different all the way through, every time

An Analysis of Post-WWII Experimental Fiction

An honors thesis for the Department of English

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Introduction

In this project, I seek to trace the rise of experimental fiction in the latter portion of the 20th century and into the new millennium. By analyzing several landmark texts in the experimental canon, I hope to show that experimentalism has come to offer a viable alternative to literature that is considered more traditional. Furthermore, I wish to demonstrate that through experimentation, contemporary authors have given us a new lens with which to look at fiction, and have created endless possibilities for future literary innovation. The project is primarily concerned with the novel and its experimental evolution.

Throughout, I will aim to prove that this genre is not only revolutionary, but reactionary; that the shift from traditional forms and narratives to experimental ones was predicated not out of a literary malaise or an obligatory chronological evolution, but out of a need to find alternate modes and models of representation. In the late 20th century, the dominant ways of writing fiction had become inadequate to signify contemporary realities. Cultural transitions necessitated literary transcendence. World War II, the Holocaust, and the dropping of the atomic bombs transformed the world, and literature was forced to adapt.

While traditional fiction could, and was, still being written, experimental fiction signified a necessary divergence. The genre offered an alternate mode of representing reality that in many ways came to be a more accurate representation. The literary canon, filled with masterworks of modernism, proved insufficient to portray life in the mid to late 20th century. The world had entered a new age, one in which human life could be

obliterated with the mere push of a button. Literature responded accordingly: modern experimentalism was born.

Contemporary critics have expounded endlessly on the "postmodern" nature of our age. Literary theorists have debated for decades about the meaning of the word postmodern, how and when it should be used, and if it can accurately describe the world in which we live. In this analysis, I will make the conscious choice to avoid that word and all of its myriad implications. Instead I will term all of the fiction to which I refer experimental. I feel the word more precisely depicts the literary endeavors of the novels and fictions I will discuss.

Each work analyzed features some elements of the postmodern and could well fall under the umbrella genre of "postmodern literature". In my opinion however, this genre is fluid at best. The term postmodern literature does not allow for specificity. In many ways it casts too wide a net; its contents could range from Laurence Sterne's *Tristram Shandy*, which predates the so-called postmodern era by about three hundred years, to Don Delillo's *White Noise*, a novel that is somewhat straightforward with regard to form and narrative.

For these reasons I will group the works that I discuss under the less broad genre of "experimental fiction". These fictions are innovative and avant-garde in terms of their experimental nature; they push narrative boundaries and bend or break entrenched fictional conventions. Each work utilizes experimental tactics, challenging traditional novelistic forms with regard to, among other things, narrative, chronology, grammar, structure, style, and content.

Through their experimental nature, the books defy and destroy established assumptions we hold about how a novel can and should be written and read. The books discussed construct themselves in opposition to, and stand outside, the traditional literary canon. As such, these works are often dismissed as mad experiments with little literary value.

Warren Motte expands on this characterization in his book, *The Poetics of Experiment: A Study of the Work of Georges Perec*:

> It is not my intent here to analyze the concept of madness. Suffice it to say that it is wholly dependent upon the concept of 'normative' behavior to which it is opposed. The same is true of experimental literature in its opposition to the mainstream. The norms of the latter may be more or less rigorously codified, either explicitly or implicitly, and they undeniably shift over time. Experimentation consists in the modification or violation of those norms. Granted this relation, then, it is not wholly surprising (though no less deplorable) to see experimental literature characterized as madness. (Motte, 133)

Yet there is an inherent paradox in the theory that experimental literature is constructed in opposition to more "mainstream" literature: while literature of an experimental nature may run in opposition to the traditional canon, it is also wholly dependent upon that canon for its existence. Without the works of the 18th, 19th, and early 20th century, there would be no canon from which to diverge. Those works that are considered experimental had to experiment *upon* something, to strike out a new path from one that was already well-trodden.

The works of Thomas Pynchon, Georges Perec, John Barth and Italo Calvino simply could not have existed without a precedent. These works have a rich inheritance left over from canonical writers such as Dickens, Austen, and Chekhov. As Patricia Meyers Spacks points out in her analysis of the formations of the novel form, "Novelists now…work within or against a long tradition. Readers consequently can locate what they read in relation to what has gone before." (Spacks, 23)

Even reading novels that obliterate normative fictional conventions, the reader must realize that these conventions are indeed pre-established. They must simultaneously know that the conventions are being flaunted. Because of this, many innovative works are self-aware of their own destructive nature. Thus, an experimental work is ultimately indebted to everything that has come before it.

In her book, Spacks outlines the evolution of the novel as a form and analyzes its development through the eighteenth century. Spacks expertly traces the evolution of the novel and the various (often experimental) forms it took during the early years of novelistic foundation. In her unpacking of the history of the novel, Spacks stresses the elasticity of the form in its earliest manifestations, analyzing the various subgenres that developed during the 18th century. Novels of adventure, development, consciousness, sentiment, and manners all emerged during the age. The fact that so many different narratives came into being almost simultaneously is remarkable and attests to the experimental nature of the times.

Spacks characterizes the 18th century as an "an era of radical literary experiment" (Spacks, 3), a description that could easily be applied to the post-WWII period. In fact much of what Spacks has to say about the novel's early elastic nature could also

characterize the literary experiments of the 20th century and beyond. Early on in her book, Spacks states that "…novels of this period often reflect in recognizable ways the assumptions and disturbances of the society from which they emanate." (Spacks, 2) The same is true of the novels and fictions analyzed in this work. Their reactionary and reflective nature is evident not only in their content, but also in their form.

Ian Watt's exploration in *The Rise of the Novel* is as compelling as Spacks'. In his book, Watt posits that the defining characteristic that distinguished the novel from earlier genres in the eighteenth century was formal realism[1]. Watt also stresses the early novel's attention to individual experience as opposed to collective experience, in the form of myths and classical allusions, as a distinctive trait of the new novel. Watt states that:

> This literary traditionalism was first and most fully challenged by the novel, whose primary criterion was truth to individual experience— individual experience which is always unique and therefore new. The novel is thus the logical literary vehicle of a culture which, in the last few centuries, has set an unprecedented value on originality, on the novel; and it is therefore well named. (Watt, 13)

While Watt concentrates on three specific authors (Defoe, Richardson, and Fielding), he also engages with the novelistic genre as a whole. As with Spacks, Watt's specific statements, when de-contextualized, prove helpful in describing more modern developments. For example, when Watt states that, "…we must regard the break which Defoe and Richardson made with the accepted canons of prose style, not an incidental blemish, but rather as the price they had to pay for achieving the immediacy and

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[1] Ian Watt, *The Rise of the Novel*, 32.

closeness of the text to what is being described" (Watt, 29), we realize that this statement is also true of many contemporary novels.

In their experimental nature, the novels analyzed here certainly aim for an 'immediacy' and 'closeness'. A necessary rupture with the trappings of realism and modernism is evident in the works of such novelists as Nabokov and Perec. This rupture opens a void which the authors then fill with experimental techniques, techniques which come to help the works more accurately represent the rapidly shifting realities of the post-WWII era.

Thus, we come to see the 18th century as a time of both formal and contextual literary innovation, an age of elasticity in which authors were free to experiment precisely because of the newness of the genre. Authors like Defoe and Sterne were in no way limited by a set of rules that governed the way a novel should be written. The 18th century was a time of boundless novelty, a time before the concretization of the novelistic form.

With this knowledge we can begin to look at the late 20th century as similarly elastic. It is almost as if the two literary eras bookend the structured formality of the 19th and early 20th centuries. As I will show through close literary analysis, the fictions of the post-WWII age regained the mutability lost during the emergence and dominance of realism and modernism.

Since the end of the Second World War, there has been an explosion of literary experimentation. Yet there is a central difference between this experimentation and the experimentation of the earlier age: a foundation. The novels of Richardson, Fielding and Goldsmith had little upon which to build. These authors were truly treading on new territory. The first novels had few antecedents (most notably Cervantes' *Don Quixote)*,

and as such (to refer back to an important distinction), were more revolutionary than reactionary. The opposite is true of the novelistic experiments of the contemporary age. The novels of Pynchon, Cortázar, and Calvino have a rich and abundant novelistic history upon which to build.

Yet just as much as contemporary experimental fiction is indebted to its literary antecedents, it is also heavily indebted to the cultural and historical events of the age in which it was born. The post-WWII era in America and internationally was (and is) the greatest time of upheaval and rapid change in human history.

My explorations into experimentalism will trace the development of experimental literature beginning on August 6th, 1945. On that date, the world as we know it changed dramatically. On August 6th, Paul Tibbets flew the super fortress bomber named *Enola Gay* (after his own mother) over the city of Hiroshima, Japan, dropping the atomic bomb "Little Boy" on the city, completely destroying the metropolis and marking the beginning of the end of the Second World War.

With this historic act of destruction, the world entered the nuclear age. Previously held notions, assumptions, and beliefs were shattered along with the buildings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. As Jeff Nuttall points out in his seminal work on post-WWII movements *Bomb Culture*, while VE Day was a time of joyous celebration and shared recognition of the triumph of good over evil, VJ Day, the day that America defeated Japan, was not similarly festive: "The first victory was a victory confirming our merits and security. The second victory destroyed them irrevocably." (Nuttall, 12)

Bomb Culture chronicles the slow and willful disintegration of established norms following the dropping of the atomic bombs. Through his rambling and brilliant

exploration of various counterculture movements (Teds, Beats, hippies), Nuttall paints a grim picture of worldwide cynicism and alienation. His book, divided into five parts ("Pop", "Protest", "Art", "Sick", and "The Underground"), laments the future-less feeling that dominated the post-bomb era, and comments on the "massive public guilt" (Nuttall, 112) that many Westerners felt after Paul Tibbets made his fatal flight.

Nuttall studies each event that he discusses through the lens of the atomic bomb. By his logic, the dissolution of the world, as exemplified by the Moors Murders, the Columbia University riots, and the censorship of the underground, are all in some way related to the dropping of the bomb. For the first time in history, humanity was threatened with mass extinction, and, chillingly, the odds seemed to be against us. In the face of such insurmountable odds, new means of expression had to be formed. In this way, the catastrophic events that ended the Second World War can be seen as a catalyst for the experimental literature that followed.

It is not surprising that experimentalism came into its own in the years following World War II. Man's innate need to express himself does not cease when presented with the grave specter of death. In fact, one could argue that the need for creative expression is augmented when mortality is shown to be close at hand. For what is creative output if not a means by which to leave a lasting impression on the world? It was in this era then, one which had glimpsed a vision of apocalypse and recoiled at its sight, that experimentalism came to be as a genre. If we agree that the need for creative expression was not dulled but sharpened by the events at the end of World War II, we must then look at the modes of expression that succeeded and failed in the post-war age.

Nuttall accurately describes the pervading sense of hopelessness that hung over the 20th century in the years after the war:

> The future is a void. In these days this seems particularly apparent. The only way to deal with void is by a game of chance, some absurd pattern of behavior. The complete void of the future reveals the fallacy of logic and rationality. The void is infinite and thus absurd. Consequently the only human activities which can be of any use in one's progress into infinite void are absurd practices. (Nuttall, 71)

In effect, Nuttall is saying that traditional practices and modes of expression were no longer adequate to describe and document experience. Looking at this statement through a literary lens, we could say that these "absurd practices" were carried out by the experimentalists, men and women who attempted to accurately describe the world in which they lived, and, aiming for a truthful depiction, stepped outside literary traditions to do so.

However, this is not the only frame through which one can look at experimentalism. Boredom, frustration, rebellion, aggression. All of these could be seen as reasons why authors chose to use new methods to express their ideas. It would be oversimplifying history to choose any one reason. I believe that the reasons for this choice were both individualistic and collective; that each individual author felt compelled to explode the novelistic form for personal reasons upon which one can only speculate. But also, that the age in which they lived necessitated this explosion. It is upon that theory that I can and will build.

To that end, I will examine three topics which are indicative of experimentalism as a genre. These topics are: The Death of the Character, Formal Innovation, and

Narrative Disintegration. For the first topic, I will concentrate on Vladimir Nabokov's *Pale Fire*, a novel that causes the reader to constantly question the veracity of its own construction and completely explodes the notion of a reliable narrator. For secondary texts, I plan on looking at Philip Roth's *The Counterlife*, and John Barth's *The End of the Road*.

My second topic will focus on a seminal text of the OuLiPo movement, Georges Perec's *Life: A User's Manual*. The work is a complex extended formal experiment which attests to the author's persistent innovation. In this segment, I will also examine B.S. Johnson's *The Unfortunates*, and Julio Cortázar's *Hopscotch*. Finally, in my third segment I will primarily analyze Thomas Pynchon's *The Crying of Lot 49*, a stunning indictment of contemporary America and a subversion of the traditional mystery genre. In that segment, I will also look at Italo Calvino's *If on a winter's night a traveler*.

Through close analysis of these landmark texts in the experimental canon, I hope to show how the socio-cultural forces at work when these novels were produced influenced and inspired their production. However, I do not plan on explicitly linking specific events to the publication of certain works. There are an almost infinite number of historical events to which the conception of innovative works could be attributed. Rather, I will attempt to show that the climate (social, historical, political) in which these novels emerged had a tangible effect on their creation.

In addition I will attempt to explore several questions regarding the genre as a whole. What place does experimental fiction hold in our society? In what ways has experimental fiction altered our view of literature as a whole? Do form and style outweigh or enhance content in works of experimental fiction? These are indeed broad

and difficult questions. But I hope that by the end of this experiment, I will have achieved a better understanding of their answers.

