texts play with realism, namely chronological time and verisimilitude, but that the interpretation of these texts subsumes the modernist fragmentation and experimentation, folding it back into the frame of realism. Thus even the experimentation of a modernist text like *Ulysses* invites its readers to find a narrative schema, like Joyce’s own, that rearranges the confusion of the text into linear or chronological order. This breaking-and-mending formulation of modernism is fundamentally different from that of simultaneous fictions, which favor layering and accumulation over the puzzles of modernism. The simultaneous fiction, in other words, has no original linear pattern that it can be re-organized into; its layers are too intertwined to be separated. If modernism is motivated by attempts to explode, fragment, and warp time, I read simultaneous fictions as motivated by attempts to expand how we think of space and presence, in addition to time.

Likewise, I find that simultaneous fictions are distinct from postmodern novels. While some of postmodernism’s distinct characteristics (nonlinearity, fragmentation, metafiction, and intertextuality) are of course present in simultaneous fictions, they do not insist, as postmodern novels do, that everything is constructed and therefore subject to scrutiny and paranoia. Put differently, the heightened self-consciousness of postmodern novels—like E.L. Doctorow’s *Ragtime*, Thomas Pynchon’s *The Crying of Lot 49*, or even A.S. Byatt’s *Possession: A Romance*—is not working quite the same way in simultaneous fictions. While simultaneous fictions point to their own construction and often play with metafictional addresses, they utilize self-consciousness as a pedagogical tool to teach the reader a particular way of seeing the world. This is a project not of cynicism or earnestness, but a sort of thought experiment, as a text becomes something like an optical illusion. Simultaneous fictions ask, can we learn to see two things at once? What would it take to read this way? In my chapter on Italo Calvino’s *If on a winter’s night a traveler* (*Se una notte d’inverno un viaggiatore*), I elucidate more of the differences between postmodern novels and

simultaneous fictions. I ultimately argue that reading Calvino's novel as a simultaneous fiction unlocks new formal intricacies of the text, an intimacy with the reader that postmodern readings of Calvino often foreclose or even refuse.

Simultaneous fictions work to attune their reader to scenes of double vision and concurrent layers that already exist in texts, helping readers connect these layered texts to their everyday life and negotiations with the textuality of the internet era. Francesco's fresco paintings, for instance, hold close and distant objects together through Renaissance perspective, itself a form that narrates a particular (and novel) relationship to space. But simultaneous fictions turn to a slightly more affective register to consider how experiences like being in love or grieving can change the operations of reading and attention more broadly. Like learning to see the two figures of an optical illusion—a duck or a rabbit? old woman or young lady?—at once, this sort of double vision offers not just a temporal openness to the process of reading (as in, the process extends before and after the book is opened) but a spatial openness, where the process of reading extends across multiple places, both physical and mental. That is, simultaneous fictions stage scenes of reading and rereading that show how world and text collide in the mind of the reader: reading a book that a love interest has lent you is different from reading a book you are assigned in a course. The generative distraction of falling in love, as chapter two on *If on a winter's night a traveler* demonstrates, is mirrored by the painful distraction of grieving the loss of a loved one, as in chapter four on *The Furrows*. The ordinary experiences of grief and love feel extraordinary and even unreal to the one experiencing them and these mental frames—these narratives—come to bear on the process of reading. By staging the distractions of reading (and reading with others), simultaneous fictions aim to show their readers the ways the world and our narratives about it come to bear on the process of reading.

My first chapter examines Ali Smith's *How to Be Both*, a novel whose form twists two narrators—a Renaissance painter and a young girl in contemporary England—around each other.

One version of the book begins with the painter, Francesco del Cossa, in purgatory, while another version, published with the same ISBN number and cover, begins with the girl, George, in Cambridge, England. While critics contend that once you read the novel, you can never read it from the other perspective, I argue that characterizing *How to Be Both* as a simultaneous fiction allows us to see its central pedagogical project of teaching its reader to reread. Since each moment in the novel is always twinned by the possibility of the other perspective, I demonstrate how the novel takes on the antiparallel form of the double helix (a form famously discovered in Cambridge). The simultaneous form of the double helix, itself an engine of internal difference, offers a model of the other (real or imaginary) as encoded in the rereading process. This names the internal difference at the heart of every readerly encounter, showing how the text continually compels the reader to return, to confront the otherness and openness within the act of reading itself.

If the first chapter shows how open and relational rereading is, my second chapter develops this sense of the other invoked in reading not through friendship or affinity, but through romance. In this chapter, “Reading in Love: *If on a winter’s night a traveler* and Kaleidoscopic Form” I turn to look at the distraction of reading in love. I read Italo Calvino’s *If on a winter’s night a traveler* (*Se una notte d’inverno un viaggiatore*) as demonstrating a simultaneity between world and text, teaching its readers that any reading as such is always constituted by interruption and distraction. In *If on a winter’s night a traveler*, the second-person protagonist, called the Reader, is in one place physically and a different place mentally, the book acting as a vector of attachment to another reader he falls in love with. Through this distracted reading—the world bleeding into text and vice versa—*If on a winter’s night a traveler* argues that distraction is not a condition to be lamented, but in fact the very grounds of a valuable relationship with another person and the text. The novel takes the kaleidoscope as its organizing formal principle, an optical instrument that comes to name the layered

and simultaneous operations of the reading mind, making Calvino's 1979 novel a poignant precursor to novelistic discourse in the digital era.

In my third chapter, I return to anxieties about the internet and its effect on textuality, tracing the spiral shape of Lauren Oyler's internet novel *Fake Accounts*. I argue that the spiral models the widespread anxiety over the deconstruction of authenticity and artifice in the digital era, particularly after Trump's election. I read the novel's form as invested in collapsing the lines between 'real' writing and mere 'content,' showing that the projected anxiety of the spiral names not just the political fear of the 2016-2017 period, but also the fear about what happens to art and writing in the internet age. As I show in this chapter, real and fake begin to be simultaneous in *Fake Accounts*: all writing becomes content and all relationships are sites of inauthenticity. At the same time, I show how the spiral form offers us new visions of social relations in the digital era: if there is no separation from the numbness of the internet and the banality of real life, questions of originality and intention can be motivated anew.

In my fourth and final chapter, "Reliving Again: *The Furrows* and the Parallel Universe," I trace the parallel universe as an organizing form for *The Furrows*. I read the parallel universe as an allegory not just of grief, but of critical interpretation more broadly, following the main character, Cassandra ("Cee") as she navigates life after the uncertain death of her younger brother. Searching for answers, Cee reads her life and grief concurrently and this reading comes to take on the form of the parallel universe. The parallel universe comes to stand for the overlapping, multiple worlds which each reading of the novel mobilizes, an allusive multiplicity that encodes the novel's refusal to be read with conclusiveness or certainty. In this sense, *The Furrows* uses the parallel universe as an experimental form that recruits readers to dwell in the messy, entangled, distracting qualities of grief, a reading experience that mirrors the protagonist, Cee, and her journey to represent mourning without rehabilitating the unthinkability of death itself.

By reading with attention to a specific, unique structure in each of these novels, I aim to find form in the formlessness of the internet, particularly the “vibes, atmosphere, [and] simultaneity” that Chayka humorously distills as the dominant contemporary aesthetic. In reading for these spatial forms, I’ve aimed to think with each novel in my study, reading and rereading with attention to their structural claims, not just their novelistic content. I read the four novels here not just as novels and artifacts of contemporary literary aesthetics, but as theory. At stake in this approach is the idea of what close reading and literary study can do for its practitioners: paying attention to the granular details of a text does not just burrow deeper into the text and offer insular little accounts but can point to structural and formal scales, again a navigation of several modes of seeing at once. Putting form to what seems to be atmospheric textuality may, I hope, make readers better at distilling the structures at work around them in what can feel like an atmosphere of near-apocalypse at worst and utter banality at best. We may be able to take what seems unreadable, as George conceptualizes the simultaneous text in *How to Be Both*, and instead see a lesson in perspective, of negotiation between different scales, or a renewed attention to what we cannot seem to see. “The structure is the argument,” as Namwali Serpell declares, quoting Toni Morrison’s thesis on Woolf and Faulkner, and this rings true for simultaneous fictions. To read their form is to read their argument—to read for and with form is to learn the lessons these books are trying to teach. Ultimately, reading with the singular, complex forms of simultaneous fictions offers us a chance to see reading as a relation that holds near and far, close and distant, dead and living together at once.

CHAPTER ONE

Rereading with Others: *How to Be Both* as Double Helix

“You can’t step into the same story twice—or maybe it’s that stories, books, art can’t step into the same person twice, maybe it’s that they allow for our mutability, are ready for us at all times, and maybe it’s this adaptability, regardless of time, that makes them art.” – Ali Smith, *Artful* (2012)

What compels rereading? Critics and scholars often elide this question, since the very condition of their work makes rereading necessary: to teach or write about literature requires regular rereading, regular re-encounters with a text. Rereading is a dominant critical mode, since it is only through sustained and repetitive returns to the text that mere noticing of patterns or images in a text can cohere into argument or synthesis. But when critics do discuss or theorize rereading, these theorizations almost always return to the territory of the personal, the reflective, the autotheoretical: consider Monica Huerta’s *Magical Habits*, which decenters the individual reader/‘hero’ in favor of the collective; or Patricia Meyer Spacks’ *On Rereading*, which records Spacks’ own experience (after retiring from the University of Virginia English Department) of rereading novels and reflecting on them; or even popular memoirs-in-reading like Rebecca Mead’s *My Life in Middlemarch* and Joanna Biggs’ *A Life of One’s Own*. To write about rereading is to attend to what remains, to words, phrases, and thoughts that take hold in a reader’s mind and stay there. Perhaps this is why critics shy away from theorizing or discussing their rereading practices. What could be more personal—what could feel less critical—than the way a text stays with you?

In literary theory, rereading has thus far been the domain of criticism centered on affective experience, emerging most often in postcritical texts like Rita Felski’s *Hooked* that seek to recuperate attachment, theorizing about why we like what we like, pointing readers to engagements with texts that go beyond criticism towards modes of appreciation or reflection.¹⁴ But through this lens,

¹⁴ Felski writes that the critical attachments to art are “heightened by the labor of interpretation, fueled by the time and effort that goes into poring over and explicating works of art. Weeks, months, years are often spent in conditions of physical proximity and intensive interaction: repeated treks to an art museum to stare intently at a Dürer engraving;

rereading as a particular mode of reading is not available for much sustained analysis or theorizing; it exists as an expression of personal taste, of individual attachment to art. Is there anything left to say besides, I did or did not like this book years ago, and I do or do not like it now? The language of postcriticism and autotheory leaves us awash in the realm of personal feelings and memories of readings. In contrast, my assertion is that rereading is not only or always a property of readerly attachment, but an experience of simultaneity, one that novels can enact through their form. This gives us room to study how novels stage their own reading and rereading conditions, anticipating the world of textual overlap we live in and teaching their readers how to respond. Reading simultaneous fictions, as I've termed them, offer us scenes of reading in doubling, complex forms that can teach or demand rereading through the shape their narratives take. As Ali Smith formulates in *Artful*, a genre-bending book of fictional literary critical essays (and the epigraph to this chapter), "Great books are adaptable; they alter with us as we alter in life, they renew themselves as we change and reread them at different times in our lives. You can't step into the same story twice—or maybe it's that stories, books, art can't step into the same person twice, maybe it's that they allow for our mutability, are ready for us at all times, and maybe it's this adaptability, regardless of time, that makes them art" (33). Riffing on Heraclitus, Smith formulates a vision of "real art," as opposed to "transient art," which has the capacity to "hold us at all our different ages like it held all the people before us and will hold all the people after us" (ibid). In this categorization, Smith shows that the capacity to return—to reread—is not simply a question of personal feeling or a matter of taste, but a formal feature of a text.

Smith's vision resonates with Roland Barthes' own infamous categorization of readerly texts and writerly texts in *S/Z*, where the writerly text is amorphous and perpetually asks to be rewritten

scribbling countless notes in the margins of a battered copy of *The Mysteries of Udolpho*; endlessly rewinding and watching the final scene from *Vertigo*. Through ongoing exposure and unflagging attention, the particles of a painting or novel or film get under the skin and seep into the bloodstream; they become an integral part of who we are" (133).

and engaged by the reader while the readerly text exists as a finished commodity. The reader of a readerly text is passive, but a writerly text encourages an active, even plural, reading, a multiplicity where time of the first reading and last reading collapse. Barthes writes that rereading is “an operation contrary to the commercial and ideological habits of our society, which would have us ‘throw away’ the story once it has been consumed (“devoured”), so that we can then move on to another story, buy another book, and which is tolerated only in certain marginal categories of readers (children, old people, and professors), rereading is here suggested at the outset, for it alone saves the text from repetition” (15). Critiquing the “commercial and ideological habits of our society” that turn reading into a process of consumption, Barthes singles out the categories of readers, “children, old people, and professors,” whose rereading is “tolerated.” Barthes’ observations point to rereading as a mode of reading for certain people, like professors, but also to how the formal qualities of a text can themselves compel rereading. For Barthes, as for Smith, rereading is an experience of return but not of repetition: Smith calls great books “adaptable” and argues that “they alter with us as we alter in life,” while Barthes thinks of rereading as what can save “the text from repetition.” And this compulsion to return lies not only with the reader and her feelings, but also somewhere within the text itself. But what I want to insist on is not just that rereading is a formal property of certain texts but also that rereading itself is an experience of simultaneity, of several times of reading collapsing at once. Barthes writes that the operation of rereading “draws the text out of its internal chronology (“this happens *before* or *after* that”) and recaptures a mythic time (without *before* or *after*); it contests that claim that would have us believe that the first reading is a primary, naïve, phenomenal reading which we will only, afterwards, have to “explicate,” to intellectualize (as if there were a beginning of reading, as if everything were not already read: there is no first reading...)” (16). Rereading is a

simultaneous operation, where “internal chronology” gives way to a “recapture[d] mythic time,”¹⁵ not an experience of provisional reading that will come to be revised. Smith, too, echoes this, writing in *Artful* that we “treat books surprisingly lightly in contemporary culture. We’d never expect to understand a piece of music on one listen, but we tend to believe we’ve read a book after reading it just once” (32). There is no reading, Smith and Barthes posit, at least outside of the consumerist regime of books. There are only rereadings.

To show exactly how a novel can invite and teach rereading through its form, I turn to what I consider the paradigmatic simultaneous fiction, Ali Smith’s *How to Be Both*, published in 2014. Described by Smith’s publisher, Anchor, as an “original literary double take,” there are two versions of *How to Be Both* in circulation, identical in cover and ISBN number: one, like mine, begins with poetic (and humorous) narration from the point of view of a long-dead Renaissance painter, Francesco del Cossa, a real artist from Ferrara, Italy who is, in Smith’s imagination, born female but moves through the world (and history books) as male.¹⁶ A second version of *How to Be Both* begins from the perspective of George, an androgynous teenage girl in contemporary Cambridge, England mourning the sudden death of her mother. The only way to find out that there are two versions of the book is to talk to (or read a review by) someone who read the book in opposite order—no overt

¹⁵ I want to note an interesting resonance with this idea of ‘mythic time’ and simultaneity, which Benedict Anderson mentions in his classic study of literary nationalism, *Imagined Communities*. “The medieval Christian mind,” Anderson writes, “had no conception of history as an endless chain of cause and effect or of radical separations between past and present” (23). He reads Auerbach’s *Mimesis* as “stress[ing] an ideal of simultaneity that is wholly alien to our own. It views time as something close to what Benjamin calls Messianic time, a simultaneity of past and future in an instantaneous present” and notes that “Our own [contemporary] conception of simultaneity has been a long time in the making, and its emergence is certainly connected, in ways that have yet to be well-studied, with the development of the secular sciences” (24). Interestingly, simultaneity was once the realm of religious mystics, and now is the domain of science departments: I trace simultaneous forms in the double helix of DNA in this chapter, as well as theorizations of the parallel universe in chapter three, which account for the connection between simultaneous forms and scientific attention to microscopic and abstract forms.

¹⁶ The both-ness of Francesco’s gender is fascinating and certainly corroborates the novel’s central preoccupation with simultaneity but is far too rich a topic to be engaged with briefly in my chapter. For more on gender in *How to Be Both*, see Sonya Andermahr’s “Both/And Aesthetics: Gender, Art, and Language in Brigid Brophy’s *In Transit* and Ali Smith’s *How to Be Both*,” where she argues that Smith represents gender as a fluid category, one that allows for people to be “both.” Francesco operates a bit like a Tiresias figure here, as sight and gender become exceptionally fluid categories.

moment in the text or paratext other than the language of “literary double take” would tip the reader off. And both versions of the text feel complete to the reader, since both versions of the book conclude with the opposite narrator; if you read George first, your edition would conclude with Francesco, and vice versa. Both sections are named “One,” no matter what order you read them in, and you can only tell the sections apart based on their icons: Francesco’s “One” is accompanied by an illustration of a pair of eyes on a stalk, a hand-drawn cartoon of the real Francesco del Cossa’s painting of Saint Lucy¹⁷ on the paperback cover, while George’s “One” is paired with a hand-drawn surveillance camera.

The double “One”s point us immediately to simultaneity, since the concurrent numbering system insists that there is no priority to these narratives, no correct linear way to read the book.¹⁸ Both sections occur at once, are “One.” I read the simultaneous form of *How to Be Both* as Smith’s answer to the problem posed in *Artful*: “the main problem with writing anything at all is that it’s inevitably always linear—one word after another” (34). Smith then cites José Saramago’s *The Stone Raft*, where Saramago’s narrator further elucidates how the frame of linearity limits the writer, noting that “however hard writers might try, there is one feat they cannot achieve, that is to put into writing, in the same tense, two events that happened simultaneously. Some believe the difficulty can be solved by dividing the page into two columns, side by side, but this strategy is ingenuous, because the one was written first and the other afterwards, without forgetting that the reader will have to read this one first and then the other one, or vice versa” (quoted in Smith 34). Simultaneity is framed here as a formal problem for both readers and writers, who are limited by the layout of a page and the conventions of sight. Reading simultaneously feels impossible, since readers’ eyes will encounter

¹⁷ Saint Lucy is, of course, the patron saint of the blind: she is said to have gouged her eyes out rather than marry a suitor, since she had consecrated her virginity to God. Del Cossa’s painting, *Saint Lucy*, dates to around 1473 or 1474 and is housed at the National Gallery in Washington, D.C.

¹⁸ Although based on the pagination of citations in the major critical work on *How to Be Both*, it is clear that most critics have read the version of the novel that occurs in the order of George-Francesco, while my copy is the exact opposite.

the words in linear order, left to right. With these two “One”s, *How to Be Both* announces a complication of narrative priority and linearity, posing one possible answer to Saramago’s formal conundrum. But like rereading, the question becomes whether these two “One”s are palimpsestic, written on top of each other: do they replace or cover the other perspective or run alongside the other in a different way? I argue that the novel answers this question through its form, which I read as the double helix of DNA, giving this experiment a shape, a model for the possibility of simultaneous reading.

Simultaneity and its effect on reading preoccupies *How to Be Both*, even without the context of *Artful*. George, sounding much like Saramago, reflects that “if things really did happen simultaneously it’d be like reading a book but one in which all the lines of the text have been overprinted, like each page is actually two pages but with one superimposed on the other to make it unreadable” (169). George’s vision of the impossibility of simultaneity may seem at first to be mirrored by *How to Be Both*, since you cannot read both George and Francesco’s sections at the same time—you will always encounter one narrator before the other. Though the novel twists around itself to show multiplicity and connection, there are still two separate sections that will be read in linear fashion. Again we return to the seeming impossibility of simultaneous reading: once you read a text, can you ever approach it from a different lens? Can you replace or revise a first reading? Most reviewers of *How to Be Both* tend to think not. As Heller McCalpin writes for *NPR*, “Like the frescoes it describes, *How to Be Both* can be approached from both sides; the order in which you read the sections subtly changes the emphasis. In truth, you can’t fully have it both ways because, after reading the contemporary story first (as I did) there’s no way to *unread* it so you experience the historical half with a blank narrative canvas (and vice versa).” *How to Be Both* cannot be both in McCalpin’s reading: there are only two versions of the novel, and once you read one, you are locked in to forever encountering the novel in that exact way. Laura Miller writes in *The Guardian*, “While I

do not doubt the two halves of *How to Be Both* may be read in either order with satisfying results, once read, it's impossible to know what it would be like to first encounter it in the alternate order." Yet is it impossible to know how the novel would be read in a different way? Do any of our reading experiences occur on the background of a "blank narrative canvas"? Is there no way to approach *How to Be Both* anew, to have the text both ways? Is it destined to fail its project of being both?

In this chapter, I suggest an alternative reading—considering *How to Be Both* not as a gimmick or an impossible thought experiment, but as a paradigmatic simultaneous fiction. Through its double helix form, *How to Be Both* teaches its readers to read with an attention to accumulation, accretion, and layering between old and new, known and unknown, seen and unseen in the novel. From its very title, *How to Be Both*, both a question (how?) and play on the name of an instruction manual (how to), Smith's novel invites its readers to reencounter the text, to revise their original thoughts, and ultimately, to reread. Given this compulsion to return, I argue that the fatalistic criticism about the novel and its one-and-done readings doesn't seriously consider the simultaneity of the novel, which is ultimately found not just in its helix form, but through the text's invitation to reread with others. The doubleness of *How to Be Both* depends on a concept of reading as a social endeavor, not a personal and individual experience. Put differently, *How to Be Both* can never be read but only ever be reread—the text continually compels the reader to return, to confront the otherness and openness within the act of reading itself.

"A Mighty Twisting Thing"

Francesco's section, which is the beginning of my copy of *How to Be Both*, starts with an insistent twisting motion: "Ho this is a mighty twisting thing fast as a / fish being pulled by its mouth on a hook / if a fish could be fished through a / 6 foot thick wall made of bricks or an / arrow if an arrow could fly in a leisurely / curl like the coil of a snail or a..." (5). Although I have used slashes here to preserve the line breaks, these opening pages of Francesco's section have

stanzas that are indented as if a concrete poem, visually recalling the double helix of DNA. This primacy of twisting motion and the stanzas like helices are our first clue towards the novel's double helix form. The second comes from the novel's insistent use of twisting and turning as a mode of seeing connections, including the way the two narrators wind around each other.

Though Francesco and George each have two different sections, they overlap into each other's worlds. This is already a complication of the linearity and individual consciousness of a novel,¹⁹ and a layered quality suggested by the two "One"s, as well as the dispersed connections between George and Francesco throughout the novel. Readers are not offered one climactic scene where the connection between the two are clear, but multiple, subtle moments that slowly accrete into understanding. Consider the sheer amount of overlap between the two narrators. Throughout Francesco's section, which occurs in purgatory but concerns reflections about his life in 15th century Ferrara, he sees and narrates an unnamed girl and her activities, who turns out to be George. In George's section, set in contemporary Cambridge, UK, she reflects on a trip she and her mother took to Ferrara, Italy, specifically to see the frescos that have so caught her mother's eye—frescoes that turn out to be, of course, Francesco's own at the Palazzo Schifanoia. In Francesco's narration, he observes George in the palazzo, looking at his frescoes (though he misidentifies her as a boy, another both-ness of the text) and then seems to follow her back to Cambridge, narrating events that we also hear from her perspective. For instance, George watches a particular porn video daily as a form of compulsive witness to the young girl in it, but this ritual appears to Francesco as "watching the girl watch an old old story, the performance of love through a too-small window" (82). Likewise, George and her mother debate the exact scenario that has befallen Francesco at the

¹⁹ For more on *How to Be Both* and consciousness, see Nick Lavery, "Consciousness and the Extended Mind in the 'Metamodernist' Novel." Lavery links the experience of viewing art in *How to Be Both* with metamodernism, writing that "engagement with Modernist forms and ideas complements [a] willingness to attempt to depict the subjective experience of consciousness... Reading these novels within a metamodernist framework allows us to relate this attempt to the authors' simultaneous critical engagement with the social and cultural context of the extended mind and with the possibilities of literary form" (764-5). For Lavery, the consciousness of the novel is deeply entangled with its form.

Palazzo Schifanoia: her mother poses the hypothetical situation to George, “you’re an artist...and you’re working on a project with a lot of other artists. And everybody on the project is getting the same amount, salary-wise. But *you* believe that what *you’re* doing is worth more than everyone on the project, including you, is getting paid” (166). George and Francesco weave around each other, as each narrator influences and calls to the other just slightly, but the novel never offers a moment of discovery, instead privileging the multiplicity of connections that the reader witnesses. Put differently, the doubleness in *How to Be Both*’s form alerts the reader to the potential simultaneity of all textual encounters.

But crucially, *How to Be Both* double helix structure departs from the most common spatialized novel form, the braided narrative structure of many contemporary novels, like Bernadine Evaristo’s *Girl, Woman, Other* or Anthony Doerr’s *All the Light We Cannot See*,²⁰ where multiple narrators turn out to be intertwined in the end. These novels give the appearance of a perfect puzzle piece fitting into place: all these people come together, as the reader thought (and hoped) they would. Yet the reader of these braided narratives is the one hazarding connection, until the book finally gives in at the last minute. It is the reader who wonders how it all will turn out to make sense, while the form of the book presents a puzzle that can be easily solved, simply by continuing down the linear track of reading. These novels act like the readerly text that Barthes considers, a text easily digested, consumed, and forgotten. *How to Be Both*, on the other hand, does not offer its reader that moment of payoff or discovery, nor is its form precise or symmetrical. There is not one scene or instance where the reader realizes, all of the sudden!, how connected these narrators are. The process of reading is not strictly linear in this novel, precisely because the novel’s form points towards multiplicity: each reader might realize the connections at different points, hearing about the

²⁰ As these two texts show, the form of the braided/interconnected narrative is widespread, from highly literary novels (*Girl, Woman, Other*, A.S. Byatt’s *Possession*, Jennifer Egan’s *A Visit From the Goon Squad*) to popular titles (*All the Light We Cannot See*, Gillian Flynn’s *Gone Girl*, Kathryn Stockett’s *The Help*).

“boy” then “girl” Francesco sees long enough that when they begin reading George’s section, they recognize her; or reading enough about George’s mother’s fascination with an Italian fresco artist from the Renaissance that by the time they get to Francesco’s section, they are primed to see his work on the palazzo walls as exactly what George has witnessed in Ferrara. *How to Be Both* works in any direction: no matter whose perspective you encounter first, the connections between George and Francesco flicker in and out of view. There is not a braided form that comes to intertwine, but two stories that have been curiously—and irregularly—connected from the start. In *The New York Times*, Christopher Benfey aptly describes *How to Be Both* as “sly and shimmering double helix of a novel,” and I echo Benfey in affirming the double helix as the form of *How to Be Both*. The double helix is a particularly poignant structure not just because of Francesco’s opening, but also because in the contemporary world, George must learn about the shape and its history in her classes. One of the closing scenes of George’s section follows her while cycling the DNA Bike Path in Cambridge, a two-mile cycling trail decorated with rectangles that stand for the components of a human gene, honoring the discovery of the shape of the DNA molecule in Cambridge itself, by Rosalind Franklin, James Watson, and Frances Crick.

How to Be Both forms a double helix, then, a twisting structure that winds around itself: the form of the novel is the very “mighty twisting thing” that pulls Francesco into the narrative in the first place. After all, the beginning and ending of Francesco’s section is structured like a concrete poem in the shape of a double helix, meandering down the page. The double helix, the shape of a DNA strand, is in fact an antiparallel structure, meaning that it is formed of two strands that are at once running parallel to each other but in opposite directions. As Judith Roof usefully summarizes in *The Poetics of DNA*, each DNA strand is composed of

four different nucleic acids: adenine (A), thymine (T), cytosine (C), and guanine (G). These bases are arranged in pairs like rungs on a ladder, which turns a bit at every rung, producing

DNA's famous double helix structure. If the rungs are split apart, each half provides an empty slot that can be occupied only by its complementary opposite. For example, if one side of a DNA ladder consists of A, C, G, T, it can be reconstructed only by inserting the combination T, G, C, A in that order. When the pairs “unzip” and replicate, two identical strands of nucleic acids are produced. (6)

This is a key function of the double helix: its form is made possible by the relation between two antiparallel strands, the bases connecting to their complements. Like the double helix, Francesco and George's sections in *How to Be Both* contain “complementary” information, each have an “empty slot” for the other. This image of the ‘complementary’ is taken up by Siddhartha Mukherjee, who writes in *The Gene* that DNA's two “strands contain the same information—except in a complementary sense: each is a reflection, or echo, of the other (the more appropriate analogy is a yin-and-yang structure)...A double helix of DNA can thus be envisioned as a code written with four alphabets—ATGCCCTACGGGCCCATCG—forever entwined with its mirror image code” (157). Yet we should see in Mukherjee's inability to choose the right metaphor (reflection? echo? yin-and-yang?) to describe the double helix a similar slipperiness in *How to Be Both*. Like the two strands of DNA, the two “One”'s name Francesco and George as simultaneous narrators, but their relationship is unclear. Are they echoing each other? Perfect complements? Or is the relationship between the two narrators random? As we will see, the novel's layering calls into question regular reading practices of framing or priority, unsettling the hierarchy that one of these stories is secondary or auxiliary to the other.

Formed of two strands that make up one, the shape of the double helix challenges hierarchy. After all, there is not a primary or secondary strand—both sides of the double helix are absolutely necessary. *How to Be Both* plays with this shape in moments of humor, too, as George and her friend (and crush) Helen make up song lyrics to help them study for a biology test, articulating the shape

and history of DNA: “To the Tune of Wrecking Ball (verse 1) *Herr Friedrich Miescher found it in / some pus in 1869 / Crick, Watson and Ros Franklin saw / the two strands intertwined like vine. / Double helix in 1953 / X-Ray photo ’52. / Franklin died before Nobel Prize Award / Life not one strand but two.* (Chorus) *G – A – T – C and DNA / Deoxyribonucleic / Guanine-adenine-thymine cytosine / Supercoil can be both / Po – o – si tive / Yeah and / Ne – e – g a tive*” (241, emphasis original). Their playful song articulates the inherent multiplicity of the DNA structure, “life not one strand but two” and “supercoil can be both.” The structure of the double helix appears in the novel as form of connection, a shape that draws Helen and George together. The song, too, enacts the lyrics that life itself is “not one strand but two,” pulling disparate scientists and dates together, from Swiss scientist Friedrich Miescher, who discovered nucleic acids, to the work of Watson, Crick, and Franklin, all to the tune of Miley Cyrus’ chart-topping 2013 hit song “Wrecking Ball.” Crucially, the novel stages the very backbone of human biology as connective and simultaneous, across time and space. And the double helix is, as the girls’ song notes, both positive and negative, making it a structure that contains a fundamental contradiction—it can be both.

Much of the inherent multiplicity (the “bothness”) of the double helix comes from its antiparallel shape. This antiparallel form is what allows each DNA strand to split apart and replicate, to create itself again. Mukherjee writes, “To Watson and Crick, the double-helix model of DNA—with two complementary ‘yin-yang’ strands counterposed against each other—instantly suggested a model for replication....[they] proposed that each DNA strand was used to generate a copy of itself—thereby generating two double helices from the original double helix. During replication, the yin-yang strands of DNA were peeled apart. The yin was used as a template to create a yang, and the yang to make a yin—and this resulted in two yin-yang pairs” (179). This replication is only possible because the strands are antiparallel, able to ‘unzip’ in opposite directions to make a copy. If the double helix strands ran parallel, the bases would not be able to pair with their complement (adenine

to thymine and cytosine to guanine). Undoing itself to create again, the double helix makes the final, helix-shaped lines of Francesco's section even more prescient: "hello all the new bones / hello all the old / hello all the everything / to be / made and / unmade / both" (Smith 159). The process of replication demonstrates the peculiar relationality of the double helix: it is both one unit but also two strands, ready to separate from itself at any moment. And crucially for thinking about the novelistic form of *How to Be Both*, Mukherjee conceptualizes DNA in explicitly formal terms: "a gene 'acts' by encoding information to build a protein, and the protein actualizes the form or function of the organism" (163). DNA has a certain form that enables a certain function. Like rereading, the double helix encodes an action of repetition but with a difference. Judith Roof notes the multiplicity of these different repetitions: "the nucleic acids of DNA function through contact with one another...DNA's logic is a logic of contiguity (or metonymy)—of how each site of intersection affects each other site. In addition, instead of the repetition of the same pattern through different levels or scales, a logic of contiguity represents a logic of systems whose possibilities go multiple directions at once" (26). Roof's analysis points to the fundamental connection and openness to the structure of DNA, where "contact" and "contiguity" make things happen and form a "logic of system whose possibilities go multiple directions at once." This language of connection, relationality, and multiple possibilities at once resonates with *How to Be Both*.

