Brutal Narratives, Savage Figures:

On the Matter of Violence in Postmodern

American Literature and Literary Criticism

Inaugural-Dissertation zur Erlangung

des akademischen Grades eines

Doktors der Philosophie (Dr. phil.)

der Philosophischen Fakultät der

Heinrich-Heine-Universität Düsseldorf

Vorgelegt von

Martin Wallerius

aus Düsseldorf

Düsseldorf, April 2009

— D61 —

Tag der mündlichen Prüfung

13.7.2009

Gutachter der Dissertation

Prof. Dr. Herwig Friedl

Prof. Dr. Therese Seidel

PREFACE

In the introductory chapter of his monumental *The Structure of Evolutionary Theory*, Stephen Jay Gould ponders Darwin's famous statement from the concluding chapter of his *On the Origin of Species* that "this whole volume is one long argument" without explicitly stating for what. From many possible answers, Gould prefers to regard Darwin's "long argument" as an attempt to establish a specific methodological and theoretical approach (Darwin 459; Gould 12).

In the process of sketching the scope and boundaries of this thesis, the question of the curious "long argument" became part of the general design. Besides the inquiry into the topic of violence in postmodern literature and literary criticism as such, this thesis tries to make a point for a methodological and theoretical approach that is postmodern and thematic at the same time, and that draws equally from literary and critical texts that belong to the same period: an approach intended to make elements, structures, and processes visible that connect literary texts of a given period with that period's critical discourse, and to show how these shared characteristics relate to their own rhetorical modes and to their reception in the public discourse.

Until the late 1990s, thematic criticism and postmodern criticism generally would not mix. Thematic critics claimed that postmodernists—or poststructuralists or deconstructionists—were hostile to thematics on the grounds that any discussion of "theme" was suspect because of a theme's inherent "unifying" and therefore "logocentric" quality (e. g., Rimmon-Kenan, "What Is Theme and How Do We Get at It?" 16-17). Notions like "text" or "discourse" were considered strictly formal and allegedly neglected the creative activity that shapes literary works (e. g., Bremont and

Pavel, "The End of an Anathema" 182). Thematics, in contrast, "argues forcefully against the decentering of social and moral issues rampant in current textual criticism" and causes a "refocus on the continuities and consistencies of human pursuits" (Ziolkowksi, *Thematics Reconsidered* 2). Equally strongly argues Philipp Wolf in "Why Themes Matter: Literary Knowledge and the Thematic Example of Money":

> All I want to argue is that the differential and infinite opening up of the text as well as the stark assertion that 'all readings are necessarily misreadings' (see Culler, 1982:178) [...] not only proves a rather insufficient legitimization for thematic studies, it is inimical to its very idea. (344)

Thematics, on the other hand, has "nearly disappeared from the indexes of the Modern Language Association" (Sollors, "Thematics Today" 219). This might account for the discourse's more agitated parts, mechanisms not particular to thematics but intrinsic to power structures in the academy as such.

By the end of the 1990s, though, thematics had returned to the indexes, and some steps toward reconciliation had been undertaken. Sollors, e. g., makes a case for thematics in "Thematics Today" by arguing that its practice, contrary to general belief, "may be more widespread than ever" in postcolonial studies, cultural studies, ideological criticism, and New Historicism, but "has become *undeclared* thematology, as the investigation of themes tends to travel under different colors" (219). But this comes at a price. As J. Hillis Miller points out in "The Disputed Ground," there is a possibility that the "reinstatement of thematic and mimetic readings of literature" rather supports an ideological narrative that combines the return to history with the reinstatement of "traditional ideas about personal identity, agency, and responsibility"—in the course of which deconstruction or poststructuralism again would have to be "denigrated" as an alleged adversary (82).

Similar to Sollors's argument about undeclared thematics, Gerald Prince in "Notes on the Categories 'Topos' and 'Disnarrated'" also sees thematics principally involved in poststructuralist thinking:

> Similarly, the post-structuralists—who tried to undermine the very principles of unity and stability presupposed, perhaps, by any rhetoric, any poetics, any thematics—were themselves aware of their incapacity to escape the traps of semiotic coherence and equilibrium. Besides, their endeavor involved not so much the destruction or transcendence of meanings, ideas, concepts as their reinscription through deconstruction or critique; and, more often than not, the reinscription became another label for theming or thematization. (127)

This assertion too has to be taken with a caveat since one has to allow for the possibility of "second-level" approaches in poststructuralist discourse where, as Jonathan Culler puts it in *On Deconstruction*, themes "that appear at both levels often have the same names, a fact which produces confusion" (206-08). The confusion arises because, on the one hand, a thematic approach investigates important "themes" that a text or a group of texts can be said to be "about*";* these are what Culler and others would label "first-level" themes. For a poststructuralist approach, on the other hand, the theme to be investigated is often a theme related to how a text operates on a rhetorical level, how it interacts with readers, or how it is related to its modes of physical, social, or psychological production. This kind of theme, the "second-level" theme, is in turn investigated as to how it corresponds to first-level themes manifest in the text—but these themes as first-level themes are, by and large, much less visible than those usually investigated in the course of a thematic approach. And they are almost never the most important or even dominant themes in a given text:

> What may often appear to be an insistence of posing inappropriate questions and searching a work for themes that are not evident may be a shift to another level of analysis where a theoretical discourse that makes claims about the fundamental organization of language and experience attempts to provide insights into the structure and meaning of texts, whatever their ostensible themes. (207-08)

This, it should be noted, is often undertaken by beginning to investigate a text's seemingly marginal theme in the first-level sense of "theme" which, if more dominant, would in principle also inform a thematic reading, and proceed from there to investigate it as a second-level theme as outlined above. Jacques Derrida's investigation of "writing" as a minor (first-level) theme in philosophical texts and as a (second-level) theme pertaining to writing and the production of texts as such in *Of Grammatology* might serve as an example. This technique, often called a "reading from the margins," and the investigation of the first- and second-level themes of a text or a group of texts and their mutual dependencies, counts among the techniques that are part of the methodological approach of this thesis.

To this, another constituent has been added, also intended to bring literary texts together with their period's cultural environment: a "mixed corpus," consisting of literary and critical texts from the same period, to be investigated on an equal footing. Elevating critical texts to a level worthy of studies customarily reserved for literary texts is certainly not an idea first conceived by postmodern literary critics, but it has been more strongly promoted in postmodern literary theory than in any other period before. Actually put into practice, though, has it been only sporadically and highly selectively; here, in contrast, it has been consistently applied throughout. How these critical texts are read in the course of this thesis follows, again, the same procedure of combining elements from thematic readings and postmodern critical theory as outlined above.

Thus, this thesis investigates "violence" as a first-level theme in literary as well as critical postmodern texts, and as a second-level theme with regard to these texts' rhetorical modes and the public discourse they engendered. In the course of this investigation, aspects related to violence will be highlighted that are not only consistently reproduced in each of

these domains, but actually seem to build upon and reinforce each other.

While this approach seems tailor-made for postmodern texts, it should in principle, with different rules, be applicable to different literary periods as well, since other literary and critical writings that stem from the same period should also both display their common period's zeitgeist. This, of course, is a hypothesis, and it can only be confirmed or refuted by probing different periods by way of a similar approach. But it can at least be stated that there is preliminary evidence that this approach would not work with "arbitrary" input, i. e., mixed input from different literary periods. This became evident while reading J. Hillis Miller's early critical work before his "crossing the pass" into what he calls a new "direction of thinking" (*The Form of Victorian Fiction* vii). As it turned out, Miller's early critical work was not applicable at all to the arguments of this thesis. What makes this especially remarkable is that Miller, in his early writings, reads many of the same writers and the same texts as in his later critical work, and even *specifically* explores violence in his writings on violence in *Bleak House*, violence and sadism in *Wuthering Heights,* violence and body fragments in *Secret Agent*, or violence and repetition in *Tess of the d'Urbervilles*.[1] This finding has been felt to be of some importance. If this approach had turned out to be broad enough and flexible enough to create an apparently meaningful output even if fed with mixed input from different literary periods, this would have rendered it ultimately useless as a critical method, or instrument, for the intended purpose.

Thus, with credits to the case of the abovementioned "long argument" and the late Stephen Jay Gould's lifelong efforts at bridge-building between the natural sciences and the humanities, this thesis endeavors to

---

[1] *Charles Dickens: The World of His Novels* 160 ff.; *The Disappearance of God* 194 ff.; *Poets of Reality* 39 ff.; *Thomas Hardy: Distance and Desire* 102 ff., respectively.

investigate the theme of violence in postmodern texts and how it relates to postmodern thought as a whole by bringing forward a critical approach that combines methods of thematic and postmodern criticism and draws from a corpus of both literary and critical texts from the same period.

Table of Contents

ABSTRACT

This thesis explores "violence," in the sense of narrative and figurative expressions of inflicting physical harm, in postmodern literary texts by John Barth, Thomas Pynchon, Donald Barthelme, Robert Coover, Kathy Acker, and William Gibson, and in postmodern critical texts by Paul de Man, Barbara Johnson, J. Hillis Miller, Jonathan Culler, and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak. METHOD: The approach combines a thematic reading with a postmodern, or deconstructive, reading. Violence as a theme is investigated in the texts on the narrative level, the figurative level, and on several layers of critical and public discourse. To this end, literary as well as critical postmodern texts were selected, to be examined on an equal footing, and complemented by documents of public reception where narrative and figurative forms of violence are involved that seem to mirror, or reproduce, certain forms of violence encountered in the texts. The investigation of both literary and critical texts has been undertaken under the assumption that there exists a common set of perspectives relating to postmodernism as a period, and that for each of the aforementioned levels, corresponding characteristics can be found in both kinds of texts that would shed light not only on the workings of violence in postmodern literature and literary criticism, but on postmodern thought in general. RESULTS: It has been found that occurrences of violence in both literary and critical postmodern texts strongly center around the origin and perpetuation of ideology; the reproduction of patterns; the willful disruption of writing and reading habits; the self-conscious focus on the use of figurative and performative language; and the question of ethics and what counts as human. Along these lines, it became clear that both "playfulness" and "irresponsibility," from which postmodern texts allegedly suffer, turn out to be serious practices where ethical frameworks are tested and political and cultural criticism is articulated.

KEYWORDS

INTRODUCTION

For the topic of violence in postmodern American literature and literary criticism, several boundaries had to be drawn. The first boundary pertains to the textual corpus which, against the backdrop of the methodological approach outlined in the preface, includes both literary and critical texts. For the former, the works of John Barth, Thomas Pynchon, Donald Barthelme, Robert Coover, Kathy Acker, and William Gibson have been selected—writers representative of classical postmodernism, classical postmodern punk/dystopia, and classical cyberpunk as a genre which has been called by Fredric Jameson, somewhat ambiguously, the "supreme literary expression if not of postmodernism, then of late capitalism itself" (*Postmodernism* 419n1). For the latter, the works of Paul de Man, Barbara Johnson, Jonathan Culler, J. Hillis Miller, and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak have been selected—writers representative of postmodern, or deconstructive, criticism. This "set" of postmodern writers and critics, whose works published prior to fall 2006 have been included, follows a general agreement in academic discourse as to who might be counted among the period's "core writers," and it should be understood as neither unassailable nor arbitrary. By and large, it follows the viewpoint of John Barth's "Tragic View of Categories":

> Terms like Romanticism, Modernism, and Postmodernism are more or less useful and necessary fictions: roughly approximate maps, more likely to lead us to something like a destination if we don't confuse them with what they're meant to be maps of. (*Further Fridays* 114)

Another boundary pertains to what will actually count as violence; here, scope is what is at stake. From the 1960s onward, the meaning of the term *postmodern* has been broadened almost to the point of unintelligibility, and *violence*, when juxtaposed with *postmodern*, has not only gained new meanings, but whole new categories of meaning in its wake. These

are related to either of two extremes: outrageous violence and subtle transgression. An example of the former is the excessive "pop-art violence" in the visual media (also dubbed "postmodern media" in discussions about media violence), an example of the latter the most intricate and subtle conditions involved in approaching and facing the *Other*, based on the work of Emmanuel Levinas, in postmodern philosophical and ethical discourse.

For this thesis, the scope of *violence* has been limited to a rather raw, or mundane, meaning of the term: something will count as violence when physical harm is involved. This, to be sure, includes a range of examples that would certainly count as "excessive" in the sense of the first extreme mentioned above, although it focuses not on visual but on "textual" violence. Also, it includes elements of ethical discourse that relate to the second extreme, but differ from it by staying within the boundaries of a critical discourse concerned first and foremost with texts, and within the boundaries with regard to expressions of physical harm.

How violence in the sense of "physical harm" manifests itself in a text needs to be specified. In one sense, this should be immediately obvious: any kind of action where a character comes to harm. But the agent who inflicts this harm is less immediately obvious. It can be another character, of course, or it can happen "by chance," or even perpetrated by an agent from the order of "things," as will be seen. But behind these agents loom other agents, from the narrator to the writer, especially in postmodern texts, where multi-level narrators and writers-as-characters abound, and where the process of writing itself, e. g., why the story takes a certain turn and not another, or why a certain character does something—harms someone, gets harmed—and not something else, frequently becomes part of the story itself. Another agent, finally, is figurative language: tropes, as will be shown, dis–figure, kill, rape, and mutilate as well.

While the critical texts certainly do not contain "characters" or "actions" where harm could be inflicted on a narrative plane, aspects of violence in literary and critical texts overlap in important ways. This can be observed in principal discourses on violence in both kinds of texts, in the use of figurative language, and in discourses on figurative language as such. Moreover, violence on the narrative plane in the literary texts can often be juxtaposed with comments from the critical texts that appraise *functions* of violent events in other literary texts. That this latter kind of common ground between the literary texts and the critical texts should especially be frequent and productive is remarkable since it is overwhelmingly established not by critical readings of literary texts from the selected corpus or even from the same period, but by overlapping *perspectives* between the critical and literary texts in general. Thus, to give an example, can a critical reading of violence in Thomas Hardy by J. Hillis Miller, in the chapter on *Iterations*, illuminate a recurring kind of violence in texts by John Barth, and reflect back again to the broader treatment of this particular violence in postmodern critical theory at large.

Yet, defining violence in terms of physical harm in the context of *texts* is a many-faceted proposition. As Paul de Man observes, reading Kleist's „Über das Marionettentheater":

> The theoretical problem, however, has been displaced: from the specular model of the text as imitation, we have moved on to the question of reading as the necessity to decide between signified and referent, between violence on the stage and violence in the streets. The problem is no longer graceful imitation but the ability to distinguish between actual meaning and the process of signification. (*The Rhetorics of Romanticism* 279)

Violence in the media—be it books, movies, television shows, video tapes, DVDs, or console and computer games—has notoriously and recurringly brought forth public discussions on media violence which always seem intent to not merely pursue the legitimate question whether violence in the

media supports or advances real-life violence, but this question's very closure—through a resounding and unchallengeable "yes," unperturbed by professional advice or actual evidence from the social sciences. This closure of the question seems also intent on effectively erasing the difference between meaning and signification, between serial killings and pixels on a screen, between violence on the stage and violence in the streets.[2] The general problem is exacerbated by the fact that, while violence should be no laughing matter, in the media and particularly in postmodern texts it often is—all too often, punchlines go untroubled for the kill. Writers in the early days of postmodernism were labeled "Black Humorists" for a reason, even if this label was quickly dropped. As will be seen, it is precisely the most excessive violence in the texts that is the most non-serious and the most hilarious—which, indeed, is also frequently the case with hotly debated horror movies or computer games. What those discussions about violence in the media and certain types of attacks against postmodern literature and literary criticism have in common is the peculiar capacity or willingness to read—or watch—everything absolutely *literally* as if there were no such things as playfulness and parody and satire and figurative language and irony. The differences that are erased in this manner, and this will be a recurring topic throughout this thesis, complement and support the intended erasure of the differences between media and street violence.

Such processes, as will be seen particularly in the final chapter, are also recognizable in certain aggressive and rather virulent strands of the public discourse about postmodern literature and literary criticism: in the figurative language employed in attacking postmodern texts as such; in the procedural rhetoric that intensifies the aforementioned erasure by col-

---

[2] In these periodically revitalized exercises to run a solid bypass between media event and violent action, only soccer seems exempt.

lapsing violent characters with the person of the writer as was the case with Kathy Acker; and in the attempts to "crush" and "annihilate" postmodern critical theory by labeling it "fascist" through casting one of its most prominent proponents as a Nazi and accessory to murder, as was the case with Paul de Man.

Finally, the overall structure of this thesis should be remarked upon. Violence, as has been pointed out in the preface, is not a dominant theme in the texts, and it is precisely its status as "marginal" that qualifies it for this approach. But this does not mean that violence is not common in the texts. Together with the rather comprehensive corpus of texts as such, the sheer abundance of violence caused a curious problem known in the social sciences as *Signifikanzproblem*. This "problem of significance" in statistical evaluation is usually caused by a sample that is too small; the smaller the sample, the greater the probability that a finding, if any, is caused by chance or effected by something completely unrelated to the question. But, contrary to expectation, statistical findings become equally useless if the underlying sample is too large. With too large a sample, as a rule, *everything* becomes significant contingent on the original question— whereby "significant," in statistical parlance, does not mean an "important" finding, but a finding that relates in any form to what has actually been looked for.[3] This had a direct bearing on the method eventually employed. Instead of starting out with a repertoire of questions and looking for clues and evidence to initiate fruitful discussions, the textual evidence was, as a first step, simply collected and "tagged" with descriptive markers that were not specified beforehand; contextual markers like "murder" or "war," but also minutiae relating to time, location, character intentions, level of realism, level of detail, narrative style, and many more. During this process,

---

[3] For an introduction to the *Signifikanzproblem* cf. Bortz and Döring's *Forschungs-methoden und Evaluation für Human- und Sozialwissenschaftler.*

six different contexts began to stand out, reminiscent of *strange attractors* in chaos theory, which warrants a brief explanation. Strange attractors function as a kind of "favored states" for unpredictable, non-periodic processes in chaotic but nevertheless deterministic systems, and this came to mind as a metaphor for two different reasons. First, the textual evidence seemed to "fall" into such favored states in the course of being tagged, and it did so quite early and remained remarkably stable throughout the collating phase. These states were subsequently developed into the six major chapters—*Formations*, *Iterations*, *Fragmentation*, *Composition*, *Humanity*, and *Reality*. Their exact properties, and how they relate to each other, will be sketched at the beginning of each chapter and in context.

The second reason that strange attractors came to mind as a metaphor draws on their important contribution to fractal quality, self-organization, and *self-similarity*, a phenomenon where characteristic features can be observed at practically every level of magnitude. Self-similarity can be found almost everywhere, in nature as well as in mathematics or in works of art—examples would be coast lines, Koch's famous "Snowflake" curve, or Jackson Pollock's drip paintings. It turned out that characteristic features of "postmodern violence"—in the literary texts, the critical texts, and public discourse—are repeated and reproduced on numerous levels in ways strongly reminiscent of this phenomenon.

In this vein, what started out as a reading from the margins as outlined in the preface, turned out to touch the very key positions of postmodern discourse in many ways. Regarding content and form, but also processes and mechanisms with an intrinsic habit of repeating themselves on every tier: from the fictional to the biographical to the political, from the outrageously fantastic to the disconcertingly familiar to the horribly real.

Chapter I:
Formations

This chapter on violence in the context of formative processes, the first of the six major contexts as outlined in the introduction, follows instances of violence related to mythological origins, historical origins, the formation of social contracts, and the transformation of nation states—particularly the United States—from distant pasts to possible futures. These motifs, as it will become clear in the course of this chapter, are concomitant to the formations of power structures as well as belief systems and ideologies; an intrinsic elusiveness of origins as such; and certain forms of figurative and performative language involved in how such violent origins and formations are brought about. While this chapter's viewpoint is oriented at, and contingent on, the flow of time along a "diachronic" axis on the narrative plane, it will be complemented by a more "synchronic" point of view in the second chapter on *Iterations*, which corresponds to the second major context that stood out in the course of the collating phase. In this second chapter, some types of violent origins figure prominently again, but in the form of cyclical events instead—which, in most cases, turn out to be rather elusive as well, and associated with various types of repetition to be discussed in context. Thus, the first two chapters complement each other, and their different perspectives overlap at many junctures. Moreover, the different perspectives of these two chapters can, respectively, often be encountered crosswise at a smaller scale, mostly against the backdrop of intrinsic tensions between teleological and cyclical concepts as explained below. Subsequent to this pair of chapters, the two chapters on *Fragmentation* and *Composition* will engage in occurrences of violence connected to the more "formal" aspects of narrative style in general and figurative and rhetorical language in particular, followed, in turn, by a "topical" chapter that focuses on violence and humanity. The sixth and final chapter, then,

takes the findings from the preceding chapters and explores if and how the structures and processes identified as being intimately related to violence in postmodern literature and literary criticism are also operating in exemplary texts that violently attack postmodern writers, texts, and theory.

Following violent events in the texts connected to origins of societies, particularly the United States, and the formations of power structures, belief systems, and ideologies, it turns out that myth figures prominently: from "mythohistorical" footings to the formation of a (post-)modern America where new and spectacularly successful myths of political and corporate conspiracies abound. The term "mythohistorical," as understood in this context, encompasses three important categories. In the first category, myth comes into play when the historical evidence is sketchy or doubtful, and narratives are inserted as "conjectural histories" to fill in lacunae and pad out accounts. In the second category, actual events with ample historical evidence are "cast" into narratives with mythical overtones and underpinnings, intended to support certain ideologies or self-images by way of seemingly history-based rationales. In the third category, finally, elements of historical accounts and mythical tales are mixed into manifestly pseudo-historical narratives. As instances for the first category qualify, for example, such pieces of our knowledge of classical antiquity that hinge on the interpretation of texts that are suffused with, or outright engaged in, mythical narrative. Into the second category belong, for example, narratives about the colonization of America as the colonization of the "New World," from the "Puritan settlers" to "How the West was won." The most obvious examples for the third category, eventually, would be the narratives that constitute the Tanakh as the Hebrew Bible, or the Christian Old and New Testaments. From the first to the third category, moreover, an observable increase takes place in ideological matter and purpose, and all three are linked, by and large, to high levels of violence. How postmodern texts

engage these types of mythohistorical narratives and process them into playful, but nevertheless oftentimes profoundly critical and violent counter-ernarratives will be the central topic of this chapter.

Another important aspect addressed in this chapter, and from a different perspective in the second chapter, is the tension between the cyclic nature of myth and the teleological orientation of narratives that focus on developments in time instead, with superordinate ends in view. While classical myths are indeed basically cyclically oriented, modern myths—among them the narratives surrounding the colonization of America—tend to embed rather teleologically oriented elements. How strong these elements are in particular cases is, by and large, contingent on the nature and intensity of the aforementioned ideological intent. No modern myth can accommodate the basically cyclic nature of mythological motifs with its own intent-driven teleological nature without extensive modifications—some of which, as will be seen, are effected by politicizing myth and mythologizing politics.[4] How this is developed and "mimicked" by postmodern texts will be focused on in this chapter—and how, in the course of this development, myths, motifs, and heroes become literally "updated" and modern power structures at the same time "archaized," often to hilarious effect.

Along these lines, violent events will be traced from the rewriting of origins to the rewriting of present power structures. Many elements will be of importance again in later chapters, among them the thematization of a certain, and rather sinister, tendency to read texts "literally," to be explored alongside this chapter's trajectory of formative events, from the realms of the gods and virgin lands to internal strife and sophisticated states of paranoia.

---

[4] Which should not imply that myth and the political, or proto-political, have not been intertwined ever since.

1. Myth Creation: The Invention of Origins

This subchapter sets out to trace the motif of the origin of history and the origin of the self along occurrences of violence in the literary and critical texts, as well as the possibility of retrieval or reconstruction of these origins, and the uneasy relationship between cyclicity and teleology. In classical myth, the origins of history are often strongly intertwined with the formation of a particular community and the formation of a "self," and this is also the case in the postmodern narratives that this subchapter will discuss. Through the element of the self, moreover, psychoanalytic motifs come into play—which, as will be seen, add to the problem of retrieval with regard to origins. Further impeding the reliable reconstruction of historical or individual origins are two phenomena related to language, both of which will also be discussed. The first consists of performatives, i. e., when "origins" happen to be instituted by a performative utterance in the sense introduced by J. L. Austin, especially if the performative utterance in question actually misfired somehow. The second problem is constituted by "messages" that became corrupt, ambiguous, unreadable, or were lost altogether, but which are vital for retrieval, or reconstruction, of a given origin—whereby such corruptions or losses, in turn, are often attached to another well-known mythical motif, the fall from grace. Against this backdrop of lost or miscalculated messages, infelicitous performatives, and psychoanalytic motifs, this subchapter will follow mythohistorical narratives where history and consciousness come into existence through a violent "fall" that already precipitates the vanishing of its own point of origin.

Splicing Myths

Not limited to particular cultural spheres, founding myths and especially creation myths are saturated with violence, more often than not of the

most gruesome kind. Two major premises seem to dominate, usually thought of as distinct from each other: a pantheon of "superhuman" beings whose machinations wreak havoc and create the cosmos almost as a by-product, and the more peaceful act, initially, of deliberate creation, followed by a fall or a succession of falls with bloodshed involved. Yet, some "splicing of myths" in the sense that certain strands, i. e., motifs, of one premise are woven together with strands of the other, can often be observed even where they appear to be most distinct. This is even true for the biblical creation myth: the first generations from Adam and Eve's line upward are endowed with several moderately superhuman qualities, among them extreme longevity that is later revoked by the creator. With their respective characteristic strands much more visibly spliced and interlaced this way, foundation myths based on both premises at once are a recurring theme in postmodern texts—most notably executed in John Barth's *Giles Goat-Boy*, discussed later in this section, where such splicing even takes center stage.

In Barth's *The Sot-Weed Factor*, many aspects of the "virgin land" myth, the fall from grace, heroic attitudes, and images of intrepid settlers and noble natives are diligently explored and hilariously dismantled, as has been amply documented in the critical literature pertaining to this text. Here, the history of the "Ahatchwoops," a not altogether fictitious native tribe,[5] shall serve as an example for the rewriting of the foundation myth's pantheon variety, moderately spliced with elements from biblical mythology. While not endowed with superhuman characteristics save those retrospectively projected through the workings of oral tradition and the misreadings or misuses of lost and eventually recovered messages, the

---

[5] A reference can be found in the online archives of the *Maryland State Archives*, pointing to a hitherto unpublished document from the *Acts of the General Assembly* that mentions the "Ahatchwoop Indians (1697)", 1 October 2008 <http://www.msa.md.gov/megafile/msa/speccol/sc2900/sc2908/000001/000038/html/am38--463.html>.

self-image, laws, and traditions of the Ahatchwoops are firmly grounded in a succession of outrageous events reminiscent of elements of Olympic carnage. The tribe, to sum up the basic events, once was tricked with the help of a prowess contest by an imprisoned party led by John Smith and by Henry Burlingame, one of the ancestors of the principal character, into allowing their prisoners to escape. But Burlingame, "sacrificed" in the course of Smith's trick, is left behind to subsequently become the Ahatch-woops' furiously unwilling new chieftain.[6] Swearing revenge, he led the tribe to kill every "white devil" and too light-skinned offspring from his own bloodline. Later, under the rule of his son and successor, a missionary was burned alive, one of whose offspring—after having spent his last night with the tribe's unmarried women—was taken to be drowned for her light skin, but, instead and against the law, taken by the chieftain into his household, raised as his daughter, and later raped by him and made his wife. From their offspring, in turn, another light-skinned child was taken to be killed, but put in a basket instead and sent floating down the river, to be eventually picked up by an English ship.

All the bits and pieces of this history, scattered as hidden "messages"—a motif to be focused on later—throughout the American settlements, must and will eventually be retrieved by Henry Burlingame III as he himself is retrieved from the floating basket, in order to know who he is, to "become" himself. And becoming himself he does: with the plasticity typical of Barthian characters, his knowledge translates into a final rewriting of his personality and the return to his tribe.

The violence involved in this foundational narrative is far from being realistic, and since everything is retrieved from documents or oral history,

---

[6] Among Barth's numerous satirical layers, the juxtaposition of a heroic but somewhat slow-witted god (Burlingame/Thor) with a trickster god (Smith/Loki) seems also intended.

the violence never gains immediacy. While the question of narrative immediacy as such will be addressed in the chapters on *Composition* and *Iterations*, the lack of immediacy in this context serves as a further indication of the mythical qualities involved. Regardless of how the flow of time is individually and socially experienced within the respective frameworks of oral history and written records, the history of the Ahatchwoops is clearly recent, spanning no more than three generations, not much more than a human lifespan. But how and why this can become soundly projected into a mythical past retrievable only by a quest which, in turn, becomes part of the myth as Burlingame becomes part of the tribe, is the first indicator for a specifically postmodern motif where myth and myth's cyclicity are translated into the violent foundations of consciousness itself.

In Robert Coover's *The Origin of the Brunists*, similar techniques are visible. The three successive founding events of the sectarian order of the Brunists, all three extremely violent in nature, are virtually on the spot translated into myth. The plot's two cornerstones are a gruesome mining accident that creates the sect's "prophet" Bruno, a young miner displaying signs of madness after his rescue, which in turn leads to the foundation of the sect itself, and the final battle on the holy "Mount" where the sect's Coming of Light is interrupted by the Powers of Darkness—i. e., by the police and by Miller, one of the principal characters investigating the event. Located between these two cornerstones is a fateful car accident in which Bruno's sister is killed:

> And, finally, there was his picture of the girl herself, Marcella Bruno, lying, face up, in the ditch [...] the girl's eyes opened suddenly and her lips parted as though to speak. All leaned forward—he himself must have been quite close—but instead of a sound, all that emerged was a bright red bubble of blood that ballooned, burst, and dribbled down her cheeks. (24)

This is turned immediately into myth:

> The most persistent legend in later years—and the only one which Hiram knew to be false—was that the girl, in the last throes of death, had pointed to the heavens, and then miraculously, maintained this gesture forever after. This death in the ditch, the Sacrifice, became in the years that followed a popular theme for religious art, and the painters never failed to exploit this legend of the heavenward gesture, never failed to omit the bubble of blood. Which was, of course, as it should be. (25)

While these events are teleological in principle, cyclicity is suggested through the narrative sequence itself: it starts with the preparations for the Mount, followed by the outcome of the car accident, followed by the events leading to and including the mining disaster and its aftermath, followed by the car accident and how it came about, and closes with the unfolding events on the Mount. Thus, on a meta-level, the narrative sequence turns formation into repetition. This is also indicated by the fate of Tiger Miller, the owner and principal journalist of the local newspaper "West Condon." Not only does he clash several times with the members of the sect during their constitutive phase, he is also held indirectly responsible for the car accident and the death of Bruno's sister. During the apocalyptic scene on the Mount where Coover combines evangelical ecstasy with Dionysian frenzy, Miller is practically taken apart by the members of the sect and then dumped into a ravine:

> "No!" he pleaded, but it sounded more like a gurgle. "Please!" and a whip lashed his mouth. Where the fuck were the troopers?
>
> And it was done, the act was over. Through the web of pain, skies away, he recognized the tall broad-shouldered priestess with the gold medallion. She issued commands and he floated free. Rain washed over him. He seemed to be moving. The priestess was gone. And then there was a fall. Trees. Muddy cleft and a splash of water when he arrived. At which point, Tiger Miller departed from this world, passing on to his reward. (410)

But Miller is not dead. Twenty pages later, under the chapter heading "Epilogue: Return," he wakes up in a hospital with a huge number of serious, but neither critical nor lasting injuries: "The West Condon Tiger rose from the dead, pain the only sign of his continuance, for he was otherwise blind,

deaf to all but a distant shriek, and abidingly transfixed" (431). This effect of a rising from the dead, achieved against an otherwise realistic background by a narrative ruse, is suggestive of resurrection myths on the one hand and—considering Miller's achieved status as the sect's principal opponent—of the ritually slaughtered but ever returning adversary from classical mythologies, both related to the scapegoat principle on which, in turn, the Christian foundation myth's sacrifice and resurrection of the "lamb" also seems to draw.

The technique of splicing motifs from biblical and classical mythologies is employed more strongly still in Barth's *Giles Goat-Boy*, where mythical violence and cyclicity become increasingly explicit. Aggregating elements of the so-called monomyth, particularly as it is depicted in Joseph Campbell's *The Hero With a Thousand Faces*, with elements of biblical myths about fall and redemption, *Giles Goat-Boy* is set against a pseudo-1960s backdrop with the world operating as an all-encompassing university. Giles, who has been raised with the goats, kills his "best friend," the goat Redfearn's Tom, in a dispute over Hedda, a she-goat from the herd, reenacting the biblical story of Cain and Abel in a classical mythological environment. While approaching Hedda, Giles is attacked by Tom with unexpected fury:

> Too late I heard the rush of hooves behind me: Redfearn's Tom full gallop smote my thigh like a rolling boulder and drove me, half-turned, against the gatepost. I felt a shock from hip to sole, then another, more terrific, when he crotched me with the flat of his horn. Unable even to shout I fell to my knees. (43)

This initial shock is increased by Hedda's subsequent "betrayal," and Giles brings his herdsman's crook down on Tom's head in mid-act. The event becomes decisive for Giles to embark on his mythical quest and, concomitantly, to "wander the Earth." But further elements of biblical foundation myths have already entered, almost surreptitiously. From Redfearn's Tom's

"smoting his thigh," Giles retains a life-long limp, which undoubtedly alludes to Jacob's wrestling with the stranger at the river Jabbok, shortly before facing his brother Esau whom he once tricked out of their father's blessing. Jacob also retains a life-long limp from the stranger "touching his thigh" and putting it out of joint.