<center>The Death of Character</center>

In a 1986 interview about his then-latest work, *The Counterlife*, Philip Roth stated, "We are all writing fictitious versions of our lives all the time, contradictory but mutually entangling stories that, however subtly or grossly falsified, constitute our hold on reality and are the closest thing we have to the truth."[2] This statement was never more relevant than in the decades following WWII when identities shifted, the idea of selfhood was re-imagined, and individual character began to disintegrate. As is true of most cultural trends, this was reflected in the fiction of the era. The death of character came to be most evident in the work of experimentalists who set out to dismember the fictional convention of character in their works. This breakdown is clearly visible in the novels of Vladimir Nabokov, Philip Roth, and John Barth.

In his influential critical work, *Postmodernist Fiction*, Brian McHale deconstructs Vladimir Nabokov's *Pale Fire* and the multitude of theories surrounding the novel. McHale states: "In *Pale Fire*, this familiar convention of narratorial unreliability has been pushed to the limit." (McHale, 18) I would venture to go one step further and say that the convention has in fact been shattered. For, by the end of Nabokov's complex book, the reader is left unsure not only of our narrator's reliability but also of his true identity. Charles Kinbote, King Charles the Beloved, V. Botkin, John Shade, Vladimir Nabokov. All. Or none. Who is the main character of *Pale Fire*? And, perhaps more interestingly, does it truly matter?

Pale Fire, published in 1962, opens with a 999-line poem titled "Pale Fire" in four cantos, written by a man named John Shade. The poem is followed by extensive

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[2] Quoted in William H. Gass's review of *The Counterlife*, New York Times, January 4th, 1987. The entire review can be found here: http://www.nytimes.com/1987/01/04/books/deciding-to-do-the-impossible.html?scp=3&sq=william%20gass%20the%20counterlife&st=cse&pagewanted=1.

commentary and notes from Shade's self-appointed editor, Charles Kinbote. Kinbote also has a story to tell, and quite soon, we realize that he is the de facto narrator of our tale. Before long, the lines dividing Kinbote's identities become muddled. By the end of the work they have dissolved completely.

As we read the novel it becomes apparent that Kinbote's editing is in fact editorializing. His 'notes' are more personal than academic, and his commentary is biased due to his association with Shade. Thus, his roles as editor and narrator are blended: Kinbote mistakenly believes that the stories he related to Shade, stories about a benevolent King's escape and exile from his own native land, form the basis for the poem.

Kinbote not only provides explanation for various passages in the poem, but also narrates a complex story involving Zembla, a fantastic kingdom north of Russia. It is here that his roles as narrator and fictional character begin to blend: Kinbote may not be Kinbote at all, but rather King Charles the Beloved, living in exile from his kingdom after a *coup d'état* by the Zemblan Extremists. Or he may be V. Botkin, a delusional but harmless professor of Russian at Wordsmith University in New Wye, Appalachia, where Botkin counts John Shade among his colleagues.

As is evident, Nabokov takes the unreliability of the narrator to the extreme. From the very start of the book, we learn that Kinbote's esteemed colleagues take issue with and contest his editorship. He forcibly inserts his own speculations, observations, and intuitions into the text, rendering it and him completely unreliable. In addition, he makes frequent and glaring mistakes of scholarship, most notably in his woefully inaccurate

translation of several lines of prose from Shakespeare's *Timon of Athens*, which is the source of the title of Shade's poem.[3]

Narratorial unreliability in and of itself is not necessarily experimental. Yet Nabokov takes this unreliability to the next level when he plays with issues of identity and transforms his characters into people altogether different from those whom we first began to acquaint ourselves. In a startling but not unexpected turn of events, Kinbote reveals himself as the King of Zembla on page 274, when, in the middle of telling a story about the Zemblan king, he switches from the third to the first person, and begins using the pronoun "I".

In this way, Nabokov treads on experimental ground. We not only know that we cannot and should not believe our narrator, we are not even sure of his true identity. Is he indeed the exiled King? Is he a delusional V. Botkin? Or is he a thinly veiled version of Nabokov himself?

The last question merits further exploration as authorial intrusion is clearly present in the novel. Nabokov's humor is exceedingly well tuned and always spot-on.[4] At one point, he inserts himself into the novel through the use of this wit. The index reference to Charles Kinbote's 'sense of humor' corresponds to note 680, a note explaining why hurricanes are given female names; the one named in the poem is 'Lolita'. Whoever the narrator may be, the fact of his shifting and uncertain identity, more so than the unusual form the book takes, accounts for the experimental nature of Nabokov's *Pale Fire.*

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[3] Nabokov, *Pale Fire,* 80.
[4] For more on Nabokov's humor, see his obituary in the *New York Times* published on June 5, 1977. In it, Nabokov is quoted as saying, "Give me an example of a great writer who is not a humorist". The article can be found here: http://www.nytimes.com/books/97/03/02/lifetimes/nab-v-obit.html.

From the early beginnings of the novel form, readers have been trained to rely on the narrator for an accurate depiction of the events of the plot. Even before the novel's formation, narrators acted as the only reliable witnesses. Ned Ward famously traveled around London reporting on its daily goings-on in his periodical "The London Spy". Samuel Pepys published his diary, providing an exact and truthful accounting of his daily activities. Both of these men served as the only witnesses in their respective publications, and thus, came to be regarded as accurate sources of veracity. This format provided a model for the emergent novel.

In the realm of fiction, narrators came to be similarly reliable. Who would doubt that the letters of Samuel Richardson's title character Pamela are anything but honest? Even Tristram Shandy, the strangest of narrators, provides an accurate reporting of the events in his life, even if he does so in a non-traditional, non-linear way. Fictional convention and literary necessity taught the reader to rely on narrators implicitly.

In most literary works, the audience wants to believe (and believe in) the narrator, for if we do not, all of the events of the story are cast in doubt, depleting the sense of verisimilitude within the book. We read fiction to enter another world. While at our core we may know that what we are reading is fictional, unreal, we are willing to suspend our disbelief in order to enjoy what we read.

What happens then when the fictional nature inherent in the novel is shoved in our faces? When the narrator, the very voice and medium of the story, lays bare for us the unreality that is built into the very fabric of the novel? This is exactly what Kinbote does. Through his messy scholarship and personal interjections, Kinbote clouds the fictional

world we are trying so hard to believe in. In his shifting and uncertain identity, the narrator confounds the reader's innate desire for a reliable and concrete storyteller.

This desire, to be able to piece together and understand the events of the novel through information told to us by a reliable narrator, is an utterly human desire. In this way, the detective novel is the story *par excellence*; it satisfies the reader's need for a rational narrative. The detective novel ties up loose strings, most often by having the protagonist (along with the reader) collect the clues, piece them together, and solve the case.

Pale Fire is in many ways a detective novel. However, it has little to do with the works of Agatha Christie and Raymond Chandler. Because of everything we know, we know that we cannot trust our protagonist, our detective. Due to that fact, we are not given what we want: a neat and tidy solution. Instead, by the end of *Pale Fire,* the reader is left with more questions than when he began. Nabokov effectively subverts the detective genre by making Charles Kinbote utterly unreliable.

Brian McHale characterizes the move from modernist to postmodernist fiction as one of epistemology and ontology. Modernist novels, McHale asserts, are inherently epistemological, while postmodernist novels are inherently ontological[5]. In this frame, McHale states that *Pale Fire* "…is a text of absolute epistemological uncertainty" (McHale, 18) finally labeling the work the "paradigmatic limit-modernist novel" (McHale, 19). While I agree with McHale's first argument, I take issue with his second. In its unusual form, its refusal to give any semblance of surety, and its destruction of narratorial reliability, *Pale Fire* seems to me explicitly experimental.

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[5] Brian McHale, *Postmodernist Fictions*, 9-10.

Charles Kinbote's unstable identity jumbles and calls into doubt all of the facts the novel presents as ostensibly absolute truths. However, we go into the novel with this knowledge. Nabokov prepares us for disbelief from the very start of the novel. Even the poem upon which the commentary is based tells us that the work will be an extended exercise in artifice.

The very first lines of Shade's poem serve as a haunting and beautiful reminder to be wary of taking anything at face value: "I was the shadow of the waxwing slain/ By the false azure in the windowpane…" (Nabokov, 33) These lines, in their invocation of shadows and mirrors, let the reader know that sleight of hand will play a major role in the novel. Nothing is to be trusted; no one is to be believed.

Later in the work, Kinbote embarks on a typically discursive story before stopping himself: "But enough of this. Let us turn to our poet's windows. I have no desire to twist and batter an unambiguous *apparatus criticus* into the monstrous semblance of a novel." (Nabokov, 86)[6] That may not be Kinbote's desire, but it is certainly Nabokov's. In twisting and battering the conventional ways of storytelling, Nabokov attempts to subvert the novelistic form in order to better reflect the twisted events of the late 20th century.

By explicitly showing the subversion of truth in the frame of the novel, Nabokov opens readers up to a new way of reading fiction. In providing extensive commentary, discursive footnotes, endnotes, and even a lengthy index, Nabokov mocks the conventions not only of academia, but also of realism and modernism. In this light, the

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[6] Picking up *Pale Fire* for the first time, I mistakenly believed I had stumbled upon a work of criticism about Nabokov's book. It was only upon a return trip to the library that I realized that the commentary in fact constituted the bulk of a novel.

exhaustive research and endless attempts to determine the 'truth' behind the narrative by scholars and literary analysts seems senseless.

Pale Fire is above all a construction. It uses the tools of modernism to create a definitively un-modernist text. Many academics, in their efforts to piece together the puzzle pieces, seem to consciously or unconsciously ignore the ludic nature of the work. Emma Lieber, in her essay "Having Faith in Nabokov's *Pale Fire*" skillfully describes these scholarly, modernist impulses: "If the novel is fundamentally uninterpretable, then we, as readers, are placed in the same category as the misguided and solipsistic Kinbote: our quest for answers to *Pale Fire*'s hermeneutic challenges may reflect little except our own needs, our own desire to unravel and ultimately to appropriate the text." (Lieber, "Having Faith in Nabokov's *Pale Fire*")

Nabokov constantly plays with our sense of character, undermining our instinctive need for clarity and precision. Defying novelistic conventions, *Pale Fire* consistently and thoroughly rings the death knell of fictional character. In my opinion, this death is not something to be mourned. Whereas the pleasure of reading a novel once lay in getting to know and understand a character and his or her motivations, pleasure in the reading of many post-WWII era novels arrives through the breakdown and destruction of character. Inundated with deep and complex characters, many contemporary readers find it refreshing to read about a character that is unreliable, unidentifiable, or, best of all, maybe not even a character at all.

One manner in which Nabokov plays with his characters is through contextualizing them in terms of time-space. This is exemplified in the character of

Gradus, the would-be assassin making the long journey from Zembla to New Wye, Appalachia in order to kill the exiled king.

Gradus serves as both a character and an event. From very early on in the novel, we know that Gradus will attempt to kill King Charles. Correspondingly, he weaves his way through the pages in both time and space, coming closer and closer to New Wye as the narrative pushes forward: "Gradus is now much nearer to us in space and time than he was in the preceding cantos." (Nabokov, 277) In this sense, Gradus is moving alongside the text, and, as the novel concludes, so does Gradus' journey.

While Gradus as a character is fairly recognizable, the characters in many experimental novels (typified by Charles Kinbote) are unable to be imagined or reconstructed. The characters are shattered, their pieces lie scattered around the floor, but for some reason they no longer fit together. Something which was previously so entrenched in the novelistic form is now absent, and readers derive a rush from that absence. D.H. Lawrence's famous and prophetic proclamation ("You mustn't look in my novel for the old stable ego of the character"[7]) proved overwhelmingly applicable to many authors of the experimental group. For many in that group (including Nabokov, Roth, and Barth), the old stable ego is now irrelevant.

In *Character in Literature*, critic Baruch Hochman analyzes the evolving trend towards the dissolution of character in contemporary literature:

> Postmodernist writers not only challenge the cogency of character as a
> category but actively work to dismantle it as an operative element in their
> stories. Nabokov is a prime example of this tendency, but virtually all of

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[7] Written in a letter to Lawrence's friend Edward Garnett on June 5th, 1914.

the innovative writers of the past forty or fifty years have participated in it.

(Hochman, 14)

It is unsurprising that Hochman points to Nabokov as the leader of this innovative movement. Kinbote is dismantled even as he is constructed; the more we learn about him, the more he is destroyed. Hochman, however, largely ignores *Pale Fire* in favor of examining another of Nabokov's works, *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight*.

The uncertainty surrounding character in *Sebastian Knight* serves as a precursor to character's further and ultimate destruction in *Pale Fire*. Again framed as a detective novel, *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight* centers on one man's investigation into the life and times of his English half-brother, Sebastian Knight, for a biography he is in the process of writing. As the novel progresses we come to understand that we will never be offered a clear picture of Sebastian Knight, or for that matter, of the narrator himself.

This experiment into the dissolution of cogent characters comes to full fruition in *Pale Fire*, where everything we think we might know about our narrator turns out to be smoke and mirrors. Nabokov's further push into experimentalism may have been predicated by the events of the intervening years between the two books.

Much writing on *Pale Fire* seems to pass over the effect that personal and socio-cultural events may have had on the author, situating the book instead as a stand-alone piece of fiction. To me, this seems dangerous. It is important to analyze what may have accounted for the radical experimentalism of the text. Thus I will attempt to offer some insight into what predicated that shift.