The double helix, a constant engine of internal difference, thus comes to be emblematic of the novel's pedagogical project, teaching its reader to see many things at once. Just as Francesco and George's consciousnesses wind around each other, confounding the limits of linear time, death, and geographic distance, the double helix form of *How to Be Both* is antiparallel, seemingly random but part of a "logic of system whose possibilities go multiple directions at once," as Roof contends (26). If the novel is teaching its readers to read simultaneously through the double helix, this move is mirrored in a closing scene from George's section, where the double helix offers itself as a

pedagogical model. The DNA molecule appears not simply as the “mighty twisting thing” of Francesco’s introduction, but in sculpted form, at both ends of the DNA Bike Path in Cambridge. Here the double helix is particularly reversible and multiple in its meaning, marking the beginning and the end of the bike path from one direction, and the opposite from another. We should see here, of course, a mirror of the structure of *How to Be Both*, where entrance to text and exit from text are arbitrary and reversible. But more specifically for George, the double helix is a form that confounds linearity, as she sees its shape as the stark opposite of conventional notions of history and its chronological timeline. She reflects that the double helix sculpture marking the end of the DNA bike path “resembled a joyful bedspring or a bespoke ladder. It was like a kind of shout, if a shout to the sky could be said to look like something. It looked like the opposite of history, though they were always going on at school about how DNA history had been made here in this city” (304). She continues: “What if history, instead, was that shout, that upward spring, that staircase-ladder thing, and everybody was just used to calling something quite different the word history?” (305). The very shape of the double helix teaches George that another relationship to time and history is possible, making her question “received notions of history.”²¹ But even more crucially, George’s questioning of time and history becomes a questioning of language as she wonders whether the word ‘history’ as it is colloquially used might mean something different than what history actually is. The tie between signifier and signified in the very word “history” comes to be interrogated simply by beholding the DNA sculpture and its twinned strands. She goes on: “What if received notions of

²¹ We might read this scene even more particularly as an invocation of Walter Benjamin’s concept of messianic time, a mode of attention to time that complicates an idea of history as a model of progress through time. He writes in “Theses on the Philosophy of History” that “The concept of the historical progress of mankind cannot be sundered from the concept of its progression through a homogenous, empty time. A critique of the concept of such a progression must be the basis of any criticism of the concept of progress itself” (261). This scene also speaks back to an earlier conversation between George and her mother, where her mother asks, “Do things just go away?...Do things that happened not exist, or stop existing, just because we can’t see them in front of us?” (249). George responds that “They do when they’re over,” to which her mother rejoins, “And what about the things we watch happening in front of us and still can’t really see?” (ibid). Their conversation likewise problematizes history, in particular through George’s mother’s insistence that history is ongoing and layered, not a series of discrete events.

history were deceptive? Deceived notions. Ha” (ibid). Punning on the relation between “received notions” and the deception of history, George takes questions of time and finds in them questions about the reliability of language—a returning motion that calls George to reconsider what she thought she knew (history) in relation to others. Here Smith seems to be foregrounding a different kind of learning than the one practiced in schools, as the shape of the double helix teaches George to see history and DNA anew.

George likewise doubles back on her tracks, cycling back on the path to take a video to send to Helen, her partner in song lyrics, on whom she has developed a crush. Yet on the bike path, George notes that “on the film” she takes on her phone, they are “green bars...for adenine, the blue for cytosine, the green for guanine and the red for thymine” (306). Green is repeated twice here—though on the actual bike path in Cambridge, yellow represents one of the bases, in George’s rendering, green is both adenine and guanine at once.²² George complicates the antiparallel structure of DNA by misremembering it, and her misreading inserts simultaneity into the very backbone of human genetics. Confounding—literally twisting—narrative form into a double helix, *How to Be Both* shows that past and present don’t simply swap places, but that they always coexist, winding around each other. The novel answers our questions with more questions, compelling us to return, just as George asks her mother clarifying questions on the moral conundrum that readers know is Francesco’s own situation: “Past or present? George says. Male or female? It can’t be both. It must be one or the other. / Who says? Why must it? her mother says” (167). *How to Be Both* follows the

²² See “[DNA Cycle](#)” in *Nature* 447, 911, published in 2007, for more details on the path: “Passengers travelling from London to Cambridge by train may glimpse this striped cycle path cutting through the flat countryside as they near their destination. Over a mile of its length, different coloured bands spell out the base-pair sequence of the BRCA2 gene — mutations in which are associated with increased risk of breast cancer.” It’s a unique project, which the article notes. “I expect this will be one of only a few human genes to be represented as a cycle path,” says Michael Stratton, who identified and mapped BRCA2 twelve years ago and acted as a scientific advisor to this project. It’s a safe bet — were the entire human genome laid down at the same scale, the path would circle Earth about ten times.”

lead of George's mother, troubling binaries that would make both-ness impossible, answering questions with more questions.

Seeing Double

If the double helix encodes simultaneity, this form also complicates sight and reading, to return to the problem posed by Saramago and Smith, and even George, who reflects “if things really did happen simultaneously it'd be like reading a book but one in which all the lines of the text have been overprinted, like each page is actually two pages but with one superimposed on the other to make it unreadable” (169). The form of the double helix brings readability into question. The genetic information of the DNA strand is read by proteins that make things happen in the cells of bodies, but this information is largely unreadable to a human eye, save the rise of human genome mapping projects. These questions occupied geneticists for the second half of the twentieth century: “What features of the double helix enabled it to bear the code of life? How did that code become transcribed and translated into actual form and function of an organism?” (Mukherjee 160). While the actual form of a double helix is odd to human eyes—a “staircase-ladder thing” and/or a “mighty twisting thing” that confound both Francesco and George—the function of the DNA strand does exactly what puzzles George, making things happen simultaneously. Thus the double helix as a model of simultaneity challenges reading and points to a negotiation with scale that asks us to read with others, an attempt to see double. Yet seeing double is a dizzying process. How can you learn to see like someone else, learn to see something anew, without negating or erasing your own perspective? Through scenes of double vision that serve as microcosms of reading, *How to Be Both* elicits multiple perspectives, imagining fields of vision that coincide with the reader's own without replacing it.

If the first lines of Francesco's section establish “mighty twisting thing” of the novel's form, the first lines of George's section demonstrate a moment of layered vision, of confounding time and

tense through grief: “Consider this moral conundrum for a moment, George’s mother says to George who’s sitting in the front passenger seat.

Not says. Said.

George’s mother is dead.

What moral conundrum? George says” (163).

This moment flies back and forth in tense: George’s mother is alive and active in present tense until George remembers she is dead. But crucially, the text switches back. It is not that George recalls her mother’s death and the text snaps her back to the “real” present tense, the present of narrative time. Instead, the novel lingers in this moment of confusion, of “Not says. Said,” before returning to George’s memory, as if to strike through “says” without erasing it. The anachronism of this passage is striking: we are first introduced to George’s mother as “George’s mother” before we are introduced to George, and introduced to the particular, “This moral conundrum,” before George even asks, “What moral conundrum?” *How to Be Both* confuses these lines, as does George’s process of grieving. For George, memories stay open, able to be revised and revisited. Even though George’s mother is dead, she is animated through George’s grief; she acts again, speaks again, not just in remembered ways, but in new ones too. (The simultaneity of grief is the topic of my fourth chapter, where I explore this particular presence of absence.) Thus both George and Francesco open their sections with movement through time: George switches tenses, bouncing back and forth in time, which mirrors the “mighty twisting thing” of Francesco’s opening. Both George and Francesco recollect their own pasts, but this return is not a replacement of the present with the past. Like the shape of the double helix, Francesco and George connect across time through moments of return, represented as grief and painting, which show the accretion of layers.

For George, grief is the primary mode for a return, a mental attention to her absent mother that layers onto her experience of the present moment. Her seeing double is inflected by the

confounding tense of “Not says. Said,” two sentences that serve to strike through the past without negating it. Her mother is dead, and George continually remembers that fact alongside the very real and very active role of her dead mother in her life. But for Francesco, seeing double is a tool of his art, and a hallmark of Renaissance painting more generally. He is thrilled by the concept of working in perspective: “So things far away and close could be held together, in the same picture? So there were ways to learn to do such a thing?” (30). Crucially, Francesco frames this artistry as a negotiation in scale, an ability to connect the small and large. And he sees this form as lending itself to multiplicity, since he wants to “tell a story, but tell it more than one way at once, and tell another underneath it up-rising through the skin of it” (45).

This multiplicity is also an experience of defamiliarization, as Francesco reflects that “as soon as I’d painted them into the skin of the fresco they stopped being the people I knew...A picture is most times just picture : but sometimes a picture is more : I looked at the faces in torchlight and I saw they were escapees : they’d broken free from me and from the wall that had made and held them and even from themselves” (104). Francesco looks again and again at his fresco and sees not his own intention, but the artwork on its own. Francesco calls this “the life of the picture itself step[ping] beyond the frame,” which then “does 2 opposing things at once. The one is, it lets the world be seen and understood. The other is, it unchains the eyes and the lives of those who see it and gives them a moment of freedom, from its world and from their world both” (105). Like the double helix, its antiparallel form making and unmaking at once, these frescos do two contradictory things at once, both explaining and denaturalizing the world. Just like George sees her mother as simultaneously absent and present, Francesco, too, sees something new that does not replace the old, but is simply adds another layer. Encounters with art—like reading—show a simultaneity in the text which in turn teaches the viewer to see doubly, to see more than just one way at once. Francesco reflects that “pictures can be both life and death at once and cross the

border between the two,” a statement that calls to mind his own existence at the hazy border between life and death (ibid). Here again, it is not just recognizing the simultaneous form of the artwork, but the ongoing process of looking itself that unlocks these new valences of the fresco. *How to Be Both* insists not just that art can do more than one thing at once, but that the viewer’s experience, brought to bear upon the text, can “be both life and death at once.”

And the layers of Francesco’s painting are not just evident to him, as a part of his artistic process, but are easily seen by viewers of his work. In one scene that takes place in both Francesco’s foggy purgatorium and George’s more realist perspective, George is looking at the Salone dei Mesi (Hall of the Months) in the Palazzo Schifanoia in Ferrara—frescos that Francesco himself painted. George reflects,

It is like everything is in layers. Things happen right at the front of the pictures and at the same time they continue happening, both separately and connectedly, behind, and behind that, and again behind that, like you can see, in perspective, for miles. Then there are the separate details, like that man with the duck. They’re all also happening on their own terms.

The picture makes you look at both—the close-up happenings and the bigger picture (205). The layers of the fresco here mirror the project of *How to Be Both* in teaching readers to see more than one thing at once, to see layers as connected and concurrent. Like the double helix form, things in the fresco happen “both separately and connectedly,” seeing “the close-up happenings and the bigger picture” in multiple ways. Thus George’s early insistence that the simultaneous form is unreadable is negated not just by the double helix, which offers a concrete shape for many readings happening at once, but also by the fresco. The background and foreground of the fresco don’t just allow you to see both, it “*makes* you look at both,” appreciating that things that are “happening on their own terms.”

And while George is awake to the perspective unfolding in the frescoes in front of her, she cannot see Francesco, who can see her. George cannot recognize her own place in the larger scene. In fact, this is the first scene of Francesco's section, after the double-helix structured "mighty twisting thing" lines, which end "there are flowers that open for / all the world like / eyes : / hello : / what's this? / A boy in front of a painting" (7). The poem moves from flowers like eyes, which call to mind the eyes of St. Lucy on a stem, the icon that announces Francesco's section, then spirals Francesco to the Salone dei Mesi, where he finds George, misrecognized as the "boy in front of a painting." "Good : I like a good back : the best thing about a turned back is the face you can't see stays a secret : hey : you : can't hear me? Can't hear? No? My chin on your shoulder right next to your ear and you still can't hear, ha well, old argument about eye or ear being mightier all goes to show it's neither here nor there when you're neither here nor there" (7). The repetitive "hear," "here," and "ear" in this passage, separated with odd colons that look like eyes and the punctuation of an analogy, mark another moment of pedagogical intervention, as the reader is pushed to consider how the material of this sentence fits together. Francesco's puns are characteristic of Smith's writing: "it's neither here nor there when you're neither here nor there" points to his confused position between life and death. The sayings "the pen is mightier than the sword," "all ears," and the "eyes are windows to the soul" all get mixed up here, suggesting ("all going to show") that George's inability to see or hear Francesco is not a failure of sight, but a failure to see outside singular readings. The puns themselves, like the layers of the fresco, have multiple meanings that happen "both separately and connectedly."

How to Be Both also draws attention to the overlapping textuality of technology. If we are comfortable with simultaneous reading in art and even grief, contemporary culture is less comfortable about the double vision of multiple screens. Mainstream discourse about the internet typically reads multitasking and multi-screen usage as a failure of focus, a distraction, a splintering of

the self rather than an attention to multiple layers at play at once. Take this scene, where George engages with multiple forms of technology, to her mother's dismay:

Six months before she dies...George's mother comes into the living room. It is a Sunday evening. George is watching a programme about the Flying Scotsman, a train from the past, on TV. But because George came in halfway through the programme and missed the beginning, and because it is an interesting programme, she is simultaneously watching it from the start to catch-up on her laptop.

On one screen the train has just broken the hundred-mile-an-hour record. On the other screen the train has been superseded by cars. At the same time George is looking up photobombs on her phone...You, her mother says watching her, are a migrant of your own existence. (194)

This scene plays with tense, moving back and forth in the same twisting that we have seen characterizes the novel's form as a whole. But more than that, this scene depicts simultaneity in the classic contemporary understanding, that sense of doing too many things on too many screens at once. It is crucial to note that it is George's mother who calls George a "migrant of your own existence," enacting the role of parent overly concerned about technology. Her mother asks "Don't you ever want to simplify?...Read a book?...Think about one thing, instead of fifteen all at once?" (195). George answers that "I'm versatile...I'm from the versatile generation. And you're supposed to be the great online anarchist. You should approve of me being so savvy" (ibid). Ironically, George is watching a train here, a paradigm of modernity and the first force of universalized time. George bends time to see past and future at the same time through her simultaneous reading: in 1934, when the Flying Scotsman broke the 100 mph record, and in more modern times, when cars and paved roadways overtook trains as common transport. At the same time, George looks up photobombs on her cell phone, adding yet another screen to the tableau. Yet this scene draws the reader's attention

not just to the dynamic operation of focus but also to many layers within the relationship between George and her mother. Just as George's mother asks whether she can ever escape the single narrative of being "George's mother," George asks her mother whether she can step beyond the "concerned-parent bit" (195) to see her savviness in her layered approach to these texts.

This scene mirrors the double helix and the fresco: the layers of things happening, all at once, confusing narratives of priority. Yet where George's mother can see the simultaneity in the form of the fresco—as an artist and "online anarchist," she herself she is highly attuned to art and its formal possibilities outside of hierarchical structures—she cannot at first see it in her daughter's interactions with technology. George articulates an appreciation for simultaneity as "versatility" here, an adaptation that lets her live effectively and with flexibility. Crucially, George's mother echoes a common contemporary anxiety about simultaneity—that it is distraction, a shallow form of presence—while George can appreciate a multiplicity of screens as a form of usefulness, as a way of being fully present. George is a simultaneous reader, at home in the world of many screens at once, and experiences this not as a lack of attention or a splintering experience, but one that allows her to catch up with what she has missed and see past and present as interconnected, as she watches the program on two timelines. *How to Be Both* stages this scene as a pedagogical intervention, this time of George teaching her mother how to see as she does. George insists to her mother that when she is surrounded by screens, she is not divided from herself, nor is she divided from the people around her. George is attentive to the layers here, and uses this perspective to teach her mother, convincing her to "approve of me being so savvy" (195). Her mother responds that "I don't actually care how many screens you look at at once. I'm just doing my concerned-parent bit. We all have to" (ibid). Where earlier it is George's mother who articulates the importance of fresco layers and their multiplicity, here George is the one teaching her mother to see as she sees, asking her mother to "approve of [her] being so savvy" (ibid). Just like the double helix of the novel, George and her

mother wind around each other as they teach the other to see like they see, a project that is never completed or finished, even when George's mother dies. But their model of teaching each other is curious and open, not seeking to change each other's minds but instead to layer their perspective onto each other's. The layered vision of the fresco is the same layered vision of multiple screens, a way of seeing double as a form of relationality: "nothing's not connected." And the simultaneous vision of these scenes—from grieving to frescoes to multiple screens—aims to teach the readers of *How to Be Both* how to read with attention to this sense of relationality. This idea is embedded in the formal material of the text, in the double helix that connects Francesco and George, Renaissance Italy and contemporary England, to each other. But this double helix structure, as I've insisted, is not a neat trick or marketing ploy of the novel, but its central pedagogical project, a project that becomes complete as the reader becomes attuned to the doubleness inherent in every act of rereading. Rereading emerges in the novel as a social act, a mode of reading that problematizes the idea of a singular reader, who can never see everything all at once on her own. Instead, the reader acts like the strands of DNA, like George and Francesco: she splits and replicates herself, imagining another view outside of her own, a perspective that layers onto her rereading.

Rereading With the Other

How to Be Both uses the double helix form and its antiparallel structure to teach its reader how to read for layers, literally enacting the *how to* of the title. The double helix is not an arbitrary form or an aesthetic emblem, but a theory of reading that *How to Be Both* seeks to teach its reader—its antiparallel form makes it clear that opposition can take place within harmony. Unlike Miller and McCalpin's assertion that you can never read the novel from another perspective, what *How to Be Both* teaches its reader is that there can never be a first or singular reading of the novel to begin with. *How to Be Both* can never be read—it can only be reread. Indeed, even from the "first" reading of the novel, the reader is being taught to see what will come 'later' as what has already happened, just like

George and her simultaneous engagement with the beginning and end of a documentary. The “first” reading of the novel, then, is only ever a reading that draws attention to its own incompleteness and calls to be revisited. Finding a moment of connection between narratives—Francesco seeing George in the Salone dei Mesi, for instance—does not so much answer a question as it opens up more. That is, the system of the novel is so deeply connected, so intrinsically overlapped, that any discovery only leads to more questioning. And these questions can only be answered within the novel itself, which calls the reader back time and time again.

But *How to Be Both* is not interested in making the reader double back and reread forever, recursively, but rather, is interested in showing that even when alone, rereading a text can invite and summon other people, both real and imagined. Returning to the text is a social endeavor, one that involves multiple perspectives, just like Francesco returns to his own painting with the Falcon and can see his own work anew. In the case of *How to Be Both*, we can literally revisit the novel without actually rereading it when we hear of its twinned form. Whether you know the novel is printed in two editions before beginning your reading or find out once you’ve finished, this knowledge invites the reader back to the text, to imagine another reading. Did everyone else see the text’s inversion, or are there readers who have missed the point? What might it have been like to hear from George first? You might literally imagine this reading for yourself, returning to the text in alternate order. You might ask someone else who read the opposite version of the text. You might be inspired to pick the novel up once again. Thus where some critics might mourn the ability to never read *How to Be Both* from another perspective, never able to erase a first reading, they seem to miss the pedagogical point of the novel. *How to Be Both*’s antiparallel form teaches its reader to see from many perspectives at once, to read from different vantage points, insisting that every reading is always incomplete. The form of *How to Be Both* pushes us to imagine another reader, a perfect mirror of ourselves, much like the opposite side of a DNA strand: if I read Francesco then George, I imagine

another reader who has done the very opposite, and I return to the text, whether to literally reread or to imagine a rereading, with this perspective in mind.

The double helix operates not just as the formal principle of *How to Be Both*, but as its method. We can understand the double helix as an emblem of rereading that attends to the layers of otherness within the self. Just like the processes of replication in the DNA strand, rereading moves forward through a constant engine of internal difference. Rereading with others does not mean rereading with literal other people. Instead, we can see rereading as a way of understanding the layering between the self and the other that occur in every act of reading, the same double vision that Francesco sees when he returns to his art with the Falcon, the same simultaneous engagement with screens that George appreciates as her own savviness. As *How to Be Both* illustrates so clearly, this rereading does not require a book to read—rereading happens with paintings, films, TV shows, and memories—with any text that is revisited and re-evaluated. *How to Be Both* ultimately teaches its readers to see rereading as a way of attending to the otherness within the self: like the double helix and its internal difference as a mode of replication, readers split and replicate themselves in rereading. This antiparallel model of rereading unlocks new forms of sociality in rereading, producing an effect of double vision in each reader.

While this sounds like a postcritical reading of reading itself—arguing that an artwork is not fixed in place and in stasis but constantly open to changes and adjustments with each encounter—I want to return to my earlier claim, that this form of rereading with others comes not from theory or an outside perspective, but from *How to Be Both*'s own modeling of rereading and return.²³ While I consider the novel as engaged in a pedagogical project directed to its reader, this teaching in my

²³ For more on postcriticism and *How to Be Both*, see Elisabeth Anker, “Postcritical Reading, The Lyric, and Ali Smith’s *How to Be Both*” and Cara L. Lewis, “Beholding Visuality.” Anker in particular argues that *How to Be Both* “also undertakes a type of unlearning: a forgetting of the habits of reading academic criticism inculcates,” eluding “many conventions of novel criticism, demanding that we bracket off that mindset of critique to harness alternative faculties of reading” (20).

reading refers to the actual possibilities of both-ness in its form, a possibility that critics like Elisabeth Anker write off, since “one can’t digest both halves at once (at least not without complicating things even further!)” (21). Yet complicating things further is precisely the reading *How to Be Both* proposes: attending to the imbrication of self and other in this text is the very method of rereading it sets out to teach. As we have seen, Francesco returns to his fresco with the Falcon, and only at the Falcon’s suggestion does Francesco see the political statement his work has made. Other people have always changed our minds about texts, making new things evident to us, upon return. But what *How to Be Both* uniquely demonstrates is that this return does not have to have real, literal people to change your perspective. You can reread a book by yourself and still interact with imaginary or ideal other readers. You can view a piece of art alone and still feel the presence of someone who introduced you to that artist. The sociality of reading and rereading can occur while alone, can happen anywhere or with anyone, once we recognize the relationality of rereading, the simultaneous layers of new and old, known and unknown.

This sociality occurs in the novel’s most insistent scene of rereading, George’s many visits to see Francesco’s painting of St. Vincent of Ferrer. George skips school twice a week to visit the National Gallery, “where the only painting in this country done by the painter her mother liked is” (289). George’s narration of the painting marks a shift in tense—we move from third person present to second person present, from “George” as the subject to a curious “you.” The passage begins with a reflection on how boring this painting is compared to the others in the gallery:

At first all these pictures by the other people look more interesting than this one, which just looks like another religious picture (first reason not to look) of a rather severe-faced monk (second reason not to look) who’s ready and waiting with his finger up, holding a book up and open in his other hand, with which, both finger and book, it looks like he’ll probably admonish anyone who does stop and look at him (third reason not to look) (290).

Our first introduction to the painting is a curious ekphrasis, a summary ironically punctuated by “reasons not to look.” But the looking continues for several pages, marked by the repetition of “then”: “then you notice that he’s not looking *at* you,” “then there’s the stone road off to the side of him which seems to be changing from road into waterfall as you look,” “then you notice that the saint is standing on a little table” (290-291). The narration feels simple, as if an excited child is telling you what the painting looks like, getting caught up in detail after detail: “Then you notice that the saint is standing on a little table. The table is like a tiny theatre stage. This makes the black cloak-like thing he’s wearing start to look like theatre curtain too” (290). The repetitive “then...then...then...” marks excitement and an attention to the how elements of the painting are related: first you see that, then that, which lets you see this. The second person “you” disappears again into George’s third person as she reflects that her interest in the painting is perhaps because she “has spent proper time looking at this one painting and that every single experience of looking at something would be this good if she devoted time to everything she looked at” (292). The “you” that George narrates the painting to is not really the reader here, but an imaginary other—just like the other reader that the reader of *How to Be Both* imagines reading the text in reverse. George’s return to study the painting is a manner of rereading with other people, an imagined viewer who she can teach how to see the painting, caught up in excitement over how all the pieces fit together. And of course, this is a literal rereading, a return to sustained engagement with a text, a return characterized by picking up on new things every time. (And notably, in this painting, St. Vincent holds up a book, the Bible, with his fingers holding the pages of multiple places at once, again suggesting rereading as a simultaneous engagement with text.) George notes that she “has now been seven times. Each time she’s visited, the monk has seemed less severe...Now when she comes into Room 55, it’s weird, but it’s like she is a meeting an *old friend*” (ibid, emphasis mine). George’s return to study and sit with this painting brings new things into view each time—she is literally reading for the layers here. But not only that,

the painting itself becomes an “old friend,” as George moves from seeing St. Vincent as a schoolmaster, strict and ready to scold, to seeing him as a friend. As the repetitive “reasons not to look” underscore, George’s rereading of this painting is not rational: the painting may at first seem boring and pedantic, but her desire to keep examining it is uniquely social as she is drawn in by the “old friend” in the painting.

For George’s rereading, real people and the memory of real people are just as important as imagined others. It is her mother’s fascination with Francesco’s art that initially draws George to the National Gallery and brings her to the information desk to ask where she can find the painting, an exchange that “delighted” the woman working there as if “George’s asking and their being able to answer her had made their day better” (288). Here again, friendship occurs in what might seem like an individual activity: George’s visiting the painting that her mother likes in fact makes the docent’s day better. The role of other people and their interests, their work, draws George to Room 55 and the painting of a rather severe monk. But more than the people on the page, George’s rereading brings a second person “you” into view, creating an imaginary other not just to share her viewing experience, but to help make sense of it to herself. Even when she is alone (although of course no one is ever alone in a gallery full of guards, visitors, and docents), George rereads the painting with others, others that may include her dead mother and absent friend Helen, but do not seem limited to them. Rereading prioritizes the layers of the reader’s own experience—the reader does not approach the text defamiliarized, a blank slate to encounter the text afresh, but brings baggage, experience, and insight to the text each time. *How to Be Both* teaches its readers to approach reading not as a linear activity, but as an experience of openness, showing many scenes of rereading that depend on revision and return as if to insist that we, too, will come back to this book like George returning to Francesco’s painting. *How to Be Both* works to persuade its reader to embrace rereading, to see that reading is an ongoing process. Like George, the reader is asked to overturn their habitual reading

practices (or at least consider them anew) and pay attention to what emerges in their sightline when they acknowledge the ongoing work and sociality of rereading.

George's return to the painting of Saint Vincent of Ferrer as "*A friendly work of art*" (293, original emphasis) provides a microcosm for this type of rereading. For George, this process of seeing demands sustained attention and presence to what is in front of her: "Today what she sees is the way the rockscape on one side of the saint is broken, rubbly, as if not yet developed, and on the other side has transformed into buildings that are rather grand and fancy. It is as if just passing from one side of the saint to the other will result if you go one way in wholeness and if you go the other in brokenness. Both states are beautiful" (293). The order or form of the painting does not dictate the direction a viewer travels through it: like the antiparallel structure of the double helix, or the Cambridge bike path, or the reader's path through *How to Be Both*, both options remain open. Here George notices the simultaneous form of the painting—the brokenness and wholeness of the setting, that "both states are beautiful"—without foreclosing future interpretation, without imposing a temporal limit to her rereading experience. George's narration of what she sees repeats the word "today," insisting that the way she sees today might be different tomorrow. George's readings of the painting remain open to revision, reimagination, reencounter. Just like the formal simultaneity of Francesco's painting of St. Vincent teaches George to read differently, the reader of *How to Be Both* encounters the simultaneous form, the "mighty twisting thing" of the novel's structure and is transformed by it. By seeing the simultaneity encoded in *How to Be Both*'s form, the reader is invited to reread with other people, an invitation that points to the sociality and continuity of every reading. Like George, we might experience every text as "a friendly work of art" or "an old friend" once we conceptualize rereading as a social process. The pedagogical figures in *How to Be Both*, ranging from Francesco's friends to masters, from George's mother to works of art, all introduce new ways of seeing but crucially find their authority gently dismantled, so that this friendly viewing takes

precedence. *How to Be Both* teaches its reader that rereading is not trying to see everything all at once, on your own, but an experience of imagining another view outside of your own, a perspective that layers onto your own thought, adapting and adding on instead of dividing.

The simultaneous form of *How to Be Both* elicits the figure of the other and provokes a double vision, and this pedagogical project extends to the reader too. The two sections of the novel mean that any reader of *How to Be Both* is in inherent conversation with another reader, a mirrored reader who has read the novel in the opposite direction. The inverted form of the novel shows that another reading might complement your own, helping you to see doubly, attuning you to another way of reading. As we see Francesco and George mirroring each other, *How to Be Both* pushes its reader to imagine their own relation with the figure of the other reader, teaching us how to look for the layers and overlap. And as *How to Be Both* demonstrates through dramatizing returns to artwork and texts, rereading with other people might change the way we read altogether.

If the text's theorization of rereading sounds like deconstruction, with a twist, perhaps that is apt. *How to Be Both* does find resonance in deconstructive theory by Paul de Man and Barbara Johnson that foregrounds repetition with a difference as a critical impulse, a key question for practitioners of literary criticism. In thinking about the potential of deconstructive readings, Barbara Johnson argues that "The surprise of otherness is that moment when a new form of ignorance is suddenly activated as an imperative. If the deconstructive impulse is to retain its vital, subversive power, we must therefore become ignorant of it again and again. It is only by forgetting what we know how to do, by setting aside the thoughts that have most changed us, that those thoughts and that knowledge can go on making accessible to us the surprise of an otherness we can only encounter in the moment of suddenly discovering we are ignorant of it" (Johnson 332). *How to Be Both* elicits the "surprise of otherness," the sense that returning to a text, reading for its internal difference, can show us how incomplete and partial our own knowledge about a text is.

Rereading with others, like seeing double, like the antiparallel double helix form of the novel, all point to a central preoccupation of *How to Be Both* in showing the possibility of simultaneous reading, complicating binaries of sight and blindness, a binary that is often equated with knowing and unknowing. In “The Rhetoric of Blindness,” Paul de Man suggests that blindness in fact can produce insight for critics: “critics’ moments of greatest blindness with regard to their own critical assumptions are also the moments at which they achieve their greatest insight” (109). The critic has to “undo the explicit results of a vision that is able to move toward the light only because, being already blind, it does not have to fear the power of this light. But the vision is unable to report correctly what it has perceived in the course of its journey” (106). What de Man elucidates here is that to write anything at all requires a blindness that is, to a reader, often a source of insight. This is of course deeply paradoxical, a “paradoxical effectiveness of a blinded vision that has to be rectified by means of insights that it unwittingly provides” (ibid), which is one way to think of the deconstructive work that de Man does. Yet while de Man considers the link between knowing and not knowing in a critical context, exploring Derrida’s accidental insights on Rousseau, this dynamic of blindness and insight also offers us a metric to think about reading and the relationship between text and reader, art and viewer, more generally. In *How to Be Both*, Francesco is blind to contexts he has created, “unwittingly,” in his own frescos, just like de Man’s critic. Take, for example, Francesco’s return to his own work—an overt moment of rereading. He sees his fresco in the Palazzo Schifanoia anew through the eyes of the Falcon, the liaison between the fresco artists and the Duke who commissioned it:

in all honesty, when I looked at my own pictures they surprised even me with their knowledge : cause at the same time as I’d been painting these questioning things I’d been telling myself that the Marquis would be just, he’d naturally know and honor my worth and reward me properly for it...cause the life of painting and making is a matter of double

knowledge so that your own hands will reveal a world to you which your mind's eye, your conscious eye, is often blind. (109)²⁴

Here what Francesco has not seen in his own work is the subtle political context that literally paints his patron, the Duke, in a negative light. It is only the presence of another person—a friend—and the attempt to literally see with his eyes, in an overt moment of rereading, that makes this insight in Francesco's own creation clear to himself—that surprises him. Any reading requires a position of ignorance that can never be fully overcome or recognized—yet other perspectives can “lay bare some hint of ignorance one never knew one had” (Johnson 332). Johnson writes that “if I perceive my ignorance as a gap in knowledge instead of an imperative that changes the very nature of what I think I know, then I do not truly experience my ignorance. The surprise of otherness is that moment when a new form of ignorance is suddenly activated as an imperative” (ibid). Ignorance or blindness are not positions to fear or retreat from: figured by de Man and Johnson, they are opportunities for reading and rereading with others, for curious encounters with texts that decenter the self.