Giles Goat-Boy's quest finally comes to a close with the overcoming, but again not final defeat, of his adversary, and the concurrent execution at "Founder's Hill" of Max, his mentor and father-figure, in the form of a public "shafting":

> The moment was at hand. As Max went waving to the peak I put the buckhorn to my lips and blew with all my strength. *Teruah! Teruah! Teruah!* My keeper, whose dear wise like the campus will not soon see again, combusted in a glorious flare [...] (695)

While the exact nature of the contraption employed in Max's execution is not altogether clear, the allusion to crucifixion is. Moreover, since the figure of Jesus in the guise of "Enos Enoch" did indeed exist in the world of *Giles Goat-Boy*, the "shafting" of the father-figure on Founder's Hill reenacts the original shafting, or crucifixion. But beyond that, it also places this pivotal founding event—which is to all intents and purposes teleological in nature—squarely at the center of the never-ending revolutions of the mythical cycle.[7]

Paradise Lost

Along the splicing of mythical strands, even of manifestly incompatible persuasions, several important elements have been established: the immedi-

---

[7] It should be annotated that the biblical crucifixion's teleological "purity" became compromised in favor of repetition and cyclicity a long time ago by the Roman Catholic denomination itself, culminating in the doctrinal acts of the Council of Trent in 1151 where the Eucharist was affirmed to be not an act of remembrance but a true sacrifice (and a binding definition for "transubstantiation" was established).

acy with which violent foundational events can be turned into a mythical past with uncertain retrievability; how formative events can, again almost immediately, turn into cyclic repetitions which, moreover, contain and perpetuate the violence involved in the original event; and how these processes seem to touch upon, eventually, the making of the self. A second topic, equally persistently present as a theme from *The Sot-Weed Factor* on to the much more recent *Mason & Dixon* by Thomas Pynchon, is the myth of America as a "paradise lost." Some outstanding examples from the texts' microstructures shall serve to outline this theme's treatment and the various aspects of violence involved.

It is at this point that an important caveat should be included. Not exclusively involved in the various "postmodern histories" of America discussed above and below, but particularly in these histories, is often a criticism that is visible, articulated, and severe. This should not be misunderstood. There is not a single one among the writers and literary critics here discussed who appears to be in any discernible way "anti-American," neither of the vulgar nor of the sophisticated type. With the exception of the Asian perspective often employed by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, who was born in Calcutta and takes regular time-outs from her professorial duties at the University of Columbia to teach aboriginal children in rural West Bengal, and a handful of texts by Kathy Acker, who lived for several years in England during the 1980s, it is exceptionally rare that viewpoints which are not genuinely American are being employed at all. Even the most scathing criticism appears as criticism from *within*, directed at what is deemed deplorable in the conduct of their fellow humans and—often quite naturally, but also frequently specifically—their fellow Americans. Moreover, the modern myths surrounding the colonization of America are an almost natural target in that respect if read against the abovementioned backdrop of "mythohistorical narratives" with their various

ideological agendas—some of the most noticeable cases of which will later be discussed in the third subchapter "State of Violence: Lex Americana."

In *Mason & Dixon*, Pynchon overlays the tale of the early American settlements and their arising conflicts with the indigenous people with the tale of the first Norse settlements in America. He compresses the chain of events into one decisive event, and collapses Massachusetts Bay with the Vinland colony from the Icelandic sagas even topographically.[8] The pivotal event, as it is told in *Mason & Dixon* by the character Stig, is briefly sketched. The Norse settlers are trading goods with the *Skraellings*, the settlers' name for the American natives. The Norse leader, Thorfinn Karlsefni, has forbidden anyone to sell weapons, but that is exactly what the Skraellings "really want." When one of the Northmen kills a Skraelling who tries to seize his weapon, the slaughter begins.

While Eirik's Saga gives a completely different account of the incident, the version in the Grænlendiga Saga roughly complies with Pynchon's version in the details, but not on the whole (cf. *The Vinland Sagas* 99–101, 64–67). Though this particular Norse group eventually leaves the Vinland settlement indeed, both saga's outcomes disagree with Pynchon's version. According to the sagas, Karlsefni announces in the following spring that "he had no wish to stay there any longer" and wants to return to Greenland, after which they make ready for the voyage and "took with them much valuable produce, vines, and grapes and pelts and get back safely to Eiriksfjord in Greenland" (67). Stig's account in *Mason & Dixon* ends on a completely different note:

---

[8] While the actual location of the Vinland settlement is still unclear, Pynchon's characters in *Mason & Dixon* leave no doubt: "So that's why the Swedes chose to sail between the Capes of Delaware,— they thought it was another Fjord! You fellows do like a nice Fjord, it seems. Instead, they found Pennsylvania!" (634).

> [...] in another year Karlsefni's outpost would be gone, as if what they had done out upon the Headland, under the torn Banners of the Clouds, were too terrible, and any question of who had prevail'd come to matter ever less, as Days went on, whilst the residue of Dishonor before the Gods and Heroes would never be scour'd away. Thereafter they were men and women in Despair, many of whom, bound for Home, miscalculated the Route and landed in Ireland, where they were captur'd and enslav'd." (634)

Taking the narrative techniques into account, i. e., overlay, collapse, and compression, numerous opportunities are opened up for the application of "miscalculations of routes" on the path from the Massachusetts Bay Colony to modern America, a motif figuratively associated with miscalculated and unreadable messages that will soon be addressed.

Applying similar narrative strategies including overlay and collapse in her treatment of the settlement myth in *Don Quixote*, Kathy Acker focuses on the treatment of the Quakers by the Puritans: the imprisonments, punishments, and the eventual imposition of the Death Penalty. Don Quixote —a female knight on a "quixotic" quest for a language of her own in a world made of and controlled by male texts—inquires about the "beginning of America":

> "First," Don Quixote asked, "how did America begin? What are the myths of the beginning of America?"
>
> Answer: The desire for religious intolerance made America or Freedom.
>
> Explanation: Puritans and Quakers founded the north-eastern portion of the United States. In the Massachusetts Bay Colony, the method of instruction was the sermon and the place of instruction, the New England meeting-house. Theology, or politics, took place, not as in the Mother Country on the level of theory, but in terms of praxis: these New Worlders had left England not because they had been forbidden there to worship as they wanted to but because there they and, more important, their neighbors weren't forced to live as rigidly in religious terms as they wanted. (117–18)

Besides this answer's strong backing from historical accounts pertaining to the "Puritan" Protestant radicals in Elizabethan England, there is a peculiar twofold twist. Ostensibly, the "longing for religious freedom" of the early

settlers is exposed as a myth. Actually, though, this ostensibly "exposed" version itself resides at the place of the myth and is explicitly labeled as such, "the myths of the beginning of America." Turning an account on its head, i. e., simply reversing its positive or negative charge, causality, or hierarchy—as follows from her essays and interviews, Acker was intimately familiar with deconstructive theory—does not necessarily turn faulty relations into proper ones. And it might well be that any question asked about a "beginning" can only and will always generate a myth.

As indicated, miscalculated and unreadable messages associated with miscalculated routes figure in the process of violently losing or leaving paradise. In Pynchon's *Mason & Dixon*, the heralding of the killing by an apparition should be mentioned as one outstanding agreement in detail between the text and the saga's account. This apparition, observed solely by Karlsefni's wife Gudrid, delivers a strange message:

> ["]Upon the [Skraellings'] second visit, Karlsefni's wife Gudrid is inside the House, tending Snorri the baby, when despite the new Palisado and the Sentries, a strange, small Woman comes in, announc'd only by her Shadow, fair-hair'd, pale, with the most enormous eyes Gudrid has ever seen, and asks, 'What is your Name?'
>
> "'My name is Gudrid,' replies Gudrid. 'What is your name?'
>
> "'My name is Gudrid,' she whispers, staring out of those Eyes. And all at once there is a violent crash, and the woman vanishes,— at the same Instant, outside, one of the Northmen, struggling with one of the Skraellings, who has tried to seize his weapon, kills him. [...] None but Gudrid ever saw the woman whose visit announc'd this first Act of American murder, and the collapse of Vineland the Good [...] (633-34)

On the basis of this textual agreement between the saga and Pynchon's narrative, the strange apparition and its cryptic message gain considerably more weight in the latter, and although the message remains unreadable, one can at least be sure that death is structurally embedded. While in Barth's texts hidden, cryptic, or garbled messages can usually be retrieved, if not always to the intended purpose or effect, Pynchon's texts

rather focus on the undecipherability or intrinsic ambiguity of messages, and on their susceptibility to misdirection and misfiring as performatives. Another example is his treatment of the African legend of "how the hare's lip was split," which exists in many different versions. In essence, the Moon goddess grants mankind immortality, but her messenger, the hare, distorts the message and instead brings death to mankind. In *Gravity's Rainbow*, the myth reads:

> But under the earth, in the night, the sun is born again, to come back each dawn, new and the same. But we, Zone-Hereros, under the earth, how long will we wait in this north, this locus of death? [...] North is death's region. There may be no gods, but there is a pattern: names by themselves may have no magic, but the *act* of naming, the physical utterance, obeys the pattern. Nordhausen means dwellings in the north. The Rocket had to be produced out of a place called Nordhausen. The town adjoining was named Bleicheröde as a validation, a bit of redundancy so that the message would not be lost. The history of the old Hereros is one of lost messages. It began in mythical times, when the sly hare who nests in the Moon brought death among men, instead of the Moon's true message. The true message has never come. (322)

The cryptic, distorted, or misrouted message does not bring death as a causative agent, but in the sense of being death; the message itself is what brings death about in the same way the true message would have brought about immortality, as an *act* in the sense of a performative. The paradise is irretrievably lost as is the true meaning of the message. In both varieties of the creation myth mentioned above, "word" and "deed" often collapse into one such performative—and by building and elaborating on its potential for misdirection and distortion, creation myths in postmodern texts gain an additional twist on how paradise is lost and history gains momentum.

Thus, the motif that paradises are lost through unreadable or corrupted messages into which death and violence are structurally embedded led to the motif that paradises are indeed inevitably lost through the intrinsic ambiguity of messages as such, and their susceptibility to misdi-

rection and misfiring as performatives—plus some indications that the question of origins itself might also be a kind of performative that automatically creates a myth. With the involvement of critical texts, the properties of inaugurating performatives will be returned to in the following section. Before that, however, it will be necessary to investigate the act of creation itself, especially as to what happens to the point of origin from the viewpoint of the creator. This will become important when, eventually, the act of creation and the creation of the self are brought together with the ethical implications of performatives on the one hand, and the loss of origins on the other.

Self-Creation

Foundation myths are, of course, fictions. But these fictions are also and foremost narratives, and, as the following example will demonstrate, they belong to a class of inaugurating narratives that are particularly prone to becoming increasingly independent from their creator. In Coover's *The Universal Baseball Association, Inc., J. Henry Waugh, Prop.,* the principal character J. Henry Waugh creates a completely self-contained, fictitious baseball league, based on an extensive set of rules which, though events and outcomes depend on the throwing of dice, are less based on chance than on probabilities, which generates high degrees of realism. The set of rules expands with time to mimic more and more aspects of reality, and the initial league becomes a full-fledged world where people live, love, and die—and even have their obituaries written by their "creator." This works as expected until an extraordinarily improbable, but within the parameters of probability theory perfectly reasonable, cataclysmic chain of events sets in. In this chain of events, a key figure, a batter, is killed by the throw of another key figure, a pitcher (69–71, 73), and J. Henry Waugh's "real" life consequently also veers toward an equally cataclysmic breakdown. But

two more extraordinary events happen. The first event is that Waugh, in order to regain his world's and his own balance—and also because he can't resist to actively advance what he perceives as an emerging "apocalyptic" conflict between two baseball "dynasties"—executes what might be called a "divine intervention": the responsible pitcher, in turn, is killed by a line strike, but the dice are "carefully set down," not thrown (202). The third extraordinary event, after this consolidation of good vs. evil in the world, is the vanishing of the creator, fading from an active historical force into a deus absconditus or deus otiosus. The text becomes independent, the invented world of J. Henry Waugh becomes, without a visible narrator, the "text."

At which point not only the inaugurating moment's properties are at stake but also its retrievability. The text jumps into the league's future, and the original events have been "mythified" long since:

> Can't even be sure about the simple facts. Some writers even argue that Rutherford and Casey never existed—nothing more than another of the ancient myths of the sun, symbolized as a victim slaughtered by the monster or force of darkness. History: in the end, you can never prove a thing. (223–24)

Moreover, these now mythical events are reenacted in the guise of initiation rites, with some outright sinister aspects attached:

> Skeeter laughs, but that funny look doesn't leave his face. "Do me a favor, roomie."
>
> "Name it."
>
> "When that pitch comes today, step back."
>
> "You kidding?"
>
> "No, Hardy, I'm dead serious." The grin is gone and Skeeter's gaze is fixed on him. But can he trust even Skeeter? Isn't this just another trick, another prearranged ploy to see if he'll break? Cuss hinting he should deck Casey when he pitches to him in the top of the third, Skeeter tempting him with cowardice. Won't know for sure until the initiation is over. "Seeing you there just now, I don't know, I got the idea suddenly that maybe this whole goddamn Association has got some kind of screw loose, Hardy."

"You just finding that out?"

"No, wait, Hardy, I'm not joking. Maybe... maybe, Hardy, they're really gonna kill you out there today!"

Hardy feels a cold chill rattle through him, tingling that patch behind his ear, pulverizing his organs and unhitching his joints, but outwardly he laughs: "Bullshit, Skeeter. The old-timers just build it up this way to give the rookies a little scare each year. They'd have to be crazy to—" He's sorry the minute he's said it. (227)

The original event, despite its momentous consequences for individual and collective self-image in this "world," has been lost. No one can tell whether the original event happened at all, or if it happened, happened the way it was passed down. But ultimately, in the framework of the adopted perspective, it does not make a difference. Not only is it not necessary for the foundational act to actually have happened at all, it might, matching certain processes proposed by psychoanalysis discussed below, be even an intrinsic *characteristic* of the foundational act that this necessity does not exist.

Freud—as summarized by Jonathan Culler in *Ferdinand de Saussure* —discusses the prohibition of incest and other social taboos in *Totem and Taboo* and postulates a historical event in primitive times where a tyrannical father is killed and devoured by his sons who seek, by devouring him, to take his power and his role. While this "memorable and criminal deed" created taboos out of guilt and remorse, Freud admits that the original deed possibly never actually took place, and only the sons' fantasy of killing the father triggered the remorse:

This is a plausible hypothesis, [Freud] says, and "no damage would thus be done to the causal chain stretching from the beginning to the present day." In fact, the question of whether the deed really took place or not "does not in our judgment affect the heart of the matter." (89–90)

From which follows:

Freud here appears very much in the guise of an eighteenth-century

thinker, using fictions of origin to discuss the nature of a thing. What is most important, however, is his recognition that if the original deed is to serve as a true historical cause, one must postulate an underlying psychic system which, in turn, makes the deed itself unnecessary. (90)

But the process would not stop there. As Culler points out in *The Pursuit of Signs*, discussing Freud's argument in a different context:

But once again, one cannot fail to wish to choose, and Freud does: primitive men were uninhibited; for them thought passed directly into action. "With them it is rather the deed that is the substitute for thought. And that is why, without laying claim to any finality of judgment, I think that in the case before us it may be assumed that 'in the beginning was the Deed.'" (182)

For Culler, this referral back to the deed is an evasive maneuver and easily self-deconstructs, i. e., effectively deconstructs on its own without the reader's efforts, in the reversal of the assumed hierarchy between "word" and "deed." By claiming that in the beginning was the deed, Freud "refers us not to an event but to a signifying structure, another text, Goethe's *Faust*, in which 'deed' is but a substitute for 'word'" (182–83). Collapsing this hierarchy, in turn, marks the biblical creation myth's first spoken words as a performative, as has been mentioned. Within this framework, the observed characteristics of violent origins begin to converge, supported by a reciprocal interdependence of narrativity, cyclicity, the loss of origins, and performativity. At which point an ethical dimension begins to emerge.

J. Hillis Miller, in his reading of Kant and the categorical imperative in *The Ethics of Reading,* compares Kant's "*as if*"—which should test whether a maxim that underlies a particular action would qualify as a universal rule—to writing a "miniature novel," a "little fiction." Narrative, accordingly, acts as the necessary and the only bridge between the universal "law" on the one hand and life's "practice" on the other. Therefore this little fiction, according to Miller, must be of a very special sort to be able to function as a bridge between the law, represented by the underlying maxim, and the real world, represented by the action to be tested: it must

be a "miniature version of the inaugural act which creates a nation, a people, a community":

> The implied story in such an "as if" is the grand historical story of the divinely sanctioned law-giver or establisher of the social contract, Moses, Lycurgus, or the framers of the Declaration of Independence or of the Rights of Man. [...] This inaugural act, moreover, has an implicit teleology. It creates history. (29)

Again, in this conjunction of narrativity and foundational event, the "performative" as a determinant is close at hand. Kant's central example to substantiate his argument is a promise not intended to be kept.[9] But this yields, according to Miller, a number of unexpected consequences that threaten to subvert Kant's argument from within. Due to certain characteristics particular to the "promise" as a special type of performative, there emerges an uncertainty with regard to its authority as being autonomous or granted from an outside source, as well as an uncertainty with regard to a given promise's teleology in the temporal rift between "the time of the promising" and "the time of the keeping of the promise" (cf. 32–34).

Taking the promise out of the equation as a safety measure leaves the possibility of "catastrophes" still open, as Miller observes in his reading of Kleist's *Michael Kohlhaas* in *Topographies*. Here, the "rapid expansion from the particular and parochial to the universal," i. e., the expansion from a pair of horses to a new world order, becomes a "mad logic" and escalates to excessively violent acts where the "appeal to a justice that is private and at the same time universal, a law above the law, is intrinsically violent":

---

[9] While Kant's example revolves around the borrowing of money, Miller's paraphrase substitutes a rather peculiar plot: "Such calculations, for example that of the man who promises the cannibals a better meal later on if they do not eat him now, have nothing whatsoever of moral about them" (30). The reason for this substitution is not easily discerned. But Miller's discourse on foundational and inaugural events veers from the outset, perhaps inevitably, toward archaic patterns that include cannibalism and incest.

> The initial limited demand contains its own implicit universalization. It contains also within itself the possibility of all the violent acts Kohlhaas and his men commit. (93)

With the proclamation of a new world order by Kohlhaas, incidentally, another "infelicitous" performative enters the "as if," this time at the maxim's opposite end. "Declarations of independence [...] speak in the name of a preexisting people and preexisting rights, a people and rights that they create by performative fiat," but here, context and circumstances are not right, and Kohlhaas's "proclamation is not ratified by a new contract and a new constitution" (93).

By tracing postmodern creation narratives along elements of violence, properties have been encountered that affect foundational events on every conceivable level from the formation of history and social contracts to the law in reference to ethics and the formation of the self. Between the inaugural event that—intrinsically—may or may not have happened and the performative's precariousness, assumed origins of history and of the self seem anything but solid. In the light of these findings, Fredric Jameson's remark that "Postmodernism, postmodern consciousness, may then amount to not much more than theorizing its own condition of possibility" (*Postmodernism* ix) might, though expressed in a different context, gain some currency. Moreover, revolving around a violent loss that establishes a history of origin that did not exist prior to the loss, formative events collapse the creation with the fall, cyclicity with historicity, and the self with the possibility of its own formation. Describing the fall from grace in terms of Freud and Lacan in *Mother Tongue,* Johnson gives this specific loss another violent name:

> The paradise lost brought into being by the fall never existed, except in retrospect in the mind of the child. The perfect fusion of mother and child never existed even in the womb, but the discovery that the mother *has a life* is called, by Freud and Lacan, castration. The phallic mother is thus the ideal everyone wants the mother to live up to, the ideal of perfect reciprocity, per-

fect knowledge, total response. It is not that people *know* that that is what they want, but that they suddenly notice they have lost something, and that if "castration" is the name for that loss, the phallic mother must have once existed. (87)

And castration, fittingly, is a figure derived from myth where it figures prominently—as it does, as will be seen in the chapter on *Iterations*, in postmodern narratives.

Thus, the intertwined formations of world and self become suspended in strange loops that also affect, inevitably, the properties of the performative as the "language of creation." For Johnson, Adam's naming of the animals disrupts the clear-cut differentiation between a perfectly referential language in which God's word creates "the world out of the void in the act of speaking" on the one hand, and language after its fall from grace into diversity with the fall of the Tower of Babel on the other:

> [...] Adam named, but he did not create. He brought the animals into language, not into being. But if he brought the animals into language, they must have first existed outside it. The referential world outside of language stilled the creative word—the word that was itself material. The unity of "the word was God" becomes "the word was *with* God." The word could no longer have been God if it was *with* God. One only says "with" about two separate things.
>
> In the beginning, therefore, there was no outside to language. God brought the world out of the void in the act of speaking. But for Adam, already, the world and language were two separate things. For him, in fact, naming the animals brought into being that separation. What concept of unity, then, would account for the pre-Babelian but noncreative word? (49)

Read from this angle, the powerful simplicity of the "word" in Genesis where even, thanks to Hebrew grammar, the phrases "let there be light" and "there was light" are indeed identical, becomes less and less simple, less and less powerful, until St. John's "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. The same was in the beginning with God" has reached a point of overdetermined complexity

reminiscent of Freud's example of the borrowed kettle.[10] Ever created and recreated in the violent processes of subject formation and the fall into history through a necessary loss that never happened, word and origin—before they have been lost—have never been.

This aspect of the intimate connection of creation with the origin of the self will be raised again, from a different perspective, within the context of repetitions in the second chapter. In the next step, however, a second constituent of the modernization of myths and its relations to violence in the texts will be explored, complementary to what has been discussed so far. This constituent pertains to the modernization of characters, motivations, and events in mythical narratives and, going hand in hand, the equally playful examination of mythical elements modern self-conceptions appear to be built upon.

2. Myth Rewritten: Beheaded Damosels

In contrast to, e. g., modernist adaptations that translate mythical kernels into contemporary settings, postmodern adaptations tend to leave the original myth's framework largely intact but interspersed with contemporary elements—where heroes are hauled before the Great Father Serpent by means of submachine guns, and captured heroines respond to interrogations with the four items set out in the Third Geneva Convention. While combining mythical and contemporary elements of limited compatibility has not been alien to medieval and early Renaissance treatments where mythical or semi-mythical events seamlessly unfold against the technical,

---

[10] Which allegedly had not been borrowed in the first place, had the disputed hole from the outset, and been given back fully intact long ago (*Der Witz und seine Beziehung zum Unbewußten* 50).

social, and ethical background of the High Middle Ages, postmodern treat-
ments in this regard are deliberately playfully anachronistic, albeit not less
violent than their literary predecessors. In the course of the texts' system-
atic use of anachronisms which combine myths and mythical motifs includ-
ing formative elements connected to the Narcissus and Oedipus myths
with feminism, political correctness, and superheroes, certain mythical
premises are severely questioned while others, interestingly, are not.
Another thread that will be discussed in this subchapter consists of a willful
over-mythologizing that employs the inflation and equal distribution of ste-
reotypes—to such extent as to carry forward into the political as well as
the academic arena, between cultural and postcolonial studies on one side
and literary criticism on the other. A rift, as will be seen, develops here
over the entitlement to, and achievement of, individual and national "rights"
and the deconstruction of these rights.

Rewriting Rationales

Reading Barth's *Chimera,* Barthelme's *The King* and *The Dead Father* as
well as critical texts by Spivak on Narcissism and Culler on Christianity,
this section traces how certain premises are exposed and questioned with
regard to formative events by rewriting rationales and motivations. Two
recurring and noticeable motifs will be examined in greater depth: victimi-
zation as an impediment to development, and initiation/formation through
an act of murder. Pertaining to both, it will be shown how literary and crit-
ical texts complement each other, how in Barth's *Chimera*, for example,
topics can be found that relate to postcolonial theory, and how critical texts
employ mythical narratives to illuminate political developments. In the case
of initiation/formation through an act of murder, it will also be discussed
how the already mentioned killing of the "lamb" as a foundational act of
murder in Christian myth seems somehow exempt from scrutiny, at least

compared to the level of attention that is directed at violent origins else-where.

Besides Barthelme's *The King*, the most sustained example of leaving period and backdrop intact but rewriting almost everything within its premises are the three thematically—and causally—connected novellas in Barth's *Chimera.* The rewriting of the myth is not only enacted on the textual level, but thematically embedded as such in all three of the novellas, especially in the second, "Perseid," where Perseus retraces and rewrites his own "heroical career," and in the third, "Bellerophoniad," where Bellerophon tries to "edit" his own life's events toward such a heroical career, following the life of Perseus as a template—constantly in conflict not only with actual events, but with the reverberations of the rewritings Perseus undertook with *his* career as well.

Within this context, Barth's rewritings of rationales in the vicinity of violence are conspicuously flavored with elements of political correctness and de-victimization, which is especially true pertaining to the "monstrous." Elements surrounding Medusa in "Perseid" and the Chimera in "Bellerophoniad" are almost completely rewritten in this respect. Medusa, after having been raped by Poseidon in Athena's temple, is transformed into a Gorgon by Athena, who "in her wisdom, punished the victim for the crime" (97). Perseus, retracing his career, is eventually told by a hooded figure (who turns out to be a revived Medusa) that he had beheaded his true love: Medusa, in the absence of mirrors, hadn't been aware of her transformation into a Gorgon and had waited for Perseus as a lover, having prepared the scene for his approach herself:

> One day the seagulls on the statues of her bouldered beaux told her that Perseus himself was winging herward, a golden dream; she lulled her sisters to sleep with a snake-charm song she'd learned and then feigned sleep herself. Softly he crept up behind; her whole body glowed; his hand, strong as Poseidon's, grasped her hair above the nape. Her eyes still closed, she

turned her neck to take his kiss . . ."

"O wow," Calyxa said. "Do you know what I think?"

"I know what I felt," said I. "But how was I to know?"

"I wish I'd known," I said shamefaced to the hooded one, who replied it was no matter: if she'd known herself to be as Gorgon as her sisters, Medusa would have begged to have her head cut off. (98)

Once a staple of "herodom," slaying the monstrous has become a dubious activity, and this dubiousness also begins to interfere with the making of a hero in the "Bellerophoniad":

"'*I* never heard of its hurting anybody,' I said. 'For all I know, it may be minding its own business up there in the crater. Am I supposed to kill it just because it's monstrous? Besides, it's female. No more sexist aggression.' [...]

"'Don't kill her, then,' Philonoë suggested in a gentler tone. 'Bring her back alive for the University's Zoology Department. Okay, Bellerophon?' She grew excited at the idea: we could build Chimera an asbestos cage; her breath could be used to heat the whole zoo free of charge, maybe the poorer sections of the polis as well. 'You wouldn't have to hurt her,' she insisted, and added, blushing: 'But don't you get hurt, either.' (231–33)

But Bellerophon, if reluctantly, has to go after Chimera at last because of this labor's "conformity to the Pattern" which, moreover, "prescribes that she must not be captured, but slain":

No mythic hero ever brought back *anything* alive, except his glorious self and an occasional beleaguered princess. (233)

Intimately linked to such attempts at rehabilitating the monstrous are several incarnations of modern feminism, usually equally at odds with the mythical careers at stake, in the second and the third novella. Like Medusa, mythical women's roles are rewritten from victims into participants and even villains when, e. g., the character Antea/Stheneboeia sets up an oppressive system of reversed gender roles after the king's death which even and especially the Amazons despise (286–88; 297–98).

The enablement of former victims is observably an important concern,

not only in *Chimera*. Where such an enablement cannot be effected, the perpetrator and even the narrator are judged particularly harsh, as in Barth's recurring motif in later texts of the housemaids who are strung up and killed by Odysseus after he killed Penelope's suitors with his bow.[11] When, as Spivak observes in *The Spivak Reader*, myth is rewritten to highlight contemporary patterns in non-postmodernist discourse, in contrast, the opposite is often true: while male roles are discursively rewritten into female roles, the female victims' silence even deepens. This seems to be especially frequent with regard to Echo and Narcissus:

> I started to think specifically about Narcissus when I came across Christopher Lasch's *The Culture of Narcissism.* The book seemed such an attack on the few social gains made by feminism. Yet Narcissus was a boy! [...] I turned to Freud and found that he too had located the richest examples of narcissism among women, especially women unfulfilled by the secondary narcissism of motherhood. Where was Echo, the woman in Narcissus's story? (176)

Again, as in the preceding section, formative elements oscillate between the individual and the world. Taking Freud's assessment as a basis that the "ego ideal" is also the common ideal of a class or a nation, and combining this with the necessity to undergo an Oedipal phase in order to fully "develop," Spivak discovers instances where the denial of female development goes hand in hand with a notion that Asian or African societies, metaphorically spoken, still have to go through the Oedipal phase the "developed" world already went through and are, like the female who is denied an Oedipal phase in the first place, still "stuck" in Narcissism: "Very broadly and irreverently speaking, if—as a man—you can't get to Oedipus, you are stuck with Narcissus (177)." Therefore, their growth is "arrested on the civilizational scale":

---

[11] Cf., e. g., *The Tidewater Tales* 182 or *The Book of Ten Nights and a Night* 266–71. Although it is actually Telemachus who "strings 'em up," Odysseus himself orders the killings—but not before he made the housemaids clean up the mess from the slaughter of the suitors.

> Thus you might say that I am interested in the psychoanalytic Narcissus be-
> cause, in a kind of "colonial" reconstellation of the matter of "Greece," he is
> made to stand at the door of the free discourse of Oedipus. (177)

Moreover, inserting feminist theory and feminist terminology into the descriptive vocabulary of the formation of postcolonial nations, linking the overcoming of the colonial with the overcoming of the patriarchal order, is not necessarily a remedy. The nation *still* lacks a genuine voice, i. e., a voice of its own, as much as Echo:

> The homeopathic double bind of feminism in decolonization—which seeks in
> the new state to cure the poison of patriarchy with the poison of the legacy of
> colonialism—can read it as an instantiation of an ethical dilemma: choice in
> no choice, attendant upon particular articulations of narcissism, ready to
> await the sounds to which she may give back her own words. (185)

Things merely seem to be more simple in Barth's *Chimera*, as will soon become clear. Here, certain aspects of modern feminism are embodied in the Amazon society, whose military also happens to be the most modern, efficient, and effective military force in Greece—contrasted to great comical effect with the bumbling strategic efforts of their male adversaries who are constantly hampered by their inability to transcend their personal egos and interests. This contrast notwithstanding, atrocities committed on both sides remain on the agenda: "'*Seduction is for sissies*,' [King Iobates] said; '*the he-man wants his rape*. Heh heh. We used to prong 'em and then watch them kill themselves (230)" or, on the other side, when the King and other "Lycian officials" have been taken captive by a "troop of vengeful Amazons," are "given a knife and their choice of relieving themselves therewith of either their lives or their intermittent organs" (242). The clash between male "herohood" and female "Amazonhood" becomes most intense when Bellerophon ends the budding career of an Amazon corporal by raping her, which he regrets but certainly regrets not as much as to render his own "intermittent organ" for atonement and thereby reinstate his victim's honor and career (cf. 221–29). This insertion of a highly developed

feminist force into the patriarchal societies of mythical Greece echoes Spivak's observations in several ways. In *Chimera*, the Amazon society has indeed been formed by the combined effects of exiling a formerly suppressed part of the population into independence, and pushing them indeed through a kind of "Oedipal phase." According to the first novella, "Dunyazadiad," the Amazons are descendants of the women King Shahryar of Samarkand and his brother Shah Zaman actually exiled, but pretended to kill in order to safe face, until Scheherazade, with the help of her sister Dunyazad, put an end to these killings, or rather exiles, by keeping both the king and his brother's private members hostage, their razors ready and set to get the most Oedipal mileage out of this situation.

As it turns out, the king and his brother might be helpless, but are so of their own choosing, which reinforces the foundational dilemma. And the Amazons, having retained their Samarkandian origins as a myth, have also retained the urge to return to their land of origin and remedy the condescending, patriarchal manner in which their independence was effected —a quest the aforementioned corporal has aspired to undertake, but is barred from doing so precisely through being raped by the hero: in this manner, the circle of violence closes by being given another spin, enacting a predicament akin to Spivak's observations.

In Barthelme's *The King*, modern brands of feminism are enacted in similar fashion. Against the backdrop of King Arthur's Round Table, World War II is taking place, and even though the Axis fights with the modern machineries of war, they are no match for Arthur's knights, as this dialog between Arthur and Launcelot reveals:

> "True. I congratulate you, by the way, on the capture of that armored battalion in Norway."
> "It was only a battalion."
> "It was a marvel. A whole battalion taken by one man! Are there any

decorations you don't already have?"

"I think not."

"We'll create a new one, then. Something with a rose . . ." (109–10)

Women, not unlike Barth's Amazons, enter the fray as soldiers or as high-waymen, or rather highwaywomen, while the traditional courtly woman becomes an endangered species:

> "Gawain has swapped off a damosel's head. By accident. Again."
>
> "God in heaven," said Arthur. "Who was it?"
>
> "A daughter of King Zog. Her name was Lynet, I believe."
>
> "Then we'll have Albania up in arms," said Arthur. "All the hatred the Albanians have for the Italians, wasted. Gawain always gets them on the rebound, the damosels. He makes a stroke, the stroke bounces off his opponent's cuirass or whatever and detaches the head of the lady standing nearby. It's happened far too often." (9)

In Barthelme's *The Dead Father*, to proceed from the rewriting of female victims to the rewriting of male heroes, the son Thomas tells his rite-of-passage-story in the course of which he is abducted by "four men in dark suits with shirts and ties and attaché cases containing Uzi submachine guns" (40). They hurt him repeatedly throughout the journey, because he "was wrong and had always been wrong and would always be wrong" (40), first with corkscrews, later with dinner forks, then with documents, and finally with "harsh words," adding that he was becoming "less wrong than before" (43). After a surreal scene in a car wash and further travels, he is brought before the Great Father Serpent and asked a riddle the answer to which he, as he is told, could not possibly know. Thomas gives the right answer nevertheless and is granted a wish. The question is *What do you really feel?*, and his correct answer is "like murderinging":

> I suppose, the Father Serpent said, that the boon you wish granted is the ability to carry out this foulness? Of course, I said, what else? Granted then, he said, but may I remind you that having the power is often enough. You don't have to actually do it. For the soul's ease. I thanked the Great Father

> Serpent; he bowed most cordially; my companions returned me to the city. I was abroad in the city with murderinging in mind—the dream of a stutterer. (46)

This does not, by any means, sound like a boon. Or maybe this is the only boon one can reasonably expect, since foundational events—of psychological, national, or religious nature—seem inextricably intertwined with the act of murder.