Nabokov's father was killed in much the same manner as John Shade: caught in the line of fire between an assassin and his would-be target. In 1940, Nabokov moved to

America, where he served as a professor at Wellesley College. In 1945, Nabokov's brother, Sergei, died in a concentration camp, persecuted for his homosexuality. In Japan, in the same year, the bomb was dropped. At a cursory glance, these events seem unrelated to each other or to the events of the book. However, in my opinion, these happenings had a profound effect on the novel's experimental nature.

One of the main subjects the novel concerns itself with is that of exile. This is not at all surprising; Nabokov lived most of his life as an exile from his native Russia. His family was forced out of that country in the upheaval of the Bolshevik Revolution. Later in life Nabokov fled Berlin with his wife, Vera, who was Jewish, to escape religious persecution. In view of these facts, it becomes increasingly clear that historical forces acted upon Nabokov and influenced not only his content, but also his take on character. Thus, we are able to locate the novel within a certain historicity.

In *Pale Fire*, Kinbote narrowly escapes from his native Zembla following an extremist revolution, and after much wandering, moves to America. Like Nabokov's own brother, Charles Kinbote experiences persecution and ridicule because of his homosexuality. As I have discussed at length, Kinbote is not at all who he appears to be. In the years following the end of the Second World War, the stable and entrenched idea of individual character, pressed by circumstance, began to rapidly unravel, and that unraveling is reflected in Nabokov's writing and style.

The greatest contributing factor to the dissolution of selfhood in the post-WWII years may have been the destruction of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. It would be a mistake to underestimate the effect that the dropping of the atomic bomb had on the world and on humanity's perception of itself. Every sector of human life was affected, from art, to

politics, to literature. Faced with the grim facts of destruction, people were forced to come to terms with the notion that the totality of civilization could be obliterated with the push of a button.

Any sense of safety felt in the United States due to the fact that we alone had the capability to unleash a nuclear holocaust were quickly destroyed when the arms race ramped up and nuclear proliferation became a reality. Before long (and by the time of *Pale Fire's* publication), Russia, the U.K., and France had all begun to stockpile nuclear weaponry. By 1962, the end of the world had become a real possibility.

Along with the dropping of the atomic bomb, another event worked to undermine the salience of individual character: the Holocaust. The systematic murder of six million Jews put a crack in humanity's collective notion of individualism. The human beings who perished during the Holocaust were numbered, stamped, gathered together en masse, and euthanized. Genocide on such a large scale necessarily damages the idea of selfhood.[8]

In such circumstances we come to understand how character, a literary device so thoroughly entrenched in and tied up with the naturalist, realist, and modernist works of the 19th and early 20th centuries, came slowly to disintegrate. Character was no longer fixed or concretized. Individual identity was devalued in the face of widespread death and murder. As such, experimental authors, constantly tuned in to the cultural zeitgeist, began

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[8] Consider this quotation, taken from the journal of Lieutenant Colonel Mervin Willett Gonin, a British soldier who was among the first to liberate Bergen-Belsen: "It was shortly after the British Red Cross arrived, though it may have no connection, that a very large quantity of lipstick arrived. This was not at all what we men wanted, we were screaming for hundreds and thousands of other things and I don't know who asked for lipstick. I wish so much that I could discover who did it, it was the action of genius, sheer unadulterated brilliance. I believe nothing did more for these internees than the lipstick. Women lay in bed with no sheets and no nightie but with scarlet red lips, you saw them wandering about with nothing but a blanket over their shoulders, but with scarlet red lips. I saw a woman dead on the post mortem table and clutched in her hand was a piece of lipstick. At last someone had done something to make them individuals again, they were someone, no longer merely the number tatooed on the arm. At last they could take an interest in their appearance. That lipstick started to give them back their humanity." Source: Imperial War Museum.

to ruthlessly deconstruct their characters, reflecting the breakdown of individual personae in the post-WWII era. In the fictions of the late 20th century, character holds a very different place than it did during the days of realism and modernism.

If Hiroshima, Nagasaki, and Auschwitz caused people to doubt their own salience and selfhood, characters in literature were forced to respond accordingly. For what is great literature but a reflection of life as we know it? Thus, depictions of characters that shift and morph, that doubt and question their own existence, came to be more accurate representations than those fixed and enduring characters of the modernist age.

Countless theories on *Pale Fire* exist. Researchers and scholars have delved into the novel's numerous clues, searching for an answer to all of the questions left open. While it may be true that *Pale Fire* is a novel of exacting specificity, it is simultaneously a work of enduring ambiguity. If Nabokov had wanted there to be a clear answer, he would have given us one. Instead he left us with a distinctly experimental ending, one in which identity is left shadowy and indistinct.

John Shade is not the only character killed by Nabokov. The character of Charles Kinbote also dies within the context of the novel when he is exposed as the fictional invention of King Charles the Beloved (who may in turn be an invention of V. Botkin (Kinbot rearranged) and so forth). By the end of the novel we don't truly know who the narrator was, and interestingly, we don't really care. In this way, Nabokov turns the novelistic form on its head, showing us that despite the fact that individual character may be dead and gone, literature is no worse for it. Although *Pale Fire* is undoubtedly a masterpiece of fiction, it lacks any definitive main character.

Hochman maintains that while Nabokov tries his best to destroy characters in the minds of his readers, he is ultimately unsuccessful. He argues that our modernist minds impose real lives onto the characters we find in fiction, forcing them into coherence even where they defy that trait with each and every move they make. He states that, "…even in Nabokov, it seems to me, the obstruction of coherence of character cannot wholly obviate our construction of coherent images of character." (Hochman, 57) Thus, in Hochman's opinion, the character is not dead, just gasping for life.

To me, this theory rings less true for Nabokov and truer for Roth's characters in *The Counterlife*. Despite the countless theories that have been posited about the 'real' narrator of *Pale Fire*, we still cannot be absolutely sure that the character we read about is the man we think he is. If we cannot be sure of his identity, then we are unable to form a coherent and concrete image of him that is true and real beyond the shadow of a doubt.

That is not so in Philip Roth's 1986 novel, *The Counterlife*. In this, his fifth Zuckerman novel, Roth's characters are fully secure in their identity but are brutally tossed about at the whim of their author like skiffs in a literary perfect storm. In *The Counterlife* Roth experiments with form in order to demonstrate the slow disintegration of character. Midway through the work, Maria, one of the characters, succinctly states that, "There is fiction that is fired noisily into the air, wildly into the crowd, and there is fiction that misfires, explosives that fail to ignite, and there is fiction that turns out to be aimed into the skull of the writer himself." (Roth, 194) *The Counterlife* occupies two of these categories: the first and the third.

The book begins with a third-person narrative of how a man named Henry Zuckerman began taking pills to cure a heart condition that then caused him to become

impotent. Midway through this story, we learn that it is not a story at all but rather a planned and scrapped eulogy for Henry written by his brother Nathan. Henry had surgery to cure his heart problem once and for all but died on the operating table.

Throughout the novel, the rug is continuously pulled out from under our feet in a similar manner. The second chapter shows Henry alive and well; the surgery was a success. Later in the book it is Nathan, not Henry who is burdened with impotence and undergoes the same surgery, which kills him. At Nathan's funeral, a eulogy that we are led to believe was written by Zuckerman's editor turns out to be written by Zuckerman himself.

In this way, the book is explicitly concerned with different paths, with fragmentation. It is an exploration of what happens when an author neither cares for nor wants a concrete narrative. Simultaneously, the work is an investigation into how we lead our lives, and more importantly, how we create our counterlives, what Roth calls "one's own anti-myth". (Roth, 147) Roth seems to find it less interesting to carry out a character's full story, and more interesting to explore the splitting paths of memory and imagination that make up human interactions. *The Counterlife* is a story that is many stories at once, a story that is split, splintered, and destroyed in the frame of its own creation.

Character is the necessary victim of this destruction. At the very moment we think we know something about any one character in the book, a new chapter completely shifts the dynamic, morphing that character into someone else entirely. Within the course of the novel, Nathan and Henry are both killed and then revived. Henry dies, yet in the next chapter he is alive and well, living in Israel. In one chapter, Nathan is giving a eulogy at

his brother's funeral; in another *he* is the one lying in the coffin. Throughout, the characters reveal themselves to be constructions at the utter mercy of a merciless author.

Yet at their core, the characters in Roth's experimental work prove to be essentially realistic and modernist ones. They are rational, emotional creatures that live within a clear personal narrative. Nathan Zuckerman, long-time alter-ego of Philip Roth, is a carefully crafted character, and because of this fact, the reader comes to care about him. Thus, when Roth strikes him out, killing him suddenly and describing the events of his funeral as intimately as he described the funeral of Henry, he is frustrating our need and impulse for coherent images of characters.

As in Nabokov's *Pale Fire*, Roth uses the tools of modernism in order to construct a distinctly experimental work. Yet where Nabokov brings the fictional convention of unreliable narrative to the extreme, Roth utilizes the tools of narrative in order to deconstruct the concept of character. Roth's characters are reliable; they provide us with an accurate depiction of events and are stable in their fixed identities. We as readers know that Nathan Zuckerman is indeed Nathan Zuckerman, but we have no way of knowing that Kinbote is in fact Kinbote.

The narrative shifts that comprise Roth's work inform his characters' instability. With each shift, each re-imagination of the events experienced by the characters, they are further deconstructed and de-realized in the mind of the reader. In this way, the characters in the novel splinter and crack, reflecting the breakdown of individual identity in the late 20th century.

Yet, there is another character lurking in the background of Roth's work. History runs alongside the plot and constantly intrudes upon the narrative. The Israeli-Palestinian

conflict is one of the main points of contention between Nathan and his brother. In addition, modern British anti-Semitism is a constant source of distress in the relationship of Nathan and Maria, his British lover. She brings this up in her last letter to him: "You and I argue, and twentieth-century history comes looming up, and at its most infernal. I feel pressed on every side, and it takes the stuffing out of me—but for you, it's your métier, really." (Roth, 316) Seen in this light, the radical events of the twentieth-century inform not only the format of the novel, but also the content.

Another technique employed by Roth in *The Counterlife* and a hallmark of experimental fiction is authorial intrusion into the text. In the novel, Henry Zuckerman lives out the dream of his counterlife, moving to Israel, immersing himself in a world of Zionism and Hebrew, and forcing his brother to call him Hanoch. Roth similarly lives his counterlife in the form of Nathan Zuckerman, a man who resembles the author in many ways, but who is still a creative invention. Early on in the novel, Nathan Zuckerman is described as "The Jersey boy with the dirty mouth who writes the books Jews love to hate." (Roth, 64) What could be a more succinct and accurate depiction of Mr. Roth himself?

This again obscures the idea of character. If we know the character in the book to be a thinly veiled portrait of our author, how then do we come to see the other fictional aspects of the work? The true-to-life portrait of Nathan Zuckerman necessarily infuses the work with an essence of reality that is hard to dismiss. However, the self-referentiality inherent in much of Roth's work is undermined in *The Counterlife*, where the format of the book necessarily destroys any assumptions we may have held about authorial

intrusion. Clearly, the author of the book does not, like Nathan Zuckerman, die after a dangerous surgery.

Roth is also intimately concerned with performance and imitation. Much of the book's content centers on the fact that the act of being oneself is just that: an act. According to Roth we are constantly projecting what we think of as our 'true selves' onto the world, yet, deep down, there is no such thing as a true self. Instead, there exists only a series of masks that we don in order to come close to a representation of who we think should be. In this frame, it is easy to see the reasons behind the narrative shifts. If character is no more than a front, then why not play around with the idea of character, showing all the different ways we can and do act?

The character who does the most to cause her own disintegration in the frame of *The Counterlife* is not Nathan or Henry Zuckerman, but Maria, Nathan's neighbor with whom he has a platonic affair (they cannot consummate the relationship because of his impotence). Maria transforms from the young woman living above Nathan in a posh London apartment building into a character in Nathan's latest book, *The Counterlife*. In an extraordinary example of meta-fiction, *The Counterlife* has recently been published within the context of the novel, and Henry Zuckerman interviews Maria, asking what she thinks of it.

Maria has told Nathan several times that she didn't want to be included in his work. She has no desire to become a character in his fiction. In the interview she seems bitter about his eventual inclusion of her. She refers extensively to the following chapter, entitled "Christendom", discussing events we have yet to read about, and debunking

much of what Zuckerman says about her family and the events of the past. In doing so, Maria effectively undermines what is to follow.

Later, in the last chapter, Maria decides to leave Nathan, and the book. She becomes cognizant of her status as a character and rails on Nathan for toying with her and with the literary figments she cares for so deeply. She situates herself in a line of self-aware characters, saying, "I know characters rebelling against their author has been done before, but…I have no desire to be original and never did." (Roth, 312) Later, she speculates on her fate as a character if she continues to stay in the book: "You weren't beyond killing your brother, you weren't beyond killing yourself…what if you decide everything will be more interesting if my daughter steps off the towpath into the river?" (Roth, 313) Here Roth acknowledges the complete and total power he holds over the characters about whom he writes. In doing so, Roth fully exposes the fictionality of characters in literature.

In John Barth's *The End of the Road* (1958), the idea of character is similarly (though more subtly) deconstructed. Barth's novel follows Jacob Horner, a young professor of grammar at Wicomico State Teachers College. Horner, after suffering from an episode of psychological and physical paralysis, is instructed by an unnamed doctor to set himself in motion and move to Wicomico. Once there he meets a polite couple named Joe and Rennie Morgan, and becomes entangled in their lives and their strange relationship.