Francesco, like George at the National Gallery, becomes attentive to the layers of other perspectives on his rereading. He reflects that “your own hands will reveal a world to you which your mind's eye, your conscious eye, is often blind,” switching to future tense, pointing beyond the present scene with the Falcon to the repeatability of this experience of “double knowledge.”

But crucially in this scene, it is not through forgetting but *remembering* that the novel makes this encounter with otherness possible. By returning to what Francesco knows well, alongside the defamiliarization that another pair of eyes can offer, new layers come into view, without canceling out the others. Johnson holds that a suspension of disbelief, of remaining open to surprise even when you can predict the direction a reading will head in, is the crucial element of the “surprise of

²⁴ These spaced colons are the original typography of the novel. Smith uses these eye-like punctuation marks to make permeable connections between words, invoking the form of an analogy (high : low :: hot : cold) while also opening the direction of the sentence for questioning, invoking a kind of reversibility and open relation.

otherness.” We must train ourselves as critics to forget so that we can remember. But as rereading elucidates, the surprise of otherness occurs regularly when we can think about reading itself as an ongoing, simultaneous process, as when we return to read texts with a deepened awareness of the perspectives of others. It is not in forgetting what you’ve read, but remembering it and holding it alongside new ideas that suggests rereading’s relationality, like the tension that so strikes a young Francesco with wonder and surprise, that “things far away and close could be held together, in the same picture? So there were ways to learn to do such a thing?” (30). Through the double helix, *How to Be Both* gives us a figure for simultaneous reading and rereading, pointing us to see that we don’t have to forget to encounter the text anew—we can remember differently, in new shades and with new characters. This doubling back, this return, accumulates over time, teaching us to be surprised by what we already know, by what we’ve already read. The double helix gives us a model for the open-ended movement of rereading, where the reader imagines another reader as an opposite strand, coming together and pulling apart at once. And in this preoccupation with the double helix as the formal principle of the novel, *How to Be Both* insists that rereading is a perpetual motion. There can be no reading without rereading. Once you learn to pay attention to the layers, it is impossible to stop, to impose temporal limits on reading itself. Far past the boundaries of a closed book cover, *How to Be Both* asks us to see the world like George’s mother, that “nothing’s not connected” (250). We need not forget what we know to be surprised because the act of rereading itself surprises us, exposing the otherness that is always in our own field of vision.

As I have argued, *How to Be Both* complicates the act of reading a novel, suggesting that once we consider reading as a social encounter, the process of reading is never over and can never be begun. To understand rereading as an experience of simultaneity is to explore the nonlinear and ongoing aspects of reading itself, moments that are modeled in *How to Be Both*. Like the double helix of DNA, we can see rereading as a way of being in relation with others and the world around you, a

position of openness rather than a mastery of a text. *How to Be Both* hopes to teach the reader like the friendly work of art teaches George, like the Falcon teaches Francesco, accreting and adding layers to interpretation without negating the readings that have come before. These layers offer a different model of depth: it is not that simultaneity is a shallow form of presence, but one that pays a different sort of attention, reveling in layers and overlap that offer themselves as microcosms of connection across different scales. Rather than being alone with your eyes on the page, reading comes to be seen as a social act that remains open to revision and reimagination. Through its double helix form, *How to Be Both* illustrates how the figure of the other, both real and imagined, is elicited by rereading, an attention to the layering between past, present, and future. If the simultaneous form of *How to Be Both* elicits sociality and even friendship, then as we will see in my next chapter on *If on a winter's night a traveler*, simultaneity can also characterize the distraction of romantic love. Rereading with other people, whether real or imaginary, points to the preoccupation we bring to each reading experience, never arriving to the text as a blank slate but already inscribed by our thoughts and experiences. And what preoccupies every stray thought, colors every experience with its lens, more than the experience of falling in love?

CHAPTER TWO

Reading in Love: *If on a winter's night a traveler* and Kaleidoscopic Form

“Where the heart is really attached, I know very well how little one can be pleased
with the attention of any body else. Everything is so insipid, so uninteresting,
that does not relate to the beloved object.”
– Jane Austen, *Northanger Abbey*

Paying attention in the twenty-first century has become a crucial issue. We are confronted by hundreds of notifications a day, popping up while we do any task: so how can we even begin to read? This chapter offers a way to reconsider the distraction of the contemporary era—and what it might offer readers—by examining Italo Calvino’s *If on a winter’s night a traveler* (*Se una notte d’inverno un viaggiatore*), a 1979 work of metafiction that finds its entire plot in the very mundanity of reading. Our protagonist is “you,” also called “the Reader,” (“Lettore” in Italian) and through his attempts to read a book called *If on a winter’s night a traveler* by Italo Calvino, he meets another Reader (“Lettrice”), called Ludmilla. Together, they encounter the impossibility of reading: *If on a winter’s night a traveler*, like every subsequent novel they pick up, is cut off right when the story gets going. The Reader cannot ever read a book all the way through—in total there are ten novels he attempts to finish, all with different plots, characters, and styles—and he is joined by Ludmilla in this journey. They read novels of political revolution, espionage, family life, academia, and betrayal, and in between, the frame narrative follows the Reader and Ludmilla falling in love as they read. *If on a winter’s night a traveler* is a playful metafiction, an allusion to the constant digression of other famous frame tales, like *One Thousand and One Nights*, as stories only beget more stories.²⁵

²⁵ In her introduction to *The Arabian Nights*, A.S. Byatt writes that Calvino was “fascinated” by not just Scheherazade but by Jorge Luis Borges’ interpretation of the story in “The Garden of Forking Paths,” which follows “that night which is at the middle of the Thousand and One Nights where Scheherazade (through a magical oversight of the copyist) begins to relate word for word the story of the Thousand and one Nights, establishing the risk of coming once again to the night when she must repeat it, and thus on to infinity” (Borges qtd. in Byatt xvii). Calvino “failed to find the episode in any translation of the Nights” but was inspired, in Byatt’s account, by this circular tale. Byatt links this infinity of stories to the chapter from the diary of Silas Flannery, who “wants to write a book that will contain only the pure pleasure of anticipation of the beginning, ‘a book that is only incipit,’ a book with no ending, perhaps like the Arabian Nights” (xviii).

And while the metafictional games of *If on a winter's night a traveler* may characterize it as a quintessential example of the postmodern novel, the text is far more than that: I argue that it takes the shape of a kaleidoscope, a model that figures the overlap, the constant rearranging movement, between distraction and focus. Though this novel was written before the advent of the internet, Calvino's meditations on the elasticity of the novel form in *If on a winter's night a traveler*²⁶ point to early concerns of the computer and the connectedness of the digital world, as Calvino calls *If on a winter's night a traveler* a "hyper-novel," seeing the novel as a "network of possibilities" (*Six Memos*, 147).²⁷ Calvino's novel is best read as an expansive work of metafiction that raises crucial questions about reading as an interface between world and text: in his essay on "Multiplicity" in *Six Memos for the Next Millennium*, he points to the networks that make up people as readers, writing "for who are we, who is each of us, if not a combinatorics of experiences, of information, of things we have read and imagined? Every life is an encyclopedia, a library, an inventory of objects, a pattern book of styles, in which everything can be constantly remixed and rearranged in every possible fashion" (151). The computer's networks resonate not just with the novel, but with the way life itself "can be constantly remixed and rearranged in every possible fashion." Because of this insistence that the form of life and the form of novels come to mirror each other, the vertiginous games of *If on a winter's night a traveler*, the constant rearrangement and digression, can be read anew, in terms of simultaneity.

²⁶ It is worth noting that across his oeuvre, Calvino's novels often take on experimental and formally complex forms too, most obviously *Invisible Cities* (1972), which is made up of description of cities relayed by Marco Polo to Kubla Khan, organized by an invisible and nonlinear logic; and *The Castle of Crossed Destinies* (1973), which takes inspiration from a tarot deck. Even *Mr. Palomar* (1985), which appears a more straightforward vignette novel, in fact has a 3x3x3 pattern, with 27 chapters that are sorted thematically, according to three modes of experience: visual, cultural, and speculative.

²⁷ Calvino was, of course, deeply interested in computers and their role in literature. These questions are evident in *If on a winter's night a traveler*, particularly through the character of Lotaria and her reading practices with digital mining. For more on this, see Jonathan Usher, "Calvino and the Computer as Writer/Reader," where he argues that Calvino sees the computer as a metaphor of literary theory.

In including *If on a winter's night a traveler* in my dissertation, then, I want to foreground a parallel question to my first chapter. If *How to Be Both* demonstrated that simultaneity is not simply another name for the explosive fragmentation of modernism, then *If on a winter's night a traveler* shows us that simultaneity's vision of overlap is not the same as the ironic pastiche of postmodernism either. Linda Hutcheon refers to Calvino's novel as a "complex, parodic text" (89) and notes how the novel's self-referentiality allows it to parody many genres, from "Japanese erotica to Pasternak" (ibid). Yet this vision of Calvino as a purely postmodern writer neglects his conceptualization of life as a text, available to be read and rearranged, like a commonplace book.²⁸ Both modernism and postmodernism fail to describe the way simultaneous fictions use form to foreground the overlap between life and reading, how the textuality of the world comes to bear on reading novels, reading life, and reading the internet. The double helix of *How to Be Both*, like the kaleidoscope of *If on a winter's night a traveler*, are both relatively 'new' shapes, discovered in the early twentieth and nineteenth centuries respectively, and they both problematize sight and the possibility of exact repetition. In both shapes, you cannot guarantee you will see the same thing again. The DNA structure replicates itself in the antiparallel form of the double helix, showing layers that accrete without being resolved. The kaleidoscope, we will see, is a more particular model of a network, as the contained shapes are constantly remixed in new patterns, the mirror beneath the tube making the same fragments larger or smaller with each twist. *If on a winter's night a traveler* thus comes to mirror Calvino's account of life as "an encyclopedia, an inventory of objects, a pattern book of styles, in which everything can be constantly remixed and rearranged in every possible fashion" (*Six*

²⁸ Taxonomizing Calvino as postmodernist also neglects the early modern forms he references and play with, as well as his larger place in Italian literary traditions. Kerstin Pilz writes in "Calvino's (Post)modern Re-evaluation of Cosmogony" that "while Calvino's 'atomised' narratives are on the one hand linked to the postmodern episteme, they are also firmly embedded within the Italian literary tradition, which as he observes, has always been 'povera di romanzieri ma sempre ricca di poeti,'" which translates to 'poor in novelists but always rich in poets' (206).

Memos, 151). Though the materials in the kaleidoscope never change, every iteration is a constant remix of these shapes—a repetition with a difference.

Calling *If on a winter's night a traveler* a kaleidoscope raises inherent questions of focus and distraction. The form of the novel literalizes the fragment and interruption for the Reader. His constant distraction from the book he is reading—whether by regular interruption or plot against him—begins to show us how attention is constituted by distraction and may even be a pleasurable experience. I call this modality ‘immersive distraction,’ naming the simultaneity of focus and distraction in each reading experience. This form of reading is modeled through the novel’s own complex form, which allows us to consider the way layers of experience and anxiety and pleasure accrete in the mind of the Reader as well as us, the readers. *If on a winter's night a traveler* figures a concurrence between attention and distraction, offering us a lens to see that any reading process is always interrupted and distractable, that world and text collide for every reader.²⁹ Immersive distraction gives us new ways to name the simultaneity between focus and attention, particularly in reading: the reader’s eyes might be on the page, but their mind might be in an any number of places. The form of the novel literalizes interruption through the many fragmented novel chapters, never letting us or the Reader read on. This form reminds us that the act of reading in the novel is both distracting and distractible—if we cannot ever reach the fantasy of focus that structures our approach to the novel, it is also true that reading itself is a form of distraction from the world around us. In reading *If on a winter's night a traveler*, we are immersed in a textual world like the kaleidoscope, where the same pieces are rearranged in new patterns and priorities. Reading may take

²⁹ In *Difficult Loves*, the story “The Adventure of a Reader” follows a man, Amedeo, who is reading at the beach when he meets a beautiful woman. Like the Reader of *If on a winter's night a traveler*, Amedeo reflects on how life and books have different realities: “In the book he now found a far fuller and more concrete attachment to reality, where everything had a meaning, an importance, a rhythm. Amedeo felt himself in a perfect situation: the printed page opened true life to him, profound and exciting, and raising his eyes, he found a pleasant but casual juxtaposition of colors and sensations, an accessory and decorative world that couldn’t commit him to anything” (108). Here the ‘real world’ is “decorative,” “an accessory,” while the world of the book is “true life” and “a far fuller and more concrete attachment to reality,” an inversion of the relationships between attention and technology we have today.

us away from tasks we ought to focus on, but it may also bring us to alternate worlds and narratives that sustain us.

All reading is distracted reading, simply because to be focused or distracted depends only on your vantage point, on what the intended object of attention is. Attention is fundamentally a question of relation and intention. We are constantly engaging objects with our attention; what we call distraction is simply an orientation away from one thing—often work or productive tasks—towards another. This contemporary discourse on focus and distraction is not just outdated, but deeply undertheorized, as the conclusions of thinking on attention go unchallenged, largely the domain of mainstream internet writing that also serves as self-help discourse. And who wants to be distracted? Who wouldn't prefer to read a book with great focus instead of half-heartedly reading while also clicking around on Instagram? These fantasies of focus construct contemporary thought about everything from work to leisure, technology to text: focus is good, distraction is bad. Focus is productive, a symptom of us being 'really present' to what's in front of us, while distraction is absent, scattered, splitting our attention between multiple screens. We know that our technology shortens our attention spans, making it harder and harder to pay attention to any one thing. And we know our attention is a commodity, that technology is engineered to keep us rapt and scrolling.³⁰ Particularly in an era of proliferation shortform content like TikTok and Instagram, not to mention the constant connectivity of having internet on our phones or even watches, contemporary discourse is full of anxiety about being distracted, about not being able to pay attention like we did before.³¹ Distraction appears the downside of connection—you can always be reached, but you risk

³⁰ See *The Attention Merchants* by Tim Wu. Wu argues that the constant barrage of social media, ads, and sponsored posts are not accidental, but are exploited by industries that consume human attention as a commodity. He writes, "how we spend the brutally limited resource of our attention will determine those lives to a degree most of us may prefer not to think about. As William James observed, we must reflect that, when we reach the end of our days, our life experience will equal what we have paid attention to, whether by choice or default. We are at risk, without quite fully realizing it, of living lives that are less our own than we imagine."

³¹ A June 2021 article in *The Guardian* boasts a characteristic headline: "I have 'pandemic brain'. Will I ever be able to concentrate again?" Symptoms of 'brain fog' are common pandemic complaints—this article quotes a neuroscientist,

the constant possibility of interruption. But this understanding of distraction as linked to the internet and technology can make focus seem like the primary condition of the human mind—an early, pre-internet mental perfection that cannot be re-achieved without ditching your phone, your Apple watch, even your friends. But were we ever really focused?

Reading, as I've said, provides an apt place to examine our obsession with focus and attention. Focus appears to be the grounds of reading—we cannot delve into reading without paying some sort of attention—and we often read to be immersed or transported. A good book grips us, keeps us up all night to finish it, stays with us after we put it back on the shelf. But what about the books that don't immerse us, the reading experiences where our attention lags, and above all, what about the reader who has more important things on her mind than the book? We might see this reader not as incapable of immersion but immersed in distraction itself. Shifting our focus from technology (for now) to consider the inherent distraction of all reading might reinvigorate the stale binaries contemporary discourse about the internet rests on: reading a book is good, while scrolling on your phone is bad. And more than that, reading a book with focus is a form of presence (which is good) while reading a book distractedly is a form of absence (which is always bad—you are not where you are supposed to be). Instead, *If on a winter's night a traveler* offers us a new model, one that predates the internet, foregrounding the constant distraction of every mind, staging the shifting attention that two seemingly opposite states of mind—paranoia and love—require. For the Reader, as for us, the world outside the book is its own text, and this interconnectedness comes to inform every act of reading. In paranoia and love, attention is constituted by being distracted, by an overarching preoccupation that turns the world into the text you want it to be. This experience of

Mike Yassa, who writes that “the pandemic hasn't merely been a stressful event. It's been a collection of many simultaneous stressors, some of them life-threatening, that have been compounded by disruptions in our physical activity, daily rhythms, and routines, and stretched out over many months.” Disruption, distraction, lack of focus—all regular concerns—have been not just exacerbated, but elongated (“stretched out”) through time.

simultaneity can help us reimagine distraction not as absence from focus, but itself as a form of presence. The immersive distraction of reading is a mode of paying attention to the many layers of text, visible and invisible, that come to structure our experiences. *If on a winter's night a traveler* asks us to consider when distracted reading can be its own source of pleasure, even when it may be frustrating or unproductive. Instead of only counting reading as a finished conquest—I say I've read a book only when I've completed reading every last word of it—*If on a winter's night a traveler* fragments the act of reading, using its kaleidoscopic form to make us to imagine books themselves as instruments of communication with others, the world, and ourselves. As the novel shows, distraction has always been another mode of paying attention, a kaleidoscopic reconfiguration of the same elements into a new shape.

The beginning of *If on a winter's night a traveler* foregrounds distracted reading as the only possible experience of reading. The first encounter of the Reader with the novel mirrors our own reading—we both open the same book, hoping to get into the text, but we are confronted with the impossibility of our fantasies:

You are about to begin reading Italo Calvino's new novel, *If on a winter's night a traveler*. Relax. Concentrate. Dispel every other thought. Let the world around you fade. Best to close the door; the TV is always on in the next room. Tell the others right away, "No, I don't want to watch TV!" Raise your voice—they won't hear you otherwise—"I'm reading! I don't want to be disturbed!" Maybe they haven't heard you, with all that racket; speak louder, yell: "I'm beginning to read Italo Calvino's new novel!" Or if you prefer, don't say anything; just hope they'll leave you alone (3).

The language of concentration and isolation in this passage is particularly striking. Reading at first seems like an activity done best in complete isolation, the voice of the passage dispelling distractions and encouraging the Reader to silence "the others" in favor of focus. Yet what seems like an invitation to focus on the text is underlaid with a strange tension: the sentences in the middle of the paragraph are in the imperative mood, making what should be a casual encounter into a sharp command, telling us and the Reader to "Relax. Concentrate. Dispel every other thought. Let the

world around you fade.” The short sentences accumulate like a list, adding more and more tasks to do in the service of reading. This scene displays focus as a fragile state, a demanding and ultimately unrealistic experience. To read with focus requires quite a lot of work, requires one to listen to an unrelenting voice of authority and isolate from their peers. The opening of *If on a winter's night a traveler* begins to show the incredible effort at stake in focused reading.³²

But where is this authoritative voice coming from? Is this external or internal to the reader? As the passage unfolds, it seems that this voice is both. On one level, the novel's narrator commands us, the external reader. Yet this opening passage also stages the internal Reader's own conversation with themselves. The narrator compels us to “Relax” and “Concentrate,” to “Tell the others right away” that you don't want to watch TV, but these voices also name the reader's internal expectations. The divide between world and text breaks down as the outside world seeps into the practice of reading. Everything outside the novel—the Reader's mood, the sound of the TV, the others nearby—comes to inform what would otherwise appear the pure and original encounter of Reader and text. This is no isolation, since just being alone in a room with a book is to be open to distractions both concrete and atmospheric. If complete focus on the text is taken as the condition of all reading, then from its opening passage, *If on a winter's night a traveler* denaturalizes this condition, showing how difficult and labor-intensive all reading really is. The readerly focus that we strive for is not inherent in the act of reading; it is a condition that must be carefully staked out. This is a scene of conflict, as the Reader must work hard to be left alone to read “in peace,” a condition that will never come. The entire novel stages the Reader's impossible attempts to read a novel called *If on a*

³²This language of ‘effort’ occurs in *Six Memos for the Next Millennium*, the posthumously published book of the lectures Italo Calvino would have delivered at Harvard as the Norton Lectures in 1985. Calvino remarks himself that “the attention necessary for reading was something I developed only later, and with effort” (115). To read necessitates a kind of attention, but the language of “effort” here is striking. This attention to a text is not inherent or natural, but a mode that must be cultivated, through effort and work—and time. Calvino develops this attention “only later,” in a retrospective mode. Read through this lens of effort, scenes of focused reading emerge as constructed or fantastical, just as in the beginning of *If on a winter's night a traveler*.

winter's night a traveler, but of course we, the readers, are reading that very novel. We read the short sentences that command the Reader easily and quickly and we fly through this paragraph, its humor and metafictional games spurring us on to see what happens next. There's a curious doubling here: we, the readers of the Reader, are totally immersed in this opening paragraph. If the Reader's focus is impossible, ours is not. His TV may be on, but ours is not...or not necessarily. Our reading may be interrupted, but the short imperatives of this opening paragraph and its insistent hailing of us through the second person draw the reader in. It is easy to read, though less easy to visualize, since it offers almost no specifics. The Reader could be us, could be anyone, and the impersonal narration asks us to put ourselves in his shoes. The beginning immerses us in narrating distraction itself.

To call distraction 'immersive' implies that there is a particular form of presence that even distraction could offer us, which is a radical departure from our typical language of focus and distraction. Contemporary discourse aligns attention with being present and whole, while distraction tends to be discussed as brokenness or absence. In her incredibly popular self-help/manifesto *How to Do Nothing: Resisting the Attention Economy*, Jenny Odell writes that to 'concentrate' or 'pay attention' implies "alignment: different parts of the mind and even the body acting in concert and oriented toward the same thing. To pay attention to one thing is to resist paying attention to other things, it means constantly denying and thwarting provocations outside the sphere of one's attention. We contrast this with distraction, in which the mind is disassembled, pointing in many different directions at once and preventing meaningful action" (81). In Odell's formulation, to be focused is to be whole and 'aligned,' to have synchronicity between mind and body, to 'resist' those things that might provoke you. It's an experience of purpose: if you are focused, you are doing the thing you should be doing. To be distracted, on the other hand, is a force of 'disassembling,' where the mind points "in many different directions at once" and prevents "meaningful action." Distraction appears as a form of fragmentation, splitting the mind and body apart. Physically, you are here, but mentally,

somewhere else. This distraction occurs at the expense of your meaningful action and participation in relationships, making you less available, less attentive. But as I've insisted, this distraction happens constantly in the regular operations of our minds and has its own immersive qualities. I suggest that Calvino's novel is playing with this same formulation in its novelistic form: the broken and distracted elements of its form in fact create an entirely different account of what the 'whole' of the novel might be. *If on a winter's night a traveler* doesn't deny its fragmentation or disassembly but employs these fragments kaleidoscopically. In turn, this form shows its readers a way to see how the simultaneity of world and text comes to create a new way of reading.

I read the form of *If on a winter's night a traveler* as a kaleidoscope not just because the novel is fragmented, but also because each chapter can be seen as a reconfiguration of the previous chapter: a repetition with a difference, a remixing of the same elements. For instance, the Reader goes to the university to have a novel by a 'Cimmerian' author called "Leaning from the steep slope" translated by Professor Uzzi-Tuzii, only to find a seminar declaring that the novel is a counterfeit of a 'Cimbrian' book, "Without fear of wind or vertigo": both books deal in paranoia, treason and betrayal, close enough in tone that the claim of "Leaning from the steep slope" as counterfeit makes sense. The unknowing narrator who gets caught up in a plot in the first novel shifts into the all-knowing narrator in "Without fear of wind or vertigo," a spy who is double-crossing and being double crossed. The elements of one novel shift into the other kaleidoscopically, layering on top of each other. The kaleidoscope itself is an optical instrument³³ that works by the external hand shaping the sight at the end of the tube: an immersive, if not accurate, form of vision. As Helen Groth's account of the kaleidoscope in the Victorian era reminds us, "the kaleidoscope has always suggested interaction, a dialogue between hand and eye, inside and outside, as the observer turned the tube

³³ The kaleidoscope was invented in 1815 by Sir David Brewster, and Groth notes in particular that he "barely profited from his invention," which was "pirated and endlessly adapted...a mass phenomenon before patent laws" (217).

sending shards of colored glass and fields of light into endlessly novel and fleeting configurations” (217). There’s a dynamism, an ephemerality to the kaleidoscope: Groth writes that to “describe an event or phenomenon as kaleidoscopic evoked a sense of perpetual transformation, in contrast to the spectacular stasis and visual mastery suggested by contemporary popular sensations such as the panorama. The kaleidoscope immersed the observer in a visual field that never allowed the eye to rest, producing a visual effect that tested the limits of verisimilitude” (ibid). Groth’s argument centers the appeal of the kaleidoscope in the nineteenth century and Victorian visual culture, but her historical account of the kaleidoscope as a dynamic optical instrument, particularly one suggestive of a “dialogue between hand and eye, inside and outside” is vitally important to understanding Calvino’s novel as a kaleidoscope. The kaleidoscope as a form centers the interaction between multiple scales, imagining the reflections of “shards of colored glass and fields of light” as having almost infinite potential to be thrown into “endlessly novel and fleeting configurations” by the hand that turns. As Groth insists, the kaleidoscope is immersive, the viewer “immersed” in a “visual field that never allowed the eye to rest, producing a visual effect that tested the limits of verisimilitude.” For the reader, as for the Reader, encountering the kaleidoscopic form of *If on a winter’s night a traveler* enacts this same immersion, a dynamic shifting from one thing to the next, producing a novelistic effect that indeed pushes the limits of verisimilitude, of what one novel can represent.

And we should note, the figure of the kaleidoscope comes from *If on a winter’s night a traveler* itself: the named chapter (one of the ten fragmented novel beginnings) “In a network of lines that intersect” begins with the image of a mirror, since our narrator “cannot concentrate except in the presence of reflected images” (161) and collects kaleidoscopes:

The moment I put my eye to a kaleidoscope, I feel that my mind, as the heterogenous fragments of colors and lines assemble to compose regular figures, immediately discovers the procedure to be followed: even if it is only the peremptory and ephemeral revelation of a rigorous construction that comes to pieces at the slightest tap of a fingernail on the side of the tube, to be replaced by another, in which the same elements converge in a dissimilar pattern. (161)

Here the narrator of “In a network of lines that intersect” highlights the ephemerality of the kaleidoscope, the instability of the image at the end of the tube—at any moment it can be disrupted, replaced with a new image out of the same pieces. And this instability draws our attention to the dissolving borders between outside and inside, world and text: it is the “slightest tap of a fingernail of the side of the tube” that upends the interior image. The outside, in the form of a tiny fingernail, comes to bear on the meaning of the inside, but similarly, the image of the kaleidoscope comes to work on the mind of the narrator. The kaleidoscope as an optical instrument comes to name the layered and simultaneous operations of the mind, which reads on multiple scales at once. The kaleidoscope insists that every thought of the narrator’s is redoubled as his mind “immediately discovers the procedure to be followed.” There’s a double meaning in this discovery of being ‘followed’: the doubling of reflection, but also the paranoia of being followed. It fits, since this chapter “In a network of lines that intersect,” is a doubling of the same elements of a previous chapter called “In a network of lines that enlace.” Both chapters have paranoid narrators who are convinced (and rightly so) that they are being watched and followed. These elements are broken up to “converge in a dissimilar pattern,” recurring and remixing into each other kaleidoscopically, mirroring the layers of distraction in these narrator’s minds. This is repetition with a difference, a kaleidoscopic remixing of the same elements that immerses the reader.

The same kind of kaleidoscopic shifting that breaks down the lines between inside and outside is at play in the novel’s own theorization of distraction and focus. Like the kaleidoscope, *If on a winter’s night a traveler* works expansively (almost infinitely!) within a limited focus: the kaleidoscope is contained at the end of a mirrored tube, and its components can only be mixed and remixed only in there. Yet within the limited scope of the tube, the possibilities of formations below are almost endless: the “endlessly novel and fleeting configurations” Groth theorizes. Everything within the kaleidoscope contributes to form, every part related to the whole, however ephemeral.

Each tiny shape of glass is shuffled around and reflect to create something totally new with the same elements within the existing parameters. And if the physical kaleidoscope gives us something “endlessly novel,” *If on a winter’s night a traveler* gives us endless novels, each completely different yet often using the same components of what came before, just mixed up differently. A novel about a narrator oblivious to an escape plot he is acting in is followed by another where a narrator is only too aware of a betrayal happening, unable to think about anything else. These beginnings of novels don’t relate in a straightforward, symmetrical way that builds, but they clearly have a similarity that feels very familiar to the reader. We could read this as the déjà vu so characteristic of postmodernism, but the kaleidoscope does something more interesting—it doesn’t just make us think paranoically that we’ve heard this before, though of course it does, but shows how the novel is invested in its own form, limiting itself to the same affects and events, so that each chapter always has common elements. Calvino’s own definition of *If on a winter’s night a traveler* as a “hypernovel” ends up sounding just like this: “my aim was to give the essence of what a novel is by providing it in concentrated form, in ten beginnings; each beginning develops in very different ways from a common nucleus, and each acts within a framework that both determines and is determined” (*Six Memos*, 120). This ‘common nucleus’ within a determining and determinative framework is kaleidoscopic, a way of taking one shape (or set of shapes) and refracting it, allowing it to develop in “very different ways” from one origin. In the kaleidoscope, as in the chapters of *If on a winter’s night a traveler*, every fragment is in relation to others, each developing in different ways from the same origin. The movement of the tube is like the turning of the page, as fragments rearrange in different orders and priorities, getting bigger or smaller, closer or farther from each other: everything is repeated, just never in the same exact manner.

The form of *If on a winter’s night a traveler* displays this kaleidoscopic quality by its fragmented beginnings, which, in the end, turn out to be parts of a whole. Strung together, all the named

chapters form not their own novels, but one sentence: “If on a winter’s night a traveler, outside the town of Malbork, leaning from the steep slope without fear of wind or vertigo, looks down in the gathering shadow in a network of lines that enlase, in a network of lines that intersect, on the carpet of leaves illuminated by the moon around an empty grave— What story down there awaits its end?—he asks, anxious to hear the story” (258). Here we have the whole—and the hole of the “empty grave” at the center—but first we encounter it split into parts, as if this sentence is twisted in a kaleidoscope, giving us the chapters in splintered form. The lack of direction constructs the novel kaleidoscopically; unlike a labyrinth, which would suggest the novel has a direction or a way out, here we have layers that accumulate and shift. We cannot find our way out of this sentence, which doesn’t really end: it lacks punctuation and the closing image of the sentence is one of waiting, of anxiety to hear the story. And in fact, the action of the titular sentence is of looking down onto something that sounds exactly like a kaleidoscope: the traveler looks down onto “a network of lines that enlase” and “a network of lines that intersect” all on “the carpet of leaves illuminated by the moon,” around an empty spot—a grave. At the center is a common nucleus from which expands two networks of lines, atop the carpet of leaves which are illuminated. What we see, along with the conditional traveler of the title, is in fact the kaleidoscopic form of the novel, the many layers that make it up, broken up into fragments.

As I insisted in my chapter on *How to Be Both*, the form of simultaneous fictions teach us something about reading, something beyond their own intricate forms. In staging the simultaneity between attention and distraction, then, the kaleidoscope³⁴ of *If on a winter’s night a traveler* teaches us about the immersive distraction that constitutes all reading. To read like *If on a winter’s night a traveler*

³⁴ I privilege the form of kaleidoscope as a more particular form of the network not only because of its reflective qualities, but also because I think the kaleidoscope and its negative space provides a more apt figure of fragmentation. In a network, everything is connected, all points in conversation with each other, however distant. In a kaleidoscope, each fragment sometimes collides or overlaps, but other times not. The mirror at work in the kaleidoscope twists and turns, taking one shape and then warping it into a recurring vision, a mobility and constant movement. Though the network is likewise relational, the kaleidoscope points more insistently to how these relations move, change, and warp.

is to attend to moments, themes, and affects that recur and remix, shaken up into new configurations that give the reader the *déjà vu* of postmodern fiction, as well as something more. The novel insists that we read this kaleidoscope not as cerebral or ‘coldly luminous,’ not merely playing games, but an intimate form. The second-person tense of the frame narrative, narrated to “you,” the Reader, brings us closer as readers. We find ourselves, our reading styles and preoccupations, reflected and refracted in the text. And there are many readers besides our Reader in the text, all with different styles: one uses a computer to mine a text, another reads closely to write fake novels in translation, and yet another reader is an academic who reads in dramatically theoretical ways. The real action of the novel in its frame narrative is about reading—more particularly, the difficulty and occasional impossibility of reading. The kaleidoscope, itself a complicated reflection, attends to the doubleness of the text without reducing its complexity, its erratic way of remixing and remaking the same thing into something that looks totally new. But how does this form interact with us as readers? What does *If on a winter's night a traveler* want to teach us about reading?