One of the most famous cases in this respect, the killing of the "lamb" in Christian foundation myth, has been found to have remained largely untouched by such treatments in the texts; mostly classical myth, rites of passage, and classical pantheons are questioned in such manner. Even though the Christian religion, especially in Coover's texts, is often attacked and ridiculed with a vengeance, these attacks are almost exclusively directed against denominational excess, sectarianism, bigotry, fanaticism, and the whole lineup of Christian carnage throughout the ages—but not at the violence of Christianity's very foundations.[12] In the case of a god who has his son tortured and killed as the religion's foundational event, "murderinging" consequences do seem to be expected.

The question is how this omission could have come about, an omission that will be of import again in the chapters on *Composition* and *Reality*. Discussing William Empson's reading of Milton's *Paradise Lost* in *Framing the Sign: Criticism and Its Institutions,* and how Empson's reading keeps being dismissed as "hopelessly eccentric" in academia precisely because it vigorously attacks the foundations of Christianity, Culler writes:

> Moderns accustomed to thinking vaguely and benignly about Christianity may not confront what Empson rightly sees as a central problem: the divine legitimation of unending punishment for all who disobey divine commands, and the identification of this demand for retribution with divinity and goodness

---

[12] This is comparable to a situation in which one would criticize each and every country of the former Eastern Bloc without ever tackling the concept of state communism.

itself. Christianity is, after all, centered on the crucifixion of Christ, from whom come its name and major symbol; the claim is that God the Father himself—not some external power but a God synonymous with Goodness—required the punishment of all mankind but accepted in its place the torture and death of his son. (73).

Culler asks whether Literary Studies might indeed have contributed to the impression that "Americans had a constitutional right to encounter nothing that ridicules or attacks their beliefs" (77). As an essential step, this should involve Literary Studies in "comparing Christianity with other mythologies" and make the "sadism and sexism of religious discourse an explicit object of discussion, as we now tend to do when teaching works containing overtly racist language" (80). Or, as he puts it in his later essay "Political Criticism":

> It is striking that in America there is practically no public anti-religious discourse. In debates about prayer in the schools no one champions the view that prayer is a superstition that should be discouraged; emphasis falls instead on how a particular prayer would offend the sensibilities of others with different beliefs—as though the crucial thing were to avoid offending anyone's beliefs. (200)

Surprisingly, these observations seem true to a certain extent even within the context of postmodern literature. The most spirited attacks against religion can certainly be found in Coover's *The Origin of the Brunists*, *A Theological Position,* and *The Public Burning*—but even these attacks allow for wholehearted agreement without ever having to seriously question Christian core beliefs. Bluntly calling prayer a superstition that should be discouraged and calling the foundational event of crucifixion equally bluntly a son's torture and death to appease a sadist father is a different matter altogether. And indeed, in the already discussed "shafting" scene in *Giles Goat-Boy*, the motif of crucifixion is conspicuously exempt from the playful ridicule all other mythical motifs in the course of the novel are subjected to, but contributes instead as a central element to the novel proper's ending of atonement, closure, and new beginning as the mythical circle starts

anew.

Winning Worlds

In a second step, paralleling the progression in the first subchapter on myth creation, the modernization of elements will be explored in the rewritings of mythical narratives connected to the colonization of America, where violence equally abounds in the texts as a substantial, and maybe necessary, ingredient in formative events. This section will start off with a text by J. Hillis Miller about colonial violence within the framework of Protestant ethics, and proceed to how violence brought about by colonization is depicted in the literary texts with examples from Barth and Coover. There is a tendency, as will be seen, to pitch antagonists against each other in ways that deconstruct "cultural identity" toward utter interchangeability—a process that, as the reading of a text by Barbara Johnson will show, leads to a serious estrangement between deconstruction and certain tenets of postcolonial theory.

As has been the case with Spivak's and Culler's critical texts above, J. Hillis Miller's rereading in *On Literature* of Johann Wyss's *The Swiss Family Robinson*, first published in 1812, closely connects to motifs observed in the literary texts—most conspicuously, to begin with, to Bellerophon's aforementioned observation in Barth's *Chimera* that "No mythic hero ever brought back *anything* alive" (233). In his re-reading of *The Swiss Family Robinson*, Miller finds himself surprised both by the sheer amount of animals killed in the text and the fact that he somehow did not notice these constant killings in his childhood reading. In contrast to Defoe's "ironical undercutting of English Puritanism," Swiss Protestantism is "never disobeyed or questioned" in *The Swiss Family Robinson,* and the family is not only "unashamedly sexist and patriarchal" (141) but they "wander around," "blasting at anything that moves" (145):

> The Swiss Family Robinson's episodes recount the gradual taming of a wilderness. The island is transformed into a thriving domain of farms, houses, gardens, fields, and pens. Wild animals that are encountered must either be shot or tamed, sometimes some of each. An example is the encounter with a troop of monkeys, one of whom becomes a pet after they shoot the mother. The ostrich encounter, the kangaroo encounter, and the eagle encounter tell the same story with different materials. I had forgotten how much murdering of innocent wildlife exists in this novel. (144)

How the hapless animals fare in *The Swiss Family Robinson* is, of course, reminiscent of the treatment of native populations by colonizing forces in general, even though "The land of New Switzerland is not taken from 'natives.' It is rather taken from the animals already there" (152). But the step from killing indigenous wildlife to killing indigenous people is a small one, as history abundantly demonstrates.

In Barth's texts, the carnage effected by colonization is treated in a rather farcical and sarcastic manner. Making liberal use of historical documents and Early American writings, Barth's *The Sot-Weed Factor* proceeds to erode every conceivable myth connected to the formative process of exploring the new world, including dealing with the natives and with each other and establishing some kind of order. In the "Provinces," Protestants and Catholics are constantly at each others' throats, elaborate schemes are afoot at every corner to ensure the support of the Crown whose tax inspectors are nevertheless frequently killed, property is confiscated to and fro, and skirmishes are numerous enough to occasionally tip over into minor wars without further ado. Justice is established in a peculiar manner, paving the way for some important characteristics of the "Lex Americana" to be discussed later in this chapter:

> "Why, we convened the Assembly as a grand inquest to bring the indictment, then magicked 'em into a court to try the case and find the prisoners guilty. Uncle Leonard then sentences the prisoners to hang, the court becomes an Assembly again and passes his sentence as a bill (since we'd had no law to try the case under), and Uncle Leonard commutes the sentence to insure that no injustice hath been done." (83)

While the events unfold, still another characteristic element is developed, also to be discussed later in this chapter, namely conspiracies. The scheming on both sides of the principal conflict is so immense, with agents, double-, and triple-agents constantly operating in disguise and impersonating each and every participant up to the highest lords and leaders, that the whole setting blurs into a gigantic amorphous conflict where all the important figures might very well be nothing *but* one or two protagonists in brilliant disguise, touching upon the "author" cypher and what might be called the "compactification" of the driving forces into mythical protagonists and antagonists as well. This motif, setting the tone for a deeply embedded paranoia, will eventually develop into the motif of "fabricated history" especially in Barth's *Letters*, with a small set of agents manipulating, generation after generation, the course of history by violent means in ever-changing roles.

From such treatment, myths regarding encounters with the natives are not exempt—first and foremost the events described in John Smith's *Generall Historie of Virginia*, but retold on the basis of several "secret diaries." To begin with, there is nothing noble about Smith's party or about the natives in Barth's text. In fact, both parties mirror each other perfectly by being equally bloodthirsty, greedy for power, gluttonous, and massively oversexed. These attributes as well as the combatants themselves, moreover, are only held in check by means of various physical "inaccessibilities" with regard to women, among them Pocahontas: "inaccessibilities" that give rise to the most outlandish contests and trials of potency between all parties involved. Conflicts are resolved by sexual prowess, trick solutions, and especially a magical potion by means of which John Smith is eventually able to "unlock" Pocahontas in order to save his life and the lives of his party:

> Continuing this discourse, [Powhatan] said, that whereas his daughter

> had seen fitt, to save my C^{apts} life, what time it had been the Emperours pleasure to dashe out his braines, then my C^{apt} must needs regard him selfe affianc'd to her, and submit him selfe to that some labour (to witt, essaying the gate to Venus grottoe) as her former suitors. But . . . with this difference, that where, having fail'd, her Salvage beaux had merelie been disgrace'd, and taunted as olde women, my C^{apt}, s^{hd} he prove no better, his head w^d be lay'd againe upon the stones, and the clubbing of his braines proceed without quarter or respite. (154)

Pocahontas then is "trust and tether'd" to a pedestal in a great circle, and John Smith, his sexual organ with the help of the magic potion "now in verie sooth a frightful engine," publicly "unlocks" Pocahontas until "the Emperour begg'd for an end to the tryall, lest his daughter depart from this life" (732).

Subjected to similarly irreverent treatments—now moving forward from myths connected to the early settlements to those connected with the westward movements and the violent conflicts this expansion engendered —are natives and white settlers in Coover's *Ghost Town*, "The Kid," and several other texts. Again, stereotypes are not only employed, but inflated to the point of sheer absurdity:

> Life with the tribe, which follows as a river follows its bed, is, though always harmonious in this idyllic wilderness, not always painless. To initiate him into their exemplary ways, his new brothers play face-kicking, fire-throwing, and dodge-the-arrow games with him, rub him with skunk oil and hang him upside down in the sun without water and food for a week, cage him with rattlers, pierce his scrotum with sharpened hawk quills, chop off one of his fingers, and send him out to wrestle buck naked with a seven-foot black bear. (21)

These stereotypes, in turn, are again indiscriminately distributed. Playing on a famous scene from J. F. Cooper's *The Last of the Mohicans,* for example, it is not a native in *Ghost Town* but the white "foundling" who casually bashes the baby against a tree:

> The white baby, for example, adopted survivor of some massacre or other, perhaps the same one in which he himself was captured—if—is a favorite

tribal toy until its colicky crying disturbs the sleep of his Indian maiden's chief-
tain father, whereupon he is called upon to swing the squalling thing by its
feet against a tree and bash its little brains out, which is one of the easier
tasks they ask him to perform. (22)

Undercutting any notion of nobleness by putting the characteristics, moti-
vations, and penchants for atrocities of all parties involved on a par
through comical stereotyping is also a step toward *actual* interchangeabil-
ity. Characters often display the utmost plasticity in Barth's and Coover's
texts, and this kind of stereotyping eventually tips over into a world where
any member of any culture can truly *become* the other—thereby feeding,
as a collateral, the aforementioned mood of paranoia where everyone
might turn out to be one and the same person in disguise.

Especially in Barth's texts, examples for the interchangeability of char-
acter and culture can often be found. In *The Sot-Weed Factor,* the protag-
onist's sister—after an attempted rape and an exchange of gunfire—
temporarily but thoroughly changes from a British lady "into a salvage, into
a brute," while the native "Billy Rumbly" miraculously transforms into a Brit-
ish gentleman of great learning, culture, and impeccable manners (cf.
592–649). Another conspicuous example is provided by the noblewoman
Andrée Castine, fiancée to one of the letter writers in Barth's *Letters*:

> She goes further yet: renames herself Madocawanda the Tarratine, ex-
> changes her silks and cottons for beads and buckskins, kisses the twins a
> fierce farewell, and disappears into western Canada! There will be rumors of
> her riding with Black Hawk in Wisconsin in 1832, a sort of middle-aged Pen-
> thesilea, when the Sac and Fox Indians are driven west across the Missis-
> sippi. It will even be reported that among the Oglala Sioux, during Crazy
> Horse's vain war to break up the reservation system in 1876, is a ferocious
> old squaw named Madocawanda who delights in removing the penises of
> wounded U.S. Cavalrymen. (410)

Similar transformations can be found in Coover's texts, albeit even more
uncanny ones, which are usually deadly for the characters involved. Two
of the most conspicuous examples are the sheriff and the outlaw in "The

Kid" from *A Theological Position* and the white sheriff and the Mexican bandit in "Shootout at Gentry's Junction" from *A Night at the Movies, or, You Must Remember This*. In both cases, the protagonist somehow ends up as his own antagonist after or during the showdown. In "The Kid," the Sheriff eventually blasts away at his own deputies and is hanged subsequently (cf. 70–72). In "Shootout at Gentry's Junction," before the transformation is brought about, "Pedo the Mexican" takes the position of the outrageously stereotyped "savage other":

> Don Pedo the most contented Mexican he is in all the parts at once. He is burning the prairies and stealing the catties and derailing the foolish trains. Don Pedo finds great pleasure in the life. He is never never sad. Here he is in the schoolhouse demonstrating for the little childrens the exemplary marvels of his private member. Ay, the childrens! How they all love Pedo! (61-62)

Pedo, cheerfully murdering, raping, and torturing without respite, seems to be unstoppable because of his lightning reflexes and his utmost brutality. When the Sheriff at last approaches him, uncanny transformations take place that warrant a more detailed quotation, also because this transformation will be brought up again in the chapter on *Iterations*:

> Pedo the notorious Mexican bandit sat on an old overturned bucket about ten feet back of him in the middle of the dusty street, idly picking his teeth with a splinter of wood. He was smiling broadly around the splinter, that fat-lipped sonuvabitch, and his gold teeth gleamed blindingly in the midday sun. Hank returned icily the Mexican's hot gaze. The stinking little runt. Now that he had him here, he wasn't scared of him. With cool measured steps, aware of the multitude of hidden eyes on him, the Sheriff approached the Mexican. The Mex had something in his hands. Something that shone in the sun. Knife? Gun? A watch! The Mex was grinning and holding up a gold goddamn pocket watch! Henry recognized it. It was his own. Warily, the Sheriff accepted it. He looked: 12:09. Too soon, but to hell with it, he couldn't hold himself back. He reached down toward the Mexican to disarm him. Everything seemed wrong, but he reached down. Felt like he was reaching down into death. The goddamn Mex had let one that smelled like a tomb. Still, the bastard offered no resistance. Harmon drew the Mex's six-shooters out of their moldy holsters. Rusty old relics. One of them didn't even have a goddamn hammer. He pitched them away. Easy as that. He grunted. Old fraud after all. He turned to signal for Flem and the others to bring the rope. Heard a soft click. Hand flicked: holster was empty! Henry Harmon the Sher-

iff of Gentry's Junction spun and met the silver bullet from his own gun square in his handsome suntanned face. (72)

Whereupon the Mexican, now incorporating the image of the hero riding out of town into the sunset, "rides his little pinto into the setting sun, the silver star of the Sheriff's pinned on his bouncing barriga like a jewel" (72).

But dismantling, or deconstructing, cultural identities in this way—seriously or playfully—comes with a serious problem. As Johnson points out in her introduction to *Freedom of Interpretation*, the deconstruction of individual or cultural identity can easily be misread as being antagonistic to "human rights":

> It should be noted that the deconstruction of the foundational ideals of Western civilization has developed in tandem with—and perhaps as a response to—various race, class, nation, and gender liberation movements that have arisen around the world to eradicate the effects of the discrepancy between the humanist concepts of freedom, justice, rationality, and equality that the West has promoted and the actual forms of oppression and domination (slavery, anti-Semitism, colonialism, labor exploitation, sexual inequality, racism, and so on) in which the West has engaged. (7)

The question arises as to what is more important: that those who have formerly been deprived of these rights acquire these rights, or that those rights should rather be deconstructed since they are based on "problematic models of property and identity," carrying with them "unhealth in the form of excessive fixity, binarity, and formality that will only reintroduce the problems the acquisition of rights is designed to correct" (7). Because of their categorical nature, furthermore, these rights often come in mutually exclusive pairs: but it might be that precisely the very rigidity of such rights and rules, which makes them context-distant, can come to the aid of the powerless against the powerful where "disputes in a more negotiated or experience-near manner would always favor those with the greatest resources" (8). This question is certainly not an easy one to answer, and it has, besides some heated public disputes fanned by magazine editorials

about "postmodernism," also generated substantial unease in academia between deconstructively flavored literary criticism departments and cultural studies.[13]

Besides its great potential to antagonize both sides, i. e., those who possess certain rights and privileges contingent on their cultural identity and those who do not, the dismantling or deconstruction of individual or cultural characteristics and of master narratives based on "identity" with the help of formative myths is—with its evolving amorphousness and interchangeability—again conducive to the development of that specifically postmodern brand of playful paranoia which will be discussed later in this chapter.

Heroes Reissued

This subchapter will conclude with some observations regarding the mythical hero's journey from ancient Greece to postmodern America. Although some heroes manage to undertake this journey without modernizing transformations, as, e. g., Sir Launcelot in Barthelme's *The King* who captures a whole mechanized battalion single-handedly in World War II but still is a full-fledged mythical hero and member of the Round Table (109–10), many heroes evolve into an important contemporary equivalent: the superhero. Genuinely of American origin and jointly trademarked by the publishing houses *Marvel* and *DC*, the "superheroes" as successors to the state of herohood began their career with *Superman* in 1938, as a development from earlier "masked crimefighters" with various but at most only moderately superhuman abilities. While early superheroes from the 1930s and

---

[13] An unease, with certain aspects of cultural studies under scrutiny, even observable among deconstructionists themselves, as an argument between Spivak and Miller demonstrates: cf. Miller, *Illustrations* 9–60 and Spivak, "At the Planchette of Deconstruction Is/in America" 246–249n18.

1940s were often deliberately designed to tie in with well-known mythical heroes regarding appearance and abilities, this changed over time into a decidedly more modern approach. As pop culture icons, these heroes are, of course, frequently alluded to in postmodern texts, obliquely or by name —especially in Pynchon's texts, with *Superman*, *The Phantom*, *The Lone Ranger*, *Plasticman*, *Submariner,* and other superheroes from the 1940s (cf., e. g., *Gravity's Rainbow* 752). Such references to superheroes can function in intricate ways, not all of which might be apparent at first glance. In the opening chapter of Pynchon's *The Crying of Lot 49,* Oedipa Maas receives a long-distance call from Pierce Inverarity who goes through a routine of voice imitations, starting with the "heavy Slavic tones" of a second secretary at the Transylvanian Consulate looking for an escaped bat and a Gestapo officer asking her "in shrieks" about relatives in Germany, until he finally proceeds to:

> [...] his Lamont Cranston voice, the one he'd talked in all the way down to Mazatlán. "Pierce, please," she'd managed to get in, "I thought we had—"
>
> "But Margo," earnestly, "I've just come from Commissioner Weston, and that old man in the fun house was murdered by the same blowgun that killed Professor Quackenbush," or something. [...]
>
> "Why don't you hang up on him," Mucho suggested, sensibly.
>
> "I heard that," Pierce said. "I think it's time Wendell Maas had a little visit from The Shadow." Silence, positive and thorough, fell. So it was the last of his voices she ever heard. Lamont Cranston. (6)

Here, Oedipa's ensuing quest for Pierce Inverarity's elusive heritage and for an equally elusive "America" that will lead her to increasing paranoia, despair, and even attempted suicide, is already anticipated in a nutshell. While "Lamont Cranston" was *The Phantom*'s secret identity in the popular radio show, it was, famously, an adventurer named Kent Allard in the equally popular pulp magazine series of the 1930s and 1940s who was behind *The Phantom*—who, moreover, sometimes *posed* as Cranston posing as *The Phantom*. Thus, the elusiveness of identity has already

been unhinged from its supposedly fictional context, spilling over into the next tier of an ever-increasing stack of meta-levels. *The Phantom*, moreover, is able to make himself virtually invisible, frequently overcoming his enemies by inducing fear and paranoia; and that Oedipa's quest for origins leads to paranoia, despair, and attempted suicide also ties in, last but not least, with the irretrievability of origins discussed above.

Then, there are several "homemade" superheroes, often equally interlaced with bits and pieces from TV or radio shows. One example is Slothrop's disguise as *Raketemensch* in *Gravity's Rainbow*:

> "He's not here." The cougher makes a lunge. Slothrop sweeps aside, gives him a quick veronica with his cape, sticks his foot out and trips the kid, who lies on the ground cursing, all tangled up in his long keychain, while his pardner goes pawing inside of his flapping suitcoat for what Slothrop surmises to be a sidearm, so Slothrop kicks him in the balls, and screaming "Fickt nicht mit dem Raketemensch!" so they'll remember, kind of a hiyo Silver here, he flees into shadows, among the heaps of lumber, stone and earth. (435)

"Hiyo Silver," of course, refers to *The Lone Ranger*'s famous "Hi-yo Silver! Away!" to have his horse break into gallop—though, usually, rather toward danger and distress, and not away from it.

The transformation from mythical hero to superhero—or supervillain—in postmodern texts can, as indicated, be quite explicit. There is Barth's supervillain Jerome Bray who evolves from a mythical antagonist in *Giles Goat-Boy* to an advanced and even more uncanny antagonist with human, robotic, and insectoid features in *Letters,* including superhuman strength, hypnotic powers, and the ability to levitate; possibly involved in government or intelligence conspiracies; and endowed with all the skills and means necessary for a classical "mad scientist" to round it off (cf., e. g., 368–69, 380–81, 453–54).

Another remarkable transformation from mythical hero to superhero is

yet another of Slothrop's impersonations in Pynchon's *Gravity's Rainbow*, that of the *Schweinheld* "Plechazunga." This superhero's mythical origins are established by way of a fantastic story according to which the thunder-god Thor, or Donar, sent down a giant pig to battle invading Vikings and drive them back into the sea. The German town rescued by these means each year celebrates its deliverance, and Slothrop—thanks to the adequacy of his corpulence as well as to the fact that the regular imper-sonator still has to return from the war—winds up in a giant pig costume for the ceremony:

> At which point Fritz strikes his match, and all hell breaks loose, rockets, Ro-man candles, pinwheels and—PLECCCHHAZUNNGGA! an enormous charge of black powder blasts him out in the open, singeing his ass, taking the curl right out of his tail. "Oh, yes, that's right, uh . . ." Wobbling, grinning hugely, Slothrop hollers his line: "I am the wrath of Donar—and this day you shall be my anvil!" (569)

Right after "saving the town for another year" and still wearing his costume —"pink, blue, yellow, bright sour colors, a German Expressionist pig" (568) —Slothrop is caught in a black market raid conducted by German police reinforced by Russian troops, and manages to get others and himself to safety precisely *because* he wears his enormous *Schweinheld* costume, proving impenetrable for the riot weapons involved. But there is yet another twist of fate, connected to mythical motifs of castration that will be further explored in the chapter on *Iteration*. In order to distract the military police from two and a half ounces of contraband narcotics, Slothrop's nemesis and "supervillain" Major Marvy much later dons the abandoned costume, unaware that everyone is on the look-out for a Slothrop still thought to be disguised as a giant pig. Thus the false *Schweinheld* meets his fate: mistaken for Slothrop, the supervillain is sedated and castrated on highest orders on the spot, still trapped in the costume (cf. 608–09).

Pynchon's *Schweinheld*, combining not altogether unfamiliar mythical

elements with the structural logic of superhero storylines, would essentially still count as an "underdog"—which many of the most popular modern superheroes actually are. For the ultimate fusion of godlike mythical heroes with modern superheroes on the one hand and apocalyptic struggles tearing at the very foundations of America on the other, Robert Coover's *The Public Burning* shall serve as an example, the final one in this subchapter.

The Public Burning, set in a fantastically distorted but still fully recognizable America, is basically an account of the events leading to the execution of the Rosenbergs for high treason in 1953, mostly told by then-vice president Richard Nixon from a first-person perspective. Against this backdrop, which includes ongoing and recent events like the Korean War, the intensifying cold war in the wake of German border incidents, and the East Berlin uprising, a titanic struggle takes place between "Uncle Sam" and "The Phantom*,"* godlike entities with mixed characteristics of mythical heroes and modern superheroes, each embodying essential features of their respective realms, America and the Soviet Union. The depictions of both Uncle Sam and The Phantom, though*,* are anything but flattering and are, in the case of Uncle Sam, supplemented by the exaggeration of the employed perspective's righteousness:

> And thus it was that the mighty Sam Slick, star-spangled Superhero and knuckle-rapping Yankee Peddler, lit upon the Western World in all his rugged strength and radiant beauty, expounding what the Disciple Rufus Choate called "the glittering and sounding generalities of natural right which make up the Declaration of Independence," sharpening his wits on the hard flint of war and property speculation, and honing his first principles by skinning the savages and backwoods scavengers and picking the pockets of the thieving princes of Europe. (8)

> Elsewhere, the Phantom strikes out even more boldly, using every weapon from hysteria to hyperbole, tanks to terrorism. In Korea, firing thousands of artillery and mortar rounds, the Phantom's troops attack along a broad front, capturing Finger Ridge and Capitol Hill, breaking through Allied lines near Outpost Texas, scattering chickenshit ROKs and exhausted GIs in all direc-

tions. (38)

And, of course, Uncle Sam is meddling in daily affairs, nudging politicians into the "right" direction with tantrums, verbosity, and an inexhaustible repertoire of profanities, self-aggrandizements, and racist and sexist innuendos. By way of incessant hyperbole, he reveals everything "ugly" about how this version of America was built and the "West was won," and he himself is not above playing tricks to people and cheating with his superhuman powers on the golf course.

Close to the novel's ending, Uncle Sam even swoops into the vice president's office not unlike Zeus, impregnating Nixon with the "seed" of his inspiration in the course of a lengthy rape scene during which Nixon undergoes a transformation, or metamorphosis. But a metamorphosis not of the Ovidian kind, which often serves as an escape route from an otherwise inevitable fate which will be explored in the chapter on *Iterations*, but a metamorphosis eerily reminiscent of Winston's "conversion" and his thoughts that close Orwell's *1984*:

> His words warmed me and chilled me at the same time. Maybe the worst thing that can happen to you in this world is to get what you think you want. And how did we know what we wanted? It was a scary question and I let it leak away, unanswered. Of course, he was an incorrigible huckster, a sweet-talking con artist, you couldn't trust him, I knew that—but what did it matter? Whatever else he was, he was beautiful (how had I ever thought him ugly?), the most beautiful thing in all the world. I was ready at last to do what I had never done before. "*I . . . I love you, Uncle Sam!*" I confessed. (534)

Again, one should not confuse Coover's radical ideological critique with anti-Americanism. On the one hand, Coover tends to take the side of the underdog in his texts, a perspective that has come to be perceived as one of the most "American" in storytelling. Also, as will become evident in the chapter on *Fragmentation*, Coover is the most outspokenly political writer among those discussed. He explicitly wants to make people "see" ideologies hiding in familiar narratives, and a major tool with which he tries to

achieve this as a writer is to provoke. This should be kept in mind also and especially for the following subchapter which, indeed, is the most severe in this respect; the more so because Barth, Pynchon, Barthelme, Acker, and Gibson add to this criticism with intense reckonings, going from the harsh to the extreme, with regard to the Vietnam War, the Nixon administration, Reaganomics, clamp downs on protesters and free speech in general, and other events in American history that sparked intense internal dissent.

Up to now, to conclude the first half of this chapter on *Formations*, formative processes have been examined in the texts that directly or indirectly relate to myth: from the foundations of societies and of the self that become more elusive the more they are probed, to the dissolution of cultural and individual identities in the process of nation formation. Violence, in each case, has been found to be a major contributing factor, if not a catalyst. In the following two subchapters, formation processes are explored that build upon these foundations. But the "cut" between mythical foundations and social formation processes turns out to be not a very deep one: many elements discussed so far will again surface and reveal more details in this context, and violence remains—indeed—essential.

3. State of Violence: Lex Americana

With these versions of "America," conceived as built upon the violent and elusive foundations of mythical narratives, it is to be expected that the establishment of a social contract and the enforcement of a system of law and order will not be perceived in the texts as an altogether rational and civic process too, or a nonviolent one for that matter. The treatments in the texts, both literary and critical, have been found to concentrate on three major angles. The first angle is a peculiar *absence* of the law, noticeably

often set against the backdrop of workers' rights and union formation, where different groups fight each other violently with only marginal police presence, or none at all. The second angle, evolving from the first, revolves around an increasing *abuse* of the law in terms of executive and juridical power where the state, as will be seen, is pitched against the people. The third angle relates to the perceived *overpresence* of the law, i. e., a perceived fondness for its most rigid interpretation and execution, combined with self-righteousness and the enjoyment of punishment. While all three of these angles have ethical implications, the third, it turns out, virtually opens a floodgate in this regard, and will lead, as discussed in the third and fourth section, to the very foundations of democracy and the intricate dependencies between literature and democracy.

Picket Wars

The view of America's origins as a struggle of opposing forces barely kept in check by governmental supervision is sustained in the texts in more modern settings, including the period from the late nineteenth century until after the end of World War II up to the 1950s. But while the texts still maintain their playfulness, the tone employed for this period is somewhat different: instead of comic relief there is perceptively more sarcasm; hilarious exaggerations are increasingly replaced by deadpan "matter-of-fact" assessments; and mythically stylized violence is often superseded by gritty realism.

With the two major exceptions of Acker's rendition of the Chicago Haymarket events in 1886 in *The Adult Life of Toulouse Lautrec by Henri Toulouse Lautrec* and the 1937 Chicago steelworker riots in Coover's *Whatever Happened to Gloomy Gus of the Chicago Bears?*—both events will be outlined below—the police is of next to no importance in these conflicts. This is the case, for example, in Barth's sketches of the 1937 strikes

and picket lines for minimum wages and against their employers' ban on national labor unions in Maryland.[14] While the farmworkers beat up cannery workers and truckdrivers and are in turn attacked by company guards while an overturned tomato truck lies on the street like a "gutted elephant," the state troopers arrest "some of them" but "seemed interested only in clearing the avenue for traffic" (36–37). The only physical intervention by the police is a joint venture between the troopers and the pickets themselves to wrestle down one of the pickets "who wielded his UNFAIR sign like a bat" (37). In Pynchon's portrait of a family of labor rights activists in the 1930 in *Vineland* (74 ff.), legs are crushed in targeted "accidents" during the struggle between loggers and agents from the "Employers' Association" in California; "company finks" in Montana miner strikes are shot or dropped into mine shafts "so deep you might as well say they ran all the way to Hell"; and labor activists are shot at "by hired goons from the Associated Farmers" and "by Pinkertons," the latter a motif soon to be returned to within the context of the Chicago Haymarket events—all the while the police is absent or just marginally present, only turning up at less severe events and making arrests at "free-speech fights" (75–77). Similar rules apply during some "dirty fighting" between stage workers on strike and "a thousand IATSE goons to break it" in Hollywood in the late 1940s, IATSE being the International Alliance of Theatrical Stage Employes[15] who sided with the Warner Studios on this occasion, with the character Hub musing that "he'd thought he was fighting World War II to keep just this from happening to the world" (*Vineland* 289).

Such confrontations proceed in an even more brutal manner in

---

[14] The events are modeled after the strikes in Maryland in June 1937 against the Phillips Packing Company (which appears in Barth's text as the "Albany Brothers" cannery). Cf. Peter B. Levy, *Civil War on Race Street: The Civil Rights Movement in Cambridge, Maryland* 24 ff.

[15] "Employes" represents the labor union's retained historical spelling.