The format and plot of the novel are fairly conventional. However, our narrator, Jacob Horner, is anything but. Horner lacks a self-identity, and inasmuch as one can be, is a complete blank slate. The very first line of the book lets the reader know that we are

not dealing with a run-of-the-mill character: "In a sense, I am Jacob Horner…" (Barth, 1) Horner can't move, he can't make a decision, and, although he constantly asserts his own existence, all of the other characters in the book seem to doubt it.

As the book continues, we too begin to doubt our narrator's existence. He describes "weatherless" days, days when he feels nothing, has no mood. It is on these days when Jake's existence is most uncertain:

> On these days Jacob Horner, except in a meaningless metabolistic sense, ceased to exist altogether, for I was without a character, without a personality: there was no *ego;* no *I*. Like those microscopic specimens that biologists must dye in order to make them visible at all, I had to be colored with some mood or other if there was to be a recognizable self to me. (Barth, 40)

Barth distorts the concept of character, subverting the idea that each character should have recognizable traits, a concrete sense of self, and a fixed identity. Jacob Horner has no fixed identity, something on which he muses several times in the book. Instead, he finds himself able to act out any personality, to mirror the traits he finds in others, and to remove feeling from thought, examining arguments and theories from a completely objective perspective.

On his doctor's orders, Horner begins to practice "mythotherapy", a type of psychological therapy that consists of focusing on playing different roles in social interactions. Jake adopts the practice, forcing Rennie, the wife of Joe Morgan, to question his motives:

Rennie ignored me. 'You know what I've come to think, Jake? I think you don't even exist at all. There's too many of you. Its more than just masks that you put on and take off—we all have masks. But you're different all the way through, every time. You cancel yourself out. You're more like somebody in a dream. You're not strong and you're not weak. You're nothing.'

I thought it appropriate to say nothing, since I didn't exist. (Barth, 71)

In constructing such a character, Barth reflects the culture of his times, where the general notion of the salience of individual personality was everywhere undermined. Whereas Nabokov and Roth reflect the disruptions of a post-nuclear age both in form and content, Barth chooses to mirror the disruptive nature of the times and the destruction of the "old stable ego" solely in his content.

Once again, the reader is faced with a conflict. If our narrator, the person through whom all events in the novel are related, exists in no more than a "meaningless metabolistic sense", how then are we to go about believing in him? Horner's very existence as a character is called into doubt, yet we have no other character on which we can rely.

The issue inherent in the destruction of reliable and fixed characters is that the reader loses some sense of coherence and direction. Yet, this loss of direction proves often to be a liberating experience, freeing readers from the character-driven narratives instilled in their minds by years of conventional novels.

Formal Innovation

Post-WWII era authors reflected the growing disruptive trends in their society through deliberate shifts in form and format. Contemporary writers such as Georges Perec, B.S. Johnson, and Julio Cortàzar, weary of the stylistic limitations presented by conventional novelistic forms, began to augment the content of their works with formalistic innovations.

The breakdown of traditional formats necessarily reflected the breakdown of traditional values and mores in the mid-late 20th century. The fallout from the dramatic events that ended the war began to be felt in the global cultural atmosphere. As Robert Rebein points out in his book *Hicks, Tribes, and Dirty Realists*, "…the very air of postwar America seemed filled with anxiety and alienation. There had been the Holocaust, then the bomb, then the onset of the cold war. Who imagined anymore that the world's problems could be solved with mere words?" (Rebein, 11) Mere words would not suffice; authors had to find alternate modes of representing the realities of a post-war world.[9]

The Second World War, while utterly and relentlessly destructive, also provided an enormous outlet for scientific creativity. The technological advancements made possible by the war did not end when the atomic bomb was dropped. On the contrary, they increased exponentially. The second half of the twentieth-century was a time of

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[9] That is not to say that the modes of fiction up until this point were not sufficient. On the contrary, the works of naturalism, realism, and modernism that make up the so-called traditional canon were similarly constructed in order to convey the climate of the times in which they were written. The works of such authors as Dostoevsky, Doyle, and Dickens, although very different from the works of the experimentalists, likewise represented their age in the form that was best suited to that goal.

unprecedented innovation in all fields, and the developments of the age far surpassed anything that had come before them. However, not all progress proved to be beneficial.

The rapid changes of the post-WWII era also induced widespread collapses. Once-great empires were cut up into pieces in the name of individual statehood, the lasting effects of colonialism rippled through many nations, and the arms race made the threat of a worldwide apocalypse a viable possibility. It is unsurprising then that the form of the fiction of the age began similarly to break down. Experimentalists writing fiction realized that if they had any chance of mirroring the contemporary universe, then they needed to explode the novelistic form.

Page by page, word by word, experimentalists like Perec, Johnson, and Cortázar deconstructed formal rules and regulations, and, in so doing, reflected the chaotic events of an era gripped by a constant cycle of demolition and creation. Many writers chose to fragment the reading experience, breaking down the instilled idea of chapter following chapter to pursue other modes of narrative storytelling. Others chose to include stylistic and typographical innovations in their works. Still others imposed strict constraints on their writing, hoping to push their creativity to the limit.

Sequential order and chronology went out the window as author after author chose to shatter conventional novelistic forms. Many of the works produced by the experimentalists forced readers to experience events through the form of the work. As such, readers became interactive agents rather than passive consumers of the novels with which they engaged. Readers who felt isolated and disconnected, victims of the disruptive events of the era, were able to associate closely with the disruptive fictions they read.

For example, the reader of Georges Perec's *La Disparition* and *Life: A User's Manual* internalizes an absence made tangible by the missing pieces inherent in those works. He experiences the fragmentary nature of memory while reading B.S. Johnson's *The Unfortunates*, and he becomes intimately acquainted with the experience of a wanderer while flipping back and forth, searching for the next chapter in Julio Cortázar's *Hopscotch.*

One group, the Oulipo, discovered early on that one of the best ways to deconstruct the novel was not to break preexisting rules regarding form and format, but to impose new, more intensive restrictions, and through these impositions, to force themselves and others to undertake ground-breaking creative endeavors. OuLiPo (*OUvroir de LIterature POtentialle)* was founded in 1960 by Raymond Queneau, a French author, and François Le Lionnais, a scientist and mathematician. The group continues to exist to this day, still largely composed of French authors and mathematicians. The group aims to impose mathematical or lexical constraints upon their writing in order to augment the amount of creative input necessary to complete a work.

Queneau decided to form the group in large part as a reaction against the Surrealist group, of which he was a member until 1929. Oulipo stands in direct opposition to Surrealism in that the group uses rigidification instead of automatism and separates itself explicitly from political issues. One goal of the original group was to revive interest in classical works, even as it practiced clearly avant-garde techniques.

The Oulipo emerged as a powerful force in France in the 1970's and continues to exert considerable influence in the larger literary world even as the date of its 50th anniversary approaches. Membership in the Oulipo is invitation-only and the men and

women who make up the group are considered members even after their death. The group has spawned countless spin-offs such as the Oubapo (comics), Oulipopo (detective literature), Ouarchpo (architecture), and Ouphopo (photography), and has spread around the globe. Warren Motte, who analyzed the work of Georges Perec in his book, *Poetics of Experiment*, said of the Oulipo: "…they seek increased creative liberty through the voluntary imposition of rigorous constraint, they pose serious questions about the nature of literature through good-humored play." (Motte, 138)

The first truly Oulipian work is undoubtedly Raymond Queneau's *100,000,000,000,000 Poems*. The poem consists of ten 14-line sonnets by Queneau. Each page of the work is cut into 14 line strips so that any one line of the sonnet has 10 alternate variations, giving us 10^{14} possible poems, or 100,000 billion variations. According to Queneau it would take a reader working 24 hours a day approximately 190,258,751 years to finish reading the poem in its entirety.[10]

Formal innovation through limitation is the aim and credo of the Oulipo group. The members of Oulipo attempt to expand the collective literary imagination through the imposition of strict formal constraints upon their writing, forcing themselves to think of ideas and stories they may never have dreamt up without the regulations. It seems incomprehensible that rules and regulations can expand creativity, yet author Georges Perec successfully accomplished just that, severely limiting himself, and, in doing so, creating masterworks of fiction.[11]

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[10] *Oulipo Compendium*, pg. 14. The poem can be found in its entirety online, in an interactive, web-based format here: http://www.bevrowe.info/Poems/QueneauRandom.htm.

[11] I will make reference to several of Perec's novels, all read in translation. The difficulties inherent in the translation of these works should not be underestimated and the men who translated the works (Gilbert Adair, Ian Monk, and David Bellos) should be recognized as literarily gifted in their own right.

Georges Perec was born in 1936 to Icek Judko and Cyrla Peretz, Polish Jews who immigrated to France in the 1920's and changed the last few letters of their surname to its Francophone spelling. Perec's father, who had enlisted in the French army, was killed in battle when Georges was only four, while Perec's mother, Cyrla, fell victim to the horrors of the Holocaust, perishing in Auschwitz. The author was raised by his paternal aunt and uncle into adulthood. Elected into the Oulipo group in 1967, Perec quickly became one of its foremost and most audacious members.

Perec was a true Man of Letters (belles-lettres) in every sense of the word. He was obsessed with letters, language, and the alphabet. For him, letters were more than just characters or symbols; they had associations in his mind that corresponded with emotional experiences and personal tragedies. It is unsurprising then that so many of Perec's myriad works focus on a metaphoric perversion of the alphabet. One of Perec's favorite literary techniques was the lipogram. A lipogram is a text which excludes certain letters of the alphabet. For example, that last sentence was a lipogram that omits the letters F, J, K, Q, V, Y, and Z.

It is with this knowledge that we can begin to understand the intentions behind his seminal novel, *A Void* (*La Disparition*). *A Void*, published in 1969, is an extended lipogram in which Perec omits the letter 'e'. According to the *Oulipo Compendium*, "The result is a perfect example of the Oulipian novel in which everything – plot, style, characterisation, even punctuation – is determined or affected by a single constraint." (*Oulipo Compendium*, 242) The book is a mystery story in which more and more of the characters die horrible deaths after saying that which cannot be said: any word containing the excluded letter. Here, yet again, external historical and socio-cultural forces come to

have an effect on the content of the post-WWII work of an author. Viewed with this in mind, a missing letter may come to symbolize a missing parent.

Consider the vowel that Perec chooses to omit. Perhaps he chose the letter e because it is the most common vowel in the French language, and thus presented him with the greatest challenge. Or perhaps there is another reason. Interestingly, the e is the only vowel present in the French word for mother (*mére*) and the word for father (*pére*). Because of the self-imposed limitation, Perec cannot write those words, he is forbidden. However, the rule does not restrict Perec from using the words Nazi and Auschwitz, both of which he does in fact write. The absence of the letter e becomes all the more significant in light of these facts. The missing letter signifies a missing part of the author himself.

The effect is echoed in *W, or the Memory of Childhood*. The book centers on two parallel stories, one fantasy, and the other chillingly realistic. Significantly, the letter 'w' (pronounced double-ve in French) comes to represent the two lives (vies), diverging paths which mirror and reflect one another. Tellingly, one, then both of those narratives comes to be associated with the horrors of the Holocaust.

In another act of ludic literary achievement, Perec also constructed *Les Revenentes* (*The Reterned* (note the misspelling), also published as *The Exeter Text: Jewels, Secrets, Sex*) in 1972. In this novella, Perec took all the missing 'e's' from *A Void* and put them to work. In fact, 'e' was the only vowel Perec permitted himself to use. Unlike in *A Void*, Perec ends up distorting the language, bending the rules of spelling, grammar, and vocabulary to suit his needs. Due to these literary tricks, we are left with sentences such as, "Trewlee, the See seemed endless: there were seven seycred temples."

(*Three by Perec,* 95) Unlike in, *A Void* the construction of this novella affects its content negatively. The book doesn't succeed as a work of fiction, and we are left with what amounts to a literary farce.

Perec's most ambitious formal experiment is certainly *Life: A User's Manual* (*Vie mode d'emploi*). Published in 1978, the sprawling novel at first seems plot-less. Perec describes the residents of the fictive 11 Rue Simon-Crubellier apartment building in Paris in hyper-detail. It is as if the front façade of the building is removed for the reader's benefit, allowing us to examine the major and minute events of the inhabitants' lives. Like a scientist in a laboratory, Perec examines each character under a slide, picking apart their possessions and their furnishings, their hopes and memories, their pasts and presents.

The novel takes place at a particular moment in time, shortly before 8 P.M. on the 23rd of June, 1975: the very moment at which one of the main characters, Bartlebooth, dies. Therefore the book is written mostly in the present tense, describing domestic vignettes as they happen, frozen in time for eternity. The rest of the book is written in the past, recounting stories and tales of the inhabitants that happened prior to that fateful night.

Bartlebooth, a wealthy young Englishman living in Paris, decides to devote the rest of his life and his fortune to a single project, which he will work on every single day for fifty years. Bartlebooth devises a plan to leave no trace of the project behind him after his death. He will spend ten years learning to paint watercolors under the tutelage of an artist named Valène. Then, over the next twenty years he will travel to a different port every two weeks, depicting that port in a painting which will then be sent back to Paris to

be constructed into a jigsaw puzzle by a master craftsman named Gaspard Winckler (who shares his name with the main character in *W, or the Memory of Childhood*).

Finally, for the last ten years, Bartlebooth returns to Paris to complete each puzzle, sending each work back to the port where it was painted upon its completion. Once there, each painting is dissolved in seawater, destroying any evidence of its own creation. That of course is just one of the narratives that comprise the story, albeit an important one. There are hundreds of others, dozens of main characters and hundreds of secondary ones, and thousands of items listed in the book.