It's my contention that Calvino's novel helps us understand the role of distraction in the reading process, the way reading makes visible the simultaneity between world and text that always occurs in the mind of the reader. The novel allows us to immerse ourselves in distraction. Like the opening chapter, which hooks our readerly attention onto a reader who cannot get started reading, *If on a winter's night a traveler* stages distraction not as an experience of loss or confusion, but a mode of reading that we are always engaging in. In what follows, I examine two particular modes of reading that the novel engages in—love and paranoia—as a way of considering immersive distraction as the dominant mode of reading *If on a winter's night a traveler*, and indeed, as the dominant mode of all reading. Love gives us one prime example—a pleasurable and delightful one—of how to read for the layers not just in the text, but between your life and your books. Like the kaleidoscope, the

immersion of being in love can change your reading, shaping how you view the inside of the text as well as how you view your life. Reading in love shows distraction and focus breaking down into each other, finding pleasure in interruptions, digressions, and delays. As we'll see, paranoia gives us another example of distracted reading, showing how close attention to the world and text can show us that we were right all along, our suspicions come true. We could track reading in love and paranoid reading alongside the infamous divide between “paranoid and reparative reading” put forth by Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, further adopted and advanced by postcritical theorists like Rita Felski and Sharon Marcus, but Calvino's novel shows us how those very divisions break down. Just as distraction and focus bleed into each other for a reader, love and paranoia come to constitute each other as well—they are reconfigured into each other kaleidoscopically, the same elements in different orders.

Reading in Love

I want to highlight the active role that distraction plays for the reader before turning to love, then paranoia. And the reader is at the center of many of Calvino's texts, which ask the reader to work or think actively while reading. Carolyn Springer's account of Calvino's earlier novel *Invisible Cities* (*Le Città Invisibili*, 1974) notes that Calvino “abandoned linear schemes of development,” leaving the reader free to “traverse and explore the text in any order he pleases,” even “filling in the blank pages, imagining and composing his own cities in the margins” (293). There is an active compulsion for the reader of *Invisible Cities*: they are invited to fill in the blanks of the text, compose their own cities, move through the text in any order. For Springer, the arbitrary order is the chief form of *Invisible Cities*, since the descriptions of cities “are totally interchangeable, lacking plot, incident, or character, indifferent to the coordinates of space or time—multiple views assembled from one kaleidoscope of attributes and properties” (ibid). If *Invisible Cities* invites the reader to this action alongside the Khan and Marco Polo, notably figured as “multiple views assembled from one

kaleidoscope of attributes and properties,” then *If on a winter's night a traveler* also relies on its reader to experience the text kaleidoscopically. But imagine actually seeing someone reading a book out of order, flipping through the pages at random. You would imagine their reading to be scattered, distracted, incomplete. But as Springer argues, this reader is actually active and attentive. Distracted from the plot, but focused on what the novel can offer: this reader is engaging with the novel's form in the very way the novel seems to ask to be read.

Of course, this runs counter to our usual vision of what reading novels can do for us. The active role of the reader, recruited by Calvino's divergent forms to help the novel make meaning, is perhaps untraditional as a theory of reading—particularly a theory of reading novels. Novels are typically forms that traffic in immersion, written to capture our attention, not to inspire distraction. Calvino himself defines the novel in *The Written World and the Unwritten World* as “a gripping narrative...a technique for capturing the attention of readers, by having them live in a fictitious world and take part in events with a strong emotional charge, and by forcing them to keep reading because they're curious about ‘what happens next’” (28, emphasis his). And notably, it is this ‘captured attention’ that erases the difference between screen and book for Calvino: “It should be said that, apart from the substantial differences between reading—always ‘effortful,’ with pauses, and critical—and sitting like an idiot watching television, this danger of ‘capturing’ the reader already existed in the traditional novel...and was a reason for its unmatched fascination” (ibid). While the reader must exert effort to read, there is also a ‘danger’ for the reader of novels, the risk of capture. If you really get going in a novel, perhaps you will never stop reading. This is another image of the kaleidoscopic shifting between focus and distraction, as the reader may become captured, focused only on the novel, distracted from the world. But while Calvino's other works—namely *Mr. Palomar* and *Difficult Loves*—stage these immersive readings, this kind of gripping and capture is not figured in the same way for the Reader of *If on a winter's night a traveler*. For every novel we get in the text, the

Reader finds it interrupted, often at the moment where he has just settled in, gotten used to the style, wondering what will happen next. And still, *If on a winter's night a traveler* is a novel, one that does take us captive and hold our attention, even as we read about a distracted Reader. As readers, we are immersed in a plot about nothing but distraction, figured by the splintered kaleidoscopic form and its nonlinearity.

The novel's obsession with beginnings echoes Calvino's formulation of *If on a winter's night a traveler* as a hypernovel, as he aims to "give the essence of what a novel is by providing it in concentrated form, in ten beginnings" (*Six Memos*, 120). As the character of the 'famous writer' Silas Flannery writes in his diary,

The romantic fascination produced in the pure state by the first sentences of the first chapter of many novels is soon lost in the continuation of the story: it is the promise of the time of reading that extends before us and comprises all possible developments. I would like to be able to write a book that is only an *incipit*, that maintains for its whole duration the potentiality of the beginning, the expectation still not focused on an object. But how could such a book be constructed? Would it break off after the first paragraph? Would the preliminaries be prolonged indefinitely? Would it set the beginning of one tale inside another, as in the *Arabian Nights*? (177).

The beginning of reading here is "romantic," a "pure state" that is "lost" when the book continues. Flannery wants to write a book that layers these beginnings. Of course there's an irony in his desire, fulfilled by the very book we are reading: we readers have already read 177 pages of a novel that does just that. But this obsession with the "promise of the time of reading" is really an obsession with focus: the "potentiality of the beginning" is the only time the reader is distracted, "the expectation still not focused on an object." Distraction here sounds like presence—a way to be attuned to what the book is doing without worrying about what it will do, how it will end. It's a reading like Springer advocates for in *Invisible Cities*, but this theorization doesn't come from outside of the text—it's the novel's own meditation, the only time a writer has his say, on how to read. This reading practice is a porous state, an openness to the simultaneity of attention and distraction, a way of reading without demanding payoff or logical development.

But we would be wrong to say that the kaleidoscopic form of the novel is somehow ‘distracted’ in its fragmentation, or makes us more distracted than any other reading does. The ten novel chapters and the frame narrative of the Reader and Ludmilla are not about losing focus in the reading process, but external forces—generally other people and their various plots—making their reading impossible. Their attention as readers does not wither away: instead, we find the Reader even more determined to find the novel he originally set out to read. This readerly investment itself is multiple: the Reader wants to read the book because he’s interested, but also because the book becomes an interface between him and Ludmilla, a meditation of a growing romantic relationship. Once he meets her, the Reader reflects on the difficulty of reading:

You try to re-establish perfect calm in order to sink again into the book; you stretch out your legs, you draw them back, you stretch them again. But something has changed since yesterday. Your reading is no longer solitary: you think of the Other Reader, who, at this same moment, is also opening the book; and there, the novel to be read is superimposed by a possible novel to be lived, the continuation of your story with her, or better still, the beginning of a possible story (32).

Here the Reader—you—has to change between two scales that at first seem separate: the world and the book. But the Reader is distracted by the thought of the Other Reader reading; he is attending to both the narrative potential of the text and the narrative potential of his life. His reading superimposes the “possible novel to be lived,” a perfect distillation of the kaleidoscopic lens of reading in love, which turns the Reader’s relationship with Ludmilla into text. Both love and reading are encounters with unwritten mental narratives, thinking about what has happened and what might happen. Yet the language of “superimposition” in this passage is crucial. It is not that the Reader is distracted from reading and ceases one activity to fully daydream, but that these two activities coexist at once—they are simultaneous. Both the novel to be read and the novel to be lived (that is, the experience of love) are contemporaneous to each other, deconstructing what we might think of as distraction and focus. The Reader doesn’t toggle between Ludmilla and book but superimposes them together, a layering that is pleasurable and even generative, as in the immersion of the

kaleidoscope, where the external (his falling in love) twists the material of the internal (the text he's reading). The Reader thinks about the "beginning of a possible story," the narrative of the future, one that exists right alongside his reading. His life layers right onto the text, becoming another narrative that can be read—both life and text become more immersive to experience, not less.

When the Reader first meets Ludmilla, the Other Reader, this moment is framed as a change not just in relations but in textuality: "This is how you have changed since yesterday, you who insisted you preferred a book, something solid, which lies before you, easily defined, enjoyed without risks, to a real-life experience, always elusive, discontinuous, debated. Does this mean that the book has become an instrument, a channel of communication, a rendezvous? This does not mean its reading will grip you less: on the contrary, something has been added to its powers" (32). The binary between real life—confusing, discontinuous, hard to grasp—and a book—concrete, well-defined, uninterrupted—is blurred by meeting the Other Reader. This modeling of simultaneity confirms its additive power. Rather than the book being corrupted with the introduction of another thing, "something has been added to its powers"—it grows even more immersive. As the book becomes "an instrument, a channel of communication, a rendezvous," it draws the Reader in more, not less. But again, this is not a swap from focus to distraction. *If on a winter's night a traveler* insists that the two experiences layer on to each other for the Reader. When the Reader gets Ludmilla's phone number, he leaves the bookstore with "two different expectations, and both promise days of pleasant hopes; the expectation contained in the book—of a reading experience you are impatient to resume—and the expectation contained in that telephone number—of hearing again the vibrations, at times treble and at time smoldering, of that voice, when it will answer your first phone call in a short while, in fact tomorrow, with the fragile pretext of the book, to ask her if she likes it or not, to tell her how many pages you have read or not read, to suggest to her that you meet again..." (ibid). There are two webs of textuality here: the narrative of the novel that the Reader is "impatient to

resume” and the story he is already crafting about the telephone number he has been given. The book acts as “pretext,” an instrument of communication between the two Readers. This chapter reflects pithily, “What is more natural than that a solidarity, a complicity, a bond should be established between Reader and Reader, thanks to the book?” (32).

The Reader’s experience highlights the distinct pleasure of reading in love, the ways falling in love might not pull you from reading but instead draw you into a text, with a new lens. This is, of course, exactly the immersive distraction I’ve been tracing, and one that is typically full of pleasure. From the opening chapter, we see that for all the focus that the Reader tries to generate, the distractions of reading have their own distinct pleasure: “this circling of the book, too, this reading around it before reading inside it, is a part of the pleasure in a new book, but like all preliminary pleasures, it has its optimal duration if you want it to serve as a thrust toward the more substantial pleasure of the consummation of the act, namely the reading of the book” (9). The sexual language here is unmistakable, framing the “reading around it” as foreplay before the “thrust” of the “more substantial pleasure of the consummation of the act.” Yet even this consummation is undercut by the text: reading this novel never really begins, not in any real sense—like Scheherazade in *One Thousand and One Nights*³⁵, the Reader doesn’t ever find the novel he was looking for. Continuity is constantly interrupted in favor of more and more stories. The Reader tries to shore himself up against any and all distraction, but that very process of “circling” the book, “reading around it before reading inside it” becomes a source of pleasure in its own right—not just for us, who find it entertaining to read, but for the Reader himself. This makes us wonder: when does the act of reading really begin? This circling is set up as a “preliminary pleasure,” but it is still reading—

³⁵ *One Thousand and One Nights* is of course an important intertext of *If on a winter’s night a traveler*, the paradigmatic frame narrative. The text interestingly stages distraction from life and focus on a text as a matter of life and death, as Scheherazade’s stories save her again and again.

“reading around it before reading inside it.” Indeed, the kaleidoscopic form of *If on a winter's night a traveler* sets up a reading that finds pleasure in distractibility, as well as in the frustrations of reading the wrong book or being cut off right when it gets good. After all, it is the text's continual interruption that brings the two Readers together. At first, the problem with the diegetic *If on a winter's night a traveler* is a question of binding; the novel has been bound wrong, with the same signatures inserted so that every 32 pages repeats exactly. The version we read, by contrast, is a kaleidoscope: a repetition with a difference, that reminds us that the same elements have recurred and been reshuffled in a new order.

Reading in love is one model of immersive distraction, and one that appears pleasurable. But we should be careful not to link pleasure to something like continuity or completion—the nonlinear form has its own particular pleasures. Remember Odell's framing of distraction as one “in which the mind is disassembled, pointing in many different directions at once and preventing meaningful action” (81). The action Odell is referring to here is collective action, like strikes and other modes of refusal, but it's easy to map this same schema on to *If on a winter's night a traveler*. In this typical consideration of distraction, we would have to say that meaningful action is prevented—and it's true that the Reader and Ludmilla are stuck in this disassembled state, unable to read their book, always interrupted right at the climax. But our Reader finds this distraction a source of pleasure, despite its frustration. Chapter seven begins with the Reader, “you,” at a café,

reading the Silas Flannery novel Mr. Cavedagna has lent you and waiting for Ludmilla. Your mind is occupied by two simultaneous concerns: the interior one, with your reading, and the other, with Ludmilla, who is late for your appointment. You concentrate on your reading, trying to shift your concern for her to the book, as if hoping to see her come toward you from the pages. But you're no longer able to read, the novel has stalled on the page before your eyes, as if only Ludmilla's arrival could set the chain of events in motion again (140).

Here the Reader reflects on his two “simultaneous concerns,” the interior one (reading) and the other one (Ludmilla), finding himself unable to read. Ludmilla comes to stand in the way of the

pages being read,³⁶ but as I've insisted, the novel does not rest with this cliched conclusion. The novel's models immersive distraction here, too: the Reader awaits the presence of Ludmilla who could "set the chain of events in motion again," the Reader noting that her appearance would make the text pick back up, not slow down. He attempts to "shift his concern for her to the book," his overlapping states of mind pulling him back to the text, not away from it. What we would think of as distraction—the arrival of another person who could tear you from your book—is in fact an experience of focus, of the plot picking back up. Yet in this simultaneous reading, between "interior" and "other" concerns, there is a lack of climax, a constant interruption that does not allow the Reader to "get to the end satisfactorily" (31). The Reader is interrupted, delayed, looking for Ludmilla to join him in person rather than in his mind. The form of the novel depends on and exploits this sexual tension, a tension inherent on delay, frustration, interruption: "What is the central theme that recurs in your variations and modulations? A tension concentrated on not losing anything of its own potential, on prolonging a state of reactivity, on exploiting the accumulation of the other's desire in order to multiply one's own charge?" (154). The "meaningful action" that Odell imagines that attention makes possible is constantly thwarted. But it is not at the expense of pleasure: the kaleidoscopic delays here resist a linear model that tends towards completion, instead offering a more iterative, even feminine, model of desire. There's nothing to accomplish in linear fashion: *If on a winter's night a traveler* thwarts consummation and thrust in favor of a repetitive circling, a "prolonged state of reactivity" that comes to stand for distraction and its particular pleasures.

³⁶The preoccupation and focus of being in love can change how time is metabolized, how one writes and thinks and above all, *reads*. This concern haunts much literature: like Austen's Catherine Morland, whose wandering attention from her book is the premise of this chapter's epigraph, or Joyce's young protagonist in "Araby," who finds it impossible to read with the thought of his beloved on his mind: "At night in my bedroom and by day in the classroom her image came between me and the page I strove to read." Contemporary literature also has many resonances of the obsessive quality of thought that comes with falling in love. For some recent examples, see Elif Batuman, *The Idiot* (2018) and *Either/Or* (2022), Alyssa Songsirdej, *Little Rabbit* (2022), Lillian Fishman, *Acts of Service* (2022).

When the two Readers finally do sleep together, in the climactic chapter seven, their sex is staged like reading. The lovers become “the object of reading” for each other, both using “all the poor alphabets by which one human being believes at certain moments that he is reading another human being” (155). These “poor alphabets” point to the limit of language to convey experience, romantic or sexual or simply intense, but the Readers don’t stop there. The internal/external boundary that is broken down here also points to how language moves and connects these two Readers—the outside system of language comes inside their relationship, and even in their bodies:

Lovers’ reading of each other’s bodies (of that concentrate of mind and body which lovers use to go to bed together) differs from the reading of written pages in that it is not linear. It starts at any point, skips, repeats itself, goes backward, insists, ramifies in simultaneous and divergent messages, converges again, has moments of irritation, turns the page, finds its place, gets lost. A direction can be recognized in it, a route to an end, since it tends toward a climax, and with this end in view it arranges rhythmic phases, metrical scansion, recurrence of motives. But is the climax really the end? Or is the race toward that end opposed by another drive which works in the opposite direction, swimming against the moments, recovering time? (156)

We should not miss the language of focus and distraction that coincide here: a “concentrate” of mind and body that allows the two readers to go to bed together, resulting in “simultaneous and divergent messages.” The passive voice attributed to directionality—“a direction can be recognized in it”—emphasizes the linearity as arbitrary, an external imposition of meaning, again drawing our attention to the potential and the state of reactivity of feminine pleasure. Unlike focus and its sense of directionality, the novel undercuts the climax in favor of the constant rearranging of the kaleidoscope, its limitless potential. The passage continues:

If one wanted to depict the whole thing graphically, every episode, with its climax, would require a three-dimensional model, perhaps four-dimensional, or, rather, no model: every experience is unrepeatable. What makes lovemaking and reading resemble each other most is that within both of them times and spaces open, different from measurable time and space (ibid).

These two passages crucially frame these questions of love and reading in ways that sound kaleidoscopic: a three- or four-dimensional model, a model that can represent that ‘unrepeatability’

of it all. The Reader and Ludmilla's attention to each other—their *reading* of each other—distracts them from the rest of the world. Here an immersive reading experience is, necessarily, a nonlinear one: “it starts at any point, skips, repeats itself, goes backward, insists, ramifies in simultaneous and divergent messages, converges again, has moments of irritation, turns the page, finds its place, gets lost” (ibid). This is a narration of focus, but it sounds very much like distraction: getting lost, going back, starting at any point. Like the reader of *Invisible Cities* who skips around, if we saw someone reading this way, with these “moments of irritation,” we would label them a distracted reader. Yet this is the most immersive, most focused moment of reading that *If on a winter's night a traveler* offers. Again, distraction and focus constitute each other, kaleidoscopic repetitions of the same elements with limitless potential but totally unique: “every experience is unrepeatable.” This graphic model points us back to the role of the kaleidoscope, its shifting reflection and refraction that offers us not a linear narrative but a fragmented one, meaning that comes through “in simultaneous and divergent messages,” these repetitions with difference.

Reading's Paranoia

But curiously, the chapters following these meditations on love and sex and how to represent them for the Reader and Ludmilla do not concern love or sex or even the two Readers together. Instead, we get several spy novels and the only frame chapter that decenters the Reader, chapter eight, which is “from the diary of Silas Flannery” (169). Why follow a compelling articulation of love and its textuality with spies, with political and literary plots? After all, these next chapters contain the most paranoid novel excerpts in *If on a winter's night a traveler*, staging kidnappings and heists from the perspective of those pursued and those pursuing. This is not an accident, and nor is it simply an exercise in the novel's postmodern paranoia. Instead, I argue that these chapters provide the most compelling examples of Calvino's form: the kaleidoscope, a network of lines that jumble together to be shaken up in new forms. The intimacy of chapter seven

gets rearranged, kaleidoscope-style, into a new scene with similar ingredients, morphing the pleasurable distraction of love into the anxious distraction of paranoia, of feeling caught in a plot. We can see both love and paranoia as modes where attention is constituted by distraction, an immersion that is generative, even if fragmenting. It's my hope that the bleed between love and paranoia, at least on the scale of attention and focus, can give us some language to reimagine distraction in the process of reading, showing how being split between many places at once can be generative, its own form of presence.

I've insisted that *If on a winter's night a traveler* is a plot about love and reading, accounting for how loving someone may layer their presence right on top of the book you're reading. But it's equally possible—and the consensus of much scholarship—that the novel is also about postmodern paranoia, the feeling of being caught in a plot that feels too familiar. Like the kaleidoscopic breakdown between distraction and focus for the Reader, love and paranoia bleed together too. Right alongside the intimacy of Reader and Other Reader, the diegetic novels in *If on a winter's night a traveler* are full of political plots, spies, and detectives, all genres that also figure distraction as a way of understanding life as a web of textuality, an immersive story you can't help but read. And of course paranoia is the shadowy underside of simultaneity: if everything you see is connected and layered, it could all be part of a secret system that orders your life. Seeing everything as layered might offer connection, but it might also offer a constant thread to grasp and follow, unendingly. And this frame of mind is just as distracting as love, and can even be the kaleidoscopic reconfiguration of love itself. In the frame narrative, Reader sees himself caught in an international plot about censorship, forgery, and state control of reading—and at the center is a nameless woman he can't help but see as Ludmilla. His love makes him paranoid: like a lover, he conjures her everywhere, and like a paranoid, he assumes everyone is out to get him, by their seducing of Ludmilla. Paranoia, like love, asks the Reader for a particular quality of attention that transforms the world into text, a

projection of a possible future that is just as readable as a novel. That is, if the Reader is also reading a love story—of his and Ludmilla’s—while he reads any given novel, he is also reading a story of spies, international plots, and more—which somehow also centers Ludmilla.

The twinning of these two modes—love and paranoia—is best seen in their physical placement in the novel. If the seventh chapter is the climax of the novel, so is the eighth chapter, which is comprised of the diary of Silas Flannery. In Calvino’s own graphic representation of the novel, recounted in his essay for the Oulipo group called “How I Wrote One of My Books,” the novel is made up of semiotic squares that form a pyramid. He locates the climax of *If on a winter’s night a traveler* in both chapters seven and eight, each made of eight semiotic squares, the most of any chapter. These two chapters mirror each other, one showing the Reader motivated by love and lust (the sexual encounter we just read) while the other is the diary of Silas Flannery, a writer motivated by paranoia and anxiety. But this mirroring is anything but straightforward or reliable: the semiotic squares have the same shape and height but are composed of different elements: take the first squares, for example. Chapter seven begins with “The female reader (L) is never satisfied with the book she is reading (l) / The books she reads mean nothing to the non-reader (l) / The non-reader feels at home in a house full of books (M) / A house full of books contains the story of the female reader (L). The non-reader and the female reader are complementary to one another. It is difficult to find a book in house filled with books” (11). Chapter eight’s first square is similar but different: “The author (A) takes the female reader (L) as his model / The female reader abandons herself to the pleasure of reading (l) / The pleasure of reading knows nothing about the fatigue of writing (é) / The fatigue of writing torments the author. The female reader knows nothing of the fatigue of writing. The author has forgotten the pleasure of reading” (13). The same elements—a preoccupation with Ludmilla and her reading habits, the potential pleasure of reading, what books mean outside of their usual contexts—recur in both chapters, remixed and reconfigured

kaleidoscopically. In both, we see that attention fixed on Ludmilla serves to distract the Reader and Flannery, who are both attuned to her reading practices. If the pleasure of chapter seven becomes the paranoia of chapter eight, it's not that pleasure is replaced by paranoia: instead, they coexist, layered together. The all-consuming paranoia of Flannery still sees Ludmilla and her reading as his 'model,' since he is distracted from the pleasure of reading she embodies, attuned only to his fatigue in writing.

As the semiotic squares allude, Silas' diary begins by his recounting spying on a young woman—who, like the Reader, we think sounds suspiciously like Ludmilla—reading outside. He feels he can see her reading: “In this thin, transparent air I feel able to perceive in her unmoving form the signs of that invisible movement that reading is, the flow of gaze and breath, but, even more, the journey of the words through the person, their course or their arrest, their spurts, delays, pauses, the attention concentrating or straying, the returns, that journey that seems uniform and on the contrary is always shifting and uneven” (169). This is, of course, a compelling articulation of the nonlinearity of reading and its distraction, these delays and pauses part of a process “that seems uniform and on the contrary is always shifting and uneven.” Flannery sees this invisible movement in reading, but also in his own life: despite (or perhaps because of) his own voyeurism, Flannery himself feels that he is constantly being watched. Flannery reads many plots moving around him: a troop looking for extraterrestrials, a translation scheme in Japan that passes off ghostwritten fakes of Flannery's novels, thieves jumping out of his window at night with pages in hand. His paranoia acts like the Reader's love for Ludmilla, distracting and immersing him, all at once. The consuming distraction of paranoia does not replace his central question, which is the inverse of the Reader's: Flannery wonders what book he would like to write, while the Reader considers what book he would like to read. These plots distract Flannery from his writing while also immersing him in new and myriad reflections on his central question, how he wishes his work to be read. It's fitting, then, that

the chapter starts by watching an unknown reader on her balcony, since in this chapter, all of the readers in the novel come to see Flannery and discuss their reading: Ermes Marana, Lotaria, Ludmilla, and even our Reader.

Meeting with the Reader (our Reader), Flannery records their conversation in his diary, noting that “the Reader is beset by mysterious coincidences. He told me that for some time, and for the most disparate reasons, he has had to interrupt his reading of novels after a few pages” (197). Flannery asks whether the Reader is simply bored, to which the Reader responds, “On the contrary, I am forced to stop reading just when they [the novels] become the most gripping. I can’t wait to resume, but when I think I am reopening the book I began, I find a completely different book before me...”

‘Which instead is terribly boring,’ I suggest.

‘No, even more gripping. But I can’t manage to finish this one, either. And so on’ (ibid).

What Flannery first assumes is a scene of only distraction—of a reader getting so bored with a text that they simply stop—is a scene of deep engagement with a text. The Reader is “interrupted” and “forced” to stop; he doesn’t choose to read this way. The gripping quality of the novel is broken by exterior forces. Crucially, the form and the modality of his reading match—as I’ve said, the kaleidoscopic form of the novel mirrors the kaleidoscopic state of mind of the reader, the way attention and distraction reconfigure into each other. Yet the Reader’s distraction is not bad reading here—he is the last of the readers to meet with Flannery, a writer who thinks at length about how he wishes to be read, and the only one, apart from Ludmilla, whose method appears to be endorsed by Flannery. Flannery writes, “I have pondered my last conversation with that Reader. Perhaps his reading is so intense that it consumes all the substance of the novel at the start, so nothing remains for the rest. This happens to me in writing: for some time now, every novel I begin writing is exhausted shortly after the beginning, as if I had already said everything I have to say” (197). The

intensity of the Reader's reading occurs not in spite of his distractions, but because of his constant interruptions. Reading is made more intense, not less intense, because of these distractions. For Flannery, as for the Reader, distraction is immersive and consuming, an opportunity to direct their attention to many things at once: the mind, like the text, becomes kaleidoscopic, shifting and rearranging the elements at play.

Consider the Reader's own pursuit of Ludmilla, which reconfigures love to paranoia and back again: "Jealousy, which had been a kind of game you played with yourself, now grips you relentlessly. And it isn't only jealousy: it is suspicion, distrust, the feeling that you cannot be sure of anything or anyone... The pursuit of the interrupted book, which instilled in you a special excitement since you were conducting it together with the Other Reader, turns out to be the same thing as pursuing her, who eludes you in a proliferation of mysteries, deceits, disguises..." (151). Our Reader, encountering Ludmilla's apartment (which is admittedly full of traces of another man, Marana, who later recurs in Flannery's diary), is paranoid. He is sure that every man who longs for a woman must in fact be longing for Ludmilla. Both the lover and the paranoid read through distraction, often looking to confirm something previously suspected. *If on a winter's night a traveler* points us to consider that anxiety, jealousy, and distrust should not be understood as the antithesis of love, however, but another expression. The intensity of love and paranoia shift into each other, both expressions of immersive distraction that look to textuality as a form of presence.

We turn briefly to Roland Barthes here, who writes of the paranoia of love in *A Lover's Discourse: Fragments*. Barthes consider the absent lover as a form of presence: "an always present *I* is constituted only by confrontation with an always absent *you*" (13). He writes that "Endlessly I sustain the discourse of the beloved's absence; actually a preposterous situation; the other is absent as a referent, present as allocutory. This singular distortion generates a kind of unsupportable present; I am wedged between two tenses, that of the reference and allocution: you have gone

(which I lament), you are here (since I am addressing you). Whereupon I know what the present, that difficult tense, is: a pure portion of anxiety” (15). There’s a simultaneity here—the loved one is physically absent but present in the lover’s mind, an operation that will come to mirror grief, as we see in the conclusion—that generates “a kind of unsupportable present.” This looks like “a pure portion of anxiety,” but what Barthes shows us is that paranoia that isn’t the opposite of love, just another expression of it. To be anxious, like being in love, is a form of attention to a mental world that is just as present as the textual one, the physical one. For Barthes, as for the Reader, to think of the loved one—whether with desire or anxiety—is to put them into text, the “two tenses, that of the reference and allocution.” The world and text bleed together in the mind of the reader/lover/paranoid: the unwritten narratives are just as real as the ones that can be read in a book.

Sedgwick writes famously of paranoid and reparative reading practices, which would at first seem to map on to my distinction: reparative reading is like reading in love, a way of being open to the nonlinearity and distraction, while paranoid reading is a way of looking for the answer you want to confirm, a position of “terrible alertness” (Sedgwick 128). Sedgwick demonstrates that paranoid reading is “closely tied to a notion of the inevitable” (147) while reparative reading “is additive and accretive” (149). But for the Reader, as for Barthes, the reparative possibilities of love already carry connotations and practices of paranoia. To be distracted and oriented away from text to lover—as well as from lover to text—may produce anxiety right alongside love or pleasure or affection. This is another way of saying that there’s a kind of pleasure in paranoia, just like the delay and digression of the Reader’s love. Love encodes fear, an anxiety that you may be hurt or left or never be the same. *If on a winter’s night a traveler* models this through the Reader and Ludmilla, but also Silas Flannery, who writes (after Ludmilla refuses his advances), “The moment Ludmilla left I rushed to the spyglass to find solace in the sight of the woman in the deck chair. But she was not there. I began to wonder:

what if she were the one who came to see me? Perhaps it is always and only she who is at the source of all my problems. Perhaps there is a plot to keep me from writing, in which Ludmilla and her sister and the translator are all involved” (192). Flannery looks to an anonymous figure (though we know it to be Ludmilla) to find “solace,” but his impulse towards love or connection or pleasure morphs into anxiety. But it isn’t that his impulse changes; rather, it appears that the paranoid line of questioning he follows is enjoyable. Perhaps she is the cause of all his problems...perhaps there is a plot to keep him from writing. The paranoid impulse to find the plot at the heart of it all, especially if everything is connected, is an immersive distraction. Flannery doesn’t follow this line of questioning because it is unpleasant: for him, it’s interesting, a form of recuperating, of living on in love with the anonymous woman behind the spyglass. To find her in the center of a plot is one fantasy that he prefers to keep on writing, just as the Reader keeps on reading the love story between Ludmilla and himself.