Coover's *The Origin of the Brunists*, focusing on inter-union fighting and the added element of ethnic origins. Set against the backdrop of the late 1950s or early 1960s in a fictitious mining town, possibly located in Illinois, one of the characters remembers the inter-union rivalries from the 1940s:

> ["]He and his buddies nearly wrecked the union movement through these parts. [...] For awhile, it was like one union for Italians, one for Americans. [...] Guys got killed in those days, and it wasn't only the scabs. [...] A buddy of mine got it, right in the brains, one of the toughest union men we ever had, and just about everybody knows it was Baxter shot him, but there was no way of proving it. Back then, we blamed it on the operators because we needed evidence against them, and we was afraid of busting up our own ranks, but everybody knew.["] (105)

> There [were] some pictures from the Bruno family album, including a news photo from the late twenties of old Antonio Bruno bringing a gun butt down on somebody's luckless head during the union struggles—same glittering eyes as his boy and a grin splitting his tough lean jaws. (299)

Violence abounds during the formation of the unions, with the police nowhere in sight. But the union activists themselves often qualify as stand-ins, employing methods usually associated with oppressive police tactics. This includes, e. g., "hotbox" brainwashing techniques from the "union organizing days": pinning "the Meredith kid in one lamplit corner" and "breaking him" into confession, defection, greatful weeping, and finally into joy (366). As one of the protagonists sums it up:

> It was a time of physical and psychological insecurity, a time of anti-union violence and inter-union wars, a time of Ku-Klux Klan persecutions of immigrant Catholics, and particularly of Italians [...] Then came the crash of 1929, and by 1933, West Condon's largest industry was relief. West Condon then was a town of intense poverty, of hatred and suspicion, of prohibition gangsterism, of corruption and lawlessness. (387)

This motif of the police force actually being the least threat for anyone involved can also be found in Barthelme's texts, though these are typically —with exceptions—not set against specific historical backgrounds. Among them is the brutal beating of pickets in "Marie, Marie, Hold on Tight" from

Come Back, Dr. Caligari, who demonstrate rather philosophically against the "human condition," by youths who equate this topic with "not believing in God" *(*120–21). Correspondingly, in an essay from *Not-Knowing*, originally published in *The New Yorker*, Barthelme reports a real-life incident where he is approached by four kids, two of them "carrying pieces of pipe," and asked if he is "straight," with the obvious intention of beating him up in case he is not:

> And I was later told by my hosts that there are these bands of little kids wandering around that part of the West Village beating up gays. And that it's been going on for about two years. And that nobody seems to be able to do anything about it. (29–30)

As has been mentioned, there are two major exceptions to this treatment, the first related to the events surrounding the historical Chicago Haymarket shootings from 1886. These shootings were triggered by a bomb initially thought to be thrown by a group of anarchists who were convicted and hanged for the crime, but later suspected to be thrown by a Pinkerton *agent provocateur.* Although the demonstrators in Acker's *The Adult Life of Toulouse Lautrec by Henri Toulouse Lautrec* are later pitched against the judiciary, the role of the police is still somewhat ambiguous:

> The meeting goes peacefully enough. A heavy storm drives away most of the people. The police order the meeting to close. Samuel Fielden, one of the demonstration leaders, who's still speaking, objects. He tells the cop the meeting's orderly. The police lieutenant insists. Suddenly, a bomb explodes the crowd.
>
> Who threw the bomb?
>
> The day is wet, cold, and windy. One policeman, several other people wounded. The police start to shoot. Demonstrators policemen wounded killed. (205)

In Coover's treatment of the 1930's steelworker riots in *Whatever Happened to Gloomy Gus of the Chicago Bears?*, finally, no such ambiguity can be found. Rather, it is "Chicago's old conspiracy called law and

order":

> Poor old Gus was the eleventh fatality from Sunday's confrontation down at Republic Steel, most of them shot in the back; hundreds more were wounded and bashed, and now Kelly's cops, not merely exonerated but eulogized for their wholesale shooting and clubbing of unarmed workers (okay, they weren't all workers), have been given open license to hunt down all "agitators." (11).

Here, at last, the conflict is treated with the familiar distribution of pickets and demonstrators on one side and the police force acting on behalf of the employers and the "strikebreaker gangs" on the other. This includes *agent provocateurs* and all kinds of atrocities, from shooting kids and pregnant women to throwing people with shotgun wounds into prison without medical attention. The incident is closely modeled after the "Republic Steel Strike," also dubbed "The Memorial Day massacre of 1937," where police fired on strikers outside a Chicago steelmill, and Coover draws heavily on eyewitness accounts and a surviving newsreel—barring the "eleventh fatality," the entirely fictitious Gloomy Gus.

Nevertheless, for events that are set in recognizable historical periods up to the late 1940, the motif of the alliance of executive power with corporate interests is barely touched upon in the texts. It becomes, though, much more important and more frequent in settings from the second half of the twentieth century onward, along developments that will be discussed in the following section.

The War Within

It is not altogether clear whether a chronological history of events would actually correspond to this rather abrupt change in the texts from internal conflicts primarily fought between different parts of the population that dominate in settings from the earliest American settlements throughout the

1950s, to internal conflicts defined primarily by violent struggles of parts of the population against the state and vice versa from the 1950s on.

Both treatments, though, are strongly linked by the common element that these struggles are "internal." Only Acker's and Spivak's texts—related to their at times "foreign" points of view as mentioned above—forcefully and repeatedly engage "external" problems caused by colonization and first world warfare; the majority of the texts at hand, in contrast, focus on America's "war within." In almost all settings, internal strife takes center stage, contrasting sharply with the European experience. Moreover, beginning with the Korean war, even major conflicts in the second half of the twentieth century first and foremost serve as a backdrop for focusing on large scale civil unrest at home, suppressive and often oppressive countermeasures by the state, and "domestic violence" of various kinds in general. Being at odds with the government seems to have become second nature for Americans, lending itself to Barthelme's deadpan, double-edged humor in "Up, Aloft in the Air" from *Come Back, Dr. Caligari*:

> The man from Southern Rhodesia cornered him in the dangerous hotel elevator. "Do you think you have the right to hold opinions which differ from those of President Kennedy?" he asked. "The President of your land?" But the party made up for all that, or most of it, in a curious way. (126)

In Coover's *The Public Burning,* the war in Korea serves "Uncle Sam" quite successfully as an instrument to blackmail Americans into toeing the line. This still works because the war is perceived not only as being vital for American interests, but also as constituting an important part in the larger context of the Cold War. Thus, opposing the American engagement in Korea can be denounced as being pro-communist which can trigger witch hunts that—as the events surrounding McCarthy's blacklists demonstrate (cf., e. g., Pynchon, *Vineland* 81)—generate at least as much violence among the population itself as violence of the upcoming variety in the texts

which rather pitches the people and the government against each other.

The scale, finally, tips decidedly in favor of violence between the authorities and the people in settings related to the Vietnam war. In *The Friday Book,* Barth recalls the period's campus atmosphere in a manner which echoes the televised "duck & cover" instructions to prepare for a nuclear attack, issued by the government in the 1950s:

> While I worry about our maybe getting truncheoned by indiscriminating, fed-up cops, veteran graduate students sniff the air as connoisseurs sniff wine and say things like "Peppergas. Berkeley. Sixty-seven." [...] If we get gassed, we are not to rub our eyes, but bathe them in the drinking fountain. If push comes to shove, double up on the floor to protect gut, kidneys, and testicles; clasp head in hands to protect ears and skull. (92)

That the war is increasingly perceived as essentially fought at home is especially evident in the systematic metonymical replacement of vocabulary associated with civil unrest by war terminology. This technique, especially obvious in Pynchon's *Vineland,* comprises a wide range of executions from the subtle to the straightforward. By applying, for example, elements of equipment identification in both formal and informal[16] military speech, a surveillance camera mounted on a helicopter evokes hardware of a much more lethal kind:

> No hour day or night was exempt from helicopter visits, though this was still back in the infancy of overhead surveillance, with a 16mm Arri "M" on a Tyler Mini-Mount being about state of the art as far as Frenesi knew. (209)

This is complemented by straightforward applications that transform 1960s America into an outright war zone:

> "Gates are shut," DL reported, "figure a minute 'n' a half each with a bold cutter, plus at least three Huey Cobras in the air, FFAR's, grenade launchers, Gatling guns, the works." [...]

---

[16] The informal element being the widespread practice of "nickname abbreviation" in military speech, as, e. g., "Arri" for "Arriflex" in the following example.

> [T]hey exited at last into brightly sunlit terrain where they could hear in the distance the invading motor convoy and the blades of the helicopters, merged in an industrious roar that could as well have been another patch of developer condos going up. (191)

Here, the overall impression is further escalated by Pynchon's ploy of associating the approaching convoy with the peacetime activity of condo building, a metaphor that immediately cuts back into the metonymic operation and advances the contextual ambivalence.

The convoy's "enemy," appropriately, includes people such as the sisters Ditzah and Zipi, who run around in battle fatigues, spray-paint "Smash the State" on public walls, and keep "plastic explosive in Tupperware containers in the icebox," later declaring to have indeed been "anarchist bombers" while pretending to be film editors (194). And, again appropriately, *Vineland*'s main antagonist FBI agent Brock Vond high-handedly deploys his "law enforcement" personnel in a manner rather evocative of dealing with opposing elements in an occupied country:

> "Oh—you'd have no choice. You'd have to come." He was smiling.
>
> She moved her pretty jaw a little forward. "I wouldn't come."
>
> "Then a man in a uniform, with a big pistol, would have to make you come." (201)

The campus community *The People's Republic of Rock'n'Roll* in *Vineland* is infiltrated by the federal police by means of blackmailing and brainwashing the movement's key figures into cooperation, followed by a staged "internal" assassination of the *Republic*'s leader, notwithstanding that he himself has been coerced into working for the FBI, and the *Republic* is subsequently attacked by forces that amount to a military onslaught, quarantined against the media and with phone lines cut off, in a "scattered nightlong propagation of human chaos, random shooting, tear gas from above, buildings and cars set ablaze, everyone a possible enemy" (247).

Thus, with momentous consequences for the social contract, the role of the police is redefined—not only in Pynchon's texts, but also in texts by Coover, Acker, Barth, or Gibson, as will be seen—by bridging the motifs of "wild west style" justice and the perceived threat of ever increasing totalitarian control. No longer are the police the protector of the people, or even the ambivalently neutral force as depicted in settings up to the 1950s. This change, moreover, is experienced as having developed almost overnight in retrospect: "It was a moment of light, in which the true nature of police was being revealed to him. 'They're breaking people's heads?'" (*Vineland* 207).

This development becomes even more pronounced, and more violent, in such fantastic environments as Coover's *Pinocchio in Venice,* Gibson's *Neuromancer*, or Acker's *Empire of the Senseless.* In *Pinocchio in Venice*, the "Great Puppet Show Punk Rock Band" takes the place of Pynchon's "People's Republic of Rock'n'Roll." The numerous band musicians and show members, sentient wooden puppets like Arlecchino, Pulcinella, Pantalone, and many other well-known classical characters, are labeled "terrorists" by the authorities. After various foregoing atrocities, the punk rock band is eventually attacked during a rock concert with helicopters, tear gas, and buzz saws, the police "encircling the campus" with "all exits blocked." In the ensuing chaos, in a "mad crush of terrorized rock fans and puppets, trampling each other in their desperate search for an exit," the puppets are torn apart, dismembered, and thrown into fires by the attacking police (141–49).

In order to generate public chaos as a cover for a covert operation in Gibson's *Neuromancer*, a fake "terrorist attack" is staged by the protagonists in an office building. The people, panicking under a combination of drugs and subliminal messages, surge out of the elevators toward the street doors, but are met by the police—now a privatized force—with the

"foam barricades of the Tacticals and the sandbag-guns of the BAMA Rapids." Bodies pile "three deep on the barricades," while the "hollow thumping of the riot guns" provide a "constant background for the sound the crowd made as it surged back and forth across the lobby's marble floor":

> Case had never heard anything like that sound.
>
> Neither, apparently, had Molly. "Jesus," she said, and hesitated. It was a sort of keening, rising into a bubbling wail of raw and total fear. The lobby floor was covered with bodies, clothing, blood, and long trampled scrolls of yellow printout. (67)

In Acker's highly politicized retelling of *Neuromancer*'s key events in *Empire of the Senseless,* this scene develops into an even darker, apocalyptic vision of the police force of the future:

> In the white noise the cops arrived so that they could kill everybody. Round revolving cars emitted sonar waves. Certain sonar vibrations blinded those not in the cars; other levels numbing effectively chopped off limbs; other levels caused blood to spurt out of the mouths nostrils and eyes. The buildings were pink. [...] The cops' faces, as they killed off the poor people, as they were supposed to, were masks of human beings. (37)

But putting America's social contract into question does not stop with the breakdown of the role of the police as a protective force, a role that has been somewhat precarious to begin with. Most strongly pronounced in Pynchon's *Vineland,* Barth's *Sabbatical* and *The Tidewater Tales*, or Coover's *The Public Burning* and *A Political Fable*—not to mention most texts by Acker and Gibson—is also the perceived threat of the judiciary's turning against the people along with the executive. The respective treatments in the texts often build on actual laws that are abused and frequently directed against all kinds of "disagreeable" people, as, e. g., the RICO act in *Vineland* (cf. 347, 357)[17]. Tied to dubious evidence, such laws,

---

[17] Referring to the "Racketeer Influenced and Corrupt Organizations Act," enacted in 1970. Created to fight organized crime, its provision that those found guilty of rather broadly defined "racketeering activities" have to forfeit "all ill-gotten gains and interest" lends itself, according to the unfolding events in *Vineland*, to easy abuse when

as the narrator in *Vineland* sees it, can make the basic principle "innocent till proven guilty" sound like having once existed on "another planet, think they used to call it America, long time ago" (360).

From there, the settings of the abovementioned texts advance to a 1980s America that is pervaded by an atmosphere of fear: the fear of sliding continuously towards totalitarianism where people are, or will be, held in mass-detention centers or disappear without a trace, where the government kills people and lies about it, where massive joint exercises are conducted with unprecedented amassment of executive power,[18] and whole areas are defined and permeated by "regionwide networks" of military installations like Pynchon's Sacramento Delta in *Vineland* (306) and Barth's Tidewater Maryland in *The Tidewater Tales* (72–73). An America where the social glue is not provided by a social contract, but by Uzi theme parks with courses as "Third World Thrills" and "Scum of the City" or customized "Hit List" line-ups of public personalities on the screens of old TV sets, "as a means of resolving many of our social problems" (*Vineland* 18–19), an America where silliness and violence converge:

> Oh, you know: a sentimentality, a vulgarity, a *silliness* about our national life almost as ubiquitous as its violence. A loose cannon on the deck of history, our USA, we often sigh, with an inane happy-face plastered on its muzzle and a wiseass bumper sticker on its undercarriage. (Barth*, Once Upon a Time* 71)

So far, two of the three angles mentioned above have been discussed: the absence of the law as a defining feature in the texts that are set in periods up to the middle of the twentieth century, and the abuse of the law, i. e., the abuse of executive and juridical power, from the 1950s onward. The

---

combined with other legal provisions to allow the preventive seizure of property without trial.

[18] As an example, see Thoreen, *Fourth Amendment* 219, for the particulars of the Reagan administration's "Rex84 Alpha Ex-plan" targeted in *Vineland.*

viewpoints adopted in the texts as well as the insistent and often out-spoken criticism can, pertaining to both angles, be consistently located at the liberal-to-left side of the American political spectrum. The protagonists tend to be found on the side of worker, civil rights, or anti-war movements, or, as it is often the case in Barth's texts, in "liberal academia"—which, most of the time, leaves them at the receiving end of the often massive violence surrounding these events in the texts. Before the political and ethical questions of violence and state power raised in these texts will be explored in greater depth in the final section, the perceived "overpresence" of the law, the third angle mentioned above, shall be introduced. The often provocatively exaggerated accounts pertaining to the Law's "rigidity" and "righteousness" discussed in this context will also add to the subsequent appraisal of law and state power in Western-style democracies, complemented by passages from the critical texts.

Holding the Law

What is often attacked or ridiculed in the texts with regard to the perceived "overpresence" of the law is it's "unbendable nature," together with the most rigid execution and exaction of punishment—accompanied, in turn, by self-righteous enjoyment. How this is enacted in the texts varies from subtle tongue-in-cheek treatments to the tumultuous and outright cynical.

The stubborn insistence on rules and laws is a recurrent motif in Barthelme's stories, often in the form of an initial demand's build-up with at times hilarious, at times horrific consequences. When a policeman in *Snow White* insists that the guests of a sidewalk café move farther back from the sidewalk, he himself has to concede that it was better there: "But the law is the law. That is what is wrong with it, that it is the law." (172) Here, the question of right or wrong is approached rather lightly, and the build-up proceeds from spilling wine to "wrinkling" the whole café:

"Who has wrinkled my tablecover?" We regarded the table-cover, a distressed area it was true. "Someone will pay for the ironing of that." Then we rose up and wrinkled the entire sidewalk café, with our bare hands. It was impossible to tell who was wrong, when we had finished. (173)

A somewhat darker treatment can be found in the vignette "The first thing the baby did wrong ..." in *Overnight to Many Distant Cities:*

The first thing the baby did wrong was to tear pages out of her books. So we made a rule that each time she tore a page out of a book she had to stay alone in her room for four hours, behind the closed door. (119)

The stubborn insistence on the rule leads to longer and longer confinement periods with an unnerving "crying and screaming from behind the closed door," interfering with "normal feeding," and "worrying my wife." These periods build up to "eighty-eight hours," and at one point the door is taken down by the narrator's wife with a crowbar, only to be reinstalled by the narrator and augmented with a "big lock" that opens by inserting a magnetic card. But no progress is made:

The baby's name was Born Dancin'. We gave the baby some of our wine, red, white, and blue, and spoke seriously to her. But it didn't do any good. (120)

Finally, the narrator concedes an "ethical crisis" by realizing that the baby, calculating her debt, would have to be kept in her room for several decades. At this point, the narrator declares that tearing out pages is okay, and having torn pages out in the past has also been okay, and proceeds to a curious happy ending:

The baby and I sit happily on the floor, side by side, tearing pages out of books, and sometimes, just for fun, we go out on the street and smash a windshield together. (121)

This is not easily deciphered, but it can at least be said that something is felt to be amiss with the acquired notions of rightness and wrongness in America and elsewhere. Moreover, there are Barthelme's deadpan execu-

tions of Bill in *Snow White* (180) or, more elaborately, in "Our Friend Colby" from *Amateurs*:

> Some of us had been threatening our friend Colby for a long time, because of the way he had been behaving. And now he'd gone too far, so we decided to hang him. Colby argued that just because he had gone too far (he did not deny that he had gone too far) did not mean that he should be subjected to hanging. Going too far, he said, was something everybody did sometimes. We didn't pay much attention to this argument. We asked him what sort of music he would like played at the hanging. He said he'd think about it but it would take him a while to decide. (29)

This sets the tone for the entire story. All details relating to the execution are planned and bickered over and decided on not unlike the preparations for a town party, until Colby is hanged at last, and the two things best remembered by the narrator "about the whole episode" are "the grateful look" Colby gave him for speaking out against using a wire instead of a rope, and that "nobody has ever gone too far again" (34).

While Coover's treatments of upholding the law often appear as deadpan or tongue-in-cheek as Barthelme's, his incredibly tumultuous executions could not be more different. Both the execution of the Rosenbergs in *The Public Burning* and the eventual lynching of the Cat in the Hat in *A Political Fable* proceed for pages and pages with increasingly graphic details and ever more enthusiastic partaking by all hands involved. The Cat in the Hat, having run for president with excellent prospects until it went "too far" by proposing to abolish America's military, is finally dropped and set up for public lynching by its own party. In the course of which the cat is shot in the head, hung upside down, punched, kicked, his balls slammed "with the blunt end of an ax" until finally "all went after him with whatever they had at hand, switchblades, hatpins, goads, hatchets, scissors, rusty razor blades." After it is skinned alive and the remains have been burned, its "roasted corpse" is passed around and eaten—culminating in a "red, white, and blue" mass hallucination where the "whole hoopla

of American history stormed through our exploded minds" (76–85). The execution of Ethel Rosenberg is similarly treated in *The Public Burning*, but with the important difference that the frenzied audience that rushes onto the stage and scrambles for the electric switch after the initial surges fail to kill her, consists of well known public figures including Richard Nixon, Lyndon B. Johnson, Joe McCarthy, Foster Dulles, and many more (509–17).

In Coover's texts, the law itself seems to be able to generate the worst lawlessness imaginable. This ties in with his treatment of ambivalent "frontier justice" and its peculiar mixture of principled rigidity and sadistic enjoyment. In *Ghost Town,* in the wake of a bank heist, the new sheriff and his deputy enter the wrecked inside of the bank. Behind them a little boy enters and picks up a coin from on the floor; the deputy whirls around, shoots him dead, hangs the boy's dead body on a coat hook, and admonishes the sheriff:

> Jest caint abide a thievin brat [...] Y'know, when it comes t'metin out justice, sheriff, he says, the cigarillo bobbing like a wagging finger, yu'd appear a smidgen slow on the draw. (36)

Connected to the motif of lawlessness generated by the law itself is another recurring motif: that of justice protecting the strong against the weak by being dealt out the harshest to those who are too weak or too poor to defend themselves. Or too innocent, when Acker's "sampled" character Alexander in *Empire of the Senseless* is imprisoned by the judge for pimping while he is in truth the prostitute in question's boyfriend. It is being innocent that seals his fate: while his girlfriend is released on bail provided by her real pimp, Alexander is not: "Since Alexander was innocent or not a businessman, there was no pimp to buy him out of jail" (5). He is sentenced and imprisoned and later, after having served his time, condemned to death for going with a sawed-off shotgun after the vice squad that arres-

ted him, killing four before the cops eventually manage to "nail him to a wall." But the mistake was his:

> Alexander was innocent beyond the point of real innocence to that of stupidity. For he believed that he was innocent. Perhaps he was, but he had this world wrong. (5)

Law and punishment are also a recurrent motif in Gibson's texts, extrapolating many of the observed characteristics into a dark and gloomy future. In "Dog Fight" from *Burning Chrome*, e. g., petty thieves are exiled from Washington D. C. by linking the sight of the Washington Monument with an artificially induced phobia so they would "die rather than look at it again" (146–48). In *Mona Lisa Overdrive,* a similar kind of punishment becomes central for the story. Slick, also a minor criminal, was sentenced to a jail term once for "stealing rich people's cars," a punishment that—in order to make maintenance easier—includes neuro-chemically induced "Korsakov's," a method to erase short-term memory in five minute-intervals:

> The trick was that you retained long-term memory up to the point where they put you on the stuff. That way, they could train you to do something before you started serving your time and you didn't forget how to do it. Mostly you did stuff that robots could do. They'd trained him to assemble miniature geartrains; when he'd learned to put one together inside five minutes, that was it. (139)

After serving his sentence, the Korsakov syndrome, as an aftereffect, is still triggered by severe stress, haunting Slick from the first day on after his release when he crossed the "Solitude," the sprawl's gigantic garbage dump:

> Slick remembered crossing the Solitude on foot. He'd been scared that the Korsakov's would come back, that he'd forget where he was and drink cancer-water from the slimed red puddles on the rusty plain. Red scum and dead birds floating with their wings spread. (178–79)

Later employed in a junk yard factory, Slick tries to overcome his trauma by building gigantic, remote-controlled mechanical monsters out of junk,

representative of his inner law-and-order nightmare figures:

> When he'd gotten out, when it was over—three years strung out in a long vague flickering chain of fear and confusion measured off in five-minute intervals, and it wasn't the intervals you could remember so much as the transitions ... When it was over, he'd needed to build the Witch, the Corpsegrinder, then the Investigators, and finally, now, the Judge." (77)

Tied to the main story line, Slick's "monsters" are later vindicated up to a certain point by contributing to his survival and that of his friends during an assault by corporate mercenaries.

The texts are almost unanimous in their severity with which certain practices of law and punishment are questioned. Coover's texts, especially, question time and again the very foundations of our notions of punishment by adopting the viewpoints of "punished" characters from myths and fairy tales. Notable examples are the queen in "The Dead Queen" from *Child Again*, dancing herself to death in "flaming iron clogs" at the wedding feast while Snow White laughs "with open glee at her stepmother's terrible entertainment" (52), or, in *Stepmother*, the fate of "Stepmother" and her daughters, the hapless "ugly stepsisters," who are sentenced to their most horrible deaths by their righteous antagonists. A final and most cynical example is Coover's meta-story "Puzzle Page" from *Child Again*: a tale about the execution of five prisoners by a firing squad, told from the commanding lieutenant's perspective. A story which, in the end, pretends to turn out to be not a story at all but a logical riddle as it is often found in a magazine's "Puzzle Page," and the reader is allegedly supposed to solve "the names and occupations" of each prisoner and "where in the line they stood" prior to being shot.

Dead Serious

Connected to the question of the law's putatively unbendable nature and

the kind of punishment this might entail, as explored in the preceding section, are questions about "seriousness" on the one hand and "difficulty" on the other. Both aspects, which will be explained shortly, will turn out to be of importance in the subsequent discussion of ethical questions surrounding state power and the law, along the lines of what has been discussed so far as well as along the literary and critical texts to be explored in this section.

Connected with the already discussed propensity of the law to be taken literally, and applied most rigidly, is the aspect of being "dead serious," an aspect that has the potential, as will be seen, to turn ideas about the purpose of the law as such dialectically upside down. In Barth's *The End of the Road*, this aspect is introduced by the character Joe Morgan, a history teacher:

> If I straighten Rennie out now and then, or tell her that some statement of hers is stupid as hell, or even slug her one, it's because I respect her, and to me that means not making a lot of kinds of allowances for her. Making allowances may be Christian, but to me it would always mean not taking seriously the person you make allowances for. (49)

This comprises apologizing to people, especially for "not having their point of view":

> One day she did it more elaborately than usual, and as soon as the company left I popped her one on the jaw. Laid her out cold. When she came to, I explained to her very carefully why I'd hit her. She cried, and apologized to me for having apologized to other people. I popped her again. (51)

This is picked up as a strategy by the protagonist Jacob Horner, but for completely different purposes. When a female character later in the story laughs at Jacob Horner's statement that he "respects" her and takes her "completely serious, on my own terms," the punishment is already familiar:

> I turned from the wheel and very carefully socked her square on the cheek. The blow threw her head back against the window, and immediately

she began crying.

"As you see, I'm still taking you seriously," I said. (101–02)

To be taken seriously, obviously, has its drawbacks. According to Miller, to introduce the first critical text to this topic's discussion, it can even be connected to totalitarian politics. Recounting his visits to Moscow and Leningrad with several colleagues, Miller reports in "Literature and Value" how artists in the Soviet Union have regularly been "taken seriously" in such a fashion:

> The Americans gasped a little, in 1988, when a Soviet colleague said that a supposedly "antirevolutionary" writer may have "been shot by mistake, a tragic mistake," just as we gasped during our visit to the Soviet Union two years later when, in a museum, we were shown a painting for which the artist was executed. (22)

The Americans are assured that "literature still really matters in the Soviet Union," and that writers "are respected and their political opinions are taken seriously" (23). From this perspective which casts literature as a formidable ethical and political force, any "bad literature" likely to have a "bad moral influence" has to be censored by whatever means necessary, even including having writers shot. This rather frightening prospect, thus, opens up the possibility that being allowed to be "irresponsible" and being exempt from punishment for refusing to be "responsible" might be an important benchmark for a working democracy. This possibility, in turn, connects to accusations raised from both conservative and leftist sides, albeit for different and mutually exclusive reasons, against postmodern literature and literary theory for being "irresponsible," a topic to be addressed later in this section.

Barring the shooting of artists, tendencies to take literary texts similarly serious including efforts to "lawfully" judge and censor them have a long tradition in the West as well. But, as Miller observes reading Derrida in

Topographies, literature is principally tied to freedom of speech which, again, is one of the fundamental principles of democracy. The "right to say everything," it follows, goes hand in hand with the right to "not being held responsible" (cf. 298–99). Tying Derrida's concept of a *démocratie à venir* to a similarly structured concept of a *literature to come*, "irresponsibility vis-a-vis constituted ideological powers is sometimes the only way to begin to fulfill an infinitely more exigent responsibility toward the democracy to come" (299). All literature, moreover, "harbors a secret" that is principally unrecoverable and cannot be given away by "interrogation or torture," covering everything from undecidable events like the real or counterfeit coin in Baudelaire's "La Fausse Monnaie" (309) to how views expressed by the narrator are or are not connected to the views of the writer. As Miller puts it in "Derrida and Literature," dwelling on the same subject:

> Literature is an exploitation of the possibility that any utterance may be "non-serious." It is always possible to say, "That is not me speaking but an imagined persona or character in a literary work." I am not an axe-murderer. I have just written a novel in which I imagine an axe-murderer and tell the story of his life (Dostoevsky's *Crime and Punishment*). (64)

But things are not that simple, as Miller correctly observes. This radical irresponsibility, the right not to respond and to keep the secret, goes against another fundamental tenet of democracy, namely "the notion of the accountable individual who can be held responsible for what he or she has said or done, including what he or she has written, be hailed before the law and compelled to tell the truth" (65).

There is no easy formula to accommodate both aspects, at least in theory, and Miller keeps the question pending. In practice, though, it seems to be accommodated by commuting between being taken seriously, which entails responsibility and accountability before the law, and being aestheticized, enabling absolute irresponsibility and the right to keep a

secret. Consequently, the more serious literature is taken in a given context, the less "free" it is; the more "free" literature is, the less influence it has within its social context. The latter, incidentally, aligns with the impressions articulated by Miller's Russian colleagues about the role of literature in America as utterly negligible ("Literature and Value" 23). And indeed, the aforementioned tendencies and occasional historical and/or regional periods of increased relevance and responsibility notwithstanding, the scale by and large tips into the direction of an aestheticized literature that is more free to explore and less socially relevant at the same time.

Then again, according to Spivak in *In Other Worlds*, accommodating both aspects is a critical task for writers and critics who feel the need to make an aestheticized literature socially relevant "in a world of massive brutality, exploitation, and sexual oppression" (95) without bowing to the attached responsibility before the law that would substantially curtail its potential for exploring different concepts and advancing change. Spivak proposes a "permanent displacement" of the "bewildering contradiction" between life and art, between social relevance and aesthetic freedom:

> Everyone reads life and the world like a book. Even the so-called 'illiterate.' But especially the 'leaders' of our society, the most 'responsible' nondreamers: the politicians, the businessmen, the ones who make plans. Without the reading of the world as a book, there is no prediction, no planning, no taxes, no laws, no welfare, no war. Yet these leaders read the world in terms of rationality and averages, as if it were a textbook. The world actually writes itself with the many-leveled, unfixable intricacy and openness of a work of literature. If, through our study of literature, we can ourselves learn and teach others to read the world in the 'proper' risky way, and to act upon that lesson, perhaps we literary people would not forever be such helpless victims. (95)

Such a meta-level, though, where literature and the world converge and "the separation between the world of action and the world of the disciplines" is put into question, is not easily achieved. As a matter of fact, it is the point of entry for another, albeit closely related dispute touched upon earlier within the context of mutually exclusive accusations. According to

de Man in *Aesthetic Ideology*, the "principle of exclusion" is assumed to operate "between aesthetic theory and epistemological speculation, or, in a symmetrical pattern, between a concern with aesthetics and a concern with political issues" (105). This assumed exclusion not only impedes the aforementioned accommodation, but takes a rather paradoxical turn when critical theory keeps being "dismissed as a harmless academic game or denounced as a terrorist weapon" (de Man, *Allegories of Reading x*) or, as Miller puts it, "On the one hand we do nothing, on the other are violent anarchists" (*Theory Now and Then* 198).

This curious dilemma is enacted on several levels. Derrida, for example, encounters considerable hostility from both sides of the political spectrum by being criticized in, again, mutually exclusive ways less because of his political positions but because he arrives at these positions by way of philosophical cognition: "Reactionaries deny him access to the aesthetic because he is too much of a philosopher, while proponents of political activism deny him access to the political because he is too concerned with questions of aesthetics" (de Man, *Aesthetic Ideology* 106). Running parallel to this line of reasoning and connected to law, judgment, and punishment is another argument from public disputes about deconstruction, namely the persistent allegation that deconstruction's refusal to judge would constitute the "judgment" that texts have no meaning or that no interpretation is superior to any other—attacking it, as Johnson puts it in *The Wake of Deconstruction*, "for both an insufficiency and an excess of judgment" (26).

The fondness for self-righteous judgment, finally, is often coupled with an aversion to complexity, as it is manifest in "obscurity" charges aimed at postmodern texts in general. Here, the texts' refusal to judge—and, to a certain extent, the aforementioned reservation of a text's right to refuse to being questioned, to keep a secret, and to be "irresponsible" at times—

meets "the claim not to understand," as Culler and Lamb observe in their introduction to *Just Being Difficult? Academic Writing in the Public Arena*. This claim to not understand is anything but "an innocent posture"; it is "one of considerable power, in which authorities often entrench themselves" (2–3):

> When difficulty is seen as elitist, inimical to the ideal of democracy, a disinclination to try to understand anything complicated can readily cloak itself in self-righteousness. (3)

In a context where power is anchored not in knowledge or understanding but in ignorance and in the claim "not to understand," the role allocated to literature and how it would relate to the law coalesces with attitudes explored in the context of judgment and punishment in the preceding section.

Thus, the formation processes followed in this chapter along occurrences of violence, from mythological narratives about the origin of communities and of the self to the formation of social contracts and Western-style democracies, with their precarious divisions of power and their seemingly irreconcilable forces, have now reached, roughly, a state resembling that of contemporary Western and especially American civilization in the late twentieth and early twenty-first century. But, following the threads of violence further, there is still uncharted terrain left which, by and large, might harbor two of the most "postmodern" aspects in this context altogether. These aspects, seemingly opposed but on closer inspection intimately linked, are the attempted retrieval of one's origins on the one hand —not only connecting back to the first half of this chapter but operating as a stand-in for, or an allegory of, the retrieval of origins as such—and some vistas into possible futures, extrapolating from what, so far, has been encountered. Both aspects will be discussed in this chapter's following and final subchapter, alongside the rules and repercussions of "paranoia" as a

condition that has often, and perhaps justifiably so, been identified as one of postmodernism's master tropes.

4. Craving Conspiracies: The Paranoid Mind

In the course of this final subchapter on *Formations*, many elements that have been touched upon throughout this chapter will be encountered again in such a manner as to suggest that they indeed belong to the "foundations" of postmodern literature as such. The two seemingly opposed aspects mentioned above—retrieval of origins and exploration of possible futures—will turn out to correspond to two major loci around which these elements are concentrated: mythical narratives and the culture of paranoia. In many texts, as has already been remarked upon on several occasions, paranoia is tightly knit into the formative framework of "America" in the form of all-encompassing conspiracies on numerous levels. It is often, for example, employed as a master trope pertaining to both content and design, and even incorporate the "reader," the "narrator," and the "process of reading" into intricate and many-leveled textual conspiracies; Barth's *The Sot-Weed Factor* and Pynchon's *The Crying of Lot 49,* especially, take this meta-textual approach and deeply embed it in the making of "America"—Barth into the formative process, as has been discussed in the first half of this chapter, and Pynchon into the impossibility of its retrieval, to be discussed below. "History" and "conspiracy" are inextricably tied together in many other texts as well—Pynchon's *V, Gravity's Rainbow*, *Vineland,* and even *Mason & Dixon*; Barth's *Letters, Sabbatical*, and *The Tidewater Tales;* and practically every text by Gibson and Acker. In Barthelme's texts, paranoia and conspiracy are represented too, either as a dominant motif as is the case in "Game" from *Unspeakable Practices, Unnatural Acts* or "A City of Churches" from *Sadness,* or as an array of

conspiracy-related elements as in the aforementioned "Great Serpent" sequence from *The Dead Father*. With respect to Coover, his "The Return of the Dark Children" will serve later on as an example for a social contract shattered by paranoia. But this story is rather an exception, as is his "The Grand Hotel Nymphlight" from *The Grand Hotels (of Joseph Cornell)* with its intricately nested layers of real or imagined observers. By and large, "conspiracy" in Coover's texts is treated in an altogether different manner, relating to underlying "scripts" the characteristics of which will be explored in the chapter on *Iterations*. In the following sections, the relationship between paranoia and formative processes will be traced along selected texts, bracketed by a critical assessment by Fredric Jameson and an essay about corporate power, politics, and the history of philosophy by Spivak, and how this relates to violence—along a trajectory where political and corporate power eventually merge into the iconic, closing this chapter's circle with a return to its point of departure in ancient Greece.