Upon reading *Life: A User's Manual* one does not realize the impressive and enormous amount of formal constraints placed upon the novel's creation. One could not know for instance, that the apartment building, divided into ten floors, with ten rooms on each floor, actually represents an extended chess board with every room serving as a 'space'. Warren Motte commented on the motivations behind Georges Perec's obsession with the game of chess: "For Perec, it is not chess itself, as distinct from other games, which provides the interest, but the fact that it has historically been seen as a ludic framework within which problems are posed and then solved, very much akin, therefore, to his conception of literature itself." (Motte, 35)

Only the cleverest of chess players would realize that Perec is actually taking his readers on a Knight's Tour (adapted for a 10 x 10 board), a feat in chess whereby the knight lands on each space on the board only once.[12] Each time the Knight hits all four edges of the chessboard, a new section is begun. Thus, when we move from the flat of

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[12] Perhaps Vladimir Nabokov would realize this fact. His obsession with chess similarly (though more subtly) appeared in his writing. Mary McCarthy, in a June 4, 1962 review of *Pale Fire* in *The New Republic*, frames that novel in terms of a chessboard. She positions Kinbote as King, trying to escape death by frantically moving around the board, pursued by his would-be-assassins, or, better yet, his own fantastical imagination.

Gaspard Winckler to the apartment of the Plassaert family, it is no mere coincidence or chronological/narrative device. Rather, it is the move a knight would make: an L shaped jump to another flat, and another story.

Yet this is just one of the many constraints placed on the novel's construction. Upon the suggestion of Claude Berger, another member of the Oulipo, Perec 'placed' a Graeco-Latin bi-square (a mathematical plot in which no numbers in any quadrant can be the same, not unlike a Sudoku puzzle) of order 10 over the imagined apartment. Perec also employed a sort novel-making machine, a device utilizing the bi-squares that could churn out items that would then be included in his work. Perec called this his "schedule of obligations"[13]. He used twenty-one bi-squares, each consisting of two lists of ten elements which could then be combined to produce forty-two lists, each list comprised of 420 items, leaving 42 items or themes to be described in each room of the apartment.[14]

The categorical and meticulous listing of items, described by Motte as "…the pure Rabelaisian joy of enumeration" (Motte, 80) is overwhelming in the book. At times the items are simply inventoried, rattled off by Perec next to bullet points. At other times, they are meticulously described as integral parts of the stories. Most often, they are listed simply, as an example of the collateral clutter of our lives, the material accumulation that builds up in the course of living: "…the base and posts of an Empire bed, hickorywood skis having lost their spring long ago, a pith helmet that was of purest white once upon a time, tennis racquets held in heavy trapezoidal presses, an old Underwood typewriter of

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[13] *Oulipo Compendium*, edited by Harry Mathews and Alistair Brochie, 172. An illustration shown in that book gives an example of such a schedule. It lists such disparate things as "Occupants, Medallions, *Moby Dick*, Crosswords, Stockings, Joyce, Dreaming." (173)

[14] For a more in-depth analysis of the complex structure of the work, see the biography of Perec written by David Bellos, *A Life in Words* (513-516). Also see the *Oulipo Compendium*, edited by Mathews and Brotchie, (170-173). Or see an article in Frieze Magazine published in 2000, and found at this web address: http://www.frieze.com/issue/article/georges_perec_a_users_maual/.

the celebrated *Four Million* model…" (Perec 155) Yet for some reason the endless listing

rarely feels out of place or superfluous; each and every new item gives us a further

glimpse into the lives of the characters we come to know and respect.

Often, Perec uses the tactics of *mise en abîme* and recursion. Through these

literary devices, Perec is able to include even more items in his almost infinite descriptive

exercise. In one scene, Perec describes a character, Valène, painting himself painting a

painting of himself painting a painting: "…once again one of these nested reflections he

would have wanted to pursue to infinite depths, as if his eyes and his hand had unlimited

magnifying power." (Perec, 227) Of course this is exactly what Perec himself wants: to

be able to describe the minutest detail of each character's life, reducing every one of his

characters not to the sum of his parts, but to the parts of his sum.

What is at stake here? Certainly character, although the characters in Perec's

novel are some of the most convincing to be found in contemporary literature. Story? Yet

the stories in *Life* are everywhere, as multitudinous as the objects Perec so lovingly

describes. Narrative? Despite the fact that no overarching narrative exists within the

framework of the book, it still feels as complete a novel as any I have read due to the rich

characterizations, incredible and variable storylines, and quality of prose. In fact, one

would never be able to discern the framework behind the book by simply reading it.

Thus, we come to see that despite the enormous constraints placed upon the writing of the

work, it still succeeds as a novel.

Perec takes Nabokov's love of wordplay one step further, transforming it into the

visual medium. The work is filled with visual facsimiles of signs, billets, posters, along

with symbols, crossword puzzles, diagrams of chessboards, obituary notices, and family

trees. Perec believed that in order fully to represent a character one must present *all* of that character, in all of their insecurities, faults, and private histories.

A ludic nature pervades both the book and Perec's work as a whole. There is a game-like feel to *Life: A User's Manual* that does nothing to undermine its seriousness. Instead, the book's ludic nature adds yet another dimension to the already complex and layered narrative and works to further literary innovation.

According to Motte, "He [Perec] suggests that all literature is essentially recreational, that people read *play*, and that there is no need for literature to aspire to any other goal. The individual reading of any text becomes, thus, a game played by the author and the reader." (Motte, 23) Seen in this light, Perec and the Oulipo are suggesting a completely new way of looking at literature. While I consider this summation hyperbolic, I agree with Motte that play is an essential element in the works of Perec. Yet, Perec is not simply playing around for the sake of playing around; there is a personal and socio-historical significance to the disappearances inherent in his work. While the ludic nature of his works is vital to their innovative quality, there are also many other planes on which Perec's novels can and should be understood.

One of these planes relates to the function of meta-literature. The meta-literary nature of *Life: A User's Manual* is interesting on two levels. On one hand, Perec fills the book with names of real-life authors, literary references, and novelistic quotations. In this way Perec is not only positioning himself in a literary lineage but also distancing himself from the authors he cites by showing how very different his work is from their own. Motte states that "…these allusions…function as cues intended to direct the receptive process. They encourage the reader to receive Perec's texts in a certain manner, to situate

his works hierarchically according to the tenor of the allusions to other texts and writers whose situations in the literary hierarchy are more stable." (Motte, 114)

According to Perec, the thirty authors cited in the book's postscript are each mentioned or somehow referenced ten times in the course of the book. Just as with the detailed descriptions of objects, Perec accentuates these allusions to an almost extreme point, yet does so with a degree of subtlety and finesse, so that the allusions feel in no way forced.

Yet there is also another meta-literary aspect to *Life: A User's Manual*. Perec constantly calls attention to his own writing, making his own presence as author felt within the book. The "Preamble" of the work is reprinted in its entirety within the frame of the novel, with a few practically indiscernible alterations. In a nested painting by Valène, we find many of the stories, tales, and fables already written about at length faithfully reprinted in one-line summaries. The appendices to the book include a detailed index (à la *Pale Fire*) along with a painstakingly rendered chronology of all of the characters and an 'Alphabetical Checklist of Some of the Stories Narrated in this Manual'. Each detail has been worked out, every loose end tied; everything is contained in the manual, even the author himself.

However, there is a fundamental and important contradiction in the novel. The puzzle is missing a piece, the final piece. There are 99 chapters when there should be 100. Valène dies before completing his painting, leaving only the charcoal outline of a block of flats, which now will forever remain empty. Bartlebooth does not complete the project he started at the age of 20, falling behind and dying while working on the 439th puzzle, which, at the moment of his death lacks one piece. Tellingly, the piece is shaped

like a 'W'. Yet again, Perec inserts himself into his own work, the 'W' here symbolizing the double-life of an author, and merging Perec and his main character.

What is the meaning of the incompleteness inherent in the novel? Perhaps Perec is acknowledging that no complete picture of life can be offered in literary form; that there will always be something missing. Or perhaps Perec is once again representing a personal void, an incompleteness felt by the author himself and reflected again and again in his writings. Affected by external socio-historical forces, Perec expresses his emotional anguish not through an excess, but through a lack.

<p style="text-align:center">*   *   *   *</p>

One way in which the formal legacy of literature was challenged was by making the reading of a book an interactive experience. Authors such as B.S. Johnson and Julio Cortázar gave their readers an opportunity to construct their own reading experience in the way that suited them best. Out of this trend came Johnson's *The Unfortunates* and Cortázar's *Hopscotch* (*Rayuela*), ergodic pieces which put the responsibility of decoding the text into the hands of the reader, allowing him to construct his own version of the events by letting him choose *how* he reads the work.

The Unfortunates was first published in 1969. Born three years before Perec, Johnson, who was evacuated from London during the Second World War, published a series of experimental works that challenged formal convention on every level. In the preface to *The Unfortunates*, Johnson is quoted as saying of the traditional Dickensian novel, "No matter how good the writers are who now attempt it, it cannot be made to work for our time, and the writing of it is anachronistic, invalid, irrelevant, and perverse." (Preface to *The Unfortunates*, vi and vii)

Throughout his literary career, Johnson fought his best to avoid this 'perverse' style of writing. In *Albert Angelo* (1964), Johnson cut holes in many pages throughout the book, allowing readers to glimpse events far advanced in the chronology of the novel. In *House Mother Normal* (1971), the events are presented in a wholly chronological order, so that ideas, conversations, and experiences intermingle and entwine. In *Christie Malry's Own Double Entry* (1973), Johnson floods the narrative with meta-fictional references. While these works lack the ludic aspect which is fundamental in the Oulipian creations, they nevertheless defy fictional conventions with every turn of the page, offering an alternative to the traditional mode and manner of storytelling.

The Unfortunates again plays with chronology and narrative. This time, Johnson fragments the reading experience by not binding together his chapters, leaving each chapter individually collected but otherwise unbound, and putting all of the chapters into a box. There are 27 chapters in total, which range from one page to multi-page signatures. Johnson's only imposition into their order has one chapter marked 'first' and another marked 'last'. A note at the beginning of the work instructs readers to put the loose chapters into whatever order they like, and encourages readers to mix up the chapters so that they are less likely to have the same experience as any other reader.[15]

The plot of the novel revolves around a sports journalist sent to cover a soccer game in a small English village. Once there, he realizes he has been to the town many times before, and is racked by memories of a friend named Tony who lived there prior to being cut down in the prime of his life by cancer. The first-person narrative shifts

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[15] When Hungarian publishers refused to print the book in this manner, Johnson put different symbols at the top of each chapter, above the heading, and reprinted all of the symbols at a page in the back of the bound narrative. Johnson then encouraged readers to cut up the last page, put each of the symbols into a hat and pull them out one by one, constructing a random reading experience for themselves as an alternative to the one chosen by the publisher. (Source: Preface to *The Unfortunates*)

between the present, where the narrator is reporting on a dull football game, and the past, where he relives experiences shared with his late friend. Ostensibly a *roman-à-clef*, *The Unfortunates* has a somewhat straightforward narrative. Like Roth, Johnson utilizes traditional aspects of plot, character development, and narrative but subverts them with his unusual format.

In the format, B.S. Johnson mirrors the fragmentary nature of memory. Our narrator's memories are jumbled, intensely nonlinear, and thus, according to the author, our experience of those memories comes to be similarly muddled. As Jonathon Coe says in his introduction to *The Unfortunates*:

> Memories of Tony were unfolding, certainly, but not in a structured, linear way, and they were interrupted at random by the action on the pitch and his attempts to start writing his match report. It was this randomness, this lack of structure in the way we remember things and receive impressions, that Johnson wanted to record with absolute fidelity. (Coe, ix)

In this way, the reader is brought closer to the intimate events described in the book, aligning himself with the narrator in a manner which would be impossible were it not for the unusual format. We no longer feel as though we are viewing the events from the outside in but rather as though we are viewing them from the inside out.

In 1968, the year before the book was published, the Vietnam War and the Civil Rights movement were in full force. Several prominent leaders, including Martin Luther King Jr. and Robert Kennedy were assassinated, and student protests rocked the world. Published at a time when the world seemed to be in the process of collapsing, it is unsurprising that *The Unfortunates* represents a radical shift in the mode and manner of

storytelling. Philip Nel, in his book *The Avant-Garde and American Postmodernity: Small Incisive Shocks*, reminds us that "…reality is itself susceptible to the perceptual criteria of those who define it and the age in which they live." (Nel, 80) Nel later goes on to state that, "If we examine the relationships between historical context and the creative work under discussion, we may estimate the intensity with which we experience that work." (Nel, 177)

It seems unlikely against this backdrop of chaos and confusion that the traditional way of presenting a narrative could continue to serve as a valid and viable mode of representing reality. The conventional forms, although they were well suited to convey the general mood of their own age, proved no longer sufficient. Social, cultural, and political upheavals shook the foundation upon which we built our fragile world, and as the walls we constructed began to tumble down, so did the prevailing attitudes about how fiction should be written. Though the content of Johnson's novel has little to do with these events, the novel can still be located in a certain historicity because of its reactionary form and format.

So too can Julio Cortázar's *Hopscotch* (1963). The book follows Horacio Oliveira, an Argentinean writer living in Paris with La Maga, his mistress. Horacio and La Maga belong to "The Serpent Club", a group of bohemian intellectuals who philosophize their way through the cafés and back alleys of Paris. Eventually, La Maga's infant child dies, and she disappears. Horacio moves back to Buenos Aires where he works first in a circus and later in a mental institution.