The kaleidoscope repeatedly insists on the pleasure of not reading, or nonlinearity, of “getting lost.” Calvino’s novel sets out to teach us about the pleasure of distraction, of digression and delay of the oncoming ending. The Reader feels frustration in the constant digression of the plot, as he can never quite just get his hands on the book he wants to read. The promise of reading itself is always delayed, always a bit inaccessible. But is this from fear—an anxiety, as the title sentence ends with, “What story down there awaits its end?”—or from excitement—as in our happiest moments, where we wish time would stand still? Does the Reader dread the future or simply love the moment he is in? In the penultimate chapter, we find the Reader at the library, where he comes to interact with seven different readers, all espousing different theories of reading. They all digress, making the end even farther away, but in their longwinded accounts, they consider the role of attention in motivating their reading. The first reader finds a book only truly interesting if “I cannot follow it for more than a few lines before my mind, having seized on a thought that the

text suggests to it, or a feeling, or a question, or an image, goes off on a tangent and springs from thought to thought” (254). The second, of course, thinks the opposite, “I must not be distracted if I do not wish to miss some valuable clue,” but for the same reason: “Reading is a discontinuous and fragmentary operation. Or, rather, the object of reading is a punctiform and pulviscular material. In the spreading expanse of the writing, the reader’s attention isolates some minimal segments, juxtapositions or words, metaphors, syntactic nexuses, logical passages, lexical peculiarities that prove to possess an extremely concentrated density of meaning” (254). Both readers, like Ludmilla, make the writing they want to read appear. The first reader’s statement is appropriately tangential, full of independent clauses that stack up and lead the sentence this way and that. The second reader likewise uses particular words to isolate the reader’s attention, the very “lexical peculiarity” that proves “to possess an extremely concentrated density of meaning.” He does this most notably in his use of the word “pulviscular,” a word likely coined by Calvino’s translator since it has no English counterpart—it is only related to “pulviscolo,” an Italian word meaning a fine, atmospheric dust.³⁷ Alluding to Plato’s *Symposium*, the seven readers in the library theorize extemporaneously about reading, telling us their thoughts, but crucially we do not hear from our Reader until the very end.

Our Reader doesn’t speak but reflects when another reader asks him, “Do you believe that every story must have a beginning and an end? In ancient times a story could end only in two ways: having passed all the tests, the hero and heroine married, or else they died. The ultimate meaning to which all stories refer has two faces: the continuity of life, the inevitability of death.’ You stop for a moment to reflect on these words. Then, in a flash, you decide you want to marry Ludmilla” (259). There is a tense humor to this scene that we should not miss. The Reader is confronted with what appears a very easy choice: die, or marry. Of course he chooses to marry Ludmilla, choosing the

³⁷ “Pulviscular” also occurs in Calvino’s essay “Why Read the Classics,” in his fourteen definitions of a ‘classic.’ He writes, a “classic is a work which constantly generates a pulviscular cloud of critical discourse around it, but which always shakes the particles off.” It seems to connote a more physical aura, like that of dust or pollen, than light or color.

“continuity of life” over the “inevitability of death.” But this choice is like a coin-flip, since the ultimate meaning itself has “two faces,” “the continuity of life” as the other side of the “inevitability of death.” And crucially, it is the marriage plot that triumphs. The final page of the book, the shortest chapter of the book, follows:

Now you are man and wife, Reader and Reader. A great double bed receives your parallel readings.
Ludmilla closes her book, turns off her light, puts her head back against the pillow, and says, “Turn off your light, too. Aren’t you tired of reading?”
And you say, “Just a moment, I’ve almost finished *If on a winter’s night a traveler* by Italo Calvino.” (260).

The speed of fiction is evident here—“in a flash” the Reader chooses to marry, and in just one page, the deed is done. Choosing the continuity of life via marriage—and sex—over death illustrates the speed of thought Calvino’s lecture on exactitude suggests.³⁸ But it’s not that marriage wins over death, or that reading in love has taken place in a concrete place and time and is now finally completed. There is another delay: after all, the Reader has only “almost” finished *If on a winter’s night a traveler*—he has not finished yet. Again there is a delay, the distraction of Ludmilla’s interruption, her asking if the Reader is tired of reading. Again the shape of the novel drags its feet in attempting any kind of resolution, turning the kaleidoscope to rearrange the pieces once more. The novel never really reaches a climax, never really moves past the exposition. Like the Reader, we are left wanting, left constantly “almost finished” with reading, never fully done with the process entirely. As I’ve insisted, the form of the novel is more of a collection of beginnings which are not just interrupted

³⁸ Calvino writes about pleasure extensively in the lecture on “Quickness” in *Six Memos for the Next Millennium*. “Speed of mind is valuable in itself, for the pleasure it gives those susceptible to pleasure, not for any practical use it can be put to. Fast thinking is not necessarily better than considered thinking—far from it. But it conveys something special that has to do specifically with its swiftness” (54). He links this speed of thought to “nimbleness, mobility, and ease—all qualities that go with writing that is prone to digression, to leaping from one topic to another, to losing the thread a hundred times and finding it again after a hundred twists and turns” (55). This conception of quickness of thought and its pleasure, available to “those susceptible,” is here specifically linked to the form of the digression—the distraction. Calvino turns to Laurence Sterne’s *Tristram Shandy*, writing that the “digression is a way to postpone the ending, a proliferation of the internal time of a work, a perpetual attempt to escape—but to escape from what? From death, of course” (ibid).

and remixed, but also delayed for the Reader—and our—own pleasure. The kaleidoscope repeats itself, turning the same pieces into new configurations but without moving towards what is early on characterized as the “thrust toward the more substantial pleasure of the consummation of the act, namely the reading of the book” (9). *If on a winter's night a traveler* never consummates the act fully, never commits to focus on one task, never resolves the entirety of the plot. The novel never allows the Reader to finish the book, even if we readers are able to finish it and put it away on our shelves. Yet the kaleidoscopic form of the book allows us to immerse ourselves in this remixing and delaying, staging scenes of frustration that are also scenes of pleasure, love that is also paranoid. This pleasure is an affordance of the novel's form—it happens because, not in spite of it—and shows us a narrative form that works with distraction, not against it. As in the Reader and the Other Reader's sex/reading, the drive to finish the book (to arrive to the climax) is “opposed by another drive which works in the opposite direction, swimming against the moments, recovering time” (156).

Immersive distraction names the way the world bleeds into every act of reading and the way reading shapes how we see the world, our mind turning these elements like the kaleidoscope of the novel. This multidirectionality is relational, a textual intimacy that *If on a winter's night a traveler* might seem to eschew on its face. Calvino's novel may seem to be about tricks and traps, clever frame narratives and intellectual games, but my contention is that attending to the form of the novel more specifically can help us see the intimacy—the revolutionary reading practice—at the heart of *If on a winter's night a traveler*.³⁹ The figuration of reading in love exists right alongside the paranoid reading: both making the absent present through text. To learn how immersive distraction structures our reading can also help us see the webs of textuality around us in the world. *If on a winter's night a traveler*

³⁹ Carl D. Malmgren argues something relatedly in “Romancing the Reader: Calvino's *If on a winter's night a traveler*,” contending that “The extratextual reader thus participates vicariously in a Romance in the literary sense, a story relating the Hero/ Reader's quest for an object of desire, an object which variously takes the form of the Other Reader a fictional text or texts, and ultimately the macrotext itself, IWN [*If on a winter's night a traveler*]” (107).

demonstrates the way we always narrativize our lives, making our behavior into patterns and plots: the slide between paranoia and love for both the Reader and Silas Flannery results in different genres that use the same elements. Calvino's novel shows the simultaneity, the constant distraction, of reading while being a person with a mind—that is, of every single iteration of reading. We might situate our contemporary distraction as its own textual relationship, one that is deeply immersive. *If on a winter's night a traveler* shows us that all our reading has always been distracted, which is also to say all our reading is focused in its own ways—a kaleidoscopic shift back and forth between the two.

This is, I think, the promise of Calvino's novel in a contemporary context. *If on a winter's night a traveler's* insistent figuring of the immersion of distracted reading—as intimate even when paranoid—might give us some language for the new forms of criticism and pedagogy that we seem to be trying to reinvigorate through discourse on affect theory or postcriticism. Rather than seeing reparative and suspicious reading as two options that foreclose each other, we might see reading in love and paranoid reading as kaleidoscopic forms of each other, ways of taking the same components, turning them over like a prism, and finding in them something new. *If on a winter's night a traveler* insists that its metafictional form does something, makes something happen for its reader, that it is not just a mind game. The intimacy of this form teaches us how to read like the Reader, teaches us to appreciate the immersive distraction inherent in every act of reading. The novel's simultaneity denaturalizes focus by showing how world and text always coexist in love—so why not in something like paranoia? But the flip side of the simultaneity of love is that other feelings, other experiences of the world, are likewise distracting in ways that may feel less pleasant or even important. As we will see in the next chapter, the world of the internet is a pervasively distracting one, where it feels like nothing really happens. Simultaneity gives us a useful model for thinking of how to live—and how to write—in the age of the internet, an age where the boundaries between

online and offline, real and fake, original and copy are irrevocably troubled by the dispersed textuality of the internet.

CHAPTER THREE

Spiraling Online: Writing in the Age of the Internet

“Cyberspace does not lie within your borders. Do not think that you can build it, as though it were a public construction project. You cannot. It is an act of nature and it grows itself through our collective actions.” – John Perry Barlow, “A Declaration of the Independence of Cyberspace”

The world and the internet have come to collapse in the twenty-first century, particularly in the “realness” of real life and the “fakery” of the internet. After all, the internet is very ingrained in our everyday life, and this is a phenomenon best traced to the rise of the smartphone. Tech writer Joanne McNeil calls the rise of the iPhone a “dramatic shift” that “shredded the boundary between online and offline experience” (118). She writes that the iPhone “latched onto my thought process and memory habits. It became part of the assemblage of my day...The stray observations that barreled around my head had a vessel now...Suddenly I was writing about vast swaths of my life and sharing photographs widely” (122). Smartphones, in McNeil’s words, “blurred organizational boundaries of online and offline worlds...How could we talk about the internet as a place when we’re checking it on the go, with mobile hardware offering turn-by-turn directions from a car holder or stuffed in a jacket pocket? IRL—‘in real life,’ a common acronym—revealed itself as a spurious notion, because life through the internet was very clearly, very purposefully real” (119). The language of collapse and deconstruction is marked here: boundaries between real life and the internet are “shredded” and “blurred,” their separation a “spurious notion” when the internet became available on the go. “Both were real,” McNeil writes, “but only one could be touched. The internet realm and the world outside your phone were—while not quite one and the same—interleaved, entwined,

mutually dependent” (ibid). The popularity of smartphones mean that real life and the internet are tied up together, and even come to constitute each other.⁴⁰

This collapse between real and fake, online and offline, is the hallmark of the era of digital content. McNeil understands her increased phone usage as an experience of turning her life into content, reflecting that “the increase of information about myself that I documented through the internet did not correspond with an increase of moments that were significant to me. Writing and photographing grew less precious and deliberate. I spun my existence into digital content” (122). But since the election of Donald Trump and the 2016 presidential race, questions of the internet’s pervasiveness and reliability have come to bear not just on social media and how ‘fake’ people appear there, but in the fabric of political and social reality. The unreliability of media—the age of fake news—brings a new level of anxiety to the collapse between the internet and real life, between content and real writing. Kate Eichhorn argues that “fake news has flourished in the age of content not only because people intent on interfering with elections can now easily do so (as demonstrated by troll factories) but also because people with little or no interest in politics...have discovered that they can easily capitalize on the production and circulation of fake news” (119). One of these ‘troll factories,’ the Russian “Internet Research Agency,” wreaked havoc on the 2016 election by publishing constant propaganda while the computers “were programmed to forward the posts to fake accounts that would, in turn, open and close the posts, generating thousands of fake page views,” driving up the placement of these articles in Google search results (Eichhorn 104). This sense of the news being unreliable had many effects on the presidential election and is part of the

⁴⁰ McNeil writes about how what I call mainstream internet discourse (like *The Shallows* by Nicholas Carr) is harmful: these self-helpish narratives “focus on personal responsibility, and thinly veiled misanthropy” which “resulted in a vacuum of pointed tech criticism about surveillance, data mining, online harassment, and corporate power. Instead the media talked about the internet in broad generalities—is the internet good, or is the internet bad? Is the internet making us smart, or is it making us stupid?” (116). Part of my goal in this chapter is to sidestep these general questions and instead dwell in the ambivalence of the spiral as a way of drilling down into what the internet actually does for writing, and how one novel seeks to reflect these tensions.

constellation of anxiety and end of the world feeling that populates the internet. The internet no longer seemed like a reliable index of any kind of truth or authenticity. But Eichhorn notes that for employees of the Internet Research Agency, it “wasn’t even immediately apparent that they were part of a massive propaganda machine,” quoting one former troll factory writer who was interviewed by the *New York Times* in 2018, saying, “They were just giving me money for writing” (Eichhorn 105).

This telling phrase, “They were just giving me money for writing,” suggests a deep disconnect between the writer and the content they have produced, a crystallized example of alienated labor. This suggests that writing in the age of the internet is just another symptom of its artificiality, that even a writer may not see their place in a larger web of deception and banality. The internet is fake and shallow, populated not with writing but with content, which Eichhorn defines as “something that circulates for the sake of circulation” (5). Memes and viral videos are counted as content, but most content is far less humorous and far more boring: long listicles and website pages that sound like a million others, like WebMD or BuzzFeed or many more banal sites, writing whose actual form is engineered by writers to appear first in Google’s algorithm. This content is created not just by ‘troll factories,’ which have a particular political imperative, but in a much more everyday form, in the ‘content farms’ that similarly employ writers (and increasingly, AI tools) to populate websites with writing. This is content. Even when the content we read online is not ‘fake’ in the sense of ‘fake news,’ and may be written by an actual person, it is still banal, unoriginal, and engineered to drive traffic to ad spaces, not to the writing itself. The content-ification of the internet has changed the field of writing: the imperative for more and more content to circulate means that anyone who can produce content can consider themselves a writer. Eichhorn writes that “In the past, to be an artist or writer, you needed to be recognized and supported by the artistic or literary apparatus... This is no longer the case” (97). Here the tension between techno-optimism and techno-

pessimism comes to bear: should we read the rise of content as a democratizing force, one that allows anyone to be a writer, outside of the gatekeeping institutions that traditionally affirm and produce writers? Or is the content-fication of the internet eroding the category of ‘real writer,’ one that leaves us with less and less good literature? If Barlow’s 1996 manifesto, “A Declaration of the Independence of Cyberspace,” imagined radical democracy and new communities on the internet,⁴¹ today the only radical commons of the internet is the constant circulation of content. The tension between whether this is good or bad raises the central question of this chapter: if content is the dominant mode of contemporary writing, then how do writers write literature, and how does the novel form respond to the anxieties of this new era?

So far, my project has been examining ways that the textual/digital world runs concurrently with the ‘real world,’ arguing that seeing these realms as simultaneous unlocks new affinities and new reading methodologies for the twenty-first century. In this chapter, I turn from reading and its simultaneous modes to the question of writing in the internet era. Returning the troll factory writer’s refrain, that “They were just giving me money for writing,” it is crucial for any account of the internet and its writers to consider both the global precarity of writers, who often cannot find other jobs and are themselves victims of the content-ification of journalism (Eichhorn 106), and the way these questions about media literacy, fake news, and troll factories are rooted in the political context of Donald Trump’s election in 2016. To write in the age of the internet is to write in the age of anxiety: the shallowness and artificiality of the online world, the constant waves of notifications that distract us, and the overlapping feeling that political, environmental, and social life as we knew it is ending. On the internet, the binaries between shallow/deep, real/fake, content/art come to unravel,

⁴¹ Eichhorn uses similar anti-monopoly rhetoric in her assertion writer must also be a content producer to succeed, since without the monopoly of power once concentrated with “critics, reviewers, academics, publishers, curators, and collectors...a writer or an artist with a significant amount of content capital can thrive with or without the support of any of these gatekeepers” (100).

and this unraveling is a source of anxiety, particularly for a writer hoping to set their own work apart from others. Yet we should also see that the internet's disruption of these binaries and hierarchies is a slant form of Barlow's utopian vision, realized. This unraveling is a symptom of the internet's simultaneity, like Barlow's assertion of "the Web" as a space that is "both everywhere and nowhere," but not "where bodies live." The internet's diffuse space, where the central differences between shallow/deep, real/fake, content/art cannot hold, might be radically depressing from one vantage point but radically potential from another. In what follows, I try to hold these two viewpoints as simultaneous to each other, taking my cue from the form I explore: the spiral. The spiral gives us a new way to consider the concurrence of all these anxieties about the internet in a spatial metaphor that comes to be formally reflected in one of the most recent novels about writing and the internet: Lauren Oyler's *Fake Accounts* (2021). I consider both the novelistic form of the spiral and the spiral as spatialization of anxiety, showing how theorizing the spiral exposes an uncomfortable truth about writing, namely that no writing is ever original, authentic, or set apart in the age of the internet. What academics and writers should do with this realization remains an open question, one I return to in the conclusion.

Nothing Happens

Fake Accounts follows an unnamed narrator living in New York City who discovers that her boyfriend Felix, who seems as normal and conventionally leftist (for Brooklyn) as she is, has a fake Instagram as an alt-right conspiracy theorist. Confused by his deception, the narrator resolves to break up with him, but before she can do that, she learns Felix has died. The narrator then moves to Berlin where she spends time on her phone and reflecting on herself, creating alternate personas on dating apps, and trying lackadaisically to get a visa to stay in Germany. If it sounds like not much happens in the novel, you would be right. The structure of the novel self-consciously announces its own lack of plot to its reader: *Fake Accounts* is divided into six sections, titled Beginning, Backstory,

Middle (Something Happens), Middle (Nothing Happens), Climax, and End. The longest section is Middle (Nothing Happens), which spans pages 87-231 of this 265-page novel—over half of the entire book. The nothing that happens in the digital era is the subject of both Oyler and the narrator: the internet feels like a place to go to cope with boredom, where nothing at all happens. It may seem like boredom is the chief affective mode of the novel, as others have argued,⁴² but as I show, the narrator’s performance of boredom on the internet—she appears so over it—is complicated by her constantly cynical tone. As Sianne Ngai writes in her chapter on anxiety in *Ugly Feelings*, the negative affect of anxiety is “a handy way of immediately establishing a skeptical or critical stance toward the phenomena described,” a useful “critical framing device” (213). The narrator uses this same mode: being anxious is a way for her to set herself apart as a critic, and a discerning one, at that. As I trace, the narrator is clearly anxious about the media landscape of the internet age, even if she affects as bored when recounting the time she spends online.

Fake Accounts belongs to its own microgenre of twenty-first century writing called ‘internet novels.’⁴³ Internet novels seek to catalogue the ambiguities of living in two places at once—online and in the real world. It would be even more precise to call *Fake Accounts* a “social media novel,” a distinction that novelist and critic Brandon Taylor makes, since the action of the novel largely

⁴² For more on this argument, see Spandita Das, “What We Talk About When We Talk About Love in the Digital Age: Technology, Intimacy, and Affect in Olivia Sudjic’s *Sympathy* and Lauren Oyler’s *Fake Accounts*,” published in *Critique: Studies in Contemporary Fiction*. Das reads Oyler and Ngai together, considering Ngai’s definition of boredom as a “deficiency of affect that is reflexively felt to be dysphoric – stultifying, tedious, irritating, fatiguing, or dulling” (Ngai 269). While I agree that the narrator is occasionally bored by her time online, my argument focuses on the anxiety inherent in the time of writing in the internet era, reading the narrator’s tone as cynical, not straightforward.

⁴³ There are many trajectories of the rise of the internet novel: some critics consider the progenitor of the ‘internet novel’ to be David Foster Wallace’s *Infinite Jest* (1996), which considers the deleterious effects of entertainment, or Dave Eggers’ *The Circle* (2014), which follows a woman hired to work for a social media company, while critic Katie Yee writes in *LitHub* that Jeanette Winterson’s *The PowerBook* (2001) is the first of the genre. It’s clear that by 2020, the internet novel as a genre has taken off: Lauren Oyler’s *Fake Accounts* and Patricia Lockwood’s *No One is Talking About This* were both published in March 2021. Other notable examples include Sally Rooney’s *Normal People* (2019) and *Beautiful World, Where Are You?* (2021), Raven Leilani’s *Luster* (2020), Isle McElroy’s *The Atmospherians* (2021), Calvin Kasulke’s *Several People Are Typing* (2021), Jenny Offill’s *Weather* (2021) and *Dept. of Speculation* (2014), Jennifer Egan’s *A Visit from the Goon Squad* (2010) and sequel *The Candy House* (2022). In my opinion, Egan’s *A Visit from the Goon Squad* is probably the first “internet novel” if we consider the characteristics of the current genre: she uses nonlinearity and the multi-perspectival narrative so characteristic of contemporary literature to effectively imagine a future of influencers, where authenticity is constantly in question.

occurs on apps like Twitter, Instagram, and OkCupid.⁴⁴ And the entire plot of *Fake Accounts* is occasioned by what is perhaps the scandalous act in a twenty-first century relationship—looking through someone’s phone without permission—and discovering a secret social media account. Instagram is a clumsy, inaccurate relational mode in the novel, and Felix’s fake alt-right account is incredibly confusing for the narrator because of the liminal space that social media holds in her life. For her, as we’ll see, social media and the internet feel as if they stand apart from the “real world,” even when they are in fact simultaneous to each other. The narrator’s discovery is perturbing because it does not mean that Felix has suddenly become a bad person, but it exposes the truth that online existence does not always mirror the real world. There is a gap between his offline self and his online self. The question then becomes how to understand that gap: which iteration of Felix is the fake one, and which is the real one? Is his persona as former art student or his alt-right conspiracist the “true” version of Felix? But before this question can even be answered, before she can confront Felix, he dies, leaving the narrator reeling. Her attempts to cope—quitting her job as a blogger, moving to Berlin, making up a series of false identities, spending all day on the internet—are of course ways of grieving, though she herself is far more cavalier in recounting her grief to the reader. Instead of grief, the narrator of *Fake Accounts* has amorphous bad feelings. The internet in general, and social media more specifically, become spaces where these bad feelings can be named, amplified, and worked out, all in hopes of making the “real world” more livable.

Much of the bad feelings in *Fake Accounts* are directly related to the novel’s setting in early 2017, following the presidential election of Donald Trump but right before he entered office. The narrator situates herself and her own voice within the American left at the time of Trump’s

⁴⁴ In this essay, from Taylor’s substack, he links the logic of both “internet novels” to the Gothic novel’s abjection and horror, by way of Horace Walpole’s *The Castle of Otranto* and Leslie Fiedler’s *Love and Death in the American Novel*. For both Oylar and Lockwood, Taylor sees their projects of naming the internet as corrupting and shame-inducing as linked the Gothic novel’s nostalgia for the way things used to be. He writes, “what pervades the Internet Novel, really the Social Media novel, is a terror and guilt that in trying to shuck off our regional accents and gas station diets, we’ve all become a sea of beige vegan automatons.”

inauguration, a group of people ridden with anxiety and an imperative to “resist” that did not amount to much other than online spiraling.⁴⁵ But of course it was not just the left going mad: Trump’s election was in general a period of public hysteria, including from the right, alt-right, and Trump himself. The novel’s title echoes Trump’s repeated phrase, “fake news,” a way of negating accounts of reality by insisting that they are fake. *Fake Accounts* of course alludes to the actual fake account Felix has on Instagram and the troll factories and misinformation rampant in the 2016 election, but the other meaning of “account,” as in explanation or story, directly echoes Trump. His logic—I don’t like it and so it isn’t real—is one of pure negation of reality, a childish retort that nonetheless draws attention to the slippery territory between what is real and what is fake. Simply naming something as unreal may, in some cases, if the speaker has enough power, make it so. In this attention to the deterioration of absolutes, *Fake Accounts* takes Trump’s catchphrase (albeit one of many) and uses it to show the simultaneity between authenticity and artifice in the contemporary world—a world changed forever by the existence of the internet and the prevalence of social media.

The narrator of *Fake Accounts* begins by acknowledging this apocalyptic feeling while also preserving a cynical remove from mass feeling—a move that, as we’ll see, marks her writing with a characteristic ambivalence. I say ‘ambivalence’ here to sidestep clunky distinctions between “reliable” and “unreliable” narrators: at some points the narrator appears reliable, and other points not. But attempting to diagnose her positionality as one singular mode would be fruitless, a reading against the grain of the novel’s project. Lizzy Harding notes this same tension in her review of the novel for *Bookforum*, “I won’t list all the times Oyler plays with the ruminative cliché about things that signify both “everything and nothing”; readers can decide for themselves whether they’re meant

⁴⁵ We see this most insistently with the narrator’s attendance at the Women’s March in Washington DC, which she carools to and leaves early. The narrator feels that it is an event where mere participation takes the place of a coherent vision of the future, made more surreal by her discovery of Felix’s death, but she also thinks the people who have gone are extremely uncool.

as satire. Looking for an overarching theory would put us in a category that Oyler has conveniently dismissed.” If there is a point to the novel, it is that the narrator never arrives to one coherent position. Like the spiral, always in motion and never arriving, *Fake Accounts* uses an ambivalent tone to show the simultaneity between real and fake, reliable and unreliable, authentic and false.

The narrator’s ambivalence is formally obvious, too. The first line of the novel betrays this, reading, “Consensus was the world was ending, or would begin to end soon, if not by exponential environmental catastrophe then by some combination of nuclear war, the American two-party system, patriarchy, white supremacy, gentrification, globalization, data breaches, and social media” (5). This sentence structure is typical of *Fake Accounts* and its narrator, hedging through the form of a long list instead of simply asserting. Immediately, the strong “consensus” of the ending world is undercut by “or would begin to end soon.” The “if not by exponential environmental catastrophe,” already a prevarication, is followed by a list of many contemporary issues that might interact together to end the world, making it more and more complicated. The sentence doubles back on itself, undercutting the first confident phrase, “Consensus was the world was ending,” adding complexity and nuance by naming more and more elements that might end the world, then ending a long list of very serious risks with the glib addition of “social media.” We should see the narrator’s cynicism and insistence on adding more and more as an antidote to the pithy and overly confident writing of the internet. But curiously, after going through the laundry list of the forces that may end the world, this opening paragraph ends up almost in the same place it began. The narrator writes, “Although the death of any hope for humanity was surely decades in the making, the result of many intersecting systems described forbiddingly well, it was only that short period, between the election of a new president and his holding up a hand to swear to serve the people’s interests, that made it clear what had happened, that we were too late” (ibid).

All the nuance that the first sentence works so hard to preserve—at the expense of any explicitly clear meaning—circles back again to the election of Donald Trump. It’s a cyclical passage: we begin with Trump ending the world, move away to consider all the other elements at play, and eventually circle back to it. Though the narrator quickly adds a caveat, that “I didn’t believe this, necessarily, though as the news got worse and more bizarre I wavered” (ibid), she too cannot resist the narrative of the end of the world, the societal collapse that Trump’s election will bring. Here “necessarily” set off in commas shows the characteristic hedging of the narrator, due either to her confused thoughts or reticence to say what she means. The narrator is attached to the concept of nuance, working overtime in her writing to show her train of thought, concerned with showing her own thinking as discerning and ultimately correct. Her critical position is anxious—not bored. She has to show a lot of mental work to her reader, and affecting as bored is simply one way to hide the effort of this work. We see this in the narrator’s next sentence. She moves on to say, “I myself was soon using it [the political climate] to indulge some of my naughtier impulses, by which I mean that in the first hours of a morning in early January, when the sky was still dark and the government still inevitably hurtling, I decided to snoop through my boyfriend’s phone while he was asleep” (ibid). The narrator is cynical about the affective constellation of political feeling in early 2017, following Trump’s election, but she also has bought in enough to leverage this feeling—and self-consciously display it to the reader—into a way of snooping through Felix’s phone. The large scale ‘badness’ of the political climate enables her smaller scale ‘bad behavior.’ The narrator vacillates between embracing the doom of the perceived consensus and maintaining a posture of cynical discernment: she is anxious but ambivalent. Though movement of the narrator’s sentences are circular, often feeling like the reader is returned to the starting point, these sentences are more spiral than circle. We are not in a closed loop, but in a repetitive circular motion that adds more and more information in each turn. The sentence may return again to Trump, but only after passing through this wide arc

of nuance and detail, gaining perspective to see the origin point anew. This is the spiral, a form that never returns to the exact same place, but to somewhere slightly different. As I show, considering the spiral as a simultaneous form—and the form of *Fake Accounts*—offers us a chance to see the asymptotic movement of the internet novel, one formal response to the diffusion of writing on the internet and the age of content.

Spiraling Online

Before I dive into the spiral as mode and form, I think it useful to step back and consider how the spiral is different from the other simultaneous forms I've discussed so far. My first two chapters named specific binaries that particular literary forms disrupted and dissolved: in *How to Be Both*, the self and the other melt into each other in the form of the double helix, its antiparallel form modeling internal difference; in *If on a winter's night a traveler*, attention and distraction constitute each other through the kaleidoscope, which rearranges the same materials to show how internal text and external world are always simultaneous in the mind of the reader. These simultaneous forms show the ordinary concurrence of two or more things, pointing us to new ways of seeing that problematize reading. The spiral form of *Fake Accounts* goes even further than these other novel forms, trying to dissolve all of these binaries together at once: the lines between real and fake, internal and external, part and whole are all simultaneous. And as Nico Israel argues in his book *Spirals: The Whirled Image in Twentieth-Century Literature and Art*, the spiral encodes all of these tensions at once. Ambivalence is an integral part of the spiral form. Israel's book examines how the spiral embodied tensions that animated 20th century artists and writers, since the spiral is connected with ideas of growth and change—a progressive idea of history—but it also confounds those same ideas of change in its constant redoubling. Israel borrows the idea of spiral as a “repetition with a difference” from Roland Barthes' writing in *The Responsibility of Forms*, where Barthes contends that “The circle is religious, theological; the spiral, like a circle distended to infinity, is dialectical: on the

spiral, things recur, but at another level: there is a return in difference, not repetition in identity.

Thanks to [the spiral], we are not constrained to believe: everything has been said, or: nothing has been said, but rather: nothing is first yet everything is new” (qtd. in Israel 22). As Barthes and Israel contend, the spiral’s loops bring us to new vantage points, not a circular return to the same place. The spiral’s loops give us a chance to see anew, since “things recur, but at another level: there is a return in difference, not repetition in identity” (ibid). Where the circle traps, the spiral appears to free.

And as Israel notes, the spiral is never itself stable as a form: “the spiral, throughout much of its history a figure of metamorphosis, has itself undergone a number of metamorphoses: it has represented or allegorized ideas concerning cosmology, temporality, historicity, politics, and, indeed, growth and life itself” (35). His argument traces the visions of modernity that the spiral represents to writers like Yeats, Joyce, and Beckett, showing how the energy and modernity of early 20th century artists morphed into an “energy sapping anemia” and again into a “recoiling entropy” (8) by the end of the century. While the “energy sapping anemia” of the spiral does perhaps call to mind the numbness of scrolling the internet, I want to suggest that the meaning of the spiral turns once again in the context of twenty-first century writers, more particularly writers in the age of the internet. In contemporary online discourse, to say “I’m spiraling” is to connote more than just numbness or a vision of historical progress. The phrase “I’m spiraling,” in contrast, is a way of naming the stuckness that comes with oversaturation and dread in the present moment, a moment shaped by the internet itself. To spiral traditionally names a downwards turn, like the descent through hell’s circles in Dante’s *Inferno*, but in the contemporary context, spiraling instead comes to name an ambivalence in direction. The spiral resonates with the feeling of living on in the end times, of thinking nothing could be worse but also acknowledging it will get worse: an affective state linked inextricably, at least in a U.S. context, to Trump’s presidency.

And the narrator of *Fake Accounts* is spiraling, appearing to be stuck in a cynical position she both wishes to shed and fears losing, locked into questioning everything in her life. Her biggest question is an existential one: what is the point of everything? This is, of course, a mode of anxiety. As Sianne Ngai writes in her chapter on anxiety in *Ugly Feelings*, anxiousness is a form of fear without a specific object, an “expectant emotion,” to follow Ernst Bloch’s distinction between emotions with a clear object (“filled emotion”) and those without (“expectant”). Anxiety in this framework is quite literally pointless: it lacks the clear orientation towards a specific object that would make it a ‘filled emotion.’⁴⁶ In considering the spatialized representations of anxiety in Hitchcock, Heidegger, and Melville, Ngai argues that “in all three accounts the image of thrownness secures a strategic sort of distance for the knowledge-seeking subject, enabling him to differentiate ‘here’ from ‘yonder’ even in the absence of the fixed positions from which nearness and farness are ordinarily established or gauged” (212). Anxiety and its spatial metaphors, then, name a kind of critical distance that the narrator of *Fake Accounts* also seeks while also confusing other fixed positions—here the spiral disrupts not just ‘near’ and ‘far’ but also ‘deep’ and ‘shallow’ and ‘real’ and ‘fake,’ crucial terms that come up again and again in accounts of the internet and its influence. The pointlessness of the spiral resonates with its asymptotic context: Israel writes that the “very nature” of the spiral allegorizes and enacts “the relation between depth and surface, closeness and distance, turning and being at a standstill” (6). In my reading, the spiral form of the novel names the ambivalence between anxiety and the ‘pointlessness’ of the internet, never arriving at one position but growing closer and closer—or farther and farther. We can read the spiral’s ambivalence, its pointlessness, as a simultaneous form, being stuck and moving at once.