Developing Fear

According to an argument developed by Fredric Jameson in *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism,* postmodern literature and especially cyberpunk are affine to conspiracy theories and paranoia insofar as they employ a "faulty representation of some immense communicational and computer network." The representation is faulty because it is already a "distorted figuration" of something deeper, namely "the whole world system of a present-day multinational capitalism," i. e., it serves as a shorthand for grasping a decentered global network of power and control even more difficult to grasp than advanced technology itself (37–38). Following the argument's logic, narrative manifestations of conspiracy theories attempt to "think the impossible totality of the contemporary world system" through the figuration of this advanced technology in the context

of "high-tech paranoia":

> [...] in which the circuits and networks of some putative global computer hookup are narratively mobilized by labyrinthine conspiracies of autonomous but deadly interlocking and competing information agencies in a complexity often beyond the capacity of the normal reading mind. [...] It is in terms of that enormous and threatening, yet only dimly perceivable, other reality of economic and social institutions that, in my opinion, the postmodern sublime can alone be adequately theorized. (38)

Jameson goes on to say that such narratives have crystallized in cyber-punk:

> [...] which is fully as much an expression of transnational corporate realities as it is of global paranoia itself: William Gibson's representational innovations, indeed, mark his work as an exceptional literary realization within a predominantly visual or aural postmodern production. (38)

There is much to say about the curious phrasing of cyberpunk being an expression "of" transnational corporate realities, a remark further expanded in a footnote where cyberpunk, and Gibson's texts foremost, become "the supreme *literary* expression if not of postmodernism, then of late capitalism itself" (419n1). As McHale points out in "Whatever Happened to Descriptive Poetics?", this would implicate cyberpunk as being directly, not mediately, determined by "the imagination of the multinationals" (63), and directly, not mediately, expressive of "multinational capitalism" as if cyberpunk were a "transparent encoding of late capitalism" (64). Contrary to such a view, Gibson's texts are as highly self-conscious of their own techniques as any postmodern text, including elements of self-reflexivity and reinscription. Cayce, the protagonist of Gibson's *Pattern Recognition*, asks herself after encountering a familiar person on the same plane whether there might be more to it than "frank anomaly":

> Only, she decides, if the thinks of herself as the center, the focal point of something she doesn't, can't, understand. That had always been Win's first line of defense, within himself: to recognize that he was only a part of something larger. Paranoia, he said, was fundamentally egocentric, and

every conspiracy theory served in some way to aggrandize the believer. (126)

The motif is picked up again later in the text:

> There must always be room for coincidence, Win had maintained. When there's not, you're probably well into apophenia, each thing then perceived as part of an overarching pattern of conspiracy. And while comforting yourself with the symmetry of it all, he'd believed, you stood all too real a chance of missing the genuine threat, which was invariably less symmetrical, less perfect. But which he always, she knew, took for granted was there. (304)

On the plot level, it is indeed inevitably "there"—in Gibson's texts as well as in Pynchon's, Barth's, or Acker's. But such "there-ness" varies: there either *is* a conspiracy, as in Barth's *The Sot-Weed Factor,* Pynchon's *Vineland,* or Acker's *My Mother: Demonology*; or there is no conspiracy, and the characters are caught in a delusional circuit looping back into itself that produces its own causes and effects, like the character Stencil's imagined "V" conspiracy in Pynchon's *V*; or there might or might not be a conspiracy, but whether there is or is not cannot be ascertained by any means, as is the case in Pynchon's *The Crying of Lot 49*.

First and foremost, though, assuming conspiracies is one of the more extreme means employed by the human mind to make sense of seemingly random and unrelated events abundantly provided by "life." Whereas chaos theory as a possible means to connect events in a meaningful way, through its premise of "deterministic chaos," *without* having either to surrender to sheer randomness or resorting to paranoia could in principle offer a more healthy approach, the very idea of a "deterministic chaos" goes deeply against the grain of most people's causative reflexes on the one hand, and their not altogether reliable ideas about "free will" on the other. How a community can, under certain circumstances, succumb to such a paranoia is exemplified in Coover's "The Return of the Dark Children," a postmodern follow-up to the *Pied Piper* tale. Several years have

gone by, a new generation of children has been raised, but the community still lives in the shadow of the "fall," the loss of the children as the result of the failure to pay the piper. This event can neither be repressed nor remedied: with time, the hope of finding the children first turns into resentment, then into dread—blaming the lost, or "dark" children, for each and everything suspicious happening in the town. When the rats return, and with the rats the Black Death, the villagers conclude that this must be the dark children's revenge. In due course, a repressive, totalitarian system is adopted while death becomes more and more frequent through plague, cruel new laws, and murder; and all-embracing theories are developed, capable of explaining every single incident—real, imagined, or "staged" by certain people for personal reasons. This escalates further until, finally, the chilling "solution" is adopted to sacrifice the new generation of children to the dark children and the rats:

> I can hear the children outside now. They are being told they are going off to play with the dark children. They will leave happily. You will all have an opportunity to wave goodbye, but they will probably not even look back. Nor of course will they ever return. (156)

This solution, one can surmise, will not be "final"—the village will never get rid of the dark children. Between the lines, Coover's exemplification of the rise of paranoia in "The Return of the Dark Children" also pertains to similarly structured events during Germany's *Third Reich*. As will be seen, Nazi Germany indeed plays an important role for the development of the conspiracy motif.

Real or imagined conspiracies are prominently staged in Pynchon's texts. They are usually well suffused with violence and often nested into each other in mazelike structures. In *V,* for example, the presumed overarching "V" conspiracy begets its own spin-offs and nested sub-conspiracies. One such sub-conspiracy centers around the legendary "Vheissu,"

a "lost country" and possible piece of the "V"-puzzle, a country with Edenic qualities but rather un-Edenic conditions—"There's barbarity, insurrection, internecine feud. It's no different from any other godforsakenly remote region." (170) From there, Vheissu generates one such sub-conspiracy that fits the maze metaphor particularly well:

> "You are clever, Ferrante. You trust no one."
>
> He shrugged. "Can I afford to?"
>
> "I suppose not. Not when a barbaric and unknown race, employed by God knows whom, are even now blasting the Antarctic ice with dynamite, preparing to enter a subterranean network of natural tunnels, a network whose existence is known only to the inhabitants of Vheissu, the Royal Geographic Society in London, Herr Godolphin, and the spies of Florence."
>
> Ferrante stood suddenly breathless. She was paraphrasing the secret memorandum Stencil had sent back to London not an hour ago. (197)

Equally convoluted, if not even more so, appears the Jesuit conspiracy in Pynchon's *Mason & Dixon.* The Jesuits, who "observe Devotions so transcendent, whilst practicing Crimes so terrestrial" with the help of assassins and advanced technology—"There's Heretics a-plenty and a License to kill" (223–24)—operate from a network of hidden places and communication lines. The "meta-place" the Jesuit conspiracy hides in, though, is the serial gothic novel *The Ghastly Fop*, a novel within the novel, read by some of the minor characters. After a caesura in the main story line, *Mason & Dixon*'s 53rd chapter directly relates the indeed "gothic" adventures of *The Ghastly Fop*'s main character Eliza Fields from her initial abduction by a native tribe to her eventual flight from the Jesuits' operational base in the mountains. Notwithstanding interspersed comments from characters reading this "captive's tale" (526-29), Fields and her Chinese partner Zhang eventually join Mason and Dixon's party of surveyors after their successful flight, crossing the border into the novel proper— and also drag across this border their story's structural paranoia. When Zsuzsa Szabó, a pistol-wielding member of the party who, at the Battle of

Leuthen in 1775, had been "disguis'd as a Youth, riding in a detachment of light cavalry" (536), delivers a particularly "dialectic" reflection on the Prussian mind, Zhang mistakenly identifies her in a fit of paranoia as the Jesuit leader "Wolf of Jesus":

> "'Tis he!" screams Capt. Zhang, leaping to the Platform and taking a position as if astride a Horse, extending his hands precisely before him. [...] "Reveal yourself, Wolf of Jesus. Zhang does not kill Fools, nor may he in honor kill you, whilst you linger within that contemptible disguise." (551–52)

Especially in Barth's and Pynchon's texts, as has been shown throughout this chapter, the history of "America" can be traced along a trail of forged documents, misrouted messages, brazen impersonators, and vast conspiracies. Whereas against the backdrop of the "history of the colonies," at least in Barth's texts, a certain amount of messages can be retrieved and events retraced and reconstructed even if the point of origin is lost, the possibility of any retrieval whatsoever has been forfeited against the backdrop of contemporary America, as will be discussed below, in the final and contemporary "historical letters" in Barth's *Letters*, in *Sabbatical, The Tidewater Tales,* or Pynchon's *The Crying of Lot 49.* At this juncture, two major "brands" of paranoia and conspiracy begin to differentiate: the government and the corporate conspiracy. Both will be successively outlined in the following two sections.

State of Affairs

Letters marks a break in Barth's work with its move from primarily historical or fantastic backgrounds to contemporary ones. This move is enacted in a massively conspiratorial subplot in *Letters* itself: letters and events surrounding several generations of Cookes, Burlingames, and Castines manipulating American history all along from the French and Indian wars to the twentieth century, culminating in Barth's "Paisley" motif of an aban-

doned ship, a corpse, and the CIA. This motif is modeled after the real-life event of the never fully explained death of a former CIA director who was connected with several important events including the Kennedy assassination in 1963 and the controversial defection of KGB Lt. Col. Yuri Nosenko in 1964. Paisley's sloop *Brillig* was found abandoned in Chesapeake Bay, together with several classified documents, and Paisley himself was later found floating in the bay with a gunshot wound to his temple and diving weights attached to his body.

This event, a central motif in *Letters*, *Sabbatical*, and *The Tidewater Tales*, periodically surfaces in other texts as well, including *Coming Soon!!!*.[19] Countless descriptions, narrative enlargements, explanatory theories, and narrative variations of this case are generated, which serve as a point of entry into intelligence/government conspiracies ranging from toxic birthday cards to chemical-biological warfare research, gene splicing, or virus design (cf., e. g., *Sabbatical* 144–45). Of course, the history of the CIA is a copious source for real-life conspiracies of every imaginable kind, and oftentimes a small narrative "nudge" is all that is needed to raise the most fantastic plot from historical details of its operations; a meta-narrative example of which would be the theory of one of the customers in Barthelme's allegorical *Sam's Bar* that "Sam"—the elusive owner of the bar who is always "busy elsewhere" and never actually present, but somehow known to everybody—might have filled in for the "head Kurd" in Kurdistan for a while because the "real head Kurd" might have been napped by the CIA (7–9).

Toxins, drugs, and viruses, of course, are a staple of conspiracy theories and paranoia, and can be met equally often in Pynchon's, Acker's, and Gibson's texts. Especially Pynchon and Acker, moreover, often link

---

[19] *Cf. e. g. Letters 750; Sabbatical 3–4, 109–110, 144–145; The Tidewater Tales 247, 561, 644–45; Coming Soon!!! 4.*

dubious research of this kind with the motif of Nazi scientists brought in by the American government after World War II, which is developed into a major subplot in Pynchon's *Gravity's Rainbow*. In Acker's texts, the combined motif of conspiracy and science often goes willfully over the top, playing, e. g., with elements from actual conspiracy theories regarding AIDS and other diseases which first and foremost infect people from society's lower strata, as in *My Mother: Demonology*:

> Influenced by the Nazi scientists whom the United States government had rescued at the end of World War II, the CIA in the 1960s had begun drug-testing in order to find a chemical that would induce total memory loss in those who had revealed political secrets under coercion and torture. Unfortunately, almost all chemicals that cause full memory loss also stop life. Some years after, a monkey escaped from one of the laboratories in a third-world nation and bit a civilian. The ensuing disease, which developed into the worst plague known in the twentieth century, spread from the third world, through what Mayor —— and others considered the lower echelon of humans, blacks and homosexuals, to New York City, a conglomeration of third-world tribes in a first-world country. Formerly first-world country. (89–90)

Knowledge of these events is, as usual, subsequently repressed. Following through on this combination of motifs, not only American intelligence services but also medical doctors and the American medical system are often involved in Acker's conspiracies. Whereas in Gibson's *Neuromancer* an "AI," an Artificial Intelligence, is pulling the strings, and events enfold primarily at the locale of BAMA, the "Boston-Atlanta Metropolitan," Acker's narrative variations of these events in *Empire of the Senseless* cast AI as American Intelligence and—dropping the initial letter "B"—AMA as the American Medical Association. The principal location in *Empire of the Senseless* is a dark, futuristic Paris overrun by "the Algerians," where the CIA subsequently sets up a covert testing center in a whorehouse and conducts experiments inspired by Nazi scientists. Here, Acker mixes a pastiche of different texts, real persons, and actual events with fantastic plots, characters, and locations. But, as in Barth's or Pynchon's texts, the story's cornerstones, however bizarre, are almost always based on well

documented real-life events. In *Empire of the Senseless*, one such event is the "Operation Midnight Climax" from the 1950s, which was disclosed in the 1970s. During this operation, the CIA conducted secret drug testings on "unconsenting individuals" including unsuspecting customers of hired prostitutes, and watched the effects from behind one-way mirrors. The drugs tested, moreover, had been developed with the help of former Nazi scientists some of which had experimented on Dachau victims (*Empire of the Senseless* 142–43).[20] Launching her story from this historical basis, violence—not untypical for Acker—is cranked into overdrive:

> I was watching when the sailor's cerebral cortex was chopped. I knew death when I saw death. I knew, in the brothel of lobotomies, I was a dead man seeing my skeleton in a mirror, the land of the CIA, or a dream charac-ter who knew that he lived only in the darkest region, of himself, a land or face which he didn't recognize when he was awake. (146)

In most of the texts mentioned so far, the government does not yet target American citizens. But sooner or later, and that pertains to all writers including several motifs and "asides" in Barthelme's stories, Americans become the targets of their own government. This abuse gradually pro-ceeds from undesirables to inconvenient citizens to elite soldiers:

> It is one thing for Drew Mack [...] to accuse the navy of deliberately tar-geting what they knew was a headquarters of the antiwar movement [...] But Andrews himself—no radical, surely, and a man not given to paranoia—agrees that the pilotless aircraft, which he caught sight of from where B. and B. were poised, and pointed out to them, neither swerved nor faltered nor "flamed out," but zipped as if on wires out of nowhere (read Patuxent Naval Air Station), unaccompanied and unpursued, straight into Barataria Lodge.
>
> Four killed. Three others badly burned. (Barth, *Letters* 688)
>
> By morning there were scores of injuries, hundreds of arrests, no repor-ted deaths but a handful of persons unaccounted for. In those days it was still unthinkable that any North American agency would kill its own civilians and then lie about it. So the mystery abided, frozen in time, somewhere beyond

---

[20] Cf., e. g., "Mind-Bending Disclosures," *Time Magazine* 15 Aug 1977. 1 October 2008 <http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,915244,00.html>.

youthful absences surely bound to be temporary, yet short of planned atro-
city. (Pynchon, *Vineland* 248)

> "The war. You in the war, Julie?"
>
> "The war? What's there to know? Lasted three weeks."
>
> "Screaming Fist."
>
> "Famous. Don't they teach you history these days? Great bloody
> postwar political football, that was. Watergated all to hell and back. Your
> brass, Case, your Sprawlside brass in, where was it, McLean? In the
> bunkers, all of that . . . great scandal. Wasted a fair bit of patriotic young flesh
> in order to test some new technology. They knew about the Russians'
> defenses, it came out later. Knew about the emps, magnetic pulse weapons.
> Sent these fellows in regardless, just to see." Deane shrugged. "Turkey shoot
> for Ivan." (Gibson, *Neuromancer* 35)

American citizens, finally, have turned into mere assets, utterly expend-
able, in narratives heavily influenced, at times traumatically so, by a de-
cade that saw the shooting of student protesters at Kent State University
by National Guards; the Watergate affair and the fall of the Nixon adminis-
tration; the uncovering of CIA operations spanning from planned and per-
formed assassinations of foreign leaders to the surveillance of anti-war
and civil rights movements in America, or the recruitment and involvement
of Nazi war criminals in American intelligence operations and research
projects, including such experiments as the "Operation Midnight Climax"
outlined above. But, of course, these events and revelations had a major
impact on American literature per se.

At this point, the narratives of government conspiracies have reached
a line where they cannot possibly go any further. It is here where the world
of corporate conspiracies begins, subject of this chapter's following and
final section.

Executive Decisions

In the world of *The Crying of Lot 49*, a text most densely packed with para-

noia, Pynchon develops a tripartite plot consisting of vast and massively violent European "Old World" conspiracies that still cast a long shadow; of almost "casual" no-nonsense "New World" conspiracies; and American history. All three elements—Old World and New World conspiracies and history—are entrepreneurial and profit-driven. The Old World conspiracy revolves around the postal services monopoly once held by Thurn & Taxis, and the "Trystero" family as their fictitious rivals. The violence of the latter's secret operations is progressively directed against Thurn & Taxis, the New World's Pony Express riders, and the U. S. Postal Services. Trystero, possibly still underground in present day America, presumably manifest their power and influence through a vast accumulation of signs and covert references from postage stamp "misprints" to an underground delivery system called W.A.S.T.E.—depending on whether one interprets these clues as clues. The plot's third element consists of the legacy of the late Pierce Inverarity's innumerable economic interests which Oedipa Maas, protagonist and designated executrix, is supposed to execute. This legacy constitutes, among other things, an elaborate figure for the legacy of America and the irrevocable irretrievability of its history. Many of Inverarity's business ventures, from building materials for housing developments to filter cigarettes, are connected to bone charcoal—imported by Inverarity from Italy, harvested there "from the bottom of Lago di Pietà," and originating from American GIs:

> For weeks, a handful of American troops, cut off and without communications, huddled on the narrow shore of the clear and tranquil lake while from the cliffs that tilted vertiginously over the beach Germans hit them day and night with plunging, enfilading fire. [...] They did what they could to break out; failing, they clung to life as long as they could. But they died, every one, dumbly, without a trace or a word. One day the Germans came down from the cliffs, and their enlisted men put all the bodies that were on the beach into the lake, along with what weapons and other material were no longer of use to either side. (41)

Among the important aspects introduced here is, besides more obvious

ones, the logistic problem of retrieving the bodies of fallen American soldiers. As Diane Blaine points out in "Death and *The Crying of Lot 49,"* the return of remains was a "sore point" for the government throughout both World War I and II, and Pynchon switches the tension between citizens and authorities into one between citizens and venture capitalists where, according to Blaine, "presumably civil authorities no longer have any say in the disposition of human remains" (58).

This shifting of conspiracies and even attached civil obligations from governmental authorities to "venture capitalists" will further progress: from venture capitalists to the "global industry," and from the global industry to the "corporate complex"—the metaphor for which is, after Jameson, precisely the "high-tech paranoia" this corporate complex is associated with.

For conspiracies in the environment of the "global industry," i. e., the condition before the onset of the corporate complex and its high-tech paranoia, Pynchon's *Gravity's Rainbow* is the most focused example. The world war's "borders" have become increasingly porous for multinational industries and joint research projects, and the development of weapon systems has to conform to industrial interests. An example for the former in *Gravity's Rainbow* is the German-American research project for reflex horror and sexual reflex conditioning conducted on babies—whose most promising subject was, as it is later revealed, the protagonist Tyrone Slothrop (84). An example for the latter is the "purging" of the entire management of a subsidiary of IG Farben for "sending to OKW weapons procurement a design proposal for a new airborne ray which could turn whole populations, inside a ten-kilometer radius, stone blind," not taking into account "what such a weapon would do to the dye market after the next war" (163).

By 1945, according to Pynchon in "Is It Okay to Be a Luddite?", the

"factory system" has been extended "to include the Manhattan Project, the German long-range rocket program and the death camps, such as Auschwitz" (n. p.). War, in *Gravity's Rainbow*, has indeed become less and less central until it is only one aspect of the "real war" which is about the "survival of things":

> [...] Mister Information tonight is in a kind mood. He will show you Happyville. He will begin by reminding you of the 1937 Ford. Why is that dacoit-faced auto still on the roads? You said "the War," just as you rattled over the points onto the wrong track. The War *was* the set of points. Eh? Yesyes, Skippy, the truth is that the War is keeping things alive. *Things*. The Ford is only one of them. The Germans-and-Japs story was only one, rather surrealistic version of the real War. The real War is always there. (645)

Or, as Friedrich Kittler puts it in "Media and Drugs in Pynchon's Second World War"*:*

> But when the enterprise of systematic death and the simulation of relations between enemies and friends only serves as a pretext for the competition between various technologies that are themselves based not on adventure and narration but on blueprints, statistics, and intelligence operations, life in the trenches becomes obsolete. (160)

In even more dismal visions of the future in Gibson's and Acker's texts, corporate influence develops into limitless power that is kept in check only by fierce and violent competition. In Acker's *Rip-Off Red, Girl Detective,* corporate conspiracies and power have spread into each and every public sphere; the UN has been infiltrated "since the beginning" by the secret organization CREEP which renders the UN unable "to stop wars and deadly underground conflicts between nations and peoples, transforming the U.N. into a subsidiary of its own lethal organization." CREEP itself, in turn, is infiltrated, but "not against CREEP, but for the sake of conspiracy"—albeit these small groups purportedly try "to maintain the precarious existence of life on this planet" (129–33). In Gibson's texts, especially *Neuromancer, Count Zero,* and *Mona Lisa Overdrive*, governmental agencies and laws are, for all practical purposes, non-existent.

People in the "sprawl" live in huge corporate housing projects where gang wars are rampant. Corporations compete with each other by violent means including so-called "extractions"—quasi-military operations to help important scientists change their employer—and are not beyond the disposition of airborne rail guns that deliver as much kinetic energy as tactical nukes but without the radioactivity. Law enforcement, if any, is usually privatized, including the "BAMA Rapids" riot police already mentioned, usually only present to protect corporate assets, or "things."

The fierce competition is necessary since infinite power constitutes its very own limit, and it would be difficult otherwise to develop such scenarios further. But not unthinkable: two possible developments are suggested in Acker's texts. In *Great Expectations,* the "war of things" will develop into "a more devastating war than before," with "no more money, not much food or heat," where "diseases rampage, and fear hallucination will reign" and even language is stripped of its referentiality:

> It will be the days of nothing and the days of a kind of plenty where there are no causes and effects. There's no way to prepare for horror. Language like everything else will bear no relations to anything else. The business corporations who'll run the war are now bringing triple amounts of heroin and coke into this country to prepare the citizenship for soldiery. "Another?" says this woman, in a querulous rattling whisper. "Have another?" (33–34)

Alternatively, in *In Memoriam to Identity,* the return to the most basic kind of organized violence, biker-style, Robin-Hood-style, guerilla-style, maintains a contextual balance in the folds of which further stories can be told:

> The motorcycle leader and R sat in the gang's hideout. The motorcycle leader begged R to join the gang. "If you join our gang, you'll be able to repair social inequities. By violence. Today violence is the fastest and the only way possible. (Corporate heads, after all, legally murder their opponents; famous artists murder their wives and go scot-free.) Human history views crimes with disdain only when the criminals remain poor. . . . Help make the poor rich." (20)

Both versions have a decidedly apocalyptic undertone, and both might, finally, amount to the same thing.

But all these scenarios, far-fetched as they might appear, are still extrapolations based on current developments; and the "gist" of the texts in this respect might be more relevant to the current situation than it seems. In *Pattern Recognition*, Gibson translates the motif of dystopian corporate power into the language of a contemporary America: as a here-and-now war fought between brands and iconic images. The protagonist Cayce's two outstanding characteristics are tied right into this. On the one hand, she is a brilliant "trend scout" freelancer, on the other, she suffers from a severe phobia of logos and trademarks:

> But she sees that there is a Michelin Man within her field of vision, its white, bloated, maggot-like form perched on the edge of a dealer's counter, about thirty feet away. It is about two feet tall, and is probably meant to be illuminated from within.
>
> The Michelin Man was the first trademark to which she exhibited a phobic reaction. She had been six. (35)

The iconic quality of logos and trademarks prepares the ground in *Pattern Recognition* for an alternative approach to merge the corporate with the political. In a preparatory move, Cayce's phobia also extends to Nazi symbols, which, additionally, plays again with motifs found in Acker's and Pynchon's texts which associate the fall of Nazi Germany with the rise of post-World War II's global industry:

> National icons are always neutral for her, with the exception of Nazi Germany's, and this not so much from a sense of historical evil (though she certainly has that) as from an awareness of a scary excess of design talent. Hitler had had entirely too brilliant a graphics department, and had understood the power of branding all too well. (273–74)

In "The Dig," finally, a public and largely unorganized mass excavation on a World War II battlefield in Russia where the battle's remains have been

preserved completely intact in the mud, the corporate and the political eventually merge into the iconic, making the abovequoted "trenches obsolete" in the most uncanny manner:

> [W]e got that Stuka completely dug out. Did I tell you? It's a whole plane, and for some fucking reason it wound up four feet under the muck [...] No idea it would be a Stuka; blew me away; it's just this most Nazi-looking aircraft, amazing. Dive-bomber, they used them on the Spanish, Guernica and that. Absolutely iconic. So there it is, finally, today, and it's sitting there, all caked in the gray stuff, like an airplane done up as New Guinea Mud Man, at the bottom of this great fucking hole they'd dug. (307)

This includes the dead pilot, found after the canopy is yanked open, who is instantly torn apart by the crowd, fighting over his watch, compass, and pistol, in a small-scale enactment of Pynchon's "survival of things."

How such an overlapping of corporate and political power through the power of the iconic can manifest itself in the real world, as a final example, is related by Spivak in *In Other Worlds.* In South Korea in the early 1980s, several hundred female workers went on strike in a factory owned by a Minnesota-based multinational corporation by the name of Control Data. After six union leaders are dismissed and imprisoned, the women take two visiting vice-presidents from the U. S. as hostages, demanding the reinstatement of their union leaders. While Control Data's office is willing to release the women, the Korean government is not; and the dispute is ended by having the female workers beat up by the male workers at the factory, causing many injuries and two miscarriages (89). The incident as such, as Spivak concedes, is not at all uncommon within an environment of interconnections and interdependencies that revolve around former colonies, raw materials, manufacturing bases, and the western need for countries where workers can make fewer demands and governments "are mortgaged." It also shows that "socialized capital kills by remote control" and that it "has not moved far from the presuppositions of a slave mode of production" (90–91)—at which point the "brand" enters the stage:

> One of Control Data's radio commercials speaks of how its computers open the door to knowledge, at home or in the workplace, for men and women alike. The acronym of this computer system is PLATO. One might speculate that this noble name helps to dissimulate a quantitative and formula-permutational vision of knowledge as an instrument of efficiency and exploitation with an aura of the unique and subject-expressive wisdom at the very root of "democracy." (91)

But the iconic, historical-symbolic value of the acronym PLATO "shares in the effacement of class-history that is the project of 'civilization' as such"—which is precisely the "slave mode of production" underlying the Athenian civilization that made "intellectual heights" and the birth of democracy possible, a correspondence that, as it were, is not easily dug out.

While traversing formative processes from creation myths to brand patterns by following threads of violence in the texts, the quest seems to have ended where it started: in ancient Greece. This is not an accident. The formation of Western civilization with its democracies, dialectical philosophy, and modern sciences is—two thousand years of Christian cultures notwithstanding—deeply rooted in Greek metaphysics, as are certain intuitive assumptions and metaphorical accounts about the formation of the individual in classical mythology.

In the following chapter, where violence will be focused on that occurs along various types of repetition—iterations, loops, multiple framing, and other forms to be explained in context—that will complement this chapter's more chronological approach, certain elements from classical mythology will again become important, with "cyclicity" as a key element that connects this first chapter's various forms of "origins" with the second chapter's various modes of "repetition." From there, in the third and fourth chapter on *Fragmentation* and *Composition*, the focus will shift to how violence operates in narrative style and figurative language.

Chapter II:
Iterations

"Iteration," in mathematics and information technology, describes processes of repetition. This includes, of course, mere repetition; but more closely related to a range of phenomena to be encountered in this chapter, and more interesting as well, are repetitions with variation (variable repetitions with mutable states, in mathematical parlance), repetitions with incremental alterations, and recursive repetitions that are comparable to "nested images": an image that contains itself, often to be found in advertising when a product is pictured that is picturing the product, or in infinite reflections of an object set between two mirrors. This can involve the repetition of numbers, objects, or ideas in self-similar ways, usually accompanied by various forms of feedback loops. Feedback loops and self-similarity —the repetition of characteristic features on different levels of magnitude —are in turn closely associated with fractality and self-organization, as outlined in the introduction. In this sense, the second chapter not only connects to motifs of cyclicity explored in the first chapter on *Origins*, but to the origins of the chapter organization itself, also outlined in the introduction.

Against the background of iterative processes, violence can be found in the context of four related but nevertheless distinct motifs. All four will be explored in the following subchapters. The first motif, and the one most closely connected to the preceding chapter, consists of the father-son-cycle as the most frequently encountered instance of violent cyclic repetition in the texts. It will be followed by the examination of elaborate displacements between victims and perpetrators and, in the third subchapter, the occurrences of deadly loops and how a "frame of reference," to be explained in context, might be altered by reinscribing its own conditions—

i. e., aspects of its textuality—back into the text. Finally, the highly repetitive occurrence of "rape" throughout Barth's texts, how this repetition is reflected upon in Barth's texts, and how it compares to the ways rape is dealt with in other texts, will be explored in the fourth and final subchapter. All four subchapters explore narrative elements as well as elements pertaining to the production of texts as such, in accordance with the general approach of investigating first and second level themes as outlined in the preface.

1. Violent Cycles: Sons & Fathers

Connected to forms of cyclicity and myth discussed in the chapter on *Formations*, the iterative cycle between fathers and sons functions as a constitutive, albeit generic, part of an individual's formation process in postmodern narratives. It comprises castration, cruelty, murder, and eating one's children in general, and the Oedipus myth in particular. Only in some texts, notably in Acker's and Barthelme's, are displacements possible with roles shifting to daughters and mothers. But Western civilization's view of the father instead of the mother as "creator proper" seems to severely restrict more far-reaching treatments even in postmodern texts. A restriction akin to exclusion, moreover, sarcastically exemplified in the "mysterious horseman" that follows the party in Barthelme's *The Dead Father.* Eventually revealed to be the mother, the no longer mysterious figure is immediately sent off again, and not without a shopping list. It almost seems as if precisely the lack of an umbilical cord that could be severed between Western civilization's (self-)consciousness and its "fathering" ancient Greece makes a separation forever impossible, while this unconsummated but necessary "cut" itself keeps being displaced as the forever looming possibility of castration.

In the following sections, the violence this cycle engenders will be traced from simple to more advanced and multi-layered forms of iteration and displacement. Touching upon motifs explored in the first chapter, it will link a text's powerful and maybe even inevitable potential to "keep a secret" and the vanishing of origins to writing processes and the creation of narratives as such, where texts pose as offspring and the writer as their creator, up to and including anxieties of influence and the imperative of publishing.

Momentous Incisions

Time and again, *Oedipus Rex* takes center stage in postmodern literature and literary criticism: in Barth's *Giles Goat-Boy,* this is even literally the case. After several of the play's major motifs have already been rehearsed by the protagonist, i. e., Giles beating his "father" Max after having met "Lady Creamhair" who later turns out to be his mother, with whom he also unwittingly tries to have sex on their second "date," Oedipus is indeed brought on stage, with Giles and practically all major characters attending (cf. 27–28; 38–41; 265-317).

Consistent with the sustained metaphor of the world as a university, *Oedipus Rex* by Sophocles, renamed *Taliped Decanus* and adapted to the setting, takes place on the ancient "campus" of Cadmus College with Oedipus as its "Dean." Besides changing its backdrop, modernizing its language in line with this backdrop, and including numerous puns and self-conscious allusions to its own subject matter, the level of violence embraced by its main character in Barth's treatment is striking. In the original play, Oedipus, after exchanging blows first with the coachman and then with Laius, rather unceremoniously kills Laius and his original entourage of five, with the exception of the escaped servant: "And then I killed them all" (46). Barth not only adds a mistress to Laius and his entourage,

but has Agenora and Taliped, alias Jocasta and Oedipus, tell the incident as follows:

> *Agenora*: That intersection called the Three-Tined Fork is where they ambushed him and pulled his cork, and slit his little girlfriend's throat from ear to ear. (286)

> [Taliped:] Well, of course that clinched it. First I cut the old man's throat and dumped him out, to teach him manners. Then I humped his girlfriend as he bled to death, for sport. My policy, in cases of this sort, is first to stab 'em in the belly-button and then cut other things. She was a glutton for punishment, this kid—all kinds of stamina. I spent so much time butchering and banging her, the others almost got away. I found three, as I recall, hiding around and underneath the wagon, and of course dismembered them. (290)

Equally, while the shepherd is threatened by Oedipus and his hands are "twisted behind him" to extract his testimony in the original play (61–62), in Barth's version Taliped orders his servants to brake the shepherd's fingers one by one while threatening him with the modus operandi for unwilling witnesses that would "break their backs and screw their thumbs and stretch 'em on the wheel and do things to their privates till they squeal," which is "lots of fun, and gets results, too" (302).