The content of the book is not necessarily revolutionary (it seems heavily influenced by the work of Henry Miller and Ernest Hemingway), however the format is

most definitely experimental. The book is composed of two distinct but intertwined narratives. The first, comprised of chapters 1-56, tells the story of Oliveira and his wanderings in Paris and Buenos Aires. The second, entitled "From Diverse Sides: Expendable Chapters", is composed of chapters 57-155, yet it begins at chapter 73.

The idea behind the book is that the reader is able to choose his own path. Readers must decide before starting if they want to read the book in the conventional manner, stopping at chapter 56, or if they want to play 'hopscotch', reading the main story alongside the later chapters, flipping back and forth and supplementing the novel with additional sources, stories, and backgrounds.

Along with a listing of all possible 'moves' at the beginning of the book, at the end of each chapter, in parentheses, the reader is told where to hop next. The nomadic nature of this format necessarily reflects the content of the book, in which Oliveira travels from place to place, seemingly without incentive or motivation. Similarly, the expendable chapters often add little if anything to the context and content of the main narrative, and one is often left wondering exactly why the author chose to lay the next square in that particular place on the sidewalk.

There are certainly experimental facets to both the first book and the supplementary chapters. In chapter 34 for example, dual narratives are written on alternating lines, which causes the reader once again to choose his own way. Should you read one narrative, then the other? Or should you read both together, embracing the duality which casts the stories in a new light?: "I liquidated all the credits I could, rented out/ stuff like this and plenty of other incredible things, *Elle* and/ the properties, transferred my holdings and inventories, and/ *France Soir*, those sad magazines Babs

lends her. And moved to/ moved to Madrid to take up residence there…" (Cortázar, 202) Yet again Cortázar is putting the agency into the hands of his reader.

Active in revolutionary Latin American politics and an avid supporter of the Cuban Revolution, it seems natural that Cortázar chose to write a book that gives power to the people, allowing them to choose their own path in his offering of multiple alternatives. Cortázar was in fact invited to become a member of the Oulipo group but turned the invitation down. One could infer that it was because of their stance as an explicitly politically disengaged movement.

In one of the supplementary chapters, the content of a footnote denoted by an asterisk demands yet another footnote, finally necessitating seven asterisks to reach the final note (Cortázar, 431-2). In other chapters, newspaper clippings, quotations, and full passages from books once again locate the work in a hierarchy of literature, all while marking a crucial difference.

The final chapter (ostensibly chapter 58), loops back on itself; the parenthetical note at the end refers us to the chapter that preceded it, theoretically keeping the reader in a cycle of switching back and forth for eternity. In this looping, and in starting the novel with the 73rd chapter, Cortázar is commenting on the reflexivity and repetitious nature of literature, suggesting that true stories have no concrete beginning and ending, no moment in time which can be pinpointed as 'the start' or 'the end'.

In *Hopscotch*, Julio Cortázar comes to be closely aligned with a fictional author present in the expendable chapters named Morelli. Morelli, an idol of many members of the Serpent Club, has exceedingly interesting ideas about the formation of a novel. In a note by Morelli, we find the following declaration:

The outer forms of the novel have changed, but the heroes are still the

avatars of Tristram, Jane Eyre, Lafcadio, Leopold Bloom, people from the

street, from the home, from the bedroom, *characters*…For my part, I

wonder whether someday I will ever succeed in making it felt that the true

character and the only one that interests me is the reader… (Cortázar, 437)

Clearly, Cortázar cares for the concerns of the reader, and, far from pandering to him, our author is challenging his readers to broaden their perspective and adopt the idea that there may indeed be alternate ways of decoding a novel.

Hypertext fiction, the technological incarnation of formal experimentation, allows users to read a piece of fiction online and to access various chapters, storylines, and characters through series of web links embedded into the text. Readers have a variety of options with regard to the links, and can skip around at will with nothing more than the click of a mouse button.

Readers of hypertext fiction play a game of literary hopscotch that, not unlike Cortázar's game, has the capability to go on forever. In fact, one could argue that *Hopscotch* would work better as a piece of hypertext fiction, eliminating the need for people to flip back and forth between the text and the additional chapters.

Another aspect of many hypertext works is that they allow readers to influence the outcome of the story. By choosing different paths for characters and different storylines to follow, the readers can decide how and when they want events to unfold. In addition, much hypertext fiction has the ability to augment the reading experience by utilizing alternative media: pictures, videos, and music, all of which can be easily disseminated over the World Wide Web.

In 1997, Mark Amerika, an author and artist, released GRAMMATRON, an hypertext fiction that was eventually exhibited at the Whitney Biennial and which

"…consists of over 1100 text spaces, 2000 links, 40+ minutes of original soundtrack ….GRAMMATRON depicts a near-future world where stories are no longer conceived for book production but are instead created for a more immersive networked-narrative environment that, taking place on the Net, calls into question how a narrative is composed, published and distributed in the age of digital dissemination."[16]

Quite clearly, technological innovations have yielded yet another way of creating and accessing fictions. However, few, if any, of the hypertext fictions I have encountered could be considered literature. Many center on the Internet, using it as a main facet of the plot. Most are written by amateur authors, some of whom seem to have more experience writing code than writing prose.

Yet who is to say that this won't change? That hypertext fiction cannot become a literary force in its own right? That the Internet will not usher in a new age in the world of fiction? As people strive to immerse themselves more and more in the electronic media they consume (think 3-D movies and Internet alter-worlds such as Second Life), literature, as always, must adapt to suit the wants and needs of the masses.

The Internet, not unlike the Oulipo, is a collaborative endeavor. Feasibly many people could contribute to one piece of hypertext fiction, drawing people to different web sites in an enormous scavenger hunt. The possibilities for the future are truly endless. Formal literary innovation has gone digital.

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[16] http://www.grammatron.com/about.html.

Narrative Disintegration

Towards the end of Thomas Pynchon's short novel *The Crying of Lot 49*, the book's heroine, Oedipa Maas, comes to a realization while taking a walk: "For it was now like walking among matrices of a great digital computer, the zeroes and ones twinned above, hanging like balanced mobiles right and left, ahead, thick, maybe endless. Behind the hieroglyphic streets there would either be a transcendent meaning, or only the earth." (Pynchon, 136) Thus, to Oedipa, either everything in the world is interconnected and meaningful, or disparate and meaningless. This is perhaps the central question of the book, and of much of Pynchon's work.

The reader, along with Ms. Maas, is unsure whether the world of the novel, a world filled with signs and symbols, is constituted by an interconnected web or consists of nothing more than a chaotic jumble. At the core of *The Crying of Lot 49* is this polarity, a polarity that comes to characterize the cultural milieu of the age in which it was written, and, in doing so, sheds light on the very society it apprehends.

Thomas Pynchon, born in 1937, has achieved a cult-following in the literary world augmented by his reclusive nature. Pynchon scorns fame and has only been photographed on a few occasions. He attempts to hide all aspects of his private life despite the worldwide fame he achieved after the publication of *Gravity's Rainbow*.[17] At a young age, Pynchon was employed by Boeing, where he worked as a technical writer for manuals on missiles, among other things. His background at Boeing casts a long shadow on his work and its concern with technology (specifically missiles). Despite his aversion to fame, Pynchon remains among the foremost novelists of the 20th century, one

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[17] Interestingly, technology, a major theme in many of Pynchon's novels, has worked against this goal. In 1997, he was filmed while walking around in New York City and the video was shown by CNN. More recently, the Facebook page of Jackson Pynchon, his son, was made public.

whose narratives have come to reflect and characterize the modern age perhaps more than those of any other contemporary author.

Pynchon's second novel, *The Crying of Lot 49*, was published in 1966 to mediocre reviews. Since then, however, scholars and critics have recognized the work for its brilliance and depth. Briefly, the novel centers on Oedipa Maas, a young woman living in California who, at the start of the book, discovers that she has been named executrix to the will of one Pierce Inverarity, a real estate mogul and former lover of Oedipa's.

While executing the orders of the will, she stumbles upon (or is stumbled upon by) a vast conspiracy, a system of alternative postal routes maintained by the ominous Tristero organization. She traces the route system's roots and discovers that Tristero was founded in the 16th century as a rival postal organization to the monopolic Thurn and Taxis. At present, Tristero sends alternative mail through W.A.S.T.E. (We Await Silent Tristero's Empire), an enormous network of garbage cans and other depositories throughout the United States.

Oedipa is haunted by the Tristero system, finding clues which point to its growing influence everywhere she goes, especially when she isn't looking for them. In an attempt to order and give meaning to the world around her, Oedipa superimposes patterns over seemingly random occurrences. In a bar bathroom, she sees the symbol for Tristero, a muted post horn, adorning an advertisement for a group sex club. In Golden Gate Park, she spots the post horn drawn in chalk in a children's hopscotch game. While wandering, she comes upon an old man who asks her to deliver a letter through the W.A.S.T.E. system.

Despite these outwardly chance clues, most of the physical information regarding Tristero is given to Oedipa by people who, in one way or another, are connected to Inverarity Holdings. Due to this fact, Oedipa is plagued by doubts about the veracity of the information she discovers/is given. Is Tristero real? Is it merely a fabrication of her increasingly paranoid mind? Or is it an elaborate and extended wild goose chase, thought up by Inverarity himself and written into the will as a practical joke?

The simple fact of the matter (and the crux of the novel) is that Oedipa does not know. And neither does the reader. At the novel's conclusion, Oedipa attends a stamp auction where she hopes that the mystery will be solved. However, once again, Pynchon frustrates her (and our) desire: the novel is cut short immediately before the 'crying' of Lot 49.[18]

Not unlike *Pale Fire*, *The Crying of Lot 49* is ambiguous towards any sort of formal conclusion. Whereas in Nabokov's novel we are left unsure of the narrator's true identity, in Pynchon's we cannot know which version of events is the 'true' one. In a way, *The Crying of Lot 49* is a novel about the reader's yearning for a complete novel, with all the loose ends tied up at the conclusion. This is something Pynchon purposely keeps out of reach, instead offering us a fragmented narrative that disregards our conventional desires.

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[18] In his essay on *The Crying of Lot 49*, Edward Mendelson couches the book in strictly religious terms, pointing out explicit and implicit religious references. Mendelson notes that 49 is no random number, but rather has a religious significance. The Pentecost is celebrated 50 days after Easter and represents a moment of revelation, when the Holy Spirit descended on the apostles who were then granted the ability to speak to the residents of Jerusalem in many languages. Therefore, Mendelson posits that the number is a comment on both communication and revelation. 49 is the moment immediately before enlightenment will be granted and the ability to communicate will be fully realized. (Mendelson, *The Sacred, the Profane, and* The Crying of Lot 49, 134-135) Yet others have posited that the number corresponds to the year 1849, the year of the California Gold Rush, when postal service was extended to California to accommodate vast numbers of immigrants.

Concurrently, *The Crying of Lot 49* is a compilation of many stories put together in a traditional format. The 'plot' of the book is actually many plots, and Oedipa travels through her cosmos spastically, jumping from one story into the next, constantly followed by subplots, nested narratives, and extended yarns. Through this tactic and others, Pynchon deconstructs his own novel, creating a work that constantly resists interpretation.

Tellingly, the novel genre that Pynchon chose for his masterwork of ambiguity and incompleteness is the one that is least receptive to those traits: the mystery. According to Brian McHale, this makes the novel modernist because the genre is necessarily epistemological as opposed to ontological.[19] However, I disagree with this notion. To me, the work is explicitly un-epistemological; the novel is all about *not* knowing. Like most mysteries *The Crying of Lot 49* starts with a death. However, Oedipa's aim is not to discover how or why Pierce died, which seems to be of little consequence. Instead, Oedipa embarks on an investigative journey into the truth behind the alternative communication system named Tristero.

The act of naming in Pynchon's oeuvre is exceedingly important. The names of characters in much of Pynchon's work are often blatantly metaphorical, taking on a punning comic strip or farce-like quality that is hard to ignore. *The Crying of Lot 49* is no exception. Dr. Hilarius, Manny Di Presso, and Gengis Cohen all inhabit the streets of Pynchon's post-war polis, San Narciso. However, of particular note with regard to the genre is the name of our protagonist: Ms. Oedipa Maas. She is the Oedipus of Sophocles,

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[19] McHale, *Postmodernist Fiction*, 22-25

who, in *Oedipus, Rex* promises: "Well, I will start afresh and once again / Make dark things clear."[20]

Oedipa, like her namesake, is the mystery detective *par excellence*, seeking to extract truths from the dark and murky facts that surround her. Her last name, a homonym of the Spanish word for *more*, could suggest to us that this character is Oedipus 2.0, the next successor in a line of literary detectives. Yet unlike Oedipus, within the frame of the work, Maas will never learn the truth behind her mystery.

In this way, Pynchon confounds and distorts the genre. He is not only parodying the mystery genre, but, in doing so, is indeed contributing to an entirely different genre. In the vast majority of mystery fiction, new clues lead to the uncovering of some vital piece of information that will eventually help guide the characters to a solution. In this particular mystery story, it is just the opposite. With every clue, every new sighting of the Tristero's symbolic muted post horn, the mystery thickens. Even the name of the system is ambiguous: the spelling differs in various texts discovered by Oedipa. This Tristero/Trystero dichotomy is symbolic of the forking paths found throughout the course of the novel.