⁴⁶ This idea of anxiety as an orientation resonates with the spatiality of form; Ngai notes that “while intimately aligned with the concept of futurity, and the temporal dynamics of deferral and anticipation in particular, anxiety has a spatial dimension as well” (210).

This ambivalent anxiety is directly linked with Ngai's contention that "the representation of anxiety as an anticipatory structure [is] explicitly linked to a male subject's quest for interpretative agency...[that] oddly becomes dependent on a spatial grammar and vocabulary" (215). The falling, thrownness, and projection that Ngai traces all inform a particular kind of subject—in these cases, the male intellectual—and his search for knowledge, an anxiety about getting the right amount of distance to make the correct distinctions. We should see a parallel in the narrator of *Fake Accounts*, who we should read as an anxious female intellectual, one trying to distinguish herself through sophisticated writing to distinguish between herself and others in the dizzying space of the internet. As Ngai writes, "Anxiety nonetheless comes to assume its prominent role in structuring the 'philosophically stylized' quests for truth, knowledge, and masculine agency featured in *Pierre*, *Vertigo*, and *Being and Time* precisely as a way of rescuing the intellectual from his potential absorption in sites of asinificance or negativity" (246). Here there is an echo of our unnamed narrator and her deeply philosophically stylized search not for truth, but for writerly agency: the spiral gives her writing structure while also promising to raise her above the masses. The absorption she fears is not the same as Scottie of Hitchcock's *Vertigo*, who fears the negative space of the grave, but an absorption of her writing into the endless scroll of internet content. The spiral, then, is similarly a spatialization of anxiety for her. The spiral works asymptotically, circling around and around without ever reaching its object, while also structuring the narrator's quest to write something distinctive and original in the age of the internet and its ever-multiplying content.

Like the spiral, the narrator's characteristic writing is "pointless," as in asymptotic. Her twinned attempts to mean something definitive and inability to say anything concrete never arrive at a final, concrete iteration. This stems from an obsession with sophistication and the anti-cliché: in striving to give all the details, literally taking everything into account, nothing at all can be said. Likewise, the spiral can never arrive at a definitive position, only approaching nearer and nearer,

itself an asymptote. We see this mirrored on the level of the narrator's sentences, which resist aphorism and easily understood meaning—perhaps the most characteristic form of writing in the digital age, symptomatic of content—to instead add detail after detail. As we have seen with her opening reflection on the end of the world, the narrator's sentences feel like loops of the spiral, returning the reader back to where she began, just in a wider orbit. But the spiral as a shape has other useful spatial resonance with the internet. It also mimics the repetitive motion of the scroll itself, more particularly the social media phenomenon of “doomscrolling,” spending a massive amount of time reading bad, negative, or depressing news online, rampant in the anxious political climate of 2016 and 2017. Though the phrase “spiraling” can connote a spiraling downwards, as in one's deteriorating mental state, the spiral as a shape has an inherent bidirectionality and ambivalence. Its circular, repeated motion grows and grows, expanding on several planes at once: a spiral can go down or up while also increasing in width. As Israel writes, the very definition of the spiral encodes ambivalence: the OED defines a spiral as “a term from geometry describing a ‘continuous curve traced by a point moving round a fixed point . . . while steadily increasing (or diminishing) its distance from this’ fixed point” (Israel 22). This parenthetical indecision about the increasing or diminishing distance is of course simultaneous: the spiral is both opening and closing at once, it simply depends on your vantage point.

And like all simultaneous forms, there is something unfocused and indistinct about the shape of the spiral. This inherent simultaneity mirrors the narrator's thought. No matter the increasing or diminishing distance from its origin point, the spiral can never arrive at its destination, forever turning back on itself. Consider this passage, where the narrator, who has just arrived in Berlin, reflects on the internet as she scrolls on her phone:

The internet is always on, interaction always available, but it could not guarantee I would be able to interact with someone I liked and understood, or who (I thought) liked and understood me. I'd gotten used to using people I'd never met, or met a few times, to muffle the sound of time passing without transcendence or joy or any of the good emotions I

wanted to experience during my life, and I knew the feeling was mutual, and that was the comfort in it. It was compared to white noise so often for a reason: so many people, talking, mumbling, murmuring, muttering, suggesting, gently reminding, just asking, just wondering, just letting that sink in, just telling, just saying, just wanting to say, just screaming, just *whispering,* in all lowercase letters, in all caps, with punctuation, with no punctuation, with photos, with GIFs, with related links, *Pay attention to me!* (116-7, emphasis in the original).

Here what stands out is not that the narrator has a lot of feelings about the internet, but the imprecision of those feelings. Everything here is blurred, except a clearly articulated sense of being muffled or anesthetized, a kind of anxious critical distance. The internet is “mumbling, murmuring, muttering,” a “white noise” that can “muffle the sound of time passing.” Being very online, for her as for many others, is a coping technique. But the motion of these sentences complicates the idea that the internet might have anything at all to offer her. The noise of the internet is soft, in its “muffling” and “white noise,” but still sounds hellish in the most Dante-inflected sense. These sentences do not go anywhere—they’re stilted and slow, full of many synonyms, riffs off of one word that lead to another almost infinitely. They are related alliteratively, as in “mumbling, murmuring, muttering,” anaphorically, as in “just asking, just wondering, just letting that sink in,” but all of these variations of what people are doing on the internet never quite concludes or sums up, instead offering a vast amount of words and information, just like the internet itself. The sentence ends with the presumed cry of those people online—“*Pay attention to me!*”—but the line wavers to get there, doubling back on itself, with the clause “all lowercase letters, in all caps, with punctuation, with no punctuation, with photos, with GIFs, with related links” adding more and more detail. Just like the spiral, the narrator’s own attempts to move on in the sentence only circle her around what she means, without really saying it. She cannot conclude what the internet really does, can only think of more and more ways people are emoting on the internet. In trying to paint a picture of the totality of the internet, the narrator loses the point of the sentence, getting distracted with tangent after tangent. But this is the point, or part of it: it is impossible to account for the

totality of the internet. Like the spiral, the sentence works asymptotically—it gets as close as possible to a definitive meaning, but can never quite reach it.

This undercutting motion is mirrored in the parenthetical of the first line. Here, the narrator must admit her own flawed picture of others, writing about people “who (I thought) liked and understood me.” She avoids claiming to be authentically liked or understood, instead insisting that she understands all the flaws of that interpretation. Again she flattens other people in an attempt to be radically honest, reverting to cynicism. This cynicism continues as she characterizes the internet as a “banal but important ecosystem. There were so many people in bad moods at any given time; all we had to do was find each other. We could pretend something good, *connection*, had come of our turning to technology to deal with boredom, loneliness, rejection, heartbreak, irrational rage, Weltschmerz, ennui, frustration with the writing process. We were all self-centered together, supporting each other as we propped up the social media companies” (ibid, emphasis in the original). The italics around “*connection*” are cynical, the narrator insisting to the reader that she does not buy into that language, yet she cannot quite get away from it. She acknowledges that her online behavior, her feeling about the internet, ends up only amounting to “propp[ing] up the social media companies.” But even so, the connection inherent in this group self-centeredness is real, even if it is also fake or posturing. This is the same conundrum of social media—it is simultaneously fake and real, an artificial little world that does still exist in and have ramifications for the ‘real’ world: the discovery of Felix’s fake account results in a real-world break-up (or at least a planned one).

If the narrator sets herself up as a critic of the internet, her criticism departs from the techno-pessimism of mainstream internet discourse, in which the real world is portrayed as the site of authenticity, focus, and meaningful presence, while the internet is the opposite. The narrator does, after all, use the internet regularly to cope with being alive in 2017, and occasionally even to connect with others. During *Middle (Nothing Happens)*, the narrator grieves the loss of Felix,

adjusts to a new culture and time zone, and transitions from her full-time job to a freelance existence in Berlin. Social media, and Twitter in particular, are the places she goes to cope with this change. She finds herself looking for community and connection on the internet: she finds herself on OKCupid, on expat forums, on Instagram, on Skype. The novel both accepts and rejects the idea of the internet as a place for coping—the narrator’s ambivalence about this emerges later in the novel. Social media in particular is characterized as a place of artificiality and lies, but then again, the narrator shows us, so is the real world. She lies to people she meets in person before she begins enacting a series of personas on OKCupid, a deceit that points back to her meeting Felix at a bar crawl he was running in Berlin, when they both lied about their identities. There is no non-digital real world in *Fake Accounts*, nor is there a place on the internet that somehow remains siloed off from the real world. The two are totally collapsed, simultaneous to each other.

Fake Accounts problematizes the idea of a ‘real world,’ not just through its exploration of how very real the social sphere of the internet is, but also through a repeated insistence that ‘real people’ in the ‘real world’ are themselves very fake. The novel routinely undercuts the authenticity that offline people are presupposed to have, or how deep these interactions are supposed to be, through Felix and the narrator’s constant lying. If the truism is that social media is artificial and people are presenting fake versions of themselves online, *Fake Accounts* insists that there are already many artificial versions of people in the real world. If real-world interaction is taken as deep and sustaining, the presence of rampant deception, delusional people, and compulsive liars disturbs these binaries. Consider this moment from early in the novel, when the narrator reflects on Felix and his lies:

People often say my generation values authenticity. Reluctantly I will admit to being a member of my generation. If we value authenticity it’s because we’ve been bombarded since our impressionable teen years with fakery but at the same time are uniquely able to recognize, because of the unspoiled period the stretched from our birth to the moment our parents had the screeching dial-up installed, the ways in which we casually commit fakery ourselves (45).

Here the narrator “reluctantly” admits her identity as a millennial, part of the generation who had a brief “unspoiled period” from birth to the first installation of the internet (“the screeching dial-up”) in their homes. She also makes clear that she—and her generation—can recognize the overlap between real and fake, yet her millennial valuation of “authenticity” comes less from the bombardment of the internet’s “fakery” and more from the brief period of non-internet life that she can recall, a period marked by “casually commit[ting] fakery ourselves.” Again we should recognize the ambivalent motion of the spiral, evident in the narrator’s cynicism and desire to provide nuance/critical self-reflection, that cannot help but to reinforce the supposed “unspoiled period” of life offline. As with her reflections on the “real life” she lives on the internet, the narrator recounts a group identity (avid Twitter users, and here, millennials/digital natives) but also attempts to position herself above this same group.

Yet the spiral’s simultaneity teaches us that this cynicism may be earnestness, viewed from a different position. The same fakery of the internet can also afford space to return to Barlow’s utopian dream for the internet, of new horizons of community and democracy. Legacy Russell writes in *Glitch Feminism* of how gender and sex play online problematize the “online-versus-IRL dichotomy.” “Such limits,” writes Russell, “are bound up within a construct of ‘real life,’ one that violently forecloses worlds, rather than expands them. IRL falters in its skewed assumption that constructions of online identity are latent, closeted, and fantasy-oriented (e.g., not real) rather than explicit, bristling with potential, and very capable of ‘living on’ away from the space of cyberspace” (43). Embracing this potential is a way to avoid what Russell calls “fetishizing real life” (43). *Fake Accounts’* characteristic ambivalence never tells us whether the simultaneity of online and offline, real and fake, is a space for radical possibility, as per Russell and Barlow, or for dismay, as per writers like Nicholas Carr and Jenny Odell. The spiral rotates through both of these potentials—for new communities and for the complete destruction of what truth means. But the narrator’s main concern

is not what the internet can do for others, but what the internet can do for her as a writer. Turning to the narrator's own sense of herself as a writer and novelist, we see how this anxious ambivalence contributes to the stuckness of the spiral.

Writing on the Internet

The narrator's intellectual journey, like in Ngai's account of *Vertigo*, is linked to anxiety, spatialized as the spiral, a form that encodes a simultaneous ambivalence and cynical remove. The spiral names the narrator's repetitive attempts to distinguish herself through writing as well as her anxiety that her writing will be folded into the endless content of the internet. In trying to seem above the fray, she cannot go anywhere: she is stuck. The narrator's desire to be nuanced and complex, to reflect on her own culpability and role in what she is writing about, leaves us with an ironic tone but an enduring, if negative, attachment to an ideal. She wants to be a good writer, to believe that good literature is being written in the digital age, but she cannot hold to those values without a hint (or more) of cynicism.⁴⁷ We see this ambivalence most clearly in considering the narrator's own conception of herself as writer, which tries to ironically detach from the role of "author" or "writer" but can only affirm it. When we first meet the narrator, she is working in New York City as a blogger: "I would have liked to claim a more dignified title, journalist or writer or critic or reporter, but I didn't, because I didn't want to contribute to the rapid deterioration of those titles; I was hoping to one day claim them and scrape off some legitimacy for myself" (66). Her job seems simple: she writes four to five articles a day, "often just rewording pieces other people had written and adding mean jokes" (ibid). Blogging, for the narrator, is the ultimate form of content creation: unoriginal writing, put on the site for the sake of simply having writing on the site. The

⁴⁷ Of course Oyler's own work as a critic informs much of this novel; Harding writes in *Bookforum* that "Oyler all but invites us to read the novel through the lens of her criticism. Sometimes that feels like an exercise, or a test, or a hunt." Oyler's general disdain for contemporary literature is clear: in an interview for LitHub with Kyle Chayka, she adds that "Over quarantine, I have developed some opinions on TV and, as with contemporary literature, I think most of it's quite bad." This sense of contemporary books and art being bad is obviously a key point of agreement between Oyler and the narrator of *Fake Accounts*.

narrator does make something of a name for herself, noting that “Once I had developed my tone, a rote, pseudo-intellectual dismissiveness that could be applied to any topic so long as the worst political implications (ideally, that the thing being discussed was *bad for women*) were spelled out by the end of an article, I wrote fast, and I accumulated a modest but respectable amount of Twitter followers” (ibid).⁴⁸ In her dismissiveness of her own role, her cynicism about the website she writes (blogs) for, the narrator ends up valorizing what writing can do. The more dignified roles of writer and journalist, she assumes, do far more than simply restating what others have said. Yet this perpetual dissatisfaction with herself speaks of the narrator’s anxiety, disguised as antipathy towards group belonging. Like Woody Allen’s famous quip, the narrator appears not to want to be part of any group that would accept her (ie, the too-earnest expat group in Berlin, the too-ironic friends in Brooklyn, the deeply uncool people at the Women’s March) and thus any writing job that she could get would no longer seem like a serious, worthwhile job. Like the spiral, never able to reach its object but in perpetual motion, the narrator is unable to ever grasp the role of serious writer that she longs for.

But she does write, and often. In her job as blogger, the narrator is occasionally allowed to write longer deep-dives, called “long reads” by her boss. The understanding with her boss is that no one really reads these, but they bolster the website’s ‘credibility.’ Curiously, the narrator understands her writing in this context not as important creative and critical work, though she does write these

⁴⁸ The website the narrator works for sounds suspiciously like the feminist website *Jezebel*, especially in the italicization of “*bad for women*.” Interestingly, Oyler’s most famous piece of writing is a review of former *Jezebel* and current *New Yorker* writer Jia Tolentino’s debut essay collection, *Trick Mirror*. Writing in the London Review of Books, Oyler coins the phrase “hysterical critic” to describe Tolentino’s (and other’s) writing: “Hysterical critics are self-centered—not because they write about themselves, which writers have always done, but because they can make any observation about the world lead back to their own lives and feelings, though it should be the other way round.” Clearly this observation also sounds a lot like the narrator of *Fake Accounts*, whose primary engagement with the world is self-centered. The self-reflection of Tolentino’s writing, in Oyler’s critique, also sounds like the narrator: “In order to solve the problem of her possible wrongness, [Tolentino] adopts an elevated version of Roxane Gay’s *Bad Feminist* programme, constantly contradicting herself and referring to her shortcomings, among which are attention seeking, a desire for control, and equivocation.” By acknowledging her own shortcomings, the narrator too hopes to “solve the problem of her possible wrongness.”

pieces outside of the office and on her own time, but as a measure of popularity. She seeks out “people discussing her writing on social media, by searching the link to the article or my own name or any other related term, and I deduced that smart people didn’t bother with this website, and I didn’t blame them” (68). Sometime she notices “arguments or ideas I’d written show up in more popular writers’ pieces, six, eight months later, and I would say to myself: There are no original ideas!...I found myself wishing someone would actually plagiarize me, lift a sentence or two, so at least I could believe I was being unacknowledged and not just ignored” (ibid). The criteria that the narrator has just previously set up—that real writing does more than simply restating what others have said—fails. ‘Real’ writers also end up rewording and restating others’ arguments, just to more popular effect. In the age of the internet, then, all writing is degraded to the level of content: no writing is original, but exists only to circulate, to generate ad revenue for different websites of different reputable levels. The narrator is quick to confirm the reality of writing as content, taking great care to tell her reader that she has no illusions of grandeur as a writer, but she cannot move past her desire to be acknowledged not as a blogger but as a real writer. The narrator playfully puts this desire in terms of plagiarism—a wish that gets answered in a twisted way, as we will see—but her cynicism about the world of writing is best read as ambivalence. Her self-reflection seems detached and ironic, acknowledging the limits of her writing and influence, but the narrator cannot help but hope for a future where she is part of a larger conversation, where she can shed the role of “blogger” for something like “writer.” For the narrator of *Fake Accounts*, this ambivalence is the desire to create good writing that is mirrored by the anxiety that nothing would ever be good enough, distinguishing enough.

Yet there is an odd irony in reading these statements about the narrator’s self-conception as a writer. *Fake Accounts*’ own self-conscious status as a book means that the narrator’s desire to be a ‘real writer’ gets fulfilled—and is already fulfilled at the time of reading. A novel, the most

characteristic form of long narrative, should be its own sort of ‘deep dive,’ a way for the narrator to become a ‘real author’ through a long exploration of her life or the lives of others. But in *Fake Accounts*, the novel is never that deep: the text’s spiraling shape and symptomatic obsessions with making things longer and more nuanced, a corrective to the form of internet writing, can never rise above these distinctions. If social media and the real world are shown to be simultaneous, then so are literature and ‘content.’ Put differently, if the ultimate form of twenty-first century writing is pithy, aphoristic, and oversimplified, existing simply to circulate (content), paradoxically, the narrator’s complicated, long, and nuanced book (literature) circles back, ending up in almost the same place.

The narrator despises the fragmented form of many contemporary novels which may reflect the formal brevity and fragmentation of the internet. In one long section in Middle (Nothing Happens), the narrator riffs on the characteristically fragmented style of contemporary novels: after hearing a podcast where an author, likely Kate Zambreno or Jenny Offill,⁴⁹ describes her fragmented novel as a particularly feminine form, the narrator responds:

The author said she thought having children contributed to the form and style of her books, written in stolen moments, necessarily short sections, simple, aphoristic sentences, more of an essay than a novel at times...Having read several because they were easy to finish, I couldn’t help but object: this trendy style was melodramatic, insinuating utmost meaning where there was only hollow prose, and in its attempts to reflect the world as a sequence of distinct and clearly formed ideas, it ran counter to how reality actually worked (164).

Several things emerge in this passage. First, the narrator is talking about readerly attention. The appeal of this fragmented novel is its brevity, that it keeps the reader engaged and it is “easy to

⁴⁹ I read this as an allusion to Kate Zambreno, whose novel *Drifts* was published in 2020, or Jenny Offill, whose novels *Weather* (2020) and *Dept. of Speculation* (2014) follow a similar, fragmented form, famously detracted by Oyer in a review called “Are Novels Trapped by the Present?” in *The New Yorker* in 2020. There is another curious resonance with Danish author Olga Ravn, whose novel *My Work* was published in Denmark in 2020 and translated in English in the fall of 2023. *My Work* follows a woman who navigates her postpartum depression and inability to write my adopting a fragmented form, one that mirrors the snatches of time she must find to write in, but interestingly also takes as its setting 2016/2017 and the hysteria following Donald Trump’s election. The fragmented narrative in 2020 seemed to resonate with a constellation of readers, writers, and mothers, and we might read the narrator of *Fake Accounts* resisting the way motherhood—and other gendered experience—serves to fragment writing and life.

finish.” The lack of writerly attention, this writing in “stolen moments,” ends up appealing to the distracted reader. But the narrator’s qualms don’t lie with the way it keeps her attention—she does read them and find them easy to read—but the lack of realism. The fragmented novel seems to offer a very realistic picture of reality, but ends up giving a picture of a world “as a sequence of distinct and clearly formed ideas,” which in fact “runs counter to how reality actually worked.” The narrator is clearly against this novelistic form, which mirrors the shape of a typical novel with linearity (“sequence”) and clarity (“distinct and clearly formed”); even when this sequence is fragmented, the parts still follow traditional linear narrative logic. The spiraling form of *Fake Accounts* emerges as the narrator’s direct resistance against the fragmented yet linear novel. In the loops of the narrator’s novel, we go nowhere. There is no point. Even the named sections (Beginning, Backstory, Middle (Something Happens), Middle (Nothing Happens), Climax, and End) might seem to follow the most rudimentary understanding of traditional plot, like Gustav Freytag’s plot pyramid (Introduction, Rising Action, Climax, Falling Action, Resolution), but the novel resists it. For Freytag, the pyramid connotes depth, the plot literally thickening, while in *Fake Accounts*, the dispersion of the spiral ensures it never does.

We can see, too, that the narrator’s lengthy, trailing sentences are an attempt to resist the aphorism of the fragmented novel, itself a form that confuses the lines between what is art and what is content. The narrator is lightly nihilist, disliking any insertion of meaning where there is none, and so she resists aphoristic form on grounds of it being oversimplified. To distinguish herself as a writer, the narrator embraces length as the anti-fragment. Her goal is to make the reader, like her, endure the distractions of the internet age that plague her in something that approximates the ‘real time’ of the narrative. She seems to enjoy making the reader suffer, particularly because she positions the reader alongside her chorus of ex-boyfriends. Consider this passage, in the middle of the fragmented novel section, following her reflection on how her own lying is different than Felix’s

because her lies are shorter in duration: “The ex-boyfriends think this is outrageous self-exoneration and delusion, which surprises them, because I was always so grounded before, ha ha. They feel some obligation to finish, having gotten this far, but they have to admit, they’re looking forward to reading other things” (197).⁵⁰ In the narrator’s hands, the appeal of the fragmented novel—its brevity—is totally warped. The reader gets bogged down in this section and the narrator seems to enjoy making that happen to the reader. Yet the “ha ha” in this passage repeats through the entire novel, again complicating a straightforward reading of her as a total cynic. Is she joking? Is she posturing, the “ha ha”’s acting as a sort of nervous laugh? She is doing both, performing anxiously for her readers while also seeking to appear comported, confident, in control.

The narrator’s play with the fragment stretches it to its absolute limits, literally making it hell, “going on forever.” After one particularly long fragment where the narrator recounts a nonconsensual sexual experience with Felix, which we should read as her own way of inserting an alternate, non-maternal female experience to the fragmented form, she writes “Fuck! I messed up the structure. That one was too long” (175). Just a few fragments later, she inserts an anecdote about a dog and writes, “What’s amazing about this structure is that you can just dump any material you have in here and leave it up to the reader to connect it to the rest of the work. I was going to cut up the dog story, but why should I? It evokes a mood. It relates to my themes. When I saw it happen it was somehow incredible; I was watching earned self-consciousness mutate into unearned self-preservation in real time, something I usually only saw online, where it was easier for the unbelievable to remain that way” (181). The space between the fragments makes the reader do the

⁵⁰These odd “ha ha”’s recur regularly through the novel and again bring to mind Oyler’s review of Jia Tolentino in the London Review of Books, titled “Ha ha! Ha ha!” These “ha ha”’s of the title are actually a quote from Helen DeWitt, who Oyler describes (with reverence) as “actually peerless.” DeWitt, “when she couldn’t find a publisher for her difficult novel *Your Name Here*, sold PDFs of it through her website: ‘Ha ha! Ha ha!’” For Oyler, the chorus of ha’s from DeWitt seems to name the way in which Tolentino writes against the capitalist system without actually resisting it. The laughter here is always ironic, in the way saying “ha ha” aloud is: not really laughter, but more a way of naming a position of detachment.

work of connecting, letting the narrator off the hook. Yet the narrator's resistance to fragmentary form carries an anxiety about abdicating power as a writer. In the fragmented novel, the writer has no job except to create the fragments, leaving the connection and conclusion up to the reader. By going long, adding nuance, and developing her cynical perspective, the narrator hopes to counter the aphorism and fragment so characteristic of internet writing, keeping control over the writing and making sure the reader. But it does not work. In the narrator's hands, the longform story becomes taxing and even distracting: "OK, *get to the point*, my ex-boyfriends are saying from the audience, not unkindly but not kindly either. They will listen to me talk about other men, but you can tell they don't really like it; they use any excuse to cheapen the experience. *You take so long to tell stories*. It's hard to say what it is they saw in me if they didn't appreciate this crucial aspect of my charm" (31). This insistence that her audience is saying "*You take so long to tell stories*" reminds us that the narrator is playing with reader, manipulating a form that should be easy to digest by making it incredibly long, too long to maintain the rapt readerly attention that the fragment promises. In *Middle (Nothing Happens)* just as the rest of *Fake Accounts*, the self-consciously longform narrative, the stretches of nothing happening and the slow pace—"You take so long to tell stories"—become just as distracting, just as encompassing of the internet's modes as the shortform fragment, linked to the circularity of content. At the end of this section, the penultimate fragment sinks her method home: "What can we learn from literature? Sometimes things may feel like they've been going on forever, but really it's only been about forty pages" (206).

The narrator's confident tone in the fragmented structure section works to offset some of her own writerly anxiety. But she cannot help but remind the reader that she is the writer. By stretching the logic of the fragment to its absolute limit, pointing out the lack of work she is doing to connect everything, the narrator is setting out her own aesthetic criteria. Consider this fragment, where the narrator dismisses the whole logic of authors of fragmented novels:

Another justification for this structure is that it mimics the nature of modern life, which is ‘fragmented.’ But fragmentation is one of the worst aspects of modern life. It’s extremely stressful. ‘Fragmented’ is a euphemism for ‘interrupted.’ Why would I want to make my book like Twitter? If I wanted to write a book that resembled Twitter, I wouldn’t write a book; I would just spend even more time on Twitter. You’d be surprised by how much time you can spend on Twitter and still have some left over to write a book. Our experience of time is fragmented, but unfortunately time itself is not (191).

The narrator’s cynicism, her takedown of the fragmented novel, is what allows her to think of herself as a writer. By negatively engaging with fragmented novels, considering how she wants to write differently, we see the spiral in action. Here the narrator’s sentences circle around themselves, never ending up in the same place, save for the very quippy line, cited in almost every review of *Fake Accounts*, “Why would I want to make my book like Twitter? If I wanted to write a book that resembled Twitter, I wouldn’t write a book; I would just spend even more time on Twitter” (ibid). Yet the repetitions of “book,” especially “my book” and “write a book,” point insistently to the narrator’s role as a writer: she has to rail against this form to set herself apart as a discerning individual with the capacity to write a book—a real book.

In the end, though, *Fake Accounts* is a lot like Twitter. The final section, “End,” of the book forces the narrator to include her online life in a direct way, one that displays the same ambivalence of the spiral that the novel and the narrator exemplify. In the previous section, “Climax,” the narrator learns that Felix is actually alive and back in Berlin, having faked his own death as part of an art project that is read by the masses as a critique of social media “at a time when millions of people documented their every move on social media and monitored everyone else’s...when unearthing obscure gaps and inconsistencies was a popular self-aggrandizing pastime” (250). The narrator is upset by this, but as she learns the news from a colleague over Skype, we see her anxiety about her tone and response. She says, “‘Honestly? I’d been planning to dump him anyway, so I feel...vindicated. But it is weird!’...I felt guilty for portraying myself as aloof and uncaring—I was OK, but I wasn’t simply going to get over it—so I added that I wished it weren’t raining so hard

because I felt like running down the street or something. Again the tone was wrong, too chipper and wholesome” (253). Even her emotional response here is returned to the territory of writing, controlling tone and being cognizant of perception. The narrator wants to write the right (cynical, nonplussed) reaction for herself, a way of not being duped by Felix and his fakery. The thrownness that Ngai traces in anxiety’s spatial forms is evident here: the narrator fears not the literal thrownness of the tower in *Vertigo* but a metaphorical ‘being thrown’ by finding out she has been duped as well as being thrown to the side, her writing not making a lasting mark on the landscape of contemporary literature.

In the “End,” Felix meets the narrator’s earlier wish, that her blog writing be copied so as to prove that she’s being plagiarized and not simply ignored. She runs into Felix as she sits outside a café in Berlin and they have a conversation, where she “began to get nervous and think I was wasting my chance to get some resolution,” again a writerly impulse to make it all make sense and wrap up in a satisfying way (263). She reflects, “I knew I wasn’t going to get anything real out of him, that it would be pointless to try and get him to sit down and explain. But there’s something I didn’t mention before. I wasn’t going to mention it at all, because it’s embarrassing, the way it reveals my trifling concerns, what I keep track of, what upsets me. But it’s critical to the story and to leave it out would be self-serving. As a writer you have to think of the reader.” Again the terrain of real and fake is simultaneous, the narrator wondering if the very fake Felix will give her “anything real” while also telling her reader that there is a key element she has not mentioned, despite her obsession with this detail, which she has been “dwelling on this miniscule detail for the last two weeks, thinking of it and almost nothing else” (263). In criticizing Felix, the narrator also implicates herself—another person who has created something artificial by trying to critique artificiality. “As a writer you have to think of the reader” reminds us that the reader that the narrator has envisioned is not necessarily us, but a chorus of her ex-boyfriends. Her anxiety about not being taken seriously as

a writer—by her former lovers—is at play here, since the detail that is plaguing her is that Felix has copied one of her tweets in his revival, posted on Instagram.

She confronts Felix, seeking something like resolution, saying:

‘That’s one of my tweets.’

‘What?’ he asked.

That’s one of my tweets. That’s one of my tweets. I had been humiliated so much already by this person—I try to hide it, but no amount of positive thinking can erase all the humiliation from this situation—and now somehow without even saying anything he had managed to humiliate me more, compelling me to utter this dumb sentence not once but twice and then later to write it three times. In my own novel! (264).

The tweet Felix has copied is “I’m a pretty girl and I’m always late!,” something the narrator remembered posting on the way to a movie date with Felix, feeling anxious about whether he had booked seats or not. At this final moment in Berlin, though, the narrator feels an imbalance of power, unable to repeat herself and the tweet for a second time. She is angry that Felix has forced her into adding Twitter into her novel, but more particularly, including her own tweet in the book. Throughout the whole of *Fake Accounts*, the narrator has been oblique and unspecific about her online writing, never quoting her own work or giving details about her essays. Felix’s reticence—and plagiarism—“compel” her “to utter this dumb sentence not once but twice and then later to write it three times. In my own novel!” This language of force and a loss of control shows the narrator’s anxiety: she is literally spiraling, stuck thinking about what to say. The careful construction of her cynical intellectual journey, her growth as a writer, recast into the novel we are reading, begins to slip. The narrator is thrown. As in Ngai’s discussion of the ‘thrownness’ of anxiety, the narrator begins to project her anxiety, not just on Felix but also onto the reader as she tries to control the impression she is getting across. “I knew reciting it to him would, in addition to being boring, also make it seem like I cared, which would be disadvantageous for extracting any tidbit of information I might be able to get from him. So I just sat there looking up at him and pretending ‘That’s one of my tweets’ was a perfectly withering remark” (265). Two important things follow. One is that the

narrator briefly considers writing about Felix, pitching a “lengthy, searching interview with him” to “the website,” ostensibly the one she blogged for, calling it “A Chat with My Ex-Boyfriend, the Anonymous Online Conspiracy Theorist Who Faked His Death” (265). But if this is her past self, the blogger and not the writer, the second event in this sequence makes the narrator’s emergence as a ‘real writer’ evident. Felix pulls out his wallet: “‘Yes,’ he said, maybe pityingly, maybe exasperatedly, maybe patronizingly, maybe guiltily, maybe shamefully, maybe ruefully, maybe matter-of-factly, maybe absolutely, totally, completely devoid of any feeling at all. He lifted my saucer and coffee cup, ignoring the wasps, which dispersed into chaos, and slipped the note under it. ‘That’s part of the point.’”