While this treatment, among other possible functions, mimics so-called "gratuitous violence" in contemporary media and foreshadows the motif of violence as exercised by governmental and especially intelligence agencies found in Barth's later texts from *Sabbatical* on, it also enforces and amplifies *Giles Goat-Boy*'s all-pervading threat of castration by expressions like cutting, dismembering, doing things to privates, stabbing navels, slitting throats, and carving initials "into the girl's behind" (286; 290). As can be inferred from the play's content and the foregoing action of *Giles Goat-Boy*, this overdetermination is in accord with the novel's all-pervading fear of being outcast, left to die, and, above all, being castrated by the father. One of the scenes that introduce Max, who personifies the "father" in the aforementioned rehearsals of the myth's major motifs, has Max clip

the goat Freddie from behind with a patent docker in "mid-service" as a punishment for interfering with Max's "inspections of the does" (6–7).

In Barthelme's "A Manual for Sons" within *The Dead Father*, fathers are perceived as misogynist, racist, and generally cruel towards their children—as "monstrous," in short, as the giant living carcass of the Dead Father in *The Dead Father* physically is (cf. 125–32). In Acker's texts, where the daughter frequently takes the place of the son or, alternatively, the female narrator suddenly switches into a male persona to "impersonate" the son, the son is frequently murdered, the daughter threatened or raped, and the mother Jocasta-like driven to suicide. Oftentimes, this motif is connected with frequent appearances of knives and the corresponding threat or action of "cutting up," as, for example, in *Pussy, King of the Pirates* (cf., e. g., 181). And, as her fantastic version of Artaud's *Les Cenci* with elements from Sophocles and contemporary crime fiction in the opening sequence shows, she usually packs as many "collateral" violence into her rewritings and recombinations as the underlying texts possibly allow:

> In the first act of this play, O learned that *evil* had entered the land. That the father, who was equivalent to evil, was successfully stealing or appropriating his son's possessions. Both of them were standing behind O. Then, the father began to torture his son. He inflicted pain physically. O actually saw this older man point three different machine guns at her. (5–6)

Adding to being threatened by the father as perceived by the son is the fear of being eaten by the father, again a motif provided by Greek myth and often touched upon in postmodern texts. While Coover, as will be seen, attaches this motif to textual production, it is more generally employed by Acker, Barth, or Barthelme. In Barthelme's *The Dead Father,* for example, the Dead Father recounts the time when he was still spawning legions of children:

> [...] but this was not possible, all went forth and multiplied, and multiplied, and multiplied, and I had to Father, it was the natural order, thousands, tens

of thousands [...] I had to devour them, hundreds, thousands, feefifofum, sometimes their shoes too, get a good mouthful of childleg and you find, between your teeth, the poisoned sneaker. Hair as well, millions of pounds of hair scarifying the gut over the years, why couldn't they have just been thrown down wells, exposed on hillsides, accidentally electrocuted by model railroads? And the worst was their blue jeans, my meals course after course of improperly laundered blue jeans, T-shirts, saris, Thorn McAns. I suppose I could have hired someone to peel them for me first. (18)

According to the "Manual of Sons" contained in *The Dead Father*, there once existed a "principled man" who never ate his children. His attendance of the "bear gardens," however, caricatures the exemplum's point:

I knew a father named Yamos who was landlord of the bear gardens at Southwark. Yamos was known to be a principled man and never, never, never ate any of his children no matter how dire the state of his purse. Yet the children, one by one, disappeared. (142)

But the threat of being castrated or being eaten, explicitly or as an undercurrent, usually remains suspended as an ever-present threat without arriving at its final destination. Not only does this pertain to the texts of Barth, Barthelme, Coover, and Acker, but also to critical texts as in Johnson's and Miller's very different but in this regard very similar approaches to Conrad's *Secret Sharer* in "Secret Sharing: Reading Conrad Psychoanalytically" and *Others*, respectively. In both readings, the young captain's narrative is understood as curiously overdetermined by numerous layers of castration anxieties in the face of various "father figures," a constantly present threat of a deed that, owing to its own rules, can never actually be executed (cf. "Secret Sharing" 628–35; *Others* 138–166).

When the threat of castration does seem to find its destination after all, it is usually deflected onto a different target, like, for example, Major Marvy's castration in lieu of Lieutenant Slothrop in Pynchon's *Gravity's Rainbow.* Here, the proposition is quite complex. Slothrop's biological father long ago "ceded" his paternal rights to the research project that reconditioned Slothrop's sexual reflexes. When Slothrop gains a certain

"independence" by slipping away from their control, his abilities, however vague, are considered highly threatening by the "father," i. e., those who pull the strings behind the project, and they subsequently arrange for Slothrop's emasculation. The iterative circle is and cannot be broken, and the son prevails, but he can never fully escape the threat—except, possibly, by his eventual "dissolution" into the novel's background. Not the castration itself, but the predicament to never fully escape the father's threat is mirrored by that of the "plucky enough lad" in a fictitious tv show in *Gravity's Rainbow,* set in "the giant factory-state" of the "Raketen-Stadt." This lad also survives his father's daily onslaughts, but some day might just not:

> Unexpectedly, this country is pleasant, yes, once inside it, quite pleasant after all. Even though there is a villain here, serious as death. It is this typical American teenager's own *Father*, trying episode after episode to kill his son. And the kid knows it. Imagine that. So far he's managed to escape his father's daily little death-plots—but nobody has said he has to *keep* escaping.
>
> He's a cheerful and a plucky enough lad, and doesn't hold any of this against his father particularly. That ol' Broderick's just a murderin' fool, golly what'll he come up with next— (674)

But the "lads" in the texts usually hold it against their fathers indeed, especially in Barthelme's, and with a vengeance. This can articulate itself as a child hiding a "sawed-off in his left pant leg, and a baling hook in his right pant leg," ready to kill the father "with either one of them, given the opportunity" in *The Dead Father's* "Manual of Sons" (143), or in the demand of whole societies to either have the Dead Father "cut up and cooked" (74) or "deballocked" (105–07) before the Dead Father's party may pass. Though the latter's literal execution is prevented by the son, it is eventually metaphorically executed by taking away, among other things, the Dead Father's sword.

Rerouting the castration threat back to the father, of course, constitutes the ultimate crime from the father's perspective. In Coover's *The Public Burning*, this ultimate crime artfully intersects with the threat of the

stolen nuclear secret and its radioactive properties:

> In the middle of the middle of the Western World stands this empty chair; and only the Rosenbergs can fill this emptiness. Not the Nazi war criminals, not the disloyal union agitators or the Reader's Digest Murderers, not even the grisly necrophile John Reginald Halliday Christie can sit that seat tonight. For the Rosenbergs have done what none, not even these, may dream to do. They have denied Uncle Sam, defied the entire Legion of Superheroes, embraced the Phantom, cast his nefarious spell upon the innocent, and for him have wrested from the Sons of Light their most sacred secret: the transmutation of the elements. This is no mere theft, no common betrayal, and "plain, deliberate, contemplated murder," as young Judge Kaufman has said, "is dwarfed in magnitude" beside their crime—for they have sought nothing less than the ultimate impotency of Uncle Sam! (352)

Once established, the castration motif can take more complex forms; it can accommodate intricate replacements and displacements while still remaining recognizable. In Barthelme's texts, the roles of child and father are sometimes switched, or on the brink of switching, as in "Views of My Father Weeping" from *City Life,* and father and son can even become indistinguishable and commence "shooting at each other" (cf. 4–14). In Barthelme's "Critique de la Vie Quotidienne" from *Sadness*, the child gains adult and the adult childlike features, and even the mother is included in these displacements by "gazing out of the window and sucking her thumb" while "physical abuse" ensues and threats like "I will sew up your mouth, with your mother's sewing machine" are exchanged. In Acker's "The Birth of a Poet" from *Eurydice in the Underworld,* the son bangs his head against the wall (an image employed in a similar context in Barthelme's "Manual of Sons") and stabs his "right eye," while sleeping with his mother and hating and despising her at the same time. In a letter to his mother, then, he proceeds to overlay her characteristics with those of—for him— other undesirables, especially "Arabs," but at the same time attacks her for wanting her son to "be someone," to "grow up and rip out people's guts for money or send poor people to jail for money or tell people all of whom listen what reality is" (98). On top of that, he has already shot her: and the

letter concludes with, "Are we supposed to have sex, mom, even though you're dead? / Your son," (98). Here, the mother has become the Dead Mother indeed.

But it is John Barth in *The Last Voyage of Somebody the Sailor* who, as a final example, delivers this motif's most complex variation. In an enormously intricate interplay between Sindbad; the narrator as Sindbad's "doppelganger" or "brother"; Sindbad's daughter who may or may not have been raped by her father and who eventually becomes her father's doppelganger's lover; Sindbad's daughter's fiancé who is like "a son" to Sindbad and, initially, like a brother to Sindbad's daughter; and Sindbad's actual son to whom Sindbad is anything but a "father," the motif is shuffled and spun out, culminating in the pivotal and uncanny episode of Sindbad's encounter with "The Old Man of the Sea." Preparing for this scene, the text is already brimming with castrations, carried out as punishments, and especially castration threats. Instrumental to these threats are two of the plot's central artifacts: a razorsharp filleting knife in the possession of the narrator (cf., e. g., 141 ff.; 277) and a jeweled dagger in the possession of Sindbad's daughter (cf., e. g., 420 ff.). All these punishments, threats, and artifacts not only advance the plot but aggregate toward the abovementioned encounter which, in classical "Oedipal" fashion, is initially "hidden" and has to be uncovered in the course of the novel to make sense of all that has happened.

The encounter with the "Old Man of the Sea," first told from Sindbad's perspective, retells more or less the story from *The Book of Thousand Nights and One Night,* but with peculiar wordings that already hint at a difference. The Old Man sits on Sindbad's back and strangles him with his legs every time Sindbad struggles to free himself. Eating the grapes growing above the pool Sindbad is all but submerged in, the Old Man "has its way with that young vine" (389). And when he is finally overcome, Sindbad

feels "as fatherless and free again as Adam," and tells his arriving rescuers how he had "unstrung those treacherous loins" forever (391). These wordings strongly insinuate that Sindbad is successfully overcoming a "father." Which does not make sense at this point—until the story takes an unexpected turn when it is told from the perspective of Umar, his daughter's fiancé and appointed "son." According to Umar's story later substantiated by evidence, it was Sindbad who had elaborately conspired to have both of them stranded on the island, and it is indeed Sindbad who rides and torments Umar and plays the role of the "Old Man of the Sea." Eventually, with rescuers in sight, Sindbad tricks the subdued Umar into drinking himself unconscious, which is indeed *not* reversed and thus, in this respect, true to Sindbad's version of the story, and when Sindbad has gone and Umar regains his consciousness, he finds himself emasculated and horribly disfigured:

> Coming painfully to his senses, he found himself no longer on the beach but almost buried in a pile of forest litter beside that once-pure woodland spring. He ventured to touch his throbbing groin and to his horror discovered that he had been crudely bandaged there with his own turban [...] With a howl he dragged himself to the pool and, washing his nether wound therein, was further horrified by the reflection of a face that he could scarcely recognize from the nose down, so mutilated was it: as if whoever had taken his manhood had made to take his tongue as well, and had abandoned the attempt only after much hack and slash. When his nausea and general shock permitted, he made his way beachward and there found the ashes of his signal fire, with many footprints round about, but no sign of Sindbad or *Zahir*. (486–87)

Sindbad's overcoming the "father" equals the castration of the "son": in this loop's double-bladed iteration, the ever threatening deed seems to have at last reached its destination. But thanks to the story's intricate patterns of replacements and displacements, Umar has always already been succeeded in his roles as Sindbad's "son" and "son-in-law" by the real son and the narrator, respectively, and the deed will again have missed its target, after all.

Against such mounting complexity, the underlying plot of *Oedipus Rex* might almost look trivial in comparison, and deed and perpetrator easily uncovered. But this is never true since *Oedipus Rex* always "keeps a secret" in the sense outlined in the first chapter on *Formations*: contrary to popular belief, what has really happened on the road to Thebes can never be fully known. As many readers from Hölderlin to Cynthia Chase have observed, the "guilt of Oedipus might be a sin of interpretation," and his self-condemnation a "glossing over of contradictory evidence" (cf. Miller, *Hawthorne and History* 145–47; *Victorian Subjects* 250–54). The only survivor and witness to Laius's death reported that a "group of robbers" held up and killed the king. For Oedipus, it is clear: if it were "not one, but many," then he must be innocent, regardless of his dim memories of a violent encounter with a party similar to the king's. The "shepherd" is called for to repeat his testimony, but when he finally arrives, he is also identified as the one who was supposed to leave young Oedipus in the wilderness to die, but gave him to a shepherd from Corinth instead. As Culler observes in *The Pursuit of Signs*, the ensuing interrogation, curiously, never touches upon his witness account of the violent encounter. Thus, the "possibility of innocence is never eliminated:"

> The "whole action of the play" is the revelation of this awful deed, but we are never given the proof, the testimony of the eye-witness. [...]
>
> His conclusion is based not on new evidence concerning a past deed but on the force of meaning, the interweaving of prophesies and the demands of narrative coherence. The convergence of discursive forces makes it essential that he become the murderer of Laius, and he yields to this force of meaning. Instead of saying, therefore, that there is a sequence of past events that are given and which the play reveals with certain detours, we can say that the crucial event is the product of demands of signification. Here meaning is not the effect of a prior event but its cause. (174–75)

This, incidentally but not accidentally, parallels observations from the preceding chapter's discussion on Freud's *Totem and Taboo* and the "killing of the fathers," that there might be no actual necessity for foundational

events to have happened at all. Culler observes that the possibility of Oedipus's innocence might be *necessary* for a Freudian reading insofar as if the deed were "a prior deed, committed without understanding," Oedipus can scarcely be said "to have an Oedipus complex":

> But suppose we stress instead that as soon as Oedipus learns that Laius is his father he immediately declares what he has hitherto denied: if Laius is my father, he in effect says, then I must have killed him. If we emphasize this point, we can indeed identify an Oedipus complex: that is to say, a structure of signification—a desire to kill the father and a guilt for that desire—which does not result from an act but precedes it. (175)

Or, as Miller puts it in *Victorian Subjects* with regard to narrative strategies, Oedipus's self-condemnation is based on the assumption that a "good plot" must have a beginning, middle, and end—an assumption that "the Sphinx's riddle embodies and which Aristotle makes the logical or reasonable basis of a good plot" (251).

Engaging the "witness" in *Oedipus Rex* can further support these critical readings with yet another detail: the closer one looks, the more dubious the declared identity of the assault's survivor and the shepherd who hands over Oedipus as a child becomes. While the survivor had been a slave servant in the household of King Laius, he "begs" Jocasta after the king's death to become "her shepherd," so he "might see the city as far off as he might," and since Jocasta seems him "worthy," she grants his wish (44). This stands in stark contrast to his having, many years earlier when Oedipus was born, already been a shepherd, and even if he had been, this would by no means explain why he would be, as a shepherd, a member of the king's entourage. It is almost as if, in an early manifestation of the uncertainty principle, either the identity of the witness or his testimony could be ascertained but not both, and the text tried to settle for a practical "middle ground" with some, but not full, certainty about either. Since questions in one direction, under this premise, must necessary lead to less cer-

tainty in the other, the text has to dodge the question in order to proceed with its narrative line. And it does so quite visibly, and indeed in both directions: the witness is never asked to repeat his testimony, and Jocasta boldly dodges the question of his identity.[21]

Something is clearly amiss, and these uncertainties cast "a reasonable doubt" on the perpetrator's identity. The possibility remains that the blow—to kill the father in order to forestall the castration of the son—has missed its mark yet again. But nothing is lost: that Oedipus must be the one who slew the father and fathered children with the mother, paradoxically, becomes ever more meaningful and necessary in the light of the possibility that he might not be that one at all.

Spawning Texts

Oedipus Rex by Sophocles, moreover, is often perceived as being solidly intertwined with concepts of narrative structure and the process of writing. The first indication of this would be Aristotle's choice of the play as the archetype of the "perfect tragedy," a choice that seems puzzling on closer inspection. In *Victorian Subjects*, Miller points out that *Oedipus Rex* remains powerfully subversive to the power attested to it by Aristotle in his *Poetics*, i. e, the power to make the "alogical logical" and bring to the "light of reason" what is "dark, unreasonable, monstrous, incommensurate with the *logos*" (252). What seems to be rather at play in *Oedipus Rex* is the double gesture of uncovering the plot's secrets while at the same time *covering up* what remains alogical and unreasonable—or, in Miller's words, "the remorselessly clear logic of Aristotle's exposition [...] is every-

---

[21] The Chorus states that "I think he is no other than the peasant whom you have sought to see already; but Jocasta here can tell us best of that," and Oedipus explicitly asks her whether he is "the man he mentions." But Jocasta evades the question: "Why ask of whom he spoke? Don't give it heed [...] It will be wasted labor." (56)

where threatened by a dark fringe of the alogical which is exposed, even by Aristotle, in the act of its coverup" (252). Against this backdrop, it becomes ever more fitting that the play's central motifs can be found in postmodern texts as engaged in the exploration of the production of texts. Here, the violent iteration between sons and fathers is metaphorically employed to describe the process of writing, or, seen from a slightly different perspective, there is a metonymical shift from the production of texts to the violent iterations between sons and fathers that establishes a physical reality for the creative process. Playful and self-reflective executions in the texts notwithstanding, where texts become "children" or texts become "fathers," violence and with it "the dark, the unreasonable, and the monstrous" are constant companions on the narrative road.

Texts as children and writers as fathers are represented most vividly in Barth's "Autobiography: A Self-Recorded Fiction" from *Lost in the Funhouse* and in Coover's "Beginnings" from *In Bed One Night.* In Barth's "Autobiography," the text itself addresses the reader and explains its coming into being. And indeed, the offspring turns out to be something "monstrous":

> [Dad] understood, about time, that anything conceived in so unnatural and fugitive a fashion was apt to be freakish, even monstrous—and an advertisement of his folly. His second thought therefore was to destroy me before I spoke a word. He knew how these things work; he went by the book. (36)

The father fails to kill the text, but the text also fails to kill the father, becoming neither what his father nor itself had in mind: dead, or a hero. Instead, the text merely turns out "conventional": "Not every kid thrown to the wolves ends a hero: for each survivor, a mountain of beast-baits; for every Oedipus, a city of feebs" (37). But when the father's failure to "end" the text transforms into the lack of a proper ending, and the text, as its "last trump," ironically evokes Joyce's *old artificer* and calls for its

wretched old fabricator to "put an end to this," the alternative aspect of the child-father motif becomes visible: the overpowering, unassailable "father" in the form of literary predecessors.

Though the text itself in Coover's "Beginnings" does not speak about itself as directly as in "Life-Story," it also acts out the process of textual production—frantically, excessively violent, and on many levels. Plots as children and children as plots are unceasingly created and destroyed, and the demiurge literally "eats his children":

> [The woman] did her best to hide the children from him for fear he'd eat them. Sometimes she was distracted and then he did eat them. He was always sorry about it afterwards, because he missed them and they gave him constipation for a week. (46)

The process of giving physical birth to all these children by "the woman" is a daily and a thoroughly casual event: "She prepared him a fresh pot of coffee, then took the boat to town to have another baby and get some food" (54). But, interestingly, this process is neither understood by the creator nor does he connect it with positive images. He writes "odes to navel-strings and the beauty of ripe watermelons to keep his mind off the unpleasant tearing sensation in his testicles," or sketches a story where the wife vanishes in the hospital, which turns out to be a nightclub, and the panicking father finally finds the doctor who is actually "a stand-up comedian, delivering a dirtymouth routine on the facts of life and using his wife's corpse as a prop." But, "The worst part is" that the father "can't help laughing" (55-56). Finally, he is leaving his "island" with the woman and the children in a boat to make a "fresh start," and the island sinks into the lake and disappears:

> Hey look! he cried. You did that on purpose, the woman said. You always have to try to end it all! He had his reasons, but they didn't justify such devastation. Who was he to be the last giant of his race? Who was he to christen turds? So much for fresh starts. (58-59)

Here, too, the ending of the text as ending is invoked, referring back to its beginning. But the logic of beginnings and endings is conspicuously reversed: What started out in the story's opening with a "fresh start" by shooting himself—his blood splattering "the cabin wall" in a "readable pattern"—ends with "So much for fresh starts. He might as well have not pulled the trigger in the first place. But that was done and that was an end to it. Or so it said on the cabin wall" (59). The text, to all appearances, is itself one of the countless "children" fathered on the island, and like these it is more or less cluelessly "scrambling about," getting "carried off," and is, above all, always in danger of being eaten by the father.

In Barthelme's "Manual for Sons" in *The Dead Father,* another aspect is added to the "siring of texts" when the "daughter," in the most deadpan manner, takes the place of the "woman":

> Daughters are for dandling, and are often dandled up until their seventeenth or eighteenth year. The hazard here, which must be faced, is that the father will want to sleep with his beautiful daughter, who is after all his in a way that even his wife is not, in a way that even his most delicious mistress is not. Some fathers just say "Publish and be damned!" and go ahead and sleep with their new and amazingly sexual daughters, and accept what pangs accumulate afterward; most do not. Most fathers are sufficiently disciplined in this regard, by mental straps, so that the question never arises. (133)

On the one hand, doubtlessly, the motif of the writer-as-father who creates texts-as-children is implemented not "seriously" but in the most playful manner, including the thematization of the absence, or marginalization, of the "mother"—a marginalization traditionally covered up by the presence of the "muse." But playful thematization does not necessarily work as a corrective,[22] and the writer-as-mother still remains largely and conspicuously absent.

---

[22] Especially Barth has been frequently charged to thematize and comment upon the traditional male-writer/female-muse distinction but to nonetheless erect his elaborate plots solidly on selfsame ground.

This absence, and strategies to overcome its internalization, are frequent motifs in Acker's texts. Iterative creative violence, to follow up on the motif of literary predecessors mentioned above, does not manifest itself in the possible context of "mothering" texts, but in the alternative aspect of overcoming overwhelming "parents." Under the chapter heading "Proof That All Story-Telling Is Revolution" in *Don Quixote*, the dog—who takes the role of Sancho Pansa—explains to the female knight:

> "A child's only desire," the dog told Don Quixote, "was to kill his parents. Since the parents didn't want to die and since they were unable to kill their child, they did their best to kill their child without actually killing it by treating it as badly as possible. Then they left the kid somewhere so the kid would be an orphan."
>
> "This explains my childhood," Don Quixote announced. "I always knew literature had some purpose."
>
> "Precisely: these parents have their nurse stick a safety pin into the kid's thigh, then they abandon the kid on some field, as if they can still find a field in the nuclear waste. (147)

In an interview in *Hannibal Lecter, My Father,* Acker makes the connection between the Oedipus myth and writing explicit**:**

> [T]hat's one of the two or three major myths that I was baby-fed. So in *Empire of the Senseless* I went to de Sade who, in my mind, is the greatest writer of the Oedipal Myth. Freud and de Sade are the great modern purveyors of that myth, but Sade blasted it wide open. Feminists made me realize then why one would want to decentralize a father, take the father and tear him apart. I had some theory behind it. It also made me realize what my relation to these old authoritarian male poets was. I must have been very influenced by them, but certainly in a perverse way. (18)

But again, these "almost God-like" figures cannot be killed, and Acker goes on to explain that she started to "write in different voices" and to "deal with schizophrenia" precisely because she could not find her own voice—for her, the "authoritarian male poets" are "very much my fathers" who can only be overcome by taking desperate measures.

Authoritarian figures of this kind can take many forms. In Barthelme's

texts, e. g., such a figure repeatedly surfaces as the "President," with whose opinions, as quoted, one might not be entitled to differ, and who severely criticizes or, as in "A Shower of Gold" from *Come Back, Dr. Caligari*, even violently smashes "with a sixteen-pound sledge" a work of art just finished by the artist (176). And then there is the Dead Father with his sword, "slaying" and finally "pissing on" artists:

> The Dead Father resting with his two hands on the hilt of his sword, which was planted in the red and steaming earth.
>
> My anger, he said proudly.
>
> Then the Dead Father sheathing his sword pulled from his trousers his ancient prick and pissed upon the dead artists, severally and together, to the best of his ability—four minutes, or one pint. (12)

But since the Dead Father is, in a fashion, already dead, his power has become purely symbolic:

> Impressive, said Julie, had they not been pure cardboard.
>
> My dear, said Thomas, you deal too harshly with him. (12)

But the symbolic, of course, is still a source of considerable power, and it has to be constantly dealt with on the meta-level. If the Dead Father were really dead, after all, there would be no reason for a colossal quest to drag his giant carcass to a "large excavation," to be filled with the Dead Father and closed up by bulldozers.

But why is it impossible to kill the father, even when, or precisely when, killing the father is the very quest undertaken by the text? Reflecting on intertextuality in *A World of Difference,* Johnson connects Bloom's "oedipal rivalry between a specific text and its precursor" and Kristeva's and Riffaterre's "immersion of any text in the history of its language and literature," within the context of a "violation of property through misreading, infiltration," with the Lacanian concept of the unconscious as being structured like a language: "One might say by analogy that for modern theorists

of intertextuality, the language of poetry is structured like an unconscious" (116). This, according to Johnson, not only undermines the self-identity of a text much more deeply than the traditional conflict between the original and authentic against the imitative and derivative, but prevents the killing of the father precisely where the "anxiety of influence" is made explicit. Johnson, tracing this motif in Mallarmé's "Swan" sonnet and Victor Hugo's preface to *Contemplations,* finds that the affirmation of the father's death can indeed become that which guarantees his survival. If the swan as a father figure does not sing, which a swan traditionally does only upon its death, the father must be alive and well; but when he announces his death by singing, it is this song that intrudes into and traverses through his successor's texts. Equally, when Hugo suggests that his book should be read "as one reads the work of the dead," the father "survives precisely through his way of affirming himself dead"—and the son will always arrive too late to kill him. "What the son suffers from, then, is not the simple desire to kill the father, but the impotence to kill him whose potency resides in his ability to recount his own death" (122; 123). This also applies to theory:

> It is perhaps for this reason that the so-called "fathers of modern thought"—Mallarmé, Freud, Marx, Nietzsche—maintain such a tremendous authority for contemporary theory. In writing of the subversion of the author, the father, God, privilege, knowledge, property, and consciousness, these thinkers have subverted in advance any grounds on which one might undertake to kill off an authority that theorizes the death of all authority. (123)

In his "Review on Abrams' *Natural Supernaturalism*" in *Theory Now and Then*, Miller reflects on Abrams's choice of "Tradition and Revolution" as a subtitle. Miller argues that the concept of "tradition and revolution" itself is part of the metaphysical tradition that was challenged by Marx, Nietzsche, Freud, and de Saussure, even if they remained part of the selfsame tradition:

> Rather than the notion of revolution one needs the more enigmatic concept of repetition (repetition as displacement or decentering) to describe the effect

of these writers on the culture to which, like all of us, they belong. (83)

Against Abrams's assumption of a direct relationship between a work and its "source" insofar as the meaning of the derived work would either be "analogous," "cognate," or "in consonance" with it, Miller argues that imitation, through repetition and displacement, is always subversive:

> It transforms or destroys what it copies. The authentic "progeny" of a literary work are all bad sons who kill their father, or try to, prodigal sons who never return home. (84)

While this conclusion, with reference to the possibility of overcoming the father, reads more optimistic than Johnson's, the almost casual afterthought "or try to" should give pause—especially in the light of Miller's assessment that Marx, Nietzsche, Freud, and de Saussure themselves are still part of the very tradition they fiercely—and, to Johnson's chagrin, forestallingly—challenged in various ways. Which would be concomitant to the observations made above: the more the father's death is elaborated on in the texts, the more he stubbornly keeps being alive. In Barth's *The Floating Opera*, he even becomes more alive than ever before, manifesting himself in Todd Andrews's monumental and life-determining enterprise "Letter to My Father," a "letter" that, in turn, encompasses equally monumental historical, biographical, and literary writing projects in their own right. Here, by way of suicide, the father becomes not only larger than life, but outright gigantic, as gigantic as the Dead Father's carcass in Barthelme's *The Dead Father*. Moreover, Barth makes ample use of existentialist motifs in this text, and Todd's predicament is not only reminiscent of Kafka's relationship to his father, but also of Sartre's. In *Critical Writings*, de Man observes:

> The death of Sartre's father, which occurred before he had a chance to know him, is treated as the symbolic act that severs the child forever from normal life. The death of one's mother at one's birth [...] still leaves, in a sense, the normal cycle of nature intact, but the death of one's father represents the ir-

revocable break with all established order, a radical alienation from society, from the self, and from reality. (119)

This also, quite accurately, describes the mental state of Todd Andrews. In death, the father is more alive than ever, and Todd, as a consequence, commences work on two projects both of which fail: the "Letter" and a suicide project with mass murder as a collateral.

The "father" makes himself felt at every corner, and being traversed by voices not its own, the whole idea of a text's authorship is in question. But, connecting this motif with that of the preceding section, the failure of the son's endeavor to kill the father—a failed endeavor even in *Oedipus Rex*, and not necessarily only on the meta-level—is reciprocated by the father's failure to emasculate the son. Though both failures, as has been stressed, can never fully be taken for granted.

2. Displacements: Murderous Victims

At least in the Western metaphysical tradition, concepts based on binary relationships, or dualities, usually comprise an intrinsic hierarchy: consciously or unconsciously, one element is always taken to be "superior" to the other. Undermining binary concepts, therefore, goes hand in hand with toppling hierarchies. What Jacques Derrida accomplishes in his philosophical writings—reversing such hierarchies in a first step and putting the hierarchy as such into question in the second—also shapes postmodern literature and literary criticism to a high degree, and the turnout of textual evidence in this regard is large. Moreover, since toppled hierarchies do not tend to stay that way but have, in analogy to a remark by Derrida on metaphysics, always already reentered through the back door, the deconstruction of binary relationships can only be an ongoing project: at which point

iteration and repetition come into play.

In the less philosophical, but mainly literary or critical environment of the texts, the violent, and often playfully violent, dismantling of binary relationships can be observed most frequently in the vicinity of hierarchies of the "good vs. bad" and "perpetrator vs. victim" types. As will be shown in this subchapter's first two sections, this is true both for the literary and the critical texts—with closely matching examples and a proposition that murder turning into suicide and victims into murderers might become the key to solving a murder mystery's "plot" on the one hand, and an indispensable operation for critical reading on the other. In the more philosophical discourse, this kind of violence is played through on several levels in and around the concept of the "pharmakon" as conceived by Derrida, a concept to be introduced and explored in this subchapter's third section— a philosophical concept that, moreover, turns out to be closely connected to the preceding subchapter's topic of father-son iterations. How this, in turn, infiltrates the discourse *about* the pharmakon with violent images in reflections on matters of translation from one language into another, itself a question involved in the operation of the pharmakon, will, as an almost uncanny example, further show how processes related to violence in postmodern texts display high degrees of self-similarity by being repeated on many different levels.

Hanged Heroes

To start with the American hero as one of the staples not only of American fiction, this private or public hero takes the most severe beating in practically all of the investigated texts. Again, this should not be taken as coming from "external" perspectives—nor should it, indeed, be taken as dismantling the American hero in principle. Targeted, rather, are certain brands of unreflected self-image and unquestioned self-righteousness that

keep sprouting from this concept, and their liability to be employed as plot devices in the service of rather dubious ideologies.

One of the more complex subversions of the hero/villain hierarchy can be found in Pynchon's *Gravity's Rainbow*, amplified by its backdrop of World War II that traditionally makes casting the American as the "good guy" well-nigh compulsory. But here, the American hero is displaced and dismantled in several corresponding ways. The protagonist Lieutenant Tyrone Slothrop, at first, fits the role of the American hero in its classical variant of the "unheroic" hero. Despite his rather portly appearance and his comical bumblings and misapprehensions, he never lacks the typical characteristics habitual for a hero, especially courage and sincerity. But this hero is almost literally dismantled or, in the words of Kittler in "Media and Drugs in Pynchon's Second World War," dissolved "into episodes, comic strips, myths, and, finally, record covers" (163). Accompanying this process, "American characteristics" are displaced through subtle shifts of perspective in numerous ways. After Slothrop has gone AWOL in Europe—according to U. S. military law, the circumstances of his absence need not necessarily constitute desertion—he overhears, for example, American MPs trying to make an arrest:

> Just before dawn knocking comes very loud, hard as steel. Slothrop has the sense this time to keep quiet.
> "Come on, open up."
> "MPs, open up."
> American voices, country voices, high-pitched and without mercy. He lies freezing, wondering if the bedsprings will give him away. For possibly the first time he is hearing America as it must sound to a non-American. Later he will recall that what surprised him most was the fanaticism, the reliance not just on flat force but on the *rightness* of what they planned to do . . . he'd been told long ago to expect this sort of thing from Nazis, and especially from Japs —*we* were the ones who always played fair [...] (256)

From here, the displacements of further hierarchies follow. With Major

Marvy from the American Forces and the Herero Oberst Enzian from the German "Schwarzkommando," the binaries white vs. black, ignorant vs. educated, and GI vs. Nazi are thoroughly displaced, principally through their respective language:

> ["]hah? Whatcha think they have in mind? You know what I think? They have a plan. Yeah. I think it's rockets. Don't ask me how, it's just something I feel here, in m'heart. A-and you know, that's *awful* dangerous. You can't trust them—With rockets? They're a childlike race. Brains are smaller."
>
> "But our patience," suggests a calm voice now out of the darkness, "our patience is enormous, though perhaps not unlimited." So saying, a tall African with a full imperial beard steps up grabs the fat American, who has time to utter one short yell before being flung bodily over the side. Slothrop and the African watch the Major bounce down the embankment behind them, arms and legs flying, out of sight. (288)

Such violent "displacements" of characteristics and bodies alike, though with different techniques, have already been touched upon in the chapter on *Formations* regarding Coover's "The Kid" from *A Theological Position* and "Shootout at Gentry Junction" from *A Night at the Movies.* In these cases, the respective characteristics of the "good" sheriffs and the "bad" Kid or the "bad" Mexican are first stretched beyond any possible plausibility, then suddenly physically switched in uncanny ways. In "The Kid," the Sheriff compulsively blasts away with the Kid's guns and is hanged accordingly. In "Shootout at Gentry Junction," the Sheriff is killed by his own guns in a way—already quoted in full in the chapter on *Formations*—that suggests an iterative relationship between open and repressed characteristics: the latter creeping up on the former while the former is concentrating on stalking the latter. But both instances, as is almost always the case in Coover's texts, are by no means confined to the psychoanalytical; political dimensions permeate the displacement of such characteristics on every level.