Towards the end of the text, confronted with a vast array of clues, huge amounts of information, and numerous first-hand accounts, the solution is denied us. The novel ends immediately before the revealing auction begins. As in the novels of Georges Perec, a puzzle piece is missing, and not just any piece, but the very piece that will unite the novel and 'finish' the puzzle. Our desire, our need for a neat and tidy resolution is ultimately confounded.

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[20] Sophocles, *Oedipus, Rex*, Scene 1, lines 159-160)

The central question of the book (whether or not the Tristero system exists) is certainly important to the formation of the novel. In not giving the reader an answer to his puzzle, Pynchon is participating in an act of narrative disintegration. However, equally as important is what Tristero represents in the book. Tristero as a system provides a service to the alternatives, the disenfranchised, and the lost.

The men and women who choose to use the W.A.S.T.E. system are purposefully and consciously choosing to disavow the dominant hierarchies of control and power that come in the form of the U.S. Postal System (and, before that, the Thurn and Taxis). They are constructing themselves and their identities in direct opposition to the prevailing structure and, in doing so, choosing truth over falsehood and censorship.

There are several layers of understanding implicit in this self-imposed distinction. Followers of the Tristero could be viewed as experimentalists, favoring their own path over the more traditional systems put in place. Seen in this light, it is unsurprising that Pynchon chooses to focus on them. Undoubtedly, if the Tristero system actually existed, Pynchon would count himself as one of its patrons.

The W.A.S.T.E. enthusiasts could also be seen as the citizens of an alternate America, protesting the inequalities inscribed in their culture by subverting the archetypal bureaucratic system: the mail. In his book of criticism, *City of Words*, Tony Tanner comments on this option:

> The Tristero System in its present-day manifestation is that underground
> America made up of all the 'disinherited' – racial minorities,
> homosexuals, the poor, the mad, the lonely and the frightened. It also

contains revolutionaries from both extremes of the political spectrum who

are crazily dedicated to the overthrow of the present society. (Tanner, 177)

While Tanner is somewhat dismissive of these elements of society, his point is well

taken. Tristero is for those who swim against the cultural current and refuse to conform,

the beats and the hippies, the Abbie Hoffmans and the Thomas Pynchons.

Consider the time period during which *Lot 49* was published. During the mid to

late Sixties, the African-American Civil Rights movement was in full swing, and the

Black Power movement was beginning to gather steam. Concurrently, the second wave of

the Women's Liberation movement was changing the way that American society viewed

gender inequality, while the Gay Liberation movement altered perspectives on sexuality.

Protests for reform and against the Vietnam War were widespread.

In this cultural climate, people on the fringes of society were brought to the

forefront. Underlying systemic issues reached their boiling point as the 'disinherited'

sought their inheritance. All of this is subtly, if not explicitly, reflected in Pynchon's

novel. Not unlike those who utilize the services of the Tristero system, the minorities in

America sought to take power and control into their own hands, defining their destinies

instead of letting them be dictated by governmental organizations and societal mores.

Those who use the Tristero system, like the disenfranchised Americans of the

1960's and 70's and the experimental authors of the post-war era, live in opposition to

and alongside the mainstream, leading Tony Tanner to ask, "Is there another America;

can entirely different universes co-habit?" (Tanner, 178) Pynchon seems to think so, and

says as much in *The Crying of Lot 49*.

In, *Understanding Thomas Pynchon*, Robert D. Newman makes a point about *Gravity's Rainbow* that could just as easily be applied to *The Crying of Lot 49*: "Both structure and style illuminate theme, for the culture is in disarray, suffering paroxysms of self-annihilation." (Newman, 91) The cultural meltdown of the late 1960's predicated a disintegration of the traditional narrative. In this 'new narrative', questions breed more questions, characters take on cartoonish traits, and pop-culture references reign supreme.

The Holocaust also informs the content of the book, showing just how rooted it is in the socio-political and cultural landscape of the late twentieth century. Dr. Hilarius, Oedipa's therapist and an avid proponent of LSD, did an 'internship' at Buchenwald, where he contorted his face into such vile expressions that the prisoners there were driven to the brink of insanity. Later, at a government surplus store, Oedipa meets Winthrop Tremaine, a purveyor of mass-produced Nazi uniforms who tells Oedipa that he's stocking up for the start of the new school semester. These incidents are neither isolated nor incidental. Rather, they are calculated attempts somehow to deal with the events of the modern age.

While some might understandably consider these historical intrusions offensive, one should also realize to what end Pynchon is narrating these tales. In describing and mocking such things as Nazi medical experiments and the fetishism of Nazi apparel, he is effectively re-contextualizing the Holocaust, while simultaneously commenting on the intersection of history and capitalism.

The Holocaust is not the only historical event that pervades the book. The universe in which the novel was created was one of protest and partisanship, yet it was also one of paranoia. The Cold War, having escalated in the early 1960s, instilled the

threat of nuclear annihilation in the minds of many Americans, and an ever-expanding military-industrial complex came to dominate the American political landscape. As Bran Nicol points out in *The Cambridge Introduction to Postmodern Fiction*, "…one of the special abilities of Pynchon's fiction is to help us conceive of the interconnected webs of science, technology, politics, and history, and the events they produce (e.g. wars, the cold war, the space race) which drive post-war American society." (Nicol, 91)

Certainly an overarching paranoia (one of the defining features of Cold War America) is central to Oedipa's quest. The inhabitants of San Narciso and its environs are almost all paranoiacs. Oedipa sees Tristero in everything she does and everywhere she goes, and, even when the connections between occurrences are somewhat tenuous, she puts her faith in them. Oedipa's therapist, thinking that Israelis bent on revenge are out to get him, holes himself up in his office fully armed, and has a showdown with the police. The book even features a Beatles-like band aptly (if not subtly) named The Paranoids that plays outside Oedipa's motel room and sings about (among other things) Vladimir Nabokov and *Lolita*.[21]

This mounting sense of paranoia is one of the defining characteristics of Pynchon's fiction. In *Gravity's Rainbow*, a mega novel specifically concerned with the apocalypse, the dreaded V-2 missile is feared to drop at any moment. In *The Crying of Lot 49*, there is a different sort of paranoia. The fear that haunts Oedipa and many of her cohorts is that everything is somehow connected; that random events do not exist and that corporate America has somehow insinuated itself into the very fabric of life in the United States, controlling the nation's and its citizens' destinies from the inside out.

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[21] Interestingly, Pynchon was a student of Professor Vladimir Nabokov at Cornell. When asked, Nabokov didn't recall Pynchon being in his classes but his wife, Vera, remembered his handwriting.

Yoyodyne, a fictional company in Southern California, seems to have a hand in everything that happens to Oedipa, begging her to question the extent of its power. Tony Hilfer elaborates on this point in his work, *American Fiction Since 1940*: "Politically, the quest is for the lost America of spirit, enunciated by Whitman, perhaps forever lost in the land of General Electric, Dow Chemical, and Pynchon's own invented corporation, Yoyodyne." (Hilfer, 150) Throughout the book, one is unsure if Yoyodyne is overtly malicious or simply greedy, but there is definitely something sinister about the extent of its monopolization and control.

There is also a different sort of fear present in the novel: the fear of miscommunication. Miscommunication manifests itself in the frame of the novel in several different ways. Oedipa's search for knowledge is stymied at every turn. A word ("Trystero") seems to cause the gruesome death of a group of knights in *The Courier's Tragedy*, a Jacobean revenge play that Oedipa sees. The play itself revolves around mixed up messages and mistaken identities. Additionally, Tristero messages travel through garbage cans. A right-wing group, the Peter Pinguid Society, sends useless and trivial dispatches through their own mail system just to keep it active.

Later, Oedipa attempts to communicate with Maxwell's Demon, a machine invented by a certain John Nefastis that sorts molecules according to the laws of entropy and the flow of information, but she ultimately fails. Stamps, which stand at the crossroads of communication, information, and history, are converted into icons of postal terrorism, their pictures defaced and their messages perverted. All of these events are united in their treatment of communication. Pynchon is commenting on the failure at

every level of communication, and on man's inability to communicate in an age of constant technological advancement.

Technology is of vital importance to Pynchon and informs much of his work. To him, technology distorts the act of communicating. The white noise that surrounds us necessarily prevents any real or pure communication. That white noise was created and is fed by technology and its progeny. What we are left with is an alternative form of communication, not necessarily pure, but valuable nevertheless. The ones and zeroes that Oedipa refers to late in the book come to symbolize the utter un-knowability of a world obsessed with knowledge.

Looking down on San Narciso from on high, Oedipa realizes that the city is not unlike a printed circuit she found in a transistor radio, the houses laid out in an "ordered swirl" (Pynchon, 13), that she suspects hides some secret meaning:

> There'd seemed no limit to what the printed circuit could have told her (if she had tried to find out); so in her first minute of San Narcisco, a revelation also trembled just past the threshold of her understanding. Smog hung all round the horizon, the sun on the bright beige countryside was painful; she and the Chevy seemed parked at the centre of an odd, religious instant. (Pynchon, 13)

In this passage, technology comes to be associated with religion, two things which, at first glance, would seem to be diametrically opposed. Here, technological advancement is in concert with a religious revelation. However, not unlike the crying of Lot 49 at the auction, Oedipa sits upon the brink of this revelation, its message close at

hand yet forever out of reach. Communication in the frame of the novel is always miscommunication; all messages are lost in the telling.

Pynchon may also be suggesting a radical shift from what we have known. In one scene in the novel, Oedipa wanders upon a group of deaf-mutes dancing in a silent hotel ballroom. They dance to their own internal rhythm and miraculously, no one in the entire ballroom collides for a full half-hour. Oedipa wonders for a moment if there is some sort of predestination guiding the couples, a mysterious force or a secret order that prevents them from crashing into one another.

Throughout the work and in this passage especially, Pynchon seems to not only be commenting on the ultimate futility of communication, but also suggesting that there may indeed be a mysterious force behind all things, an alternate message that only some are tuned in to. Perhaps we (the readers, or humanity at large) are the deaf people dancing to the silent tune. However, the author is ultimately silent on this point. The ambiguity at the core of the book, whether Tristero is indeed a conspiracy or merely a hoax (which is of course a metaphor for predestination vs. free will) is left deliberately vague by Pynchon. He refuses to partake in any facile form of communication, and leaves the questions forever open to interpretation.

In his essay, "Human, All too Inhuman", published in *The New Republic* in 2001, literary critic James Woods laments the rise of what he calls 'hysterical realism'. In effect, Wood is criticizing the disintegration of traditional narrative. While reviewing Zadie Smith's novel *White Teeth,* Woods places the book in a long line of novels which have utilized the conventions of this new 'genre'. He defines this genre as one of

excessive storytelling, an emphasis on minutiae, and a forced interconnectedness which

he believes destroys any sense of verisimilitude.

Wood states:

> Yet it is the relatedness of these stories that their writers seem most to
> cherish, and to propose as an absolute value. An endless web is all they
> need for meaning. Each of these novels is excessively centripetal. The
> different stories all intertwine, and double and triple on themselves.
> Characters are forever seeing connections and links and plots, and
> paranoid parallels.[22]

Wood seems to find this model abhorrent, and he charges these new novels with

the sin of strained storytelling. In my opinion Wood is wide of the mark. He comments

on the interconnectedness of these novels as if they are symptomatic of plot when, in

reality, the web *is* the plot. The endless connections constitute the content of *The Crying

of Lot 49*; they are not some stylistic flourish used to complement the narrative. Rather,

Oedipa (and to an extent the characters in *Gravity's Rainbow)* is specifically concerned

with these connections. The narrative revolves around these correlations; they do not

orbit the narrative. As Robert Newman reminds us in his critical work *Understanding

Pynchon*, "All plots are fictions, imaginative constructs to order a world that tends toward

disorder." (Newman, 91)

In the review of *White Teeth*, Wood also argues that the characters in these

'hysterically realistic' works of fiction lack any mirror in reality, and are overshadowed

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[22] See Wood's article in the *New Republic* from August 30th, 2001. The article can be found online at
http://www.powells.com/review/2001_08_30.html.

by the vast amount of information presented in these new books. This leads Wood to argue, "Information has become the new character."[23]

James Wood sees the characters that inhabit the worlds of the novels of Smith, Pynchon, and Foster Wallace more as caricatures, people who, in their exceedingly realistic depictions, become unrealistic. To me, the authors that Wood cites are not in any way attempting to create conventionally realistic characters, characters that were completely appropriate and useful in the realistic novels of the 19th and early 20th centuries. Instead, in their intensely imaginative characterizations, these new authors are defying realism, moving beyond it to a new form of fiction, all while exceptionally self-conscious and hyper-aware.

In Italo Calvino's 1979 metafictional masterwork, *If on a winter's night a traveler (Se una notte d'inverno un viaggiatore)*, Calvino again disrupts the traditional narrative structure, fragmenting his novel into many novels and thwarting his readers' innate desire for a complete work. Novelistic convention is thrown out the window as Calvino jumps from story to story, creating a literary pastiche of ten different tales whose genres range from mystery to erotic thriller, and everything in between. What we end up reading is a commentary on reading itself, the ways in which we read, and the things we have come to expect from a piece of literature.

Born in 1923, Calvino counted himself as one of the few non-French members of the Oulipo (along with such authors as the American Harry Mathews and the British writer Ian Monk). One of the most prolific Italian authors of the modern age, his work spans four decades. According to Constance Markey, in her book *Italo Calvino: A Journey Toward Postmodernism*, Calvino, once an intensely political man with

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[23] Ibid.