The very last line of the novel is Felix’s pronouncement, “That’s part of the point,” which feels like an ambivalent note for a conclusion. Should we read this ironically or sincerely? We could read this as Felix’s ability to stop the spiraling of the novel in its tracks, the closest thing to resolution we can hope for. We can also read it as a patriarchal rejoinder, a jab that leaves the narrator with nothing else to say. Has she been wowed? Or silenced? Reading *Fake Accounts* as we have, tracing the motion and ambivalence of the spiral form, we should of course see both at once. The narrator is at once silenced and speaking, being both authentic and totally fake, anxious to be read earnestly but also anxious to be smarter and more cynical than anyone else in the room. But I’d like to suggest one further complication, one that loops us back to the beginning with new perspective, a move that is, after all, the primary affordance of the spiral form. Knitting utopian dreams for the internet, like those of John Perry Barlow, together with Oyler’s cynical novel about the internet and its fakery helps us see the spiral as the formal expression of the diffusion and collapse between the internet and life. Read one way, this collapse has achieved some of Barlow’s dreams for diffuse hierarchy, the internet as a world “a world that is both everywhere and nowhere, but it is not where bodies live” (EFF). Read another, this collapse is a hellish lack of context, truth,

authenticity that ruins relationships, writing, and art. Is this heaven or hell? Is the spiral bringing us to new technological heights or are we on our way down to the depths, to total collapse? The spiral's encoded ambivalence affords us these two simultaneous perspectives, these twinned readings, but it does not afford an escape from the internet at all.

I want to close by considering what it means to be stuck in something like the spiral, in the very simultaneity of internet and life. After all, this chapter has not traced the revolutionary potential of the spiral to bring us out of the hellish collapse we are living through. This is because it cannot, at least not in *Fake Accounts*. At most, the spiral gives us a way to see a collapse between real life and the internet as a necessary aspect of its democratization and openness. But what I do think the spiral can do, perhaps better than any form I've traced in this project, is give us perspective to see the ambivalence of simultaneity as part of our own stuckness. In "Suspended Hell," an essay for *n+1*, critic Katie Kadue tries to parse out why people are still on Twitter, if they are actively calling it 'hell' or 'the hellsite.' In her analysis, it comes down to choice and agency: "The hell of capitalism and climate catastrophe leaves us at the mercy of forces outside our control, but we can choose to live in a hell of our own making for a few minutes or hours a day or week. We keep it hovering in the background, refreshing and repopulating our feed, between emails, between meetings, between Pomodoro sessions. We tell each other, on Twitter, that we need to get off Twitter." Kadue writes about the much-meme-ified Evergreen ship stuck in the Suez Canal in 2021 as speaking to the "capacity of stuckness" to "disrupt the usual flows of capital or discourse and to create, instead, new wandering mazes of collective linguistic pleasure." This stuckness leads to moving forms, "new wandering mazes of collective linguistic pleasure." The wandering maze and moving form of *Fake Accounts* affirms a similar potential in its hope that writing literature in the age of the internet may still persist, despite cynically showing how impossible the project would be. Yet I find that *Fake Accounts* resists a reparative reading, that its cynicism is so self-conscious that any argument about

the radical potential of writing in the age of the internet falls flat. The simultaneity of the spiral resists a conclusion that the many collapses it encodes, between real/fake, content/writing, surface/depth, are somehow liberatory or freeing. We may not be stuck in the circle, but nor does the spiral offer a way out.

Instead, I join Kadue and Oyler in affirming the stuckness of the spiral as a key aspect of its form. And we do feel stuck online, stuck in the modes of Twitter takes and discourse, stuck in environmental crisis that is layered on political and economic and social crisis. Kadue closes her essay by saying, “For many of us, for those of us who find the ‘us’ of Twitter a meaningful if partial collective identity, Twitter is what we’ve done while waiting for whatever this is—the academic jobs crisis, Covid, capitalism, the world—to end, even if there’s no end to be found.” This “partialness” resonates with the “part of the point” of the ending of *Fake Accounts*, with a sense of waiting for an end, “even if there’s no end to be found.” Perhaps this is the primary affordance of the spiral as a shape: it names what it feels like to be stuck in pointlessness, a state of perpetual delay in arrival. Read this way, the narrator’s ambivalence becomes a beneficial or even protective mode, a way of her living on without knowing the ending. She can only ever approach “part of the point,” like the spiral, never arriving at the end. Better to accept the partiality of everything, the asymptotic nature of reality in the digital age. This formal thinking about the internet suggests that perhaps finding a visual or spatial representation for the diffusion of affect, content, and discourse online is an important step. Finding spatial form for internet is one way to make sense of it, to live on with it without capitulating to pessimism or optimism. The spiral’s ambivalence allows a reading of the internet that shows how its potential to do good and to do ill will always remain simultaneous. By narrating the internet age as a spiral, *Fake Accounts* attempts to chart a way of living—and writing—in times that may feel like the end, or maybe the beginning, but might just be the middle, where nothing happens.

CHAPTER FOUR

Living Through: *The Furrows* as Parallel Universe

“What I find utterly terrifying is mourning’s *discontinuous* character.”

– Roland Barthes, *Mourning Diary*, November 26, 1977

“Memory stops. The frame freezes. You’ll find that’s something that happens. I warned you. I’m telling you what you need to know.” – Joan Didion, *The Year of Magical Thinking: The Play*

So far in my project, simultaneous fictions have illuminated the modes through which readers negotiate two textual places, the book and the world, at once. *How to Be Both, If on a winter’s night a traveler*, and *Fake Accounts* all stage scenes of reading as an encounter with distraction, as the material of the world becomes a text to be read alongside a book. The simultaneity of world and text problematizes the mainstream discourse about technology as attention and distraction bleed into each other, particularly as simultaneous fictions experiment with forms (the double helix, the kaleidoscope, and the spiral) that suggest multiple vantage points at once. In this chapter, which also serves as the conclusion to my dissertation, I move to think more existentially about simultaneous reading. I consider how this operation of reading life as text—an operation inextricably linked to making sense of events, of one’s own life—raises questions of what reading and interpretation can do. I see simultaneous reading as one way of encountering some of the most fundamental questions about existence—why am I here, what is the purpose of life, how do I know what I know—without the imperative to answer them in one final way, but to consider multiple, concurrent answers. “Our life is programmed for reading,” Italo Calvino writes in “The Written World and the Unwritten World,” and this reading is “more than an optical exercise,” but “a process that involves mind and eyes together” (126). The broad question of this chapter is how we read those parts of our lives and existence that appear to not be ‘programmed’ for reading, that resist narrative continuity, that resist thought altogether.

Though there are many aspects of life that remain unthinkable, this chapter focuses on an ordinary, inevitable experience of simultaneity and the discontinuous: the experience of grieving. As I show through my reading of Namwali Serpell's *The Furrows: An Elegy*, considering grief as an operation of simultaneous reading helps us see grief not just as an experience of emotional distress and anguish, but fundamentally an experience of conceptual difficulty and repeated mental negotiations with reality, an experience that almost every person will eventually undergo. In these terms, grief is simultaneous to life, as distracting, alienating, and painful; as a non-pleasurable distraction, grief feels like an alternate reality that coexists with the world, the very presence of absence (in this way it is the flip side of my reading of love in my earlier chapter on Italo Calvino). And grief can be understood as a manifestation of love, another distracting experience that changes how we read and perceive both world and text. In his *Mourning Diary*, kept after the death of his mother, Roland Barthes writes "Like love, mourning affects the world—and the worldly—with unreality, with importunity. I resist the world, I suffer from what it demands of me, from its demands. The world increases my sadness, my dryness, my confusion, my irritation, etc. The world depresses me" (126). Grief and love together name what Barthes later calls "the great crises" (132), states of mind that are persistently distracting, giving the world a distinct "unreality." For Barthes, writing is one way of puzzling through grief as unreality, one way of giving it form, as he wrote on slips of paper that only came to be collected and published after his death.⁵¹ This form affords and encodes an ongoingness, a resistance to conclusion or boundedness that points to grief's simultaneity with life. I understand the simultaneity of grief not just as the mental operations of grief (remembering, forgetting, being in pain) that occur while life goes on, but also that the particular

⁵¹ In her introduction to *Mourning Diary*, Nathalie Leger writes that "The reader is presented not with a book completed by its author, but the hypothesis of a book desired by him, which contributes to the elaboration of his oeuvre and, as such, illuminates it" (x).

feeling of grief makes presence and absence, real and unreal, inevitable and unthinkable, simultaneous to each other.

Namwali Serpell's 2022 novel *The Furrows* takes as its chief subject the uniquely unreasonable qualities of grief, following Cassandra ("Cee") Williams as she navigates the uncertain death of her younger brother Wayne. Cee's processing of Wayne's death is an existential example of simultaneous reading, as she seeks to find a form to represent the uncertainty and disorientation she is experiencing alongside the continuity of life. Cee departs from classic notions of understanding grief as a 'wave' or even the subtitle's insistence on 'an elegy,' instead insisting on the parallel universe as the organizing form for her grief. The parallel universe thus extends as a means to understand grief and simultaneous reading more broadly. The cosmological concept of parallel universes (also called 'pluriverses' and 'multiverses') interrupts ideas of linearity and certainty which often animate the typical critical approaches to a novel.⁵² The parallel universe comes to stand for the concurrent worlds which each conflicting reading of the novel opens up, but like other simultaneous fictions, *The Furrows* refuses an organizing schema that allows the novel to be smoothed into linear order. In this refusal, the novel seeks to teach its readers to live with the uncertainty of the world, offering us scenes of multiplicity that can never fully resolve but remain ongoing.

The ongoingness of grief—its simultaneity—is clear, as *The Furrows* begins aptly with an epigraph from Marcel Proust's *In Search of Lost Time: The Fugitive*, which points to the persistent presence of the dead in the minds of the living: "people do not die for us immediately, but remain bathed in a sort of aura of life which bears no relation to true immortality but through which they continue to occupy our thoughts in the same way as when they were alive. It is as though they were

⁵² These traditional critical approaches are described by Monica Huerta in *Magical Habits* as "heroic postures," ones that "our professional and institutional structures ask us to perform" (xiii). These structures and postures celebrate the individual, the singular hero, an individualist impulse that Huerta resists. And alongside the figure of the single, brilliant critic, Huerta also draws attention to the ways that criticism expands through time, in its own nonlinear way: "One wrinkle in the conceit of criticism is that language often hits in waves, over stretches of time, finding us as though for the first time years afterward. Each critical act can only be provisional, each argument a suggestion at best" (6).

travelling abroad” (quoted in Serpell 1). Proust reminds us of the simultaneous presence and absence of the dead, indexed through the mind of the griever: they occupy our thoughts as if they were alive, yet they are absent from us. Grief emerges as an experience of conceptual difficulty, where reality does not quite feel real without the dead; their continued absence must be forgotten, remembered, and re-digested.⁵³ By beginning with Proust, *The Furrows* draws attention to the inability of the mind to grasp the magnitude of death or to reliably remember that the dead are gone. This mechanism of grief—a repeated remembering and forgetting—makes the present and absent figure simultaneous to each other. This resonates with Eugenie Brinkema’s reading of grief⁵⁴ in *The Forms of the Affects*, where she notes that grief recasts visibility and sight: “Grief refigures seeing as envisioning without enlightenment” so much that “If blindness were to be redescribed as an affect, it would be the affect of stricken disorientation” (55). This disorientation and “envisioning without enlightenment” come from the collapse between presence and absence, which cannot be smoothed out or resolved. Grief may feel like a rupture in time, a break with reality, but in *The Furrows* these ruptures splinter off and repeat, creating a web of multiple possibilities where neither reader nor character can fully distinguish between presence and absence, real and unreal.

This multiplicity makes for a complex novel, full of asymmetry and repetition. *The Furrows* begins with Cee telling us two sentences that will act as her refrain: “I don’t want to tell you what happened. I want to tell you how it felt” (3). Unsupervised at their vacation rental on the coast of

⁵³ Serpell discusses the cycle of forgetting and remembering to grieve in many interviews and publicity for *The Furrows*. In a profile written for *Poets and Writers*, Renée H. Shea notes Serpell’s dreams and how they relate to her grief: “As someone who herself has vivid dreams, [Serpell] recalls the experience of dreaming that her sister was alive and waking up to the reality of her death. ‘It didn’t feel like a dream; it felt like I was going through it again and again,’ she says. ‘There’s something in the human mind that balks at the very idea that someone can just not be there anymore.’”

⁵⁴ Brinkema’s reading is inspired by a passage from Augustine’s *Confessions* (IV. iv, “A Friend Dies: Home a Torture”) which sounds very similar to Proust: “My heart grew sombre with grief, and wherever I looked I saw only death. My own country became a torment and my own home a grotesque abode of misery. All that we had done together was now a grim ordeal without him. My eyes searched everywhere for him, but he was not there to be seen. I hated all the places we had known together, because he was not in them and they could no longer whisper to me ‘Here he comes!’ as they would have done had he been alive but absent for a while. I had become a puzzle to myself” (qtd. in Brinkema, 53).

Delaware, Cee goes to the beach with her younger brother, Wayne. The weather is rough and Wayne swims too deep, disappearing under the surface of the water. Cee swims out to bring him back. Her recollection of this moment stands apart from the rest of the chapter and is addressed to Wayne:

Dear Wayne. You swam into the furrows. At first, you didn't know it because you were under the surface and you faced down as you swam, staring at the vault of sea below. Then you felt the sky darken above you, a shadow passing, and when you came up to breathe, you were suddenly inside them, the great grooves in the water, the furrows. On either side of you, those whirring sheets of water, the foam along their edges sharpening like teeth. On either side of you, the furrows chewing, cleaving deeper. They ate you up. You were alone out there and the world took you back in, reclaimed you into its endless folding. (6)

Cee swims Wayne into shore but falls asleep, waking up alone on the beach. Time begins to move oddly for Cee. She sees a dark form, bent out of shape, on the sand—she assumes it is Wayne—and the waves drag the form into the water. “I didn’t move,” Cee tells us, “or couldn’t.” She wakes up on the beach again, and a man in a blue windbreaker appears, asking for her address and driving her home. “Time stuttered again,” she reflects, and her father returns home to Cee sitting alone on the staircase. “Where’s Wayne?” he asks, a question that the novel will never answer. From here we watch the Williams family grieve over the span of years: Charlotte, the mother, is convinced Wayne is lost and will return, and following a period of numbness, she cooperates above and beyond with the police to try to find her missing son, eventually founding an organization called Vigil, that works to find missing children. Bernard, the father, is sure that Wayne is dead but pursues his own sort of justice, following individual leads but eventually reconciling himself to Wayne’s death. These responses map the family’s racial differences, too: as a Black man, Bernard distrusts the police and is suspicious of their attempts to find a young Black boy in the Baltimore area. As a white woman, however, Charlotte’s pain is legible in institutional spaces; the police are interested in listening to her. Cee feels closer to her father, who appears to be coping more healthily with Wayne’s death, than her mother, who is obsessed with the past, even secretly replicating Wayne’s childhood drawings on the wall of their home. Charlotte also turns to Black art to heighten her feelings of grief, a phenomenon

which alienates Cee from her mother: “it was not easy to trust a woman who had spent the first week of the initial search for Wayne’s body lying faceup on the sofa, blasting Nina Simone...I felt I was seeing her truly for the first time—not only the way we all come to see our parents as fallible humans, but also the particularities of her whiteness, the way she seemed to seek expression of her feelings only through black art” (27). Time passes. The family grieves.

Then, on page 44, the beginning of chapter 5, everything we have read becomes questionable: “When I was twelve,” Cee writes, “my little brother got hit by a car.” From here, we get an entirely new narrative of Wayne’s death—he is hit by a car while walking to school with Cee—with key details recurring, like the man in the windbreaker (this time he is the driver of the car), Cee’s separation from Wayne’s body (she runs ahead to call an ambulance), and phrases like Wayne’s head rolling in an “unreasonable way.” Wayne’s death repeats one more time after this, a death on a carousel in a park, again unseen by Cee, again featuring the man in the windbreaker, again a separation from Wayne’s body, forever missing. This is not the only triptych in the novel, however. Interspersed in Cee’s reflections on the past are three scenes that seem to exist in the narrative present, in which Cee meets a man who looks like the adult version of Wayne. They flirt, then catastrophe ensues: a restaurant explodes, the Hollywood set of a movie theater catches fire, a bomb goes off in the San Francisco airport. These moments are destabilizing to the reader, not just because Cee’s obsession with Wayne morphs into sexual fetish, but also because the narration cuts off before we know what has happened to Cee in the first two of these scenes. We don’t know how or if she survives. But the third scene, following the explosion at the airport, morphs into the plot of the novel’s second half, where the adult Wayne lookalike turns out to be named Wayne Williams. We shift to his narration for much of the rest of the novel, which becomes something of a heist, as this adult Wayne seduces Cee to get access to Vigil, the foundation Charlotte has started, because he too hopes to find *their* Wayne Williams. Unlike Charlotte and Cee, though, the adult Wayne is trying

to enact revenge on the missing Wayne Williams, a Black boy from Baltimore with the same name, who ruined his life and rendered him homeless.

Confused yet? *The Furrows* wants you to be. These triptychs—Wayne’s death and Cee’s encounters with three adult Wayne(s)—leave the reader disoriented, largely because Cee as the narrator never acknowledges that Wayne’s death or her re-encounters with an adult Wayne have been narrated in triplicate.⁵⁵ “What actually happened,” asked my bewildered students when I taught this novel, and their question is apt, one that *The Furrows* itself is recruiting its reader to ponder. What happened? How do we know? The novel engenders its own suspicious reading, as we wonder which scene of Wayne’s death is real, if the cinematic moments of catastrophe are dreams, if Cee is traumatized or insane or unreliable. But *The Furrows* resists an answer to these questions, resists any interpretation of the novel that can explain everything. Instead, the repetitions of *The Furrows* point the reader not to certainty in reading, but to the multiplicity of uncertainty in life. The reader has too much information, too many possibilities to negotiate, in this way mirroring Cee’s response to Wayne’s missing body. Cee’s simultaneous reading becomes the novel’s theorization of grief as iterative and layered, as she repeatedly negotiates the presence of absence. This fundamental gap—an inability to reckon with death—emerges as a crucial question not just for reading *The Furrows*, but for living on in grief, in the unreal yet inevitable experience of loss.

The Furrows attempts to give new form to grief,⁵⁶ following Cee as she looks for models to understand Wayne’s death, a death that changes the very material of reality for her. For Cee, the

⁵⁵ The novel’s obsession with threes remains ambiguous, itself multiple: the repeating threes could be the rule of three (twice is mere coincidence, thrice is satisfying), the classic Biblical trinity (Father, Son, Holy Spirit), or perhaps even the triplicates of time itself (past, present, and future). These threes give the novel a sense of asymmetry, as narratorial perspective shifts between Cee and Wayne occur in the middle of a section as opposed to with a new break. Between the named sections, “Passing,” “Past,” and “Palace,” there is affinity as opposed to logical progression: Passing and Past may read as a progression, as in “going, going, gone,” but Past to Palace have an uncertain relationship, linked only by the similar sounds of the words.

⁵⁶ This theorization of grief as a conceptual problem is immanent to the novel, and to the perspective of Cee, who pushes our understanding of grief from a discrete an experience of emotional distress into considering grieving as a repetitive, ongoing negotiation with narrative and reality. Namwali Serpell speaks of this repeating quality of grief and

parallel universe becomes the form through which she can think about the unthinkable, the loss of her brother.⁵⁷ The parallel universe helps Cee imagine other worlds and other possibilities of reunion and connection, but it also gives Cee language to name the fundamental disconnect between the mourning of her and her family, which she illustrates as several multiple realities that are simultaneous to each other:

Me, every time: “I felt him die. I know he’s dead.”

My mother, every time: “Where is he? What really happened?”

My father, one time, when he’d finally had enough: “Why does it matter? Either way, the boy’s gone.”

He didn’t otherwise intervene in the impasse between me and my mother, which came to dictate our lives. I know now that she was beside herself with grief, that she had slipped into some other groove, some other reality. But I felt betrayed. I will be honest with you. I cried more for my mother’s betrayal than I ever cried for my brother’s death. (29)

We should not miss the implied repetition in this passage, as Cee notes her speaking as “me, every time” and her mother “every time.” Bernard’s response is, notably, couched as “one time,” a moment when he “had enough,” which points again to the accumulation of these conflicts. These conversations are repetitive and iterative, circling a fundamental break in understanding and the

how it comes to affect the structure of *The Furrows* in an interview with Jennifer Baker in *Electric Literature*: “the repetitive quality to the structure [of *The Furrows*] is meant to mimic my particular feeling about mourning, which I’ve experienced and also encountered with other people, which is that when a person that you love dies, they don’t just die once—they die every time that you remember that they’re dead. That feeling, that grief is always erupting...there’s a kind of iterative quality to grief that I wanted to enact with the repetition.” Grief is “always erupting” and the dead die many times, as the mind of the griever re-processes death every time they remember the dead. These many waves of grief are superimposed, simultaneous, and change the nature of reality, generating confusion and disorientation.

⁵⁷ I am certainly not the first to suggest that *The Furrows* has taken cues from the parallel universe. Many reviews of the book note this: Mary Retta writes in *Vulture* that “the concept of parallel universes pervades the novel, as two seemingly disparate ideas push up against each other in mostly failed attempts to coalesce.” In *The New York Times*, Dwight Garner writes, “the book is so laden with odd convergences and there are so many brushes with demons that it does leave you feeling tiny and weird,” and “with its scrutiny of doubles, of doppelgängers, of déjà vu, of parallel existences, of the transmigration of souls, of hints of incest, of shifting points of view, the book is a mind-twist. (The word I am after isn’t printable.)” In *The Guardian*, critic Beejay Silcox connects *The Furrows*’ parallel universe plot to a larger trend of multiverses appearing in contemporary media: “If there’s an emerging theme to the art of these crisis-racked times, it’s time itself: multiverses, parallel lives and wormholes; groundhog days and grandfather paradoxes; time-travellers and their ever-patient wives. From indie films (*Everything Everywhere All At Once*; *Palm Springs*) to prestige TV (*Russian Doll*, *Dark*), to queer romance novels (see Casey McQuiston’s delightful *One Last Stop*), creators seem intent on mucking with the space-time continuum. Could there be a better metaphor for our perpetual present than an inescapable cosmic loop? The more inevitable the future seems, the more we dream of one that can be averted – of a past that can be undone.” As Silcox notes, the parallel universe plot is obsessed with an unescapable future and a revisable past, which is perhaps apt for “these crisis-racked times.” But if *The Furrows* experiments with the parallel universe, the novel does so to offer readers something more than an “inescapable cosmic loop” or the ‘mind-fuck’ that Garner finds: the form pushes us to understand grief itself as a conceptually difficult process.

absence of Wayne, time and time again. Cee sees these narratives of grief as gaps, represented as an “impasse” between her and her mother, who has “slipped into some other groove, some other reality,” resonating with the parallel universe. The language of groove here reminds us of the titular furrows, which are more an image of land and solid earth than water, but also of rhythm, perhaps even the ‘groove’ of Nina Simone’s music that gives Charlotte’s grief a musical anchor. And the gulf between mother and daughter, the loop that divides their stories about Wayne, is also an occasion for Cee’s grief. She feels more bereft by her mother’s betrayal than Wayne’s death, and the two different ‘grooves’ that Cee and Charlotte are in resonate with ideas of dissonance and skipping, as if a record. Their two stories—which form their two realities—are fundamentally dissonant and in conflict, but the parallel universe gives a figure for the simultaneity of such asymmetry. Charlotte and Cee have ceased to exist in the same reality, each living in separate narratives, but the form of the parallel universe gives Cee a model for seeing their two separate realities as simultaneous instead of wholly incompatible. Through the parallel universe, dissonant and conflicting interpretations can be seen as moments of multiplicity, a framing that resists the demand for resolution, conclusion, and certainty.

Cee’s account points us to see the grieving of the Williams family as a process of interpretation. Their lack of knowledge about what happens to Wayne mirrors the reader’s own, and both reader and Williams family engage in interpretation to make sense of the complicated narrative before them. This complication comes from a fundamental gap at the heart of the Williams family’s narratives: Wayne might be missing, he might be dead, the family might never know what happened to him. This gap, a literal lack of a body, comes to figure a splintering of stories, creating the dissonance between Cee and her family. “So, in our family,” Cee recounts, “there was a story, there was this lore, but it split in two where Wayne had left it. It split, then circled around the empty space where he should have been and joined back together at the point when I walked into the house

without him. The lore was a loop at the end of a rope, a lasso endlessly tossed, catching nothing” (29). We should catch, of course, Serpell’s winking allusion to both Macbeth’s soliloquy and Faulkner’s *The Sound and The Fury*—and I will return to examine the extreme and even pedantic allusiveness of *The Furrows* later in this chapter—as well as an emphasis on “story” and “lore” as the material of reality. The story about Wayne’s death take tangible shape in this scene, becoming a clear image of a loop, one “endlessly tossed.” The Williams family is engaged in reading and interpreting each other, as each of their stories about Wayne—as missing or dead or uncertain—engender what they see as real, what world they live in. They are giving themselves a narrative with which they can live and process their grief. Yet there is a central gap in the loop, in their stories, since Wayne remains missing and his death remains unthinkable. Noticeably, the loop here is imagined as a “lasso,” a tool to wrangle back something (or someone) that has strayed too far, and not as a noose, the same shape with a different orientation: in this sense, the story-as-loop still insists on another gap, the shape of death that remains unthinkable for Cee and her family.

Cee’s account of her own grief, and her own interpretation of her family’s stories, points us back to the parallel universe. The recurring loops and threads in this scene offer an anticipation of the adult Wayne’s account of his mentor, Mo, a devout Muslim, which occurs almost 200 pages later in the novel. As adult Wayne recalls Mo, the reader is confronted by insistent imagery of loops and threads in the space-time continuum: “I had this...mentor once,” Wayne tells Cee. “He used to talk about things like that—parallel existence and all that. He’d say, *Time is a mop*. Or, *time is a rope*. He’d say, *the world is made up of threads of possibility, all the could-woulda-shouldas, but only some get caught in the rope*” (230). He continues, “One time, he told me, *Time’s got grooves in it. A moment is a needle and time can skip like a record...time is like the ground, and when something big happens, it’s an earthquake, and when it’s little, it’s ripples, like those rows on a farm*” (230). “Furrows,” Cee responds, nodding (ibid). A loop, a rope, a lasso, a mop: what Mo and Wayne discuss as the material of time itself is also the same metaphorical

material that Cee uses to discuss the parallel realities she and her family come to grieve in. These recurring images of loops and threads suggest that “only some [of the threads of possibility] get caught in the rope,” pointing again to the way grief exposes the gaps, the unthinkable, that already exist in our sense of reality.

These images of threads, loops, lassos, and mops suggest an even more particular form of gaps in reality, through string theory’s theorization of the parallel universe, which sees a fundamental simultaneity in particles, one that illuminates the limit of human comprehension. As physicist Michio Kaku explains in *The New York Times*, string theory hopes to serve as a theory of everything, combining quantum physics and Einstein’s theory of relativity. String theory looks for multiplicity and concurrence in the world of particles, in ten dimensions. (There may be more dimensions, but humans can only conceptualize ten.) Kaku writes, “Quantum theory is based on a radically different picture [from concepts of the world as an expanding bubble]—one of multiplicity. Subatomic particles, you see, can exist simultaneously in multiple states. Take the electron, a subatomic particle that carries a negative charge. Wondrous devices in our lives, such as transistors, computers and lasers, are all possible because the electron, in some sense, can be in several places at the same time.” String theory sees the crucial simultaneity of particles as, indeed, strings: “subatomic particles are just different notes on a tiny, vibrating string, which explains why we have so many of them. Each string vibration, or resonance, corresponds to a distinct particle. The harmonies of the string correspond to the laws of physics” (Kaku). We should see in *The Furrows*’ insistent language of threads and their gaps a connection to the strings of particles and their inherent simultaneity. The imagery of repetition in these threads though, as a “lasso endlessly tossed,” suggests that the parallel universe form has something to do not just with simultaneity—many worlds at once—but that these simultaneous worlds are shaped by repeats and returns that generate more and more possibilities.

Repetition can lead to a multiplicity of universes that are simultaneous to each other, particularly in another theorization of the parallel universe, the Many-Worlds interpretation, which posits that every choice creates multiple realities.⁵⁸ Peter Coles summarizes this interpretation succinctly: “every time an experiment is performed (e.g. every time a photon passes through the slit device) the universe, as it were, splits into two: in one universe the photon goes through the left-hand slit and in the other it goes through the right-hand slit. If this happened for every photon one ends up with an enormous number of parallel universes” (112). Each choice, each experiment, generates a new world: “an enormous number of parallel universes.” As a form, then, the parallel universe shows how each moment has a pair, a multitude of new worlds, since every choice that someone makes would render a universe where they have made the opposite choice, *ad infinitum*. These worlds repeat, but differently. In an interview with NPR about the existence of parallel universes, physicist Brian Greene notes that “There are only so many ways matter can arrange itself within [an] infinite universe. Eventually, matter has to repeat itself and arrange itself in similar ways.” He uses a metaphor of a deck of cards to illustrate this repetition, noting that “If you shuffle [a] deck enough times, the orders will have to repeat. Similarly, with an infinite universe and only a finite number of complexions of matter, the way in which matter arranges itself has to repeat.” The parallel universe as a form models repetition with a difference, suggesting that new worlds splinter off with every choice, every act, every shuffle of the deck: our reality might be comprised of a multitude of possibilities and timelines that we cannot even see.

The parallel universe gives language to a fundamentally simultaneous multiplicity at the heart of all matter, at the heart of reality itself. It also offers Cee a model for how to live with her family

⁵⁸ This also has its roots in the infamous illustration of Schrödinger’s cat. Peter Coles puts it thus: “Imagine there is a cat inside a sealed room containing a vial of poison. The vial is attached to a device which will break it and position the cat when a quantum event occurs...If the vial breaks, the death is instantaneous. Most of us would accept that the cat is either alive or dead at a given time. But if one takes the Copenhagen interpretation seriously it is somehow both the wavefunction for the cat comprises a superposition of the two possible states. Only when the room is opened and the state of the cat ‘measured’ does it ‘become’ either alive or dead” (111).

and their multiple stories/realities, a way to see a connection across a fundamental dissonance. But the parallel universe also seems to be teaching the reader of *The Furrows* about the confusion and conceptual difficulty that is at the heart of grief itself. When Cee narrates Wayne's death in a new way, the reader must try to reconcile two totally different and yet somehow connected possibilities. The form of the novel mirrors the split stories of the Williams family, so the reader becomes just like Cee in her family, trying to reconcile multiple stories together and feeling the destabilization of this task. In each iteration of Wayne's death, Cee falls asleep and wakes up disoriented, in this way a proxy for the confused reader. And repetition does disorient the reader, as Serpell knows: she writes in *Seven Modes of Uncertainty* that "while it often grounds the very act of narration, extreme *repetition* can eventually destabilize events and continuity; as a story accumulates parataxis ("and...and") and recursion ("again"), the reader's ability to trace meaning and sequence falters" (24). These constant repetitions of Wayne's death undermine the linearity and clarity of the story, leaving the reader defamiliarized within the novel. As Barthes writes in *Mourning Diary* (and the epigraph to this chapter), mourning has a particular "discontinuous character," a nonlinearity that resists recuperation into coherent, linear form and thus resists easy understanding.⁵⁹ The simultaneity of the parallel universe offers a model where multiple alternatives can exist at once without the imperative to find coherence: in this way, Cee's experience makes the experience of grief analogous to the experience of interpretation without certainty. Utilizing the disorienting effects of repetition, *The Furrows* mobilizes the form of the parallel universe to account for the conceptual difficulty of grief, modeling a simultaneity that holds space for the unknowable.