Related to this motif is the traditional displacement of "undesirable"

characteristics into a mirror image of the self that has to be "overcome" by either killing it or, on the contrary, by not killing it and overcoming one's aggressions instead, the latter a variant that gained considerable pop-culture credibility through its treatment in the *Star Wars* franchise's second installment, *The Empire Strikes Back*. But in postmodern texts, the inherent subversiveness and uncanniness of the mirror image takes a few more turns. In the chapter "peter's story" from Acker's *I Dreamt I Was A Nymphomaniac: Imagining,* the narrator introduces himself with the words "I was born evil and became more evil and more evil by chance. Chance is fate." Later in the chapter, he encounters his mirror image, and plunges his sword "with brute ferocity repeatedly through and through" his adversary's bosom. But, with a sudden reversal of the abovementioned motif, a figure pale and dabbled in blood approaches from a "large mirror where none had been perceptible" who does *not* turn out to be the symbolic self one has come to expect, but the now corporeal doppelganger who has so far only been imagined by the narrator. This doppelganger, formerly envisioned as a "freak," fat, ugly, and as evil as the narrator, is "the most beautiful man I've ever seen, his skin shining as light," and he comes forward from within the mirror to end his life as well as the chapter with biblical flavor:

> "You have conquered, and I yield. Yet henceforth art thou also dead—dead to the World as it now exists and as you hate it. In me didst thou exist—and, in my death, see by this image, which is thine own, how utterly thou has murdered thyself." (142)

Especially in Coover's texts, characteristics such as "good vs. evil" or "murder vs. victim" are not only displaced but often become completely "loose" and free-floating in the process: with cinematic techniques and plot structures consisting of the most blatant Hollywood stereotypes, "characteristics" often become solely a function of context. These texts are frequently populated by "extras" who switch their roles according to

requirements, surrounding and supporting a usually clueless "leading role" who is perpetually thrown into changing situations by scripts that are both conforming to Hollywood clichés and thoroughly insane. *S*uch scripted displacements can either be quite abrupt or uncannily incremental. Or both, as in *Ghost Town*: After the "hero" cinematically shoots a "bad guy," the latter—over the course of two paragraphs and six lines of dialog—incrementally turns out to be unarmed, blind, and wearing a sheriff's badge, the star now "pierced by his rifle shot and black with blood." Whereupon the "hero's" attitude changes accordingly, in an inner dialog: "Probably he should shoot them all. Maybe they expect him to."[23] Similar shifts take place on the plot level when the protagonist is seamlessly pushed by different scripts from role to role, from sheriff to gang leader to married farmer with children, while the supporting cast constantly change roles, costumes, attitudes, and characteristics, and augment down-home Hollywood Western fare with outrageous antics and surreal brutality (cf. 48-49; 62-64).

Taken to the extreme, the displacement of characteristics and the dissolving of binaries within an iterative framework can result in a condition where total entropy, in the sense of maximum uniformity, prevails. In Barthelme's "Paraguay" from *City Life,* for example, everyone has the same fingerprints. Crime exists, but "people chosen at random are punished for them. Everyone is liable for everything" (28-29). Not that these punishments are to be taken lightly:

---

[23] Incidentally, a similar "switch" occurs in an example Culler chooses in his essay "Defining Narrative Units" to clarify Barthes's concept of "kernels" and "catalysts." This displacement, though, does not seem tongue-in-cheek or chosen on purpose: "For the hero to lie in wait for the villain is, at one level, a kernel, since it logically requires a temporal consequence: the villain arrives and is shot down. But at another level these functions are satellites which expand the kernel 'revenge,' a consequence of an initial kernel such as 'suffering harm'." (135). Supposed to be an easily accessible example, shooting down the villain in an ambush curiously counteracts both the traditional role of the hero and the dramaturgy of revenge.

> There have been certain technical refinements. The procedures we use (called here "impalement") are used in Paraguay but also new techniques I had never before encountered, "dimidation" and "quartering." These I found very refreshing. (29)

These "refinements," furthermore, are deliberately set in a manner which makes it impossible to decide whether they refer to the aforementioned punishment, to sexual intercourse in the Paraguay of "Paraguay," or both.

In Coover's *After Lazarus: A Filmscript*, finally, the story itself repeats itself ad infinitum, and it is enacted over and over by a single person who, according to situation, multiplies and transforms and disappears, cycling through all available roles from priest to pallbearers to mourning widows to corpse, closing each iteration by collapsing the rising Lazarus with a pallbearer who wrestles him violently back into his grave.

Another possibility, equally extreme, is the world of Coover's *Gerald's Party*, a world that is crowded with seemingly sharply differentiated characters and an abundance of details which can turn into clues and possible evidence at any time. Not only is there what Miller calls, with regard to *Oedipus Rex* and Aristotle's *Poetics,* a "dark fringe" that becomes more insisting the more "remorseless clear logic" is applied; the way how hidden iterative structures in *Gerald's Party*'s murder cases are uncovered, and the way in which hierarchies inherent to the detective genre are toppled, are also reminiscent of what Culler calls, again with regard to *Oedipus Rex*, a meaning that is not the effect of a prior event but its cause. Within the "confines" of Gerald's party and its densely populated premises packed with farcical tragedy and tragical farce, deaths and sexual encounters, plays-within-plays and stories-within-stories, replete with violence that is as casual as it is brutal, Coover combines three elements connected to repetition and the uncanny for the scaffolding of this motif: the "detective story"; the "story-within-a-story"; and the "prehistorical museum" as the site

of the crime. Inspector Pardew, called in to the party to solve the first of the party's numerous murders and fatal accidents, remembers and tells a case that happened "many years ago" when he was "just getting started in the force," called in to assist in a "strange case that had utterly baffled the shrewdest and most experienced minds in our division" (200). A famous historian in the field of prehistory had been found, hand and feet bound, and strangled to death with an ancient Iberian garotte. For a robbery, "it had seemed *too* simple, too *self-referential*, if you take my meaning." From there, each time under the most complex circumstances, a seemingly endless chain of prime suspects are identified who, each time, had the means and the motive to have perpetrated all the preceding murders, and each suspect is murdered before arrests can be made (200–02). Eventually, it dawns on Pardew that "the victim is the killer," and the "sinister pattern" becomes gradually clear, but he is reluctant to discuss his theory with his "old school" colleagues who would deem him "mad." At last, the "murdered" historian's ingenious plan is revealed "to set in motion, with his own suicide, an infinite and ineluctable series of murders":

> "Yes, m'um, the fatal series might have run on forever had we not, upon deciphering the encoded plot, stopped the historian's brother-in-law from taking the late daughter's fiancé out hunting. And in the nick of time. It was a celebrated case, the turning point of my career. With it I won advancement, fame, the respect of my colleagues. (205)

Coover constructs this chain or murders indeed with "ingenuity." Besides overturning the murderer-victim duality, the cause-and-effect hierarchy as such is reversed. On the one hand, this "deconstruction" mocks and reveals unquestioned assumptions about how the world works. But one should not forget that liberating cause and effect from its consecutive restrictions can tip over into an elasticity of perspective that allows the interpretation of causes as effects and vice versa, a perspective that, yet again, is fundamental to the workings of paranoia and conspiracy theories.

Murderous Suicides

Villainous heroes, suicidal murderers, and the overall possibility of repetition and displacement in violent crime are, as mentioned, also frequently investigated, referenced, or alluded to in critical texts. One of these cases is de Man's reading of Lukács's essay on the *Theory of the Novel* in "The Rhetoric of Blindness" from *Blindness and Insight*, which echoes Inspector Pardew's reasoning in several ways. "Time," according to de Man, acts for Lukács as a healing and reconciling force against an estrangement which is caused by the "arbitrary intervention of a transcendental force." But this force, as it turns out, is itself "temporal" so that what is being offered by Lukács "as a remedy is in fact the disease itself" (103–04). Time, on the "organic" level of origin, continuity, growth, and totalization, is "explicit and assertive," while on the level of "ironic awareness," of discontinuity, alienation, and fragmentation, "it remains so implicit, so deeply hidden behind error and deception, that it is unable to rise to thematic assertion" (104). By stating that Lukács fails to connect irony and time, de Man's initial reference to the double-edged nature of the "pharmakon" in its double meaning as "poison" and "remedy"—to which an introduction will be given in the following section—crossfades into the image of the detective story:

> In Lukács's story, the villain—time—appears as the hero, when he is in fact murdering the heroine—the novel—he is supposed to rescue. The reader is given the elements to decipher the real plot hidden behind the pseudo-plot, but the author himself remains deluded. (104)

While the reader, or "de Man," is here cast as the detective, Lukács, or "the author," can be understood as Inspector Pardew's "old school" colleagues. The image, in similar form, surfaces again a few pages later, this time referring to Todorov's theory of interpretation as "duplication," i. e., that by writing about a text the critic automatically says something the text does not say. De Man concedes that this might be the case, and that the

critic, moreover, says something "he himself" does not mean to say (109). But this does not mean that there is no immanent connection between the work and what the critic says. On the contrary, precisely at the point where the critic "diverges" from the work, our understanding "is modified and the faulty vision shown to be productive," a point of view that develops into de Man's concept that critics' "moments of greatest blindness with regard to their own critical assumptions are also the moments at which they achieve their greatest insight" (109). With respect to Todorov, then, de Man maintains that text and commentary might indeed be locked into conflict:

> And one could say that the further the critical text penetrates in its understanding, the more violent the conflict becomes, to the point of mutual destruction: Todorov significantly has to have recourse to an imagery of death and violence in order to describe the encounter between text and commentary. One could even go further still and see the murder become suicide as the critic, in his blindness, turns the weapon of his language upon himself, in the mistaken belief that it is aimed at another. (109–10)

Here, indeed, it is the critic, or the reader, who is deluded. And, with a twist typical for de Man, it is iterated on the spot. Todorov's critical reading and his insightful error is repeated by de Man's reading of Todorov which, as de Man implicitly acknowledges, is a "misreading" of Todorov, thus iterating the suicide in an environment where the murderer's weapon always misses its mark. Paralleling in detail the deadly mechanism of Inspector Pardew's case, suicide as the prerequisite for an uninterrupted and infinite chain of murderers turning into victims by their own hand becomes the fundamental condition for critical reading.

In Johnson's and Miller's texts, murderers and victims also trade places in complex ways. Reading Melville's *Billy Budd* in *The Critical Difference*, Johnson observes that "Billy is sweet, innocent, and harmless, yet he kills," while "Claggart is evil, perverted, and mendacious, yet he dies a victim" (82). On the plot level, Johnson identifies a chiasmus in the course of which Billy and Claggart "personify" certain characteristics but

"the relation between personifier and personified" is reversed, "positioning an opposition between good and evil only to make each term take on the properties of its opposite" (83). On the level of reading, the reader is either forced to condemn Billy ("acceptance," "tragedy," or "necessity") or to condemn the text ("irony," "injustice," or "social criticism"), hence to pass a sentence which, either way, can never be fully justified. Which, in turn, resembles the position of Captain Vere as the "reader" in *Billy Budd* where personifier and personified again become unhinged since Vere is "sagacious and responsible, yet he allows a man whom he feels to be blameless to hang" (82).

Miller, in *Versions of Pygmalion,* applies de Man's motif of necessary misreading to Kleist's Novella *Der Findling*. In a constant chain of "misreadings" on the plot level, where similarities are mistaken for identities, all the main characters are eventually killed. According to Miller, this motif of catastrophic misreading culminates in an event on the textual level that is meant to structurally repeat itself on the level of reading. On the textual level, the protagonist Piachi is to be hanged for murder. But Piachi wants to follow his victim "to hell" to carry out his revenge even further, and, accordingly, refuses absolution. But absolution is a legal prerequisite for execution under papal law, and the "perpetual feedback situation" of his daily refusal at the scaffold comes only to an end when the pope ultimately "breaks the double bind by committing the monstrous injustice of having Piachi hanged without absolution and without the attendance of a priest, though this condemns him to damnation" (123). But this double bind, as Miller observes, was already embedded in the procedure as such: when absolution is given, the murderer becomes "guiltless," so carrying out the execution necessarily repeats the crime it is meant to punish, and the murderer becomes the victim. The suspension of "straightforward causality" that these double binds entail have, according to Miller, been set up in the

novella all along. But at the same time, the reader's "deeply ingrained habits as an interpreter of stories lead him or her to see the events as a causal chain," thus repeating the story's injustice that is "dramatized within":

> This rendering of justice is at the same time an act of reading, as indicated by the frequency with which the circulation of actual pieces of writing—letters, notes, legal documents, decrees, and so forth—enters into Kleist's stories as essential elements in the chain of events. [...]
>
> How and why does this happen? Can it be avoided by some procedure of mental hygiene? The effects of misreading are so catastrophic in the stories Kleist tells that the reader would do anything within reason to avoid becoming the next link in a chain of misreadings. (127–28)

However, these iterations seem to be unstoppable—or stoppable only by "forced" endings when the syntactical complexity of the readings, necessarily progressing, reaches the point of unmanageability. How this can be effected on a larger scale has been demonstrated by the progression of readings in Muller and Richardson's collection *The Purloined Poe,* at the core of which Johnson reads Derrida who reads Lacan's reading of Poe's "The Purloined Letter"—a story that is itself concerned with chains of signs and signifiers, with repetition and retrieval, and whose protagonist serves as the archetypal detective for the investigation of the "uncanny." Who, of course, is also recognizable in the character of Inspector Pardew. A far more manageable example than *The Purloined Poe* in this context, equally rather a "violation," is Johnson's reading of de Man's remarks on Locke's *Essay Concerning Human Understanding*. In an attack on figurative speech, Locke likens "eloquence" to the "fair sex" in several respects, including the characteristic of "deceiving" and the ultimate uselessness to find fault with it since men, according to Locke, find "pleasure" in being deceived. Disassembling Locke's argument by turning it against itself, de Man also sets his sights on Locke's sexist assumptions in *Aesthetic Ideology*:

> Nothing could be more eloquent than this denunciation of eloquence. It is clear that rhetoric is something one can decorously indulge in as long as one knows where it belongs. Like a woman, which it resembles ("like the fair sex"), it is a fine thing as long as it is kept in its proper place. Out of place, among the serious affairs of men ("if we would speak of things as they are"), it is a disruptive scandal—like the appearance of a real woman in a gentlemen's club where it would only be tolerated as a picture, preferably naked (like the image of Truth), framed and hung on the wall. There is little epistemological risk in a flowery, witty passage about wit like this one, except perhaps that it may be taken too seriously by dull-witted subsequent readers. (36)

Unwittingly, as Johnson points out in *The Wake of Deconstruction*, de Man's reading almost *exactly* repeats this gesture, including the "epistemological risk" of his own "witty passage," thereby turning murder into suicide again:

> Woman is fine in her proper place (in private), but among the "serious affairs of men" (in public) a "real" woman is "a disruptive scandal." Woman will only be tolerated as an image. But is a men's club the public sphere? Or rather, is the public sphere a men's club? [...] Another thing to note about the de Man quotation is that its attempts to tell an allegory of rhetoric get out of hand. The real woman in the men's club is supposed to be a figure for the scandal of rhetoric within philosophical discourse. When she is replaced by a *figure*—the picture on the wall—she is no longer a figure for the real scandal of figure. This energy to contain and reduce the scandal is enacted by de Man's own language in the passage. By arranging the grammar in such a way as to appear to refer to the woman as "it" ("like the appearance of a real woman in a gentlemen's club where *it* would only be tolerated as a picture"), de Man's language prematurely contains the scandal even as he ironizes the act of containing it. (55)

When murders turns into suicides and murderers into victims and crimes are endlessly repeated, the failure to recognize the "other" is often pointed out as contributing to the underlying mechanics of displacement. In *Der Findling*'s already mentioned context of misreading similarities for identities, the protagonist's failure to realize the "otherness" of his antagonist and later victim is what sets, according to Miller, the chain of displacement and repetition into motion.

Failing to read the Other takes many forms, and it can even include

the failure to correctly read the Other as the self's true mirror image. According to Johnson in *The Critical Difference,* all parties involved in Barthes's reading of Balzac's "Sarrasine" in *S/Z* misread the Other as an *inverted* mirror image of the self that ostensibly validates the reader's potency, a misreading that triggers an iterating chain of death and castration. This is at work in the story, in the narrative frame, and in Barthes's reading as well where, according to Johnson, "castration is erected into *the* meaning of the text," a pun obviously intended:

> On the basis of this confrontation between a literary and a critical text, we could perhaps conclude that while both involve a study of difference, the literary text conveys a difference from itself which it "knows" but cannot say, while the critical text, in attempting to say the difference, reduces it to identity. (12)

Barthes's text, though, turns out in the course of Johnson's reading to be more complex and ambivalent than it seems or is even aware of, which again points to de Man's "murderous" chain where a critical reading not only differs from the text, but also from the very thing it wants to say, and remains blind to its insights.

The combined workings of the failure to read the Other and the erroneous identification of one's true image as an inverted mirror image can have horrific and indeed "historical" consequences. Reading Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* in *Tropes, Parables, and Performatives*, Miller points out:

> Male practicality and idealism [...] turn into their opposites because they are hollow at the core. They are vulnerable to the horror. They *are* the horror. [...] This is not just wordplay but actual fact, as the history of the white man's conquest of the world has abundantly demonstrated. This conquest means the end of the brutes, but it means also, in Conrad's view of history, the end of Western civilization, with its ideals of progress, enlightenment, and reason, its goal of carrying the torch of civilization into the wilderness and wringing the heart of the darkness. (192)

The already mentioned, and soon to be explained, ambivalence of the pharmakon, i. e., the inherent impossibility to arrest or stabilize its meaning as either "poison" or "remedy," can wreak havoc in the historical and political arena, turning any form of "enlightened" cure into "brute" disease. While this is a fact that is in principle well known, it is often unreadable against the backdrop of contemporary self-images and values, as especially Spivak is able to demonstrate. Invariably, in accordance to what has been discussed so far, such misreadings generate successive ones, casting perpetrators as victims, villains as heroes, and heroes as murderers. In a detailed argument in *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason*, accompanied by ample documentary evidence, Spivak retraces the British law abolishing *Sati* in colonial India, the self-immolation of widows. While from the Western perspective this law is immediately cast as the rightful suppression of a "brutish" custom, Spivak agrees but still begs to differ: "Given that the abolishment of *sati* was in itself admirable, it is still possible to wonder" (290). Since *Sati* was not a "rule" for widows but rather a "sanctioned suicide," it could paradoxically "become the signifier of a woman as exception" insofar as such a death could be understood by the female subject as an *exceptional* signifier of her own desire, exceeding the general rule of a widow's conduct. This, in turn, is a result of the "inexorable ideological production of the sexed subject," but the British "remedy" by no means provides the cure:

> I will suggest that the British ignore the space of *Sati* as an ideological battleground, and construct the woman as an *object* of slaughter, the saving of which can mark the moment when not only a civil but a good society is born out of domestic chaos. Between patriarchal subject-formation and imperialist object-constitution, it is the place of the free will or agency of the sexed subject as female that is successfully effaced. (235)

More contemporary measures like "microcredit-baiting," as Spivak calls it in "From Haverstock Hill Flat to U. S. Classroom, What's Left of Theory?" and elsewhere, and other economical remedies undertaken by the first

world to improve the third, often follow the same route of a cure that keeps the disease alive:

> [My] point was that the British and the caste-Hindu reformers only concentrated on the visible violence of *Sati*, passed a widow remarriage law without any infrastructural involvement, and left the miserable rule-governed life of the "ordinary" Hindu widow unchanged.
>
> A structural homology may be advanced here. As long as we remain only focused on the visible violence of world trade, endorse the credit-baiting of the poorest rural women of the Southern hemisphere in the name of micro-enterprise without any infrastructural involvement, the subaltern remains in subalternity. And we legitimate the world trade coding of the finance capital market by reversal. (7)

Violence, in its manifestation as the "extermination of the brutes," moreover, is not restricted to political or financial powers. For Spivak, in "The New Historicism: Political Commitment and the Postmodern Critic," this violence is already and especially generated by the "goodwill" of the individual student in the classroom: the forces of violence involved "are at their worst when they are most benevolent," and they are "most benevolent when embodied by the most vulnerable" (284).

The Pharmakon

Several topics touched upon so far have been marked as showing a direct or indirect relationship to Plato's pharmakon in the form presented by Derrida in *Dissemination*. But this is not the only reason for its introduction at this point. The meaning of pharmakon as either "poison" or "remedy," to be explained more in-depth below, subjects this term to oscillations between these meanings that are not unlike the processes involved in how murder and suicide or murderers and victims have been shown to trade places. And these particular oscillations do not come without violence either—a kind of violence, moreover, that is closely related to the violence of the father-son cycle explored in the preceding subchapter, in both its

"physical" and its "textual" aspects. Even the discourse itself which includes the question of translation does not remain unaffected by this violence, and neither does Johnson's translation of Derrida's *Dissemination* from French into English which, as will be seen, generates itself a curious iterative effect with respect to the pharmakon.

On the basis of the story told by Socrates about the Egyptian half-god Theuth who offers his invention of "writing" to the god Thamus, or Ammon, in Plato's *Phaedrus,* Derrida develops his concept of writing as a pharmakon. For Theuth, his invention is a pharmakon for both memory and wisdom in the sense of a remedy. But it is rejected by Thamus, who calls writing a pharmakon in the sense of a poison, as a menace and mischief. "God the king," Derrida explains, "does not know how to write, but that ignorance or incapacity only testifies to his sovereign independence" (76). Writing, as it turns out, endangers the "paternal position." Contrary to speech, which, like the *logos,* always resides in the position and the presence of the speaking subject, writing is "intimately bound" to the absence of the father, and such absence, regardless of how it is brought about, is always a "doing away" with the father, in other words, murder:

> From the position of the holder of the scepter, the desire of writing is indicated, designated, and denounced as a desire for orphanhood and patricidal subversion. Isn't this *pharmakon* then a criminal thing, a poisoned present? (77)

According to Derrida, Socrates himself, not surprisingly, effectively denounces Theuth as a "wayward, rebellious son, an immoderation or perversion," a son that is effectively "*lost*" and whose "impotence is truly that of an orphan as much as that of a justly or unjustly persecuted patricide" (145). Derrida's discourse not only aims at writing, but also at translation. By rendering the pharmakon as "remedy," "recipe," "poison," drug," or "philter" depending on the context, translations erase the ambiguity of its

meaning "on a certain surface of its functioning" (97). Thus, Theuth's "passing off" poison as a remedy gets lost:

> So that in translating *pharmakon* by *remedy,* what one respects is not what Theuth intended, nor even what Plato intended, but rather what the King says Theuth has said, effectively deluding either the King or himself. If Plato's text then goes on to give the King's pronouncement as the truth of Theuth's production and his speech as the truth of writing, then the translation *remedy* makes Theuth into a simpleton or a flimflam artist, *from the sun's point of view.* (98)

The "interpretative" translation, by destroying the pharmakon*'s* ambiguity, effectively doubles the position of the father. This, moreover, is repeated on the level of the history of philosophy:

> All translations into languages that are the heirs and depositaries of Western metaphysics thus produce on the *pharmakon* an *effect of analysis* that violently destroys it, reduces it to one of its simple elements by interpreting it, paradoxically enough, in the light of the ulterior developments it itself has made possible. (99)

But this difficulty of translation is not an accident. According to Derrida, it is a difficulty "inherent in its very principle, situated less in the passage from one language to another, from one philosophical language to another, than already, as we shall see, in the tradition between Greek and Greek; a violent difficulty in the transference of a nonphilosopheme into a philosopheme" (72).

In the "Translation" section of her "Translator's Introduction" to *Dissemination*, Johnson underscores the difficulty of the task at hand, especially the difficulty to find not only English equivalents "for what Derrida *says* but also for the way in which his text *differs* from its own statements and from standard French usage," and also to keep Derrida's "juggling-puns in the air." But if translation is accessory to "violent destruction" by erasing and canceling out, and in such a manner as to duplicate textual condemnations of writing in general and translation in particular, how

would that make itself felt in her own translations?

Interestingly, measured by the standards of Johnson's own texts, her introduction to *Dissemination* stands out on account of its heightened level of violent imagery. The world of the translator is suffused with "warring forces," "double-edged swords," "combat," "violent approximations," "striking interventions," or the "mobilization" of "every weapon available" to keep, of all things, the aforementioned "juggling-puns in the air" (cf. xii–xviii).

The pharmakon seems ubiquitous. Its workings can be observed, as self-similar iterations, on many different levels or many different levels of magnitude, so to speak, and it is always potentially lethal. It is involved in Miller's question in *Victorian Subjects*—referring to the irrational in Aristotle's *Poetics*—how *catharsis* as a medicine, or remedy, can be administered without running the risk of causing "the disease it is meant to cure" (254); it is involved in the killing of the father and the castration of the son; it is involved in the uncanny doublings and displacements of murderers and victims; and it is involved in the "extermination of the brutes" through goodwill in the political arena.

3. Uncanny Loops: Tangled & Framed

Repetition, in the context of psychoanalytic theory, is often linked with the uncanny. The uncanny has already been encountered repeatedly throughout this chapter, from violence embedded in the father-son cycle to various forms of violent displacement. As will be shown in the following two sections, the acts of "doubling" or "duplicating" are connected, by way of the uncanny, with many of these motifs. Among them are questions about sameness and otherness, about saneness and madness, and about

the "anxieties of influence" in a reversed form where violence is perpetrated by "quotation," each one embedded in an uninterrupted loop whose first instance, the "original text," might have vanished as yet another elusive point of origin. Duplication, as will be shown, can vary from verbatim quotations to complex repetitions, or loops, with a narrative type of what in mathematics would amount to "mutable states," where variations are injected into the repetition without altering the narrative loop's principal structure, keeping it intact for another revolution. The scaffolding that keeps such loops intact and alive, interestingly, often consists of rather violent matter. Subsequently, in the second section, the endeavor will be discussed—or rather the possibility thereof—of arresting such loops by either "breaking" them at any given point or by "containing" them through the construction of meta-levels, or frames, around the loop; where, again, violence can be found among the basic building materials. This will touch upon the writing process and even on publishing again, as well as on problems engendered by the unarrestability of meaning, linking back to the first chapter's findings on performative language.

Doubling Agents

In literary criticism, maybe the most basic and most frequent form of "doubling" is the use of quotations. Every critical argument, Miller writes in *Reading Narrative*, relies on quotations. Cut from the original context and "sewn" into the new one, a quotation "repairs, replaces, or stands in" as a "prosthetic limb" without which something might be missing in the argument (161). To ask what happens in citation-as-repetition is to ask if something "odd and violent" is done to the original text or, vice versa, to the argument by the original:

> Does not citation perhaps always do violence to what it cites, always quote too little or too much, or too little and too much at once, so that the passage

is neither completely free of its paternal or maternal source nor sufficiently provided with it? (162)

But repetition cannot be isolated or arrested in a simple doubling. The process gestates infinite iterations, of which the first one, similar to what has been said about points of origin in the chapter on *Formations*, might not be retrievable in principle. Cited texts, according to Miller, are "already, in part at least" citations and therefore "themselves acts of violence" (162). In addition to the argument's applicability to intertextuality, Miller also stresses the kind of repetition that occurs when "previous states of mind acts of language that are imagined as having already occurred for the characters" are subsequently "iterated by the narrator." Combining these aspects, violence in citation-as-repetition generates its own double on the synchronous axis of the written text, and on the diachronic axis of literary history as well.

Such multiple citational doublings are often effectively construed by postmodern writers, with its possible violence enacted on the textual level. In Barth's *Letters*, for example, the principal characters are already elaborate "quotations" lifted from Barth's preceding six novels, and the multifaceted plot of *Letters* iterates the preceding plots as repetitions and as sequels at the same time. Aptly called "revolutions" in *Letters*, referring to both aspects at once, these iterations are dramatized and thematized throughout with a multitude of details. Within this context, in turn, Joe Morgan's *Wiedertraum* might serve as an example, the repetition-cum-sequel of Barth's *The End of the Road*. The staging of the *Wiedertraum* includes both protagonist and antagonist, Jacob Horner and Joe Morgan, a .45 caliber Army Colt, and the character Marsha Hunt as a replacement for Rennie Morgan who died in *The End of the Road*. In the form of repetitions with mutable states, some role switches take place, but the triangular relationship's framework as a point of departure and the terminating death of

one of the actors are faithfully reenacted. Through mutable state operations, different characters can be affected by the same events without altering the framework, as is the case in the text's final "mess" (*End of the Road* 197–99; *Letters* 575; 742). While Rennie dies in *The End of the Road* through the ambiguous and not fully resolvable double gesture of abortion and suicide, drowning "in her own vomitus on the Doctor's operating table," Joe Morgan dies in the equally ambiguous and not fully resolvable double gesture of murder and suicide, with people "retching" at the "dreadful" mess after the service gun's bullet blows his "brains out." Finally, the text's "written-ness" is repeated on several levels. Whereas Joe Morgan is as much the "author" of the *Wiedertraum* as the Author—also a character in *Letters*—is the "author" of *The End of the Road*, both texts are already "citations" of some sorts: while Morgan bases his *Wiedertraum* on the Author's script *of The End of the Road,* this script in turn is supposedly based on Jacob Horner's personal notes the Author allegedly came across "by accident." Thus, repetition is effected both on the horizontal axis expounded by Miller and the vertical axis suggested by the mechanisms of intertextuality, triggering the possibility of infinite quotation as well as the loss of the "non-quoting" text as a point of origin.

The vertiginous effects of a text quoting itself can, in a different and more straightforward, but nonetheless potentially disorienting manner, also be encountered in Acker's texts. Events can occur multiple times with slight variations or even with no variation at all, and whole passages are doubled or tripled verbatim as, e. g., in *I Dreamt I Was A Nymphomaniac: Imagining* (115 ff.; 122 ff.). Here, everything from the robbed and beaten man and the woman dying of starvation up to the central chase after the "evil man," a chase leading up endless progressions of two-sided staircases until the hunted "murderer" miscalculates his jump, is verbatim repeated:

> Surrounded by my friends: he jumps to reach the next lower staircase to get away; he misses the staircase falls through the narrow opening between the central and the horizontal side staircase, through the next opening, through the next opening: as he falls his left hand grabs the hand of one of the girls: as she falls, her hand grabs another person's hand, etc. I watch the bodies of my friends fall smack! break against the metal stairs. I watch my friends die. I understand they want to die. I rush over to stop them: I convince them to stop. The rest of the people, about a third left, hold on to the bannisters as hard as they can. (116/123–124)

On top of this multiplicity of selfs, stairs, and deaths ambiguously brought about, once more, by either murder or suicide or both, the encounter with the text as its perfect "double" amplifies the passage's uncanniness to a high degree. Though the written words are perfectly identical, they are, of course, differently read. Reading the repetition is profoundly different from reading its "original," and the difference lies precisely in the loss of origin and authority that the perfect duplication brings about. In psychoanalysis, this loss of origin equals the loss of the self: the repetition which initially holds the promise of the self's survival becomes the self's most alarming threat.[24]

"Loss of the self" through repetition works in numerous ways. In the course of the contemplation on the minds of Prussian soldiers in Pynchon's *Mason & Dixon*, a passage touched upon in the chapter on *Formations* and again to be touched upon in the chapter on *Humanity*, the erasure of difference by collapsing the female adventurer Zsuzsa with the "Wolf of Jesus" in Captain Zhang's imagination is brought about by the dialectic of repetition in Zsuzsa's account and its uncanny threat of the effacement of perceivable differences:

> ["]What can Hansel possibly wish for, that Heinz in front of him, and Dieter behind, and a couple of Fritzes on either side, have not already desir'd,—

---

[24] Certainly, one of the more famous representations of this threat in psychoanalysis is "castration anxiety"—a motif which, not by accident, keeps surfacing throughout this chapter.