Communist leanings, gave up his hopes for a successful social/political revolution, and, during the sixties and seventies, concentrated on a literary revolution: "Disenchanted with life's discrepancies and with humanity's ineffectualness in the face of the unknown and unpredictable, the Calvino of the sixties readily acknowledged a postwar, postmodern sense of loss and a feeling of displacement from society." (Markey, 20)

In Calvino's case, the socio-cultural events of the postwar era led him towards disengagement rather than engagement. So, even though cultural currents may not explicitly inform the content of his novels, they still clearly had an effect on the author and on his work. *If on a winter's night a traveler* was one of the last books Calvino wrote.

The novel famously begins thus: "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." (Calvino, 3) In using the second person pronoun (the familiar Italian *tu*), Calvino is forcing the reader into self-awareness. The first chapter along with every subsequent odd-numbered chapter utilizes the second person. Throughout, the 'you' assaults the reader, telling him exactly what he is doing as if he is the main character, who is actually a fictional reader on the trail of a literary mystery. In addition to his self-awareness, the reader is drawn into the narrative, and becomes an active participant in constructing the events of the book.

At the start of the novel our protagonist, the reader 'you' begins reading Italo Calvino's new novel only to find that there has been a printing error, one signature of pages has been printed over and over again, so that the first 32 pages are simply repeated numerous times throughout. Frustrated, our reader returns to the bookstore in order to

exchange his copy, only to learn that he was in fact not reading Calvino's work, but the work of a Polish author, Bazakbal. After exchanging his copy of *If on a winter's night a traveler* for the full original work (he wants to continue reading the story he started), the reader soon realizes that he has been duped yet again, and is now reading a completely different novel from the one he began in the first place.

This is how the 'real' novel continues on, with the reader constantly picking up a new book every few pages. Each of the books that he begins to read is cut off at the very moment of climax, as some pressing issue or textual defect causes the reader to halt his reading. The book disintegrates in the reader's hands; one narrative dissolves into another as each new chapter begins. In the intervening chapters, our reader traces an international book fraud conspiracy, and struggles to determine the authorship and originality of the books he reads.

In this way, as in Pynchon's *The Crying of Lot 49*, the reader's desire for a complete story is defied, leaving the reader to question the very nature of narrative. Calvino similarly subverts and deconstructs the mystery genre; the clues discovered by the reader do not lead to a narrowing down of options, but rather, open up more possibilities while refusing to give concrete answers.

A major aspect of the work is the 'Chinese box' style utilized throughout. As in *Life: A User's Manual,* nested representations appear in the work, forming a recursive style in which *mise en abîme* and *trompe l'oeil* play major roles. Films mentioned in the various novels are explained in detail. Almost an entire chapter is devoted to a story found in the diary of an author named Silas Flannery. Flannery's manager, Ermes Marana, delivers the beginnings of freshly translated novels to an impatient and easily

distracted Sultana. This nesting serves to disorient the reader, to confuse him into not knowing what plane or level of narrative he is on.

A reader can and does lose himself in this novel. As the book continues and the Chinese boxes get smaller and smaller, any sense of scope or perspective is utterly destroyed. According to Markey, this disorientation is exactly the effect Calvino desired to achieve: "It is a device designed to undo the reader's passivity and actively engage him in the creative process of literature by letting him discover his own solutions to the story." (Markey, 117) As in the novels of B.S. Johnson and Thomas Pynchon, the reader becomes an active participant in the work with which he or she engages, causing a rare and tremendous closeness between reader and text.

Another technique that dominates the novel is that of metafiction. Nicol cites metafiction as the defining and most enduring characteristic of postmodern fiction.[24] Calvino joins in a long line of authors who utilize the technique, including Kurt Vonnegut, John Barth, and Martin Amis. In this particular novel, several metafictional techniques are present which expose the devices of the fictional world and call attention to the act of writing and reading literature. We, the reader, are reading about a reader reading a novel. The novel positions itself in a literary lineage, quoting at length from *Crime and Punishment*. Additionally the frame is broken by Calvino's insertion of himself into the work and his assertion (or lack thereof) of authorship.

This final tactic is of particular interest to the topic of narrative disintegration. In breaking the frame, Calvino positions himself within the diegesis of the novel, introducing himself in the world of the novel as not only a character, but as its creator. McHale labels this metafictional technique "superrealism". (McHale, 197) McHale goes

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[24] Nicol, *The Cambridge Introduction to Postmodern Fiction*, 35.

on to elaborate on the topic of authorial intrusion: "…to reveal the author's position within the ontological structure is only to introduce the author *into the fiction*; far from abolishing the frame, this gesture merely *widens* it to include the author as a fictional character." (McHale, 198) However, as happens often with authorial intrusion, this introduction is complicated. Within the book, Calvino's writing is soon discovered to be the work of another author, whose work is then attributed to a different man entirely.

However, throughout, we know the true author of the book as a whole to be Calvino himself. This complication of authorship further unsettles the conventional reader's wish for a structured and predictable narrative. As Kathryn Hume says in her critical work, *Calvino's Fictions: Cogito and Cosmos*, "That meaning, physical presence, authorship even, should be so insubstantial naturally disturbs a Cartesian consciousness trying to discover order." (Hume, 25) Insubstantial seems the wrong word here. Authorship within the book is in many ways overly substantial, there is *too much* authorship. Yet that authorship is always insecure.

This insecurity is explicitly referred to in a passage about the fictional author Silas Flannery's crippling writer's block. The Irish author, whose works and style are described in detail in the intervening chapters between the different novels, is unable to complete his book. Much to the chagrin of his publishers, the book he is attempting to write has already been paid for. Consumer outlets have shelled out vast sums of money for him to include their brands in his latest crime caper. Because of this, Marana, Silas' manager, informs Flannery that a collective of ghost writers, trained to imitate his prose style, is ready and waiting to complete the unfinished texts, which would leave the reader

unable to discern whether or not the author himself is actually responsible for the creation of the work.

This passage is symptomatic of an anxiety present throughout the book that revolves around authorial replacement and obsolescence. A lot of the anxiety here relates to technological advancements. In the late 1970's, computer technology began to advance at a rapid stage. Microprocessors came into existence and computers became viable technology in their own right. The spread of computing and the author's own fear of technological replacement are evident in the content of the novel.

At one point, Maranas, in disguise, introduces himself as a representative of the OEPHLW, the Organization for the Electronic Production of Homogenized Literary Works. Later, at what may be the organization's headquarters, we find the disturbing image of a woman hooked up to a reading machine. As her interest peaks, computer readouts detect her brain activity, measuring her attention to see which computer generated stories will be commercially successful. If she shows no interest, the text is broken up into its various elements that are then rearranged, and the whole process begins again.

Later, we find out that Lotaria, the sister of the reader's love interest, Ludmilla, exclusively relies on computers in order to read books. The computers read the books for her, calculate the frequency of words that are used, and then create a printout of the most and least commonly used words. Lotaria reads over this printout, and, in her opinion, gleans an adequate understanding of the main thematic elements of the book. One list yields the following, "blood, cartridge belt, commander, do, have, immediately, it, life,

seen, sentry, shots, spider, teeth, together, your…" (Calvino, 187) from which Lotaria concludes that the book is a war novel.

It is clear that Calvino doesn't place too much stock in this form of literary creation or consumption. According to the technician running the test on the woman, "'Not one novel being produced holds up. Either the programming has to be revised or the reader is not functioning.'" (Calvino, 128) With regard to Lotaria's system of reading, Calvino (in the form of Silas Flannery) is similarly dismissive. Yet after his discussion with her, Flannery is plagued by doubts about his own writing, and begins carefully weighing the frequency with which he uses certain words. Calvino's anxiety about technology somehow replacing the novelistic form manifests itself through his characters and plotlines even as he explodes that selfsame form.

The fear that one day human authors will become obsolescent is not that far-fetched. Philip M. Parker, a professor at a university in France, has come up with an algorithm that allows a computer program to compile books on a wide array of subjects from publicly available information. Parker calls what he does "Automated Content Creation" and claims to have written 200,000 books this way, many on obscure subjects (try "The 2007-2012 Outlook for Tufted Washable Scatter Rugs, Bathmats and Sets That Measure 6-Feet by 9-Feet or Smaller in India") and some of which are printed only when a reader decides they want to buy one. However, Mr. Parker is developing a new algorithm to write fiction; his first foray will be into the romance genre.

These books can be written in a matter of mere minutes, while a traditional narrative can take years to create. What does this mean for the future of literature? It seems as if Italo Calvino's worst nightmares are coming true. However, for the time

being, fiction writers seem to be safe, Parker's computers have yet to create anything resembling a creative work.[25]

Perhaps this automated content signals the further breakdown of traditional narrative structures. Pynchon, in his subversion of the mystery genre and his belief in alternative messages, showed that conventional narratives often fail to communicate the realities of a contemporary world racked by chaos. Calvino showed that the physical disintegration of a novel could prove as rewarding as a complete and singular story. Parker, with his 200,000 books, may well be the most prolific author in the history of the world, without ever putting pen to paper. Something has shifted. The literary age we live in is a very different one from those that have come before it. Traditional narratives no longer suffice.

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[25] Source: http://www.nytimes.com/2008/04/14/business/media/14link.html?pagewanted=1&_r=4 , a YouTube video showing the process can be found here: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SkS5PkHQphY.

Conclusion

Despite all that's been concluded about the ability of experimental works to accurately convey the atmosphere of the post-war age, conventional narratives still remain far more popular than avant-garde ones. Perhaps this is due to the complexity and denseness of many innovative works. Or perhaps it is because in many ways, people around the world aren't yet prepared to come to terms with the events of the so-recent past.

Richard Walsh, in his introduction to *Novel Arguments: Reading Innovative American Fiction*, accurately describes experimentalism's place (or lack thereof) in the chronology of literary history: "Contemporary innovative writers do not present themselves as the van of formal experimentation's triumphant march through literary history, because such a linear progress no longer seems applicable to the art of fiction." (Walsh, x)

Linear progress would indicate that the works of innovative authors were fated to come into existence, a necessary step in a long line of fictional genres or styles. In fact, it is just the opposite. These works of fiction present themselves as a direct response to the socio-cultural and historical atmosphere of the age in which they are produced.

Despite this, fictional experimentalism in the post-war era is in no way an isolated movement. It does not stand alone but rather has a literary lineage, and it reflects intimately the age in which it is produced. With *Tristram Shandy* and *Don Quixote*, Sterne and Cervantes inaugurated experimentalism as a viable form, a different window through which to view fiction. In doing so, they set the stage for a literary explosion that only emerged after a centuries-long period of convention and traditionalism. This

revolution culminated in the latter half of the 20th century, when experimentalists came into their own and produced a stunning body of texts.

Though the experimental works of the mid-late twentieth century do have their precursors and antecedents, they are unique in that they reflect the singular events of the contemporary era. They are reactionary, not revolutionary. World War II set in motion innumerable cultural and political shifts that would have a long-lasting effect on the world as a whole and these can certainly be traced in the work of the experimentalists. Reacting to radical shifts in culture, the authors of the post-WWII era adapted their forms and content better to represent the chaotic world in which they lived.

However there is also another worthwhile facet that informs the work of innovative authors: their personal lives. Personal beliefs, political credos, and private tragedies all intersect with the work of the eight novelists discussed here. Nevertheless, all of these lives were either directly or indirectly influenced by the massive shifts that took place in the latter portion of the 20th century.

The death of character, formal innovation, and narrative disintegration are broad terms for even broader themes present in much innovative fiction. However, these themes are not found exclusively in experimental works, nor are they present in all experimental texts. Rather, they are an attempt to classify that which may in the end be unclassifiable. What makes a text ground-breaking? Undoubtedly the first realist, naturalist, and modernist texts were experimental and avant-garde in their own way. The traditional novel was in fact novel. It was new. All literary genres and styles were at one point considered experimental.

However, there is something deeper and more distinguishing at the heart of what has been termed experimental fiction. The fictional genre I have analyzed consciously turns away from the prevailing styles of the age. Its authors draw on everything that has come before and meld it with a contemporary sense of time and place to create something that is totally original. The multitudinous techniques utilized, from metafiction to lipograms, from unconventional typography to ludic word games, all serve to further distinguish this genre from any that has come before it. It is at the frontier of literary innovation.

The influence of fictional experimentalism continues to grow. Works of experimentalism, once relegated to the outer fringes of the literary world, are becoming more accepted in the mainstream, and are beginning to exert their influence on more conventional novels. B.S. Johnson's work, hardly known outside of Britain or a tight sphere of literary-minded people for the past thirty or so years, has enjoyed a resurgence of interest due to the republication of several of his books and a recent biography of him written by British novelist Jonathon Coe. More and more so-called traditional novelists are playing with narrative, fragmenting their stories to create pieces of ergodic literature which readers must work to understand and consume.

Works of experimental fiction, perhaps more than those of any other genre, have the ability to expand our literary imaginations, opening up possibilities left unexplored by the traditional novelistic form. As Richard Walsh states, "The formal inventiveness of innovative fiction implies a belief in the ultimate seriousness of imagination; it is a recognition of the potential for discovery that can be released by a more expansive concept of the nature of fiction." (Walsh, 162)

Continuing innovation is assured. With the dominance of technology, authors will be forced to find new and different methods to share their literary talent. The world is changing fast, and literature must adapt. Fiction has entered the 21st century: novels are downloaded in mere seconds and great works of literature are read by people on the subway via iPhones and Kindles.

Who can tell what novel forms are left undiscovered? The possibilities for new and innovative fiction are infinite. Undoubtedly, the rapidly shifting cultural climate in which we live will continue to make its presence felt in the creative expression of authors around the world. I, for one, am excited by the possibilities.

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