⁵⁹ Barthes writes later in *Mourning Diary* of the world's demand for continuity, the inability of people to acknowledge the unmaking and unmooring qualities of grief: "Everything began all over again immediately: arrival of manuscripts, requests, people's stories, each person mercilessly pushing ahead his own little demand (for love, for gratitude): no sooner has she departed than the world deafens me with its *continuance*" (146).

There is a more straightforward reading of this disorientation and repetition, since *The Furrows* may seem to play into the rise of contemporary fiction that narrates trauma, perhaps as an example of the ‘trauma plot,’ a term infamously coined by Parul Seghal in her 2021 essay for *The New Yorker*. “Unlike the marriage plot,” Seghal contends, “the trauma plot does not direct our curiosity toward the future (Will they or won’t they?) but back into the past (What happened to her?).” And “what happened to her” seems to be one central question of *The Furrows*, since Cee is an elliptical and confusing narrator: should we see her unreliability as a symptom of the uncertain loss she has experienced? Seghal locates the prevalence of the trauma plot in the historic rise of PTSD diagnoses and the genre of testimony: the “enshrinement of testimony in all its guises—in memoirs, confessional poetry, survivor narratives, talk shows—elevated trauma from a sign of moral defect to a source of moral authority, even a kind of expertise.” For Seghal, the trauma plot is narcissistic, solipsistic, and trafficking in certainty, allowing or even inviting readers to diagnose characters with relative ease. Seghal writes that “the trauma plot flattens, distorts, reduces character to symptom, and, in turn, instructs and insists upon its moral authority,” a clear and easily taught interpretative strategy with which to read. But *The Furrows* resists this interpretation, refusing to reduce any character to symptom or flatten any of the complexity of the novel. In contrast to the trauma plot, *The Furrows* undermines moments of certainty and conclusion for the reader, endorsing Seghal’s claim that “the experience of uncertainty and partial knowledge is one of the great, unheralded pleasures of fiction.” While *The Furrows* may represent a traumatic event, its destabilizing repetition undermines any easy diagnosis of its protagonist—or even its form. If the trauma plot asks what happened, *The Furrows* announces from its very first lines that it will never disclose exactly what happened, that this is not a relevant question for the reader. The novel is less interested in what trauma does to a person and more interested in existential questions of how these very stories about trauma, grief, and mourning create and confirm particular realities, and how Cee—and the reader—

can navigate life in these worlds. The reader is not invited to type or analyze Cee (though of course any reader can—and like my students, probably will) and is instead recruited to feel the difficulty of interpretation as a repeated negotiations with reality, a mode of simultaneous reading and living that makes grief legible. *The Furrows* aims to teach its reader, but like any teacher knows, telling your students directly what you want them to learn will probably not lead to a memorable or useful lesson. Instead, the novel replicates the form of grief so the reader can instead *experience* the disorientation of multiple, simultaneous possibilities, learning to read the world simultaneously, right alongside Cee.

The Furrows seems to evade any symptomatic reading, repeating scenes where Cee meets with therapists and psychoanalysts—three of them, another triptych of the novel—who interpret her. Here again the world turns into text, as Cee meets with Dr. Rothman, whom she calls “my first questioner, my first reader” (25). His method strikes her as odd, since he asks Cee questions about the living Wayne, not the aftermath of his death, and though Cee dislikes him as an adolescent, she admits retroactively that he “put the pen in my hand. He taught me to get it all out, write the dreams down, write letters to Wayne. He taught me about versions of things. He taught me that grief doesn’t choose its timing well: you never know when it’ll grip your neck” (31). Dr. Rothman reads Cee without giving her a clear diagnosis, teaching her about “versions of things” and putting “the pen in [her] hand,” and like grief’s uncertain timing (“you never know when it’ll grip your neck”), his lessons are experiential and unfold over time. The novel appears to endorse Dr. Rothman as an example for the reader, as he models an attention to grief’s simultaneity and ongoingness, and his interpretative questions acknowledge the continued presence of the absent Wayne. He does not demand that Cee understand or even reckon with Wayne’s death directly but gives her the space to process the concurrent realities she is reading. In contrast, Cee’s next doctor, Dr. Jacinta, asks her to keep a dream notebook—effectively putting the pen in her hand again—but this time offers Cee a

diagnosis of those dreams, “a symptom of what she called ‘ambiguous loss,’ which is when there is a death but no body” (70). Dr. Jacinta tells Cee that this is a “structure of ‘melancholia’ or ‘bad mourning’: a rhythm of loss and replacement that would endlessly repeat,” at least until Cee accepts Wayne’s death (ibid). Dr. Jacinta is a reader, too, of Freud’s “Melancholia and Mourning,” where Freud contends that unlike the more straightforward loss of the object in mourning, “In melancholia the relation to the object is no simple one; it is complicated by the conflict due to ambivalence. The ambivalence is either constitutional, i.e. is an element of every love relation formed by this particular ego, or else it proceeds precisely from those experiences that involved the threat of losing the object” (Freud 256). While Freud’s theorization of melancholia as ongoing may also point to simultaneity in grief, Cee rejects Dr. Jacinta and her attempts to get her to directly process Wayne’s death. Though Cee maintains that she is sure that Wayne has died, she responds to Dr. Jacinta by insisting that even knowing that he died cannot lead to acceptance: “I didn’t know how to accept death. I still don’t and I don’t really care to. Death is quite literally unacceptable, unreasonable, unimaginable. Imagining death would presuppose a consciousness that death itself would negate. Dr. Jacinta nodded when I said all of this but seemed irritated by my philosophizing” (70). Cee resists the diagnosis of herself as melancholic, of herself as suffering an ambiguous loss, on the grounds that any loss is unreasonable and unimaginable. Her existential “philosophizing” affirms a central gap at the heart of understanding death, undermining the sense that grief can be healed or overcome or even processed.

Her final therapist is Dr. Weil, who introduces Cee to “a theory called ‘life span integration.’ The premise is that you make a story about your life...In the therapy, you zoom in on moments of trauma—where the line broke or knotted or looped—and undo them, give yourself a before and an after...The funny thing about it, though, is that you don’t reconstruct your life as it actually happened. Instead, you design a fiction” (100). For Cee, this fiction is that she enters the moment of

Wayne's death, then enters as her current self (eighteen in this scene) to rescue her past self. Here we see resistance to the narratives of trauma in its most pointed form. The fictions that Cee writes with Dr. Weil in this particular brand of therapy read like a trauma plot, an exercise in returning to the past to identify a concrete cause and effect. That is, even in the temporal confusion ("Pausing time? Two selves?" wonders Cee incredulously), Cee is asked to smooth her life into a narrative that makes linear sense, that offers a "sense of continuity" that the very nature of grief seems to resist. Trauma here is represented as fundamentally incompatible with linear narratives, since the traumatic event is "where line broke or knotted or looped," and Cee is instructed to smooth this knot into a line. "But each time I entered the past in my mind," writes Cee, "I made the trauma into a drama. I burst up from the ground like an earthquake. I rained down from the sky above. I ran in and whisked off an astonished Cee, carrying her under my arm" (101). These moments turn the temporal confusion and the simultaneous absence/presence of grief "into a drama," into the trauma plot or a cinematic catastrophe, giving it legible and understandable form. Cee's resistance to this form of therapy is also linked to her rejection of Dr. Weil's "delving deeply into psychoanalytic structures of desire to explain what she called my 'obsession' with Wayne," and when Dr. Weil mentions that "Freud had connected sexual fetishes to unresolved mourning," Cee stops seeing her (101). While this scene may explain why Cee's three encounters with adult men who resemble Wayne are sexually charged and always end in apocalyptic scenes of catastrophe—and perhaps another 'unthinkable' at the heart of the novel, through the form of the unconscious and its desires—I want to return to Cee's own resistance to making "trauma into a drama" as a moment of interpretative refusal. These three scenes of analysis seem to insist that however well-read and well-intentioned these analysts are, all but Dr. Rothman miss the point that Cee is trying to make: by giving her narratives to understand herself, they ignore or attempt to rehabilitate unthinkability of death. For Cee, grief is a conceptual problem with no answer, since to understand death is impossible. The form she needs to understand

grief as an existential gap in understanding is not the drama of the trauma plot, which asks her return to the past to smooth out its confusion, but the repetition and multiplicity of the parallel universe, which offers a way to acknowledge the unthinkability of death itself.

If these scenes with psychoanalysts are allegories of interpretation, then this triptych seems to be insisting that how we read *The Furrows* matters. As readers, have we taken on the interpretative strategies of an analyst, trying to generate a certain interpretation of Cee's grief or identify some primal scene that exposes something new about her? Or are we able to read the novel without trying to find priority or clarity among its many simultaneous possibilities? *The Furrows* seems taunting in this approach, challenging readers to make sense of so much confusion, then daring them to resist that impulse. But *The Furrows* is not an intricate code to be cracked, despite all its clues and rabbit trails, because cracking this kind of code would suggest that conclusion is possible, that in the end, we come to one final and ultimate meaning. Instead, the diffuse structure of *The Furrows* refuses to give priority to one narrative—one universe—over the other. Is the adult Wayne the missing Wayne Williams? Is Cee dreaming? Is her memory affected by trauma? Yes...and no. Cee's experiences in therapy, her accounts of Wayne's death, and her ensuing catastrophic re-encounters with him show these questions as simultaneous: though each of these interpretations directly conflict with each other, they are all true at once. The novel asks us not to solve the puzzle but to experience a multiplicity of interpretations that can never resolve. In this way, *The Furrows* recruits its reader to feel grief as a conceptual, interpretative problem, right alongside Cee: the novel's form serves as its own answer to Cee's refrain, "I don't want to tell you what happened. I want to tell you how it felt" (3).

If the parallel universe form mirrors the conceptual difficulty of grief, as the griever inhabits multiple realities at once, then the parallel universe likewise points to readerly interpretation as an experience of multiplicity, sometimes dizzyingly so. In *The Furrows*, repetition destabilizes and

disorients the text, creating multiple realities and timelines, and the simultaneity of the parallel universe comes to bear on the novel in a more granular sense: the novel's obsession with allusions, which proliferate and multiply like the Williams' family and their narratives of grief, problematizing easy interpretation. From the very first page, it is clear that *The Furrows* is invested in its own allusiveness. Cassandra's name of course refers to the prophetess of Greek mythology whose prophecies were doomed to never be believed and her nickname, Cee, speaks to another repetition in triplicate, the homophones "see," "sea," and "C." The doubles or triples of Wayne Williams bring to mind Gothic texts and their doppelgangers, most particularly Edgar Allan Poe—another Baltimore resident—and his "The Story of William Wilson," which features an antagonism between two boys with the same name, a slant mirror of the adult Wayne Williams' story. Serpell has said the title itself speaks to Thomas Gray's "Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard," which mentions furrows in a graveyard: "Oft did the harvest to their sickle yield / Their furrow oft the stubborn glebe has broke," but also reflects a much-contested line in Toni Morrison's *Paradise*, "Beware the furrow of his brow" (86).⁶⁰ Even Cee's mantra reflects Tim O'Brien's infamous short story, "Good Form," which introduces readerly uncertainty into *The Things They Carried*: "For instance," O'Brien writes, "I want to tell you this: twenty years ago I watched a man die on a trail near the village of My Khe. I did not kill him. But I was present, you see, and my presence was guilt enough...But listen. Even that story is made up. I want you to feel what I feel. I want you to know why story-truth is truer sometimes than happening-truth," a distinction between multiple modes of truth that resonates

⁶⁰ In *Paradise*, the debate over what the Oven's inscription reads speaks again to multiple interpretations, as different generations advocate for different interpretations: "Reverend Pulliam pointed an elegant finger at the ceiling. 'Beware the Furrow of His Brow.' That's what it says clear as daylight. That's not a suggestion, that's an order!' 'Well, no. It's not as clear as daylight,' said Misner. 'It says "...the Furrow of His Brow.'" There is no "Beware" in it.'" (86). Another interpretation is hazarded by Destry, who, "looking strained and close to tears, held up his hand and asked, 'Excuse me, sir. What's so wrong about "Be the Furrow"? "Be the Furrow of His Brow"?"' (87). Eventually, the inscription is changed to "We Are the Furrow of His Brow" (298).

deeply with Cee's narration.⁶¹ The novel begs the reader to pay close attention to these little tricks, tricks that the reader begins to feel like Serpell has planted. This sense of synchronicity resonates when reading Serpell's own work: Cee's father, Bernard Williams, is also the name of a prominent English philosopher, one of the 'New Ethicists' who feature heavily in Serpell's *Seven Modes of Uncertainty*. Cee's mother, Charlotte, reads as an allusion to another bereaved literary mother: Charlotte Haze of Nabokov's *Lolita*, another disorienting novel that grounds many of the claims in *Seven Modes of Uncertainty*.⁶² In the novel's allusions to Serpell's own work, as well as to many other texts, both canonical and not, the reader opens little folds and furrows that themselves seem to be alternate timelines of interpretation, in almost endless multiplicity.

This is perhaps paradoxical, since as an interpretative strategy, finding and identifying allusions is a very concrete, even elementary, way to read a text. And this approach resonates with contemporary multiverse texts, like the Marvel cinematic universe and the concept of 'Easter eggs,' clues embedded in these films, which typically hints towards the next movie to be released or the next superhero to be reincarnated from the comics. Finding these clues brings the reader closer to the text, making them feel that their interpretation is not just correct but sanctioned by the text itself.⁶³ Thus allusions typically work to create certainty for the reader or viewer, as well as a sense of trust in the author, who knows what they are doing and has anticipated where the reader will look. And *The Furrows* is deeply invested in cinematic form and film allusions, too: Cee catches the last film of a Hitchcock double feature at the Castro and the three dream-like catastrophes of her

⁶¹ I'm indebted to Rebecca Aberle, who first noticed this particular allusion, for this insight. Notably, Serpell has not acknowledged this allusion to O'Brien in her *Poets & Writers* profile alongside the other authors she cites, like Woolf, Joyce, Poe, Morrison, and Proust, or in any of her publicity materials for the book.

⁶² Serpell writes that "the novels I consider in *Seven Modes of Uncertainty* operate within a cultural frame about the uses of uncertainty that *Lolita* made possible" (11).

⁶³ Consider, for another contemporary example, the craze around Taylor Swift's re-recorded albums and the many Easter eggs she admits to planting in music videos and interviews, clues for her ardent fans to discover what she means. This mode of reading searches for allusions and references to other texts (in Swift's case, other albums), seeking to understand what the author means.

encounters with adult Waynes bring to mind David Lynch's *Mulholland Drive*. But in *The Furrows*, the certainty that such references can engender is undermined by the sheer excess of allusion. These insistent and even disorienting layers of allusion seem to imitate some of the interpretative difficulty of high modernism's allusive style. And indeed, at a pivotal moment in the novel where Cee sleeps with the adult Wayne, she says "No" at her moment of orgasm, a crucial reversal of Molly Bloom's famous "yes I said yes I will Yes" (644) at the end of *Ulysses*.⁶⁴ In *Ulysses* as in *The Furrows*, allusions pile up and layer, to the point of distracting the reader from the plot: as first-time readers of *Ulysses* know, trying to track every reference and allusion in the novel is an overwhelming task that barely assists in comprehending the novel's project. *The Furrows* similarly overwhelms its reader with an excess of allusions, including many that seem to conflict or contradict each other, leaving the reader holding many possibilities at once, unable to decide exactly what path their interpretation should take. For instance, should we read the section called "Passing" as an allusion to Nella Larsen's *Passing* or Virginia Woolf's *To the Lighthouse* and its infamous "Time Passes" section? Like the photon passing through the slit device, every time we interpret the novel, the universe appears to split into two: in one universe, the novel is alluding to *Passing*, and in the other, it alludes to *To the Lighthouse*. But this excess and overwhelm is never resolved, instead splintering into multiple possibilities, multiple worlds. This is where *The Furrows* departs from the allusions of modernism, because the allusivity of *Ulysses* offers some resolution, in that the text can be mobilized into a narrative schema, as the chapters have names from *The Odyssey* but also have corresponding time, color, organ, symbols, and more. *The Furrows* may take on the form of the parallel universe, but this is an abstract form: its insistent intertextuality offers no schema or key that could make the novel make sense,

⁶⁴ Though I think many readers will recognize the allusion, Serpell explicitly names this scene as a reference to Joyce in her interview with Renee H. Shea in *Poets and Writers*.

once and for all. Instead, the layers and layers of allusions appear as readings that are themselves running in parallel, like different realities.

Of course, one cohesive line through the allusions in *The Furrows* is that they are obviously from Serpell's personal archive as an academic and literary critic: William Shakespeare, Thomas Gray, Virginia Woolf, James Joyce, Edgar Allan Poe, Vladimir Nabokov, Nella Larsen, Alfred Hitchcock. But there is a tension between the excitement of recognizing these allusions and the confusion of making them do something for interpretation. In *The Furrows*, these moments accrete and layer but offer little else than the thrill of discovery, as Serpell herself writes in her nonfiction book *Stranger Faces* of 'discovering' the second mop in Alfred Hitchcock's *Psycho*: "Does this feel like I'm reaching? Reading too much into a prop—a piece of junk? When I first noticed it, I thought: whoa! Then: Wait, did I see that?" (91). The excess of allusions may mirror Serpell's excitement of discovering a secret little reference, as we might expect from a novel written by a literature professor, but do they do anything other than show off how well-read the author is?⁶⁵ Of course, Serpell thinks so; in a cover launch in *Oprah Daily*, Serpell talks about planting 'clues' in *The Furrows* as an aspect of how she wants readers to engage with her work and to feel a particular mode of readerly uncertainty. Serpell names Morrison and Nabokov as her primary influences, citing "the degree to which experiment isn't just there for fun; it isn't just there for kicks or for cleverness. It's very much there to conjure feeling, ethical deliberation. Morrison wants the reader to feel snatched, as she says: thrown and disoriented in the same way that people put onto slave ships felt. When

⁶⁵ This is, in some ways, mirrors criticism about Ali Smith and her insistent use of puns: in *The New Yorker*, James Wood calls Smith "surely the most pun-besotted of contemporary novelists." Though Wood delves into how Smith uses these puns for political purpose, at least in the Seasonal Quartet, he notes that a "superabundant art naturally produces superfluity—lexical runoff, weak in nutrients. Carapace/caravan is a throwaway; "England's green unpleasant land" is too familiar to do any useful work; the college/collage joke seems forced; the thing about A4 paper being like a British A road seems like something Smith just had lying around. At times, you have the suspicion that Smith needs her characters to play around with words like this because she doesn't know how to animate them as actual human beings, motivated by need rather than by whimsy." The central question between Serpell and Smith is what all this wordplay is for other than literary pyrotechnics, a display of virtuosity?

[Morrison] reads her own work in her essays—*Unspeakable Things Unspoken*—she talks specifically about wanting to throw the reader into this other space. It’s a bold claim to make. I’m following in this tradition.” The reader of *The Furrows* does feel disoriented by the repeating deaths of Wayne and Cee’s encounters with the adult Wayne, but also by the insistent allusiveness of the text. Serpell links the intertextuality of *The Furrows* to Morrison’s project of “throwing readers into another space,” leaving them “thrown and disoriented.” This other space feels, in *The Furrows*, as if it is literally another space or universe, and this cosmological language seems to have ethical connotations for Serpell as well, who wants the reader to experience the disorientation of grief alongside Cee. And while the allusions do offer some concrete interpretative strategies, or at the least, some ingredients for a critical reading, the sheer multiplicity of these many references itself emerges as an experience of simultaneous reading. That is, finding a moment of allusion offers little else besides a brief moment of recognition; readers are left to navigate the parallel readings that these references open up, seeing the web grow larger and more complicated with every turn.

The uncertainty of the allusiveness, or rather, the multiple and conflicting certainties that coexist at once, leaves us feeling like Cee, navigating many narrative possibilities without choosing one. I see this as a microcosm for interpretation, for simultaneous reading as a resource for critics. As I’ve insisted, each reading opens up another world, another timeline: *The Furrows* in conversation with the multiplicity of racial identity, per Larsen, or *The Furrows* experimenting with narrative time and representation of grief, like Woolf. Of course these readings are not inherently contradictory. *The Furrows* can do both. Perhaps reading *Passing* and *To the Lighthouse* together even suggests something similar about the modernist experimentation in both texts, about the ambiguity and existential questions at the heart of both novels. But if criticism and interpretation are typically represented as modes of reading that engender certainty and understanding, the parallel universe complicates any easy account of what the novel is doing and why it does that. The layering allusions

of *The Furrows* offer competing but co-constitutive possibilities for the novel's reader, which recruit the reader to see their own reading as an experience of confusing multiplicity. The form of the parallel universe asks its reader not just to recognize allusions, but to see the ways these allusions themselves open up parallel interpretations without resolving them. We become simultaneous readers like Cee, sifting through a multitude of interpretative possibilities without concluding with any certainty, in this way modeling a mode of reading that acknowledges the unthinkability of death and the gaps at heart of our reality more generally.

I want to close by exploring this active role for the simultaneous reader, the creativity and open-endedness that the parallel universe figures for the critic, turning from the particular gap at the heart of grief to the kinds of gaps and limits of thought that undergird reality itself. And this concept of the parallel universe as creative resonates with physicist John Wheeler's concept of the Participatory Universe, one early explanation of the possibility of parallel universes. Wheeler writes in his 1983 article "Law Without Law" that "nature at the quantum level is not a machine that goes its inexorable way. Instead what answer we get depends on the question we put, the experiment we arrange, the registering device we choose. We are inescapably involved in bringing about that which appears to be happening" (185). For Wheeler, the act of observation is not neutral—it is creative. By asking questions and looking for answers, observers do not witness the inevitable or "inexorable," but are actively involved in creating the very phenomenon they seek to understand. Like string theory, Wheeler's idea of a Participatory Universe interrupts the narrative of a stable, solitary universe, and he understands "spacetime in the prequantum dispensation [as] a great record parchment. This sheet, this continuum, this carrier of all that is, was and shall be, had its definite structure with its curves, waves and ripples; and on this great page every event, like a glued down grain of sand, had its determinate place. In this frozen picture a far-reaching modification is forced by the quantum" (194). My chapter is, of course, not interested in the questions of whether or not

parallel universes exist but rather in how the form of such a cosmology problematizes ideas of exactitude and certainty, concepts that can, for some, animate critical interpretation. And Wheeler's metaphor of prequantum spacetime as a giant record sheet traffics in images of certainty and determinism. While the "continuum" and its "definite structure" includes movement ("curves, waves, and ripples"), these motions are "like a glued down grain of sand" in their determined location; ultimately, this is a "frozen picture." Knowing something, at least before the discovery of the quantum, can be an act of fixing something down and freezing it in place.

This is precisely the language of certainty and diagnostics that lie behind most criticism and interpretation: readers seek to find a coherence in chaos, to glue a structure down in all its movement. But the quantum era—and more specifically the possibilities of parallel universes—offers a useful disruption to this sense of sureness, most particularly through an insistence that there are central, unreconcilable gaps in understanding the universe and thus all observation is a creative act. A skeptical reader will of course notice the gap in my own argument here, since to understand and insist on the form of *The Furrows* as a parallel universe, is, to some extent, to glue the text and its movement down. But I think that naming the form of the novel as a parallel universe still holds space for the perpetual motion of the text and its fundamental asymmetry: a return to the past that repeats, but differently, never settling in one place. Repeating differently is the animating idea behind the figure of the parallel universe, and, brought to the novel, these destabilizing, repetitive moments align Cee and the reader. *The Furrows* insists that grief is simultaneous, using the form of the parallel universe to represent the unthinkable reality of grief alongside the multiplicity of interpretative possibilities and the gaps that remain. *The Furrows* embeds itself in a web of textuality where each reading can exist simultaneously, where, like Wheeler notes, every observation is an act of creation. Like the Williams family responding to Wayne's death, like Cee's analysts, readers are thus creating interpretations through observation, through tracing the excess of allusions that bleeds into each

reading. But even this mode of reading is not so certain and stable. The sheer multiplicity of *The Furrows*' allusions means that some readers will pick up on the obvious references—or the ones that Serpell comments on in interviews—but the insistent intertextuality suggests that even the certainty of understanding a reference, the very certainty that we mobilize when we call these 'clues' or 'easter eggs,' is less stable than we may think. What, after all, do these references amount to? The numerous allusions pull *The Furrows* into diverse conversations: about elegy, about modernism, about blackness and racial identity, about temporal experimentation, about apocalypse, about grief. These references can be mobilized to make *The Furrows* speak to a seemingly unlimited number of critical conversations. The parallel universe gives readers one possible figure for living with these conflicting but concurrent readings. Because of the open-ended nature of this parallel structure, readers do not need to decide with certainty what the text is doing but can see it all at once, see their role in shaping their interpretation, feeling the mental difficulty of reading as an expression of the mental difficulty of grief.

Reading *The Furrows* as a parallel universe thus gives us a useful figure not just for grief as an experience of simultaneity, but also for how to interpret a novel that seems obsessed with evading its own reader. Of course this is not the first novel to be reflexive or allusive—plenty of postmodern metafiction does this—but the novel's own preoccupation with a non-narrative answer, Cee's desire to tell us not what happened but how it feels, suggests that perhaps the novel's ultimate goal is similarly the production of a certain kind of feeling as its own metric of understanding. In engendering readerly uncertainty, *The Furrows* tells us not what happened but how grief feels, chiefly by engaging its reader in the conceptual, interpretative difficulty of reading *The Furrows*. By forcing the reader to *experience* the confusion of multiple interpretations as opposed to *narrating* that confusion, the reader joins Cee in navigating a set of disorienting, unreal worlds. The novel offers us many conflicting readings simultaneously, many allusions that take the book in very different

interpretative directions, which comes to mirror Cee's own navigation of grief. These allusions allegorize readerly interpretation as an experience of irreconcilable multiplicity and inherent concurrence, reminding us that observing what is happening in a text is a way of creating something new: in one reading, the text goes through the left photon slit, in another, it goes through the right. Thus the reader of *The Furrows* generates a multiplicity of readings that themselves splinter off like parallel universes. The reading experience comes to echo Mo's reflection that "the world is made up of threads of possibility, all the could-woulda-shouldas, but only some get caught in the rope," as each reference seems to point to all the other invisible 'threads of possibility' that aren't caught in the rope. This precisely mirrors the discontinuous nature of grief, which remains forever partial and full of threads and gaps. Grief eschews the idea of arrival or conclusion. Death is, like Cee reflects, literally unreasonable and unacceptable. To read grief like the trauma plot is to rehabilitate a simultaneous experience into a linear form that begins, deepens, and eventually ends. Instead, *The Furrows* poses the multiple realities of grief, the confusion that this engenders, as an open question to the reader. The form of *The Furrows* recruits its reader to actively make decisions, to pick up the threads they wish to follow. *The Furrows* teaches us grieving as well as reading requires us to inhabit many possibilities at once, and to live with the fact that some strands go nowhere, that they won't always be threaded back into the fold, that gaps in reality will always persist.

I see these strands that go nowhere as a crucial element of simultaneity: overlap and concurrence interrupts linearity and discrete forms, suggesting that some threads keep going, that some things never end, some gaps in our knowledge may resist being accounted for. Simultaneous fictions thus point us to see the conclusionlessness at the heart of life and reading. Of course the book does end, just as life does: we run out of words in the bounded volume as we run out of breath in our lungs. But these eventual endings are not that same as narratively satisfying conclusions, endings that make everything make sense. Simultaneous fictions refuse these

conclusions, pointing back to the iterative, repetitive process of reading. *How to Be Both*'s double helix form undergoes such replication that it ends up like a Mobius strip or feedback loop, since each ending is the beginning of the next section: there is not one but two last lines of the novel, and each lead right back into the other narrator. Each reading demands a rereading, keeping the helix twisting and moving. *If on a winter's night a traveler* playfully delays conclusion, like Scheherazade, as the novel ends with the Reader tells his wife, "Just a moment, I've almost finished *If on a winter's night a traveler* by Italo Calvino" (260), an "almost" that mirrors the novel's many digressions and delays. *Fake Accounts* asymptotic narration can never arrive, can never leave the spiral, only able to end with Felix's rejoinder that his plagiarism is "part of the point" (265). *The Furrows* concludes with Cee and the adult Wayne witnessing an apocalyptic crumbling of San Francisco, in a section called "Palace," yet even this catastrophic ending is not clearly the end—we might read the scene as merely one more of the recurring and equally catastrophic moments in which Cee encounters an adult Wayne. Feedback loops, "almost finished," "part of the point," a repeated apocalypse: simultaneity itself resists conclusion, resists a satisfactory ending and the easily-exportable meaning that the resolution of a novel can offer readers.

Inspired by the conclusionlessness of simultaneous fictions, by their insistence on repetitions with a difference, I want to close by returning (but differently) to *How to Be Both*, to a particular scene in which George and her mother have a remarkably prescient conversation about history and conclusions:

And which comes first? her unbearable mother is saying. What we see or how we see?
 Yeah, but that thing happening. With the shooting. It was aeons ago, George says.
 Only twenty years before me, and here I am sitting right now, her mother says.
 Ancient history, George says.
 That's me, her mother says. And yet here I am. Still happening.
 But *it* isn't, George says. Because that was then. This is now. That's what time *is*.
 Do things just go away? her mother says. Do things that happened not exist, or stop existing,
 just because we can't see them happening in front of us?
 They do when they're over, George says.

And what about the things we watch happening right in front of us and still can't really see, her mother says.
George rolls her eyes. (249)

Here George confronts the central problems with conceptualizing ongoingness—its messy temporality and our inability to comprehensively see the world. George wants to view history as discrete events, splitting up the world into “then” and “now,” while her mother points her to see the relation between “what we see and how we see.” George’s mother is a practitioner of simultaneous reading as a method, consistently problematizing discrete and linear narratives, including history itself, and drawing attention to the gaps in our understanding, that which we “watch happening right in front of us and still can’t really see.” And George’s mother is also a figure that refuses to conclude; her deadpan assertion “here I am. Still happening” is in fact deeply ironic, since in the novel’s narrative present, she is dead. But George’s grief pulls her mother back into the present, confusing time in the ordinary way that grief does, making the absent person present.

If this is something of a cop-out by way of conclusion, I hope that this chapter’s more existential interpretive questions point towards how I see simultaneous fictions as resources not just for reading, but for living. In the age of the internet, in the age of multitasking, everything comes to overlap: screen and text, literature and content, real world and online, paying attention and being distracted. How we narrativize these overlaps can change how we see the world. The mainstream writing about the internet posits that our attention is a problem that can be fixed with more individual discipline, more analog experiences, more IRL connection with other people. Simultaneity, on the other hand, points us to see not just that distraction is a prescient index of what matters to us, but that attention and distraction are always simultaneous and overlapping engagements, towards something and away from something. Simultaneous fictions offer us models to see the way the world and reading are concurrent and co-constitutive, and this is indeed a narrative that may help us live on and live through the conditions of the twenty-first century,

particularly its information overload and utter banality. But these models are not the end, but the beginning: in their refusal of conclusion, simultaneous fictions point us back to the iterative need for forms and narratives that account for what we think and feel. Humans continue to create meaning, find form, and make sense of the chaos of daily life. Novels, like people's individual narratives about themselves and the world, change when the world changes, adapting to respond to the conditions that surround their writing and reception. Simultaneous fictions have given us a snapshot of how concerns about the internet and attention inform the nonlinearity of contemporary novels, and how these novel forms take the spatial forms of geometry and science to offer the reader new conceptual models with which to read and live. But this is not the end of these novelistic projects. Novels will continue to experiment, continue to complicate and innovate, finding new techniques to represent new phenomenon and experience, to represent the lives and thought of writers and readers, to teach new modes of reading. Simultaneous fictions offer one account of the contemporary novel and its response to technological advances, one that points us to see the partiality of our thinking. Like the narrator of *Fake Accounts*, we only ever get to "part of the point," but we might see this as a crucial affordance of simultaneous fictions, which offer models of new perspectives and vantage points that find movement in stasis. The way we see, the way we read, is always incomplete, never able to reach total comprehension. We might look to new models that help us live with the gaps in life and reading, that help us narrate where the limit of thought lies, that show us how the textuality of the internet era comes to bear on us. We might, in other words, learn to live with it. Or at least read with it.

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