> multiplied by all the ranks and files, stretching away across the Plain? [...] What do any of their desires matter, if they can be of no use to the Manoeuvre, where all is timed from a single Pulse, each understanding no more than he must,—" (551)

The more precarious "difference" becomes, the stronger the threat is perceived. A threat that brings about, in turn, states of schizophrenia or paranoia, equally important elements in postmodern texts, and the task to regain ground from there might well be insurmountable. To differentiate oneself and to "read" the self as being sane or being mad always runs the risk of becoming hopelessly lost in hermeneutic circularity, as is the case in Barthelme's *The King* when the question of saneness is raised with regard to King Arthur's knights versus the Nazis:

> "Why are we fighting them?"
>
> "They're mad. We're sane."
>
> "How do we know?"
>
> "That we're sane?"
>
> "Yes."
>
> "Am I sane?"
>
> "To all appearances."
>
> "And you, do you consider yourself sane?"
>
> "I do."
>
> "Well, there you have it." (25)

This answer, of course, still begs the question. And how it should be read depends very much on how the passage's continuation is read:

> "But don't they also consider themselves sane?"
>
> "I think they know. Deep down. That they're not sane."
>
> "How must that make them feel?"
>
> "Terrible, I should think. They must fight ever more fiercely, in order to deny what they know to be true. That they are not sane." (25)

The play of irony, to be explored in depth in the chapter on *Composition*,

cannot be arrested to yield a stable meaning. Miller, in his abovementioned argument on citational violence in *Reading Narrative,* calls irony "a form of endless looping or feedback" which suggests that "the interpreter can never go beyond any passage she or he takes as a starting place" (163). But the context in *The King*, for once, provides considerable leverage to ascertain saneness and madness, and even the possibility of differentiating the "self" to a certain degree. King Arthur's final decision to destroy the "Grail," which turned out to be the secret to building a nuclear bomb, and to refrain from pushing the circle of violence into another revolution even when fighting against the Nazis, represents precisely *not* fighting "ever more fiercely" and lends some weight to Arthur's saneness— without having to arrest the passage's play of irony, which would be impossible in any event. Whatever answer might be won in the face of irony, though, the question would still be left open with regard to the saneness or madness of a text that has the Knights of the Round Table fight the armies, airplanes, and armored divisions of the Axis Powers with medieval weaponry on horseback, and quite successfully at that.

Implicitly "quoted" in a self thus threatened by repetition is, once again, the doppelganger motif. The shock to encounter, and oftentimes subsequently fall prey to, one's own self as Other is most strongly articulated in Barth's novels up to *Letters* and in Acker's and Coover's texts; additionally, especially by Barthelme and Pynchon, this motif is often subtly employed in the form of outward projections of inner conflicts or narcissistic endeavors. Examples range from Ebenezer Cooke's endemic confrontations with "impostors" and the Goat-Boy's battles with his "alter ego" Bray in Barth's *The Sot-Weed Factor* and *Giles Goat-Boy,* respectively, to the schizophrenic encounters Acker's characters have with themselves throughout her texts, or Coover's "fairy tale quotations": in "The Last One" from *Child Again*, e. g., the latest bride of the "Bluebeard" narrator turns

out to be his very doppelgänger he falls prey to, and she punishes him for his "disobedience and imprudent curiosity" by seizing him and putting him into her toy castle already populated by dolls that are "all little bearded men" who "are alive, even the ones whose heads have been taken off and mounted on the walls" (251).

Frameworks

Once repetition has encroached upon the text's or the self's "self-image" on any given level, it cannot be arrested on the selfsame level. Since "breaking statements," i. e., in-built instructions intended to keep a set or subset of commands from iterating forever, are naturally rare in texts, the iterative process, once put in motion, intrinsically forecloses the possibility of a final repetition just as it forecloses the possible retrieval of its origin. Intuitively, it should be possible to "contain" such infinite loops by comprehensive descriptions from a superordinate level. But, picking up on twentieth century developments in mathematics and computability theory that raised serious doubts about the intrinsic power of meta-levels, explanatory or otherwise, meta-levels came under scrutiny in the humanities in general and literary criticism in particular as well. Last but not least, to incorporate a maximum of possible meta-levels into the plot and overall structure of a text, therewith foreclosing any explanatory power these meta-levels might have yielded in the first place, is a device enthusiastically employed by many postmodern writers. The loop's unarrestability, as will be seen, actually flourishes all the more with each meta-level coming to the rescue.

In Coover's texts, infinite loops often rely specifically on cinematic techniques and range from single-level loops to those that are over and over repeated on a multitude of levels, up to and including the "actual" physical world. A simple infinite loop, to begin with, can be found in "Seven Exemplary Fictions: *In a Train Station*" from *Pricksongs & Descants.* After

some smalltalk has been exchanged between the Stationmaster and Alfred, a lone passenger waiting for his train, a "stranger" enters the station, drunk, vomiting, and—incidentally—complaining about God who "'*is eating hish own goddamn chil'ren!*'" (102). The Stationmaster, as becomes clear, expects Alfred to kill this man; which he tries, but fumbles and drops his pocketknife and begins to cry. The knife is picked up by the Stationmaster, who tells Alfred to pay attention—"'Now, watch, Alfred,' he says. '*Watch!*'"—and severs the "tall stranger's head with three quick strokes" (103). He carries the head away into his office and the body out of sight through a door, and returns to rewind the station clock—after which Alfred collects his things and approaches the Stationmaster's office to buy a ticket. The scene starts anew. The loop does not break out of its plane, and the characters within the loop know that the loop exists, and they even seem to be responsible to keep it going. Cinematic or stage techniques notwithstanding, this "exemplary fiction" can only work as "text." Alfred's trousers are already "stained from the knees down" at the story's beginning, but there is a surplus the spectacle would necessarily inject into its next loop in a visual medium, namely the bloody mess vividly described but in the aftermath not taken care off in any way apart from removing the corpse itself. The labeling as one of "seven exemplary fictions" and the stranger's remarks seem to hint at an allegorical and/or existential meaning. This cannot be trusted. But loops as such, and nightmarish ones at that, might on account of their frequent appearance constitute a fundamental condition of life in Coover's textual universe. In his "*Previews of Coming Attractions:* The Phantom at the Movie Palace" and "*Intermission,*" both from *A Night at the Movies or, You Must Remember This,* a projectionist and a moviegoer, respectively, are caught in endless loops of extremely violent genre movies in one case, and violent but still regular Hollywood fare in the other. Both are unable to escape; every seemingly stable and familiar reality arrived at turns out to be the staging ground for

yet another horrible adventure. Having found her way back from her adventures into the movie lobby where everything began during the "Intermission," the moviegoer reenters the theater and takes her seat, not sure whether she has been hallucinating or not. But casually glancing over at the people in the adjacent rows, something seems not quite right:

> The guy's not looking too great either, just sprawled out there with his cowboy hat down over his nose, his slobbery mouth hanging open, his belt buckle undone, his hand cupped rigidly around a skinny behind that isn't there anymore. She's about to let out a yell, when she feels this icy clawlike grip on her shoulder, and she can't even squeak. The claw twists her around in her seat until she's facing the screen again and holds her there, peering up in the creepy silence at all that hollow tomfoolery and wondering how she's going to get out of *this* one. (133–34)

For the projectionist, on the other hand, the trick is that every "meta-level" arrived at turns out, sooner or later, to be rather a subordinate level of the preceding one, and the loop transcends into its own meta-loop similar to the logic of an Escher painting. The closer the text focuses on the projectionist's perspective, the more confusing and threatening these entangled levels become:

> "It's all in your mind," he seems to hear the usherette at the foot of the stairs whisper, as she points him up the stairs with her little flashlight, "so we're cutting it off."
>
> "What—?!" he cries, but she is gone [...] The projectionist climbs the high marble stairs, searching for his own closing lines, but he doesn't seem to have a speaking part."You're leaving too soon," remarks the hooded executioner without a trace of irony, as he kicks his legs out from under him. "You're going to miss the main feature." "I thought I was it," he mumbles, but the executioner, pitilessly, chooses not to hear him. He leans forward, all hopes dashed, to grip the cold bolted foot of the guillotine, and as he does so, he notices the gum stuck under it, the dropped candy wrapper, the aroma of fresh pee in plush upholstery. (36)

While Coover expands this technique of loops and frames within a cinematic environment to incredible complexity in *Lucky Pierre,* his novella *Briar Rose* raises the motif of entangled loops in simpler ways to even more vertiginous degrees. Briar Rose dreams of various "true" princes that

have finally come to rescue and awaken her; of herself sleeping and dreaming; and of a fairy who attends to her both in "real" life—by cleaning her up, for example—and within her dreams. The fairy, all the while, is telling stories about what is happening or will be happening to Briar Rose in "real" life, both while asleep and, someday, awake again, complemented by the fairy's own dreams and expositions. Only, the fairy's tales are filled with even more gruesome events and outrageous violence than Briar Rose herself can dream up in her nightmares within her nightmare, including all kinds of murder, rape, torture, infanticide, cannibalism, burning alive, mutilation, and assorted cruelties taken from the rich repertoire of fairy tales:

> Thus, her tales have touched on infanticide and child abuse, abandonment, mutilation, mass murder and cruel executions, and, in spite of the subjects, not all endings have been happy. She has told her the story [...] of the hero under a beastly spell who ate Beauty immediately upon finding her so as to avoid returning to his dreary life as a workaday prince, adding a few diverting notes about his digestive processes just to stretch the tale out. But stories aren't like that, the ill-tempered child will inevitably insist, and the fairy only cackles sourly at that and tells another. (60–61)

Again, much like the logic of an Escher painting, Briar Rose awakens to and from these ever new "dreams," "realities," or "fairy tales"—i. e., the fairy's tales—quite similar to how one is continuously led astray by an optical illusion that promises a steady approach to the "top," only to find oneself having miraculously gained not at inch toward this goal, which in this case would be a waking state that one might want to call "reality." In *Briar Rose,* quite thoroughly, the sum of all possible meta-levels constitutes a "metaloop" which both creates and sustains its existence through an asymptotically structured illusion.

Such strategic looping can also include or "entangle" the writer as in the abovementioned story "Beginnings," or the text itself, or even the reader. The latter can be demonstrated with Coover's "Heart Suite" from *A*

Child Again, a detective story about stolen pastry at the court of the "King of Hearts" that ends with sending the thief to the gallows. It is printed on thirteen 5 x 7 inch cards physically detachable from the book, to be "shuffled" and played out, so to speak, by the reader. Since "Heart Suite" is looped in such a way as to allow its chapters to be freely shuffled and (re-)assembled, the reader becomes complicit in sending one character after another to the gallows with each reading, after which the pastry is stolen again for the next iteration of the loop.

Barth too contrives labyrinthine frameworks with loops folding back layer after layer onto their former iterations, but with different techniques. At its most extensive, Barth's "multiframing" nests seven or more distinct levels into each other, as in his rendering of the Trojan War in "Menelaiad" from *Lost in the Funhouse* where the termination of readability is approached by the accumulation of quotation marks. Located at the story's center, in the innermost frame, is the regaining of Helen by Menelaus, comprising the slaying of her latest lover and the question of love (151–53). But its seeming priority is already interfered with by a proposed "doubling," the substitution and reinstatement of the "real" Helen before and after the war, a motif that can be traced back to the play *Helen* by Euripides. Moreover, an uncanny and altogether different "center" suggests itself with the possibility that Menelaus, Idothea, and eventually everybody has long since become the god Proteus in disguise, who has turned into "everything there is"—including the text itself which indeed seems to be traversed by voices none of the characters seems to own (cf., e. g., 150). In Barth's *Chimera, s*imilarly, the histories of both Perseus and Bellerophon play with this kind of framing, from multiply "superimposed" battle scenes in the banquet hall (127–32) to numerous insinuations that the heroes and heroines have actually not been transformed into stellar constellations, but into the very text through which they speak. Which in the final

chapter of Coover's *Pinocchio in Venice*, similarly, is the very wish Pinocchio is granted by the fairy: to be transformed into the text of *Pinocchio in Venice.*

Barth's uncanny repetitions sometimes become "real" repetitions on the physical level of published texts. Barth's, or rather Dante's, "Florentine Assassins" might serve as an example:

> [...] Dante tells us that Florentine assassins, placed headfirst into holes in the ground and condemned to live burial, spun out their last confessions to the bending priest—inventing, to delay their end, even more sins than they'd committed. (*Letters* 725)

The looping effect implied is spun out in an essay on the situation of the writer in Barth's *The Friday Book*:

> The beauties of this image are its two nice paradoxes: The more sins he has to confess, the longer retribution is delayed, and since he has nothing to lose anyhow, he may well invent a few good ones to hold the priest's attention. (56)

Then, Barth picks up the motif again in *On With the Story*, to spin it out even further and add yet another iteration:

> Before that hole is filled, the officiating priest bends down as the poet is doing, to hear the condemned man's last confession—which, in desperation, the poor wretch no doubt prolongs, perhaps adding fictitious sins to his factual ones in order to postpone the end—and in so doing [...] appending one more real though venial sin, the sin of lying, to the list yet to be confessed. (28)

These iterations are mirrored on the "real" level of published texts, fiction and non-fiction alike. Fittingly so, since the respective contexts—more subtly in *On With the Story*—touch on "publish or perish" demands.

Pynchon, again with different techniques, erects intricate Escheresque illusions that absorb the text, the reader, and the world alike. Often, variations of the "Philomela" motif are subtly involved, not unlike the painting

by Remedios Varo described in *The Crying of Lot 49*: a tapestry woven by women inside a tower that spreads from the tower's window to constitute the world, the tower, and its weavers (13). Another example has already been mentioned in the chapter on *Formations*, namely the gothic novel-within-the-novel *The Ghastly Fop* in Pynchon's *Mason & Dixon*, which folds back into the novel proper. The flight of the rocket in *Gravity's Rainbow* is another example of inclusive framing: the novel, in the form of a parabola accompanying the rocket's flight, terminates abruptly in a movie theater and, possibly, on top of the reader.

Several loop constructions in Acker's texts, almost always packed with violence and infused with the uncanny, have already been referred to. Here, though, some caution is called for. Acker freely inserts characters named "Kathy" or "Kate" into her texts, and the urge to illegitimately identify Acker herself with these characters—examples will be discussed in the chapter on *Reality*—seems irresistible at times for publishers, censors, and critics alike. In *Empire of the Senseless*, for example, Shivai (modeled after Case from Gibson's *Neuromancer)* finds Abhor (Molly) with her cybernetic implants hooked into a colorful ensemble of drugs, and addresses the question of the "real" boss behind their mission who, in *Neuromancer*, is the "construct," an Artificial Intelligence:

> "I don't know who's backing him." Abhor turned around to face me. She must have woken up. "All I know is we call him 'boss' and he gets his orders. Like you and me."
>
> "Somebody knows something. Whoever he is, the knower, must be the big boss."
>
> "Look." Abhor raised herself up on one arm. She smelled warm, as if from kisses, but to my knowledge no kisses had taken place. "All I know is that we have to reach this construct. And her name's Kathy."
>
> "That's a nice name. Who is she?"
>
> "It doesn't mean anything." (34)

Playing with postmodern expectations, Acker at the same time constructs

and deconstructs the "author" who is the "knower," the "big boss," and—written on the text of Gibson's *Neuromancer*—the entity who pulls the strings and literally "constructs" and maybe deconstructs its text and its characters. But all that "doesn't mean anything."

Gibson himself does play with these motifs too, but he has to resort to subterfuge techniques in order to circumvent the resistance of "genre writing" with its almost zero tolerance for intrusions by, or forays into, anything liable to break up or interrupt the suspension of disbelief. One of these techniques consists in integrating reading processes into the plot, as in *Idoru* and *All Tomorrow's Parties,* the second and the third novel of the Bridge Trilogy. Laney, one of the principal characters, "reads" the network's pool of data like the reader reads the text. Laney's abilities, it turns out, might have been brought about as a side effect of a series of drug trials he participated in during his upbringing in a federal orphanage—a drug that also "tends to turn males into fixated homicidal stalkers" (*Idoru* 174). Benign or homicidal, it comes with the ability to actually "destroy" what he reads: his "reading" of a former actor for reasons of security—on behalf of a politician with whom she is connected—results in her suicide:

> And then something began to come clear to Laney.
>
> Alison Shires *knew*, somehow, that he was there, watching. As though she felt him gazing down, into the pool of data that reflected her life, its surface made of all the bits that were the daily record of her life as it registered on the digital fabric of the world.
>
> Laney watched a nodal point begin to form over the reflection of Alison Shires.
>
> She was going to kill herself. (53)

He physically tries to intervene, but Alison shoots herself. It is her only way of putting a stop to being "read," removing herself and her readability from the "surface" of the text, as Laney intuitively comprehends:

> He thought of coral, of the reefs that grew around sunken aircraft carriers;

> perhaps she'd become something like that, the buried mystery beneath some exfoliating superstructure of supposition, or even of myth. (92)

Juxtaposed with this "readerly" position is a character usually not addressed by name who, with some plausibility, might be a cameo appearance of the writer. His physical description (cf. *All Tomorrow's Parties* 20; 75; 228) suggestively resembles the author's picture printed on the back cover of most editions. What makes this character peculiar is his ability to be invisible in the data pool: he is intrinsically "unreadable" by Laney, and thereby quite deadly:

> ["]Okay: so this person I'm looking for is very, very good at not leaving traces. Nothing ever turns up, not in the deepest quantitative analysis." Laney meant netsearch stuff; that was what he did. "He's just a physical presence."
>
> "How do you know he's a physical presence if he doesn't leave traces?"
>
> "Because people die," Laney said. (73)

Whereof Laney assigns the task of finding this man to the novel's protagonist Rydell, in order to ask "a question" the nature of which, though of course embedded in the plot in a meaningful way, again plays on the reader/writer motif:

> "Coming to his attention will be easy. Staying alive once you do will not be."
>
> Rydell considered. "So what am I supposed to do for you when he finds me?"
>
> "Ask him a question."
>
> 'What question?"
>
> "I don't know yet," Laney said, "I'm working on it."

The resemblance of this person with the author's portrait, at least, has not gone unnoticed among readers. But, as mentioned, these effects do not break the suspension of disbelief. They rather work in the way of "undercurrents" beneath the text's surface, and one of the central storylines

indeed centers around efforts to bring an "Idoru" into the "real world." Idoru, the Japanese word for "idol," is not a science fiction device; she is modeled after contemporary and completely virtual Japanese teenage idols like Date Kyoko who began her professional "media career" in 1996. In the final chapter of *All Tomorrow's Parties,* the Idoru successfully enters the text's "real world" frame. But, true to other forms of repetition explored in this subchapter and especially the doppelganger motif, she arrives not as an individual but emerges simultaneously from devices installed in every supermarket of the "Lucky Dragon" chain, watched by puzzled staff members, customers, and a dumbfounded store attendant who happens to be near the obligatory video pylon with live-feeds from Lucky Dragon stores all over the world:

> But the crazy thing is, and he really doesn't get this, standing and looking out through the doors at the video pylon, so that he has to go outside and fire up his last Russian Marlboro to think about it, after, is that when he sees her walk past the screens there, he sees her on every last screen, walking out of every Lucky Dragon in the world, wearing that same smile. (326)

Many interpretive readings of literary texts try to arrest meaning from a supposedly secure meta-perspective. As postmodern literary criticism has shown, this supposedly secure position is neither "meta" nor "secure," and many readings instead reproduce certain elements of the text and "enact" parts of the plot through processes of doubling the readings themselves remain blind to, a process also related to de Man's argument about insight and blindness discussed above.[25] In *On Deconstruction,* Culler discusses an essay by Shoshana Felman about the text and critical readings of Balzac's short story "Adieu." The character Stephanie has become "mad" during a particularly gruesome battlefield experience in the Napoleonic

---

[25] Here, Nina Baym's pioneering reading of "The Short Happy Life of Francis Macomber" in "Actually, I Felt Sorry For the Lion" should be mentioned, dissecting a classroom situation in which the teacher silences other perspectives in much the same way as the hunter Wilson silences other perspectives in Hemingway's story.

wars, and her former lover Philippe tries to "restore her reason" by reproducing, or "doubling," the wartime event that triggered her madness. But to "restore her reason is to obliterate her otherness, which he finds so unacceptable that he is willing to kill both her and himself if he should fail in his cure. She must recognize him and recognize herself as 'his Stephanie' again" (62). When she finally recognizes him, she dies. Critical readings of the text, though, often "set aside women and madness" and praise the "realism" of Balzac's description of the war instead:

> The drama played out in the story reflects back on the attempt by male critics to make the story a recognizable instance of realism, and thus questions their notions of "realism" or reality, of reason, and of interpretive mastery, as instances of a male passion analogous to Philippe's. (62)

For Felman, as quoted by Culler, "'the realistic critic thus repeats, in turn, his allegorical act of murder, his obliteration of the Other: the critic also, in his own way, *kills the woman,* while killing, at the same time, the question of the text and the text as question'" In Culler's words, the "structure and details of Balzac's story provide a critical description of its male critics" (62).

The matter of framing, to conclude this subchapter, can be retraced to the workings of language itself, against the backdrop of speech act theory in general and Austin's *How to Do Things With Words* in particular. As it happens, both the precarious performative and de Man's argument about blindness and insight make themselves felt yet again: insights gained from the position of a supposed "meta-level" can be so lucid as to obscure the occurrence of yet another iteration. For Culler, the fundamental inability to "master the context" of a given text or speech act—the attempt to "arrest" meaning—makes speech-act theory vulnerable to the same mechanisms it supposedly explains. Any attempt to "codify" context "can be grafted onto the context it sought to describe, yielding a new context which escapes the

previous formulation":

> Adepts of speech act theory, interested in excluding nonserious utterances from the corpus they are attempting to master, might admire the principle at work in a sign displayed in certain American airports at the spot where passengers and hand luggage are searched: "All remarks concerning bombs and weapons will be taken seriously." (*On Deconstruction* 124)

The sign tries to preclude the possibility of making "non-serious statements" in the form of jests like "I have a bomb in my shoe." But this would not contain numerous possible remarks about the remark itself: "'If I were to remark that I had a bomb in my shoe, you would have to take it seriously, wouldn't you?' would escalate the struggle without arresting it" (125). Another occurrence is pointed out by Miller in *Speech Acts in Literature*, where Austin himself is "blind" to iterations his own insights are partly based on. The examples given by Austin for his speech act theory, according to Miller, tell "a surreptitious story" which "runs counter to, or at any rate is not told explicitly by, the overt argument of his book" (49). Alongside Austin's examples of "misfiring" speech acts, his examples of "felicitous performatives" too amount to what Miller calls "a lurid undertext of violence and catastrophe" (49):

> Patients in lunatic asylums are boiled alive. [...] Donkeys are shot. Cats are drowned in butter. Dogs or penguins are baptized. The command is given, "Shoot her!" [...] People, probably Jewish, are threatened by being reminded that their aged parents are still in the Third Reich. (50)

This, together with an observable "vein of misogyny" running through *How to Do Things With Words,* tells the "surreptitious" story of Austin's "gender, class, and national culture." Miller's reading is exceptionally harsh in this respect:

> Austin's sensibility and culture is that of an extraordinarily gifted, irreverent, sexist, nationalist, cricket-playing, English-public-school-and Oxbridge-trained male intellectual of his time [who] also takes pleasure in violence, in sexual misconduct, particularly by women, and in situations in which things go wrong in spectacularly grotesque and comic ways. (49–50)

For Miller, "iterability" is precisely the lever that overturns the "apparent certainties of speech-act theory," including "the distinction between felicitous and 'literary' ones, the cornerstone of Austin's doctrine" (51). Miller's reading of Dickens in "Moments of Decision in *Bleak House*" shall, as a final example, serve to show how iterability and speech-act theory can work together without separating "felicitous" from "literary" speech-acts or trying to arrest the context. According to Miller, the "interminable" legal processings in *Bleak House* are presented as a progression of innumerable written speech acts in the form of briefs, affidavits, case explanations, and testimonies, full of expressions of specific kinds of performatives used by the law, each "repeated over and over in a perpetually iterated present action that does not go anywhere" (52). These proceedings are "apocalyptic" in the sense that their endpoint is "death in a final moment of revelation," and all the characters that fail to detach themselves from the legal proceedings die, are killed, or blow out their "brains one day in despair" (53). The alternative is "silent resolution accompanied by efficacious local action, like Esther's mute housework" or "Jarndyce's quiet charities to those immediately around him" (59). But *Bleak House* itself is much more similar to the former, a "noisy written document almost a thousand pages long" with a strong performative component to "do something good" with written words, thereby falling itself, "by Dickens's own accounting," under the "anathema he directs at almost all written documents, especially those legally executed" (59). The novel then "would do something with words," i. e., to "persuade its readers to detest the Court of Chancery and to work to reform or abolish it" and to "persuade people to accept and act on the Victorian ideology that said a woman's place is in the home" (59):

> What is extravagant or hyperbolic about *Bleak House* is the number of characters who must die to carry off the pollution that is identified with mud, disease, law, and illicit sex: Hawdon, Krook, Jo, Gridley, Richard Carstone, Tulkinghorn [...], Hortense, Lady Dedlock, the brickmaker's baby, who dies in Esther's place, so Esther may live. The novel is strewn with rotting corpses,

> perhaps the ultimate form of the pollution the novel so fears and is so ob-
> sessed with. (60)

By working "powerfully to persuade the reader that illicit sex is as bad as an unjust legal system and that both can only be purged by death" (60–61), *Bleak House* incorporates several loops within and beyond the textual frame which seem to insist on iterating what the text tries to dispose of in the most elaborate manner.

4. Obsession-Compulsion: Repetitions of Rape

Watching the occasional Indian drama at movie festivals in the late 1980s and early 1990s, American and European audiences were often impressed by the sheer scope of the enfolding events, the depths of historical and emotional developments, and the principal characters' suffering including the rape, and most likely the subsequent death, of a female character, augmenting the drama with further elements of grief and revenge. But as Indian feminists pointed out at the time, according to Anita Pratap in *Time Magazine*,[26] "for several years a rape scene has been an all but requisite ingredient" in Indian cinema, and in mind-numbing numbers: Ranjeet, one of the leading villains in Hindi cinema and interviewed by Pratap, "has enacted more than 350 rape scenes during a 19-year career" (n. p.). However complex the reasons involved might be, one of the underlying motivations is identified in the article as the "male delight at seeing a woman in distress."

To encounter a similar phenomenon in postmodern literature is puzzling, to say the least, especially if the explicitly articulated self-awareness

---

[26] Pratap, Anita. "Romance and a Little Rape." *Time Magazine* 13 Aug 1990. 1 October 2008 <http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,970891,00.html>.

in this respect falls curiously short of expectations. To illuminate this particular instance of repetition, the first section of this subchapter will provide an overview about the uses of rape in the texts, with the exception of Barth's, while the second will focus on the latter and on how repetitions of rape operate in and across his texts.

Uses of Rape

With the exception of Barth—whose texts will be put on hold for the moment—and Acker, incidents of rape do not stand out in terms of frequency. In Barthelme's and Gibson's texts, the occurrence or allusion to rape is so scarce as to be negligible. It is still rare in Pynchon's texts, with the notable exception of his rendering of General von Trotha's campaign against the Hereros in *Deutsch-Südwestafrika* in *V.* Since *V*, though, focuses on rape as a collateral to exact and ascertain limitless power over the enemy in a context of war crimes and genocide, the occurrence of rape in *V* will be approached in the chapter on *Humanity*. In Coover's texts, rape is frequently alluded to, but actual rape is almost exclusively restricted to iterating atrocities in fairy tale adaptations. With one notable exception: the rape of Nixon by Uncle Sam in *The Public Burning*, complemented by a strategically juxtaposed rape scene earlier in the text during the preparation frenzy for the Rosenberg executions, watched but completely ignored by Nixon, and multiple references to an attempted rape in Ethel Rosenberg's biography (cf. 104 ff.; 194; 363–64; 532 ff.).

In Acker's texts, rape is much more frequent. But it is extremely difficult to file these occurrences under any clear-cut category attached to "rape in literature." Sabine Sielke, in *Reading Rape: The Rhetoric of Sexual Violence in American Literature and Culture 1790-1990*, observes that postmodern texts "draw intensely on their precursors and recontextualize both realist and modernist paradigms," and that the "aesthetics of

post-modern rape narratives"—especially Acker's—amplify "modernist parody" and "reframe rape in hyperboles of mimicry and self-referentiality" (140). Between hyperbolic use of the vocabulary of rape[27] and Acker's characteristic technique of appropriating other texts—a technique that will be discussed in the chapter on *Fragmentation*—makes it outright impossible to arrest meaning and ascertain specific "uses" of rape in Acker's texts. Furthermore, any possible "suspension of disbelief" in Acker's rape narratives is persistently undercut by referring back to the writer's imagination with such loop techniques as have been discussed above, as in this passage from *Blood and Guts in Highschool*:

> As Janey was lying on her mat, writing this, two teenage hoods, one black and one white, came into the apartment. [...] They ripped off a cassette recorder and broke all the other equipment. While Janey was still lightly masturbating and fantasizing about young black men breaking in and raping her, they broke into her room and laughed at her. Before she could scream, the white one clapped his hand over her mouth. *(59)*

In *The Adult Life of Toulouse Lautrec by Henri Toulouse Lautrec,* Acker tells a lengthy story about a girl raped by her brother who is traumatized from the Vietnam war. The brother then commits suicide, and the girl overcomes her trauma with the help of a lover she is about to marry. Then, without changing the narrative's first person perspective, the next paragraph reads, "'If you're nice to me and send me presents, especially money so I can get this trash printed,' I exclaim, rolling drunkenly over my matchstick legs, 'I'll tell you another story':" (237).

Sexual abuse in the form of incest is often touched upon in Acker's texts, but—with one notable exception—it is usually not followed through

---

[27] For the impossibility to ascertain either dictionary use or hyperbole, the term "gangbang" might serve as an example: "'My parents sent me to a prestigious Irish gentry Catholic boarding school, so my father could get rid of me. There the upper-class boys wanted to own me. They regularly gang-banged me. Once a teacher whom I loved and respected asked me to his own house for tea.'" (*Don Quixote* 13)

beyond persistent advances by the "father." Who has to be set in quotation marks: neither equates the "father" the father, nor the "daughter" the daughter, nor the "incest" the incest. To quote Sielke again from *Reading Rape*, the "rape by the father" is read by Acker "as the entrance ticket to the symbolic order," recognizing and reemploying rape "as a trope for the female condition" (141). Professing to read such events in a strictly literal fashion, in the manner the censoring board in Germany did with Acker's *Blood and Guts in Highschool*, can lead to curious effects that will be investigated in the chapter on *Reality*.

Apart from Acker's texts, occurrences of the incest motif have already been mentioned in this chapter, e. g., Barthelme's "daughters are for dangling" episode in "A Manual for Sons" from *The Dead Father.* Coover, once more, employs this motif more often, but primarily in connection with fairy tale adaptations—Briar Rose awakening to being "visited" by her father in *Briar Rose* (10–11) or, in *Step Mother*, Cinderella's lasting crush on her father notwithstanding their short incestuous marriage in the course of which he "grew tired" of her and ordered to kill her off (25 ff.). Over and above, the use of incest in Coover's texts, including domestic violence, is linked to overzealous religious upbringings, ranging from more realistic treatments in *The Origin of the Brunists* (cf., e. g., 92–98) to hyperbolic extremes in *John's Wife* (cf., e. g., 50; 127–29). Domestic violence as such, in turn, is exceedingly rare in Acker's, Pynchon's, and Barthelme's texts, but more frequent in Gibson's, with a strong focus on the American upper middle class (cf., e. g., *Virtual Light* 16; *All Tomorrow's Parties* 81).

The more the treatment of rape as a motif stands out, it can be said, the less it relates to conventional categories of "rape narratives." This, as will be seen, stands in stark contrast to the treatment in texts by John Barth.

Uses of Repetition

Barth's first novel, *The Floating Opera*, is a rare exception in Barth's oeuvre insofar as it neither contains any rape narratives nor even alludes to rape in any form whatsoever. As if to make up for this neglect, in Barth's seventh novel *Letters* the *The Floating Opera*'s protagonist Todd Andrews starts and terminates a clearly exploitative relationship with a woman who is either his friend's or his own daughter from *The Floating Opera,* and when he "dumps" her after having, for all practical purposes, sexually abused her one last time, and before she is going to commit suicide, Todd Andrews himself notices that "Jeannine looked recently raped" (705). In Barth's second novel, *The End of the Road,* rape as such does not take place, but the physical and psychological abuse of the character Rennie Morgan can be illustrated, in a nutshell, by her desperate eruption in the following quotation:

> "I *can't!* Please, *please,* either throw me out or rape me, Jake! I can't do anything!"
> "I'm not going to make up your mind," I said. (132)

On account of Rennie's helplessness, being caught between the conflicting world views embodied by her husband Joe Morgan and the protagonist Jake Horner, and her gruesome death brought about by choking on her own vomit during an abortion, critics have argued that she is figuratively raped on a meta-textual level. From *The Sot-Weed Factor* on, only three texts contain no rape narratives: the short stories in Barth's fifth publication, *Lost in the Funhouse,* which contain only references to mythical rape, i. e., Philomela and Narcissus; the twelfth novel (or fifteenth publication) *Coming Soon!!!,* which contains merely a reference to a child, adopted by two of the characters, who was "lately discovered to be the son of a chronically institutionalized paranoid-schizophrenic birthmother by an unidentified rapist" (304–05), and the autobiographically inspired *Once Upon a*

Time: A Floating Opera, which contains no rape narratives as such but an oblique reference to be addressed later in this section.

In all other novels, novellas, or short story collections up to and including *The Book of Ten Nights and a Night,* Barth's texts contain extraordinary amounts of the most detailed and sustained rape narratives, employed as narrative threads, central plot devices, or key events in character development. The magnitude of suffering depicted is immense, and completely independent from the prevailing narrative mode, genre, or perspective. For Barth's more fantastic settings, one outstanding rape narrative would be the chapter "The Rape of the *Cyprian*" from *The Sot-Weed Factor*, an extensive account of a mass rape of prostitutes or prospective prostitutes by a gang of pirates, eventually joined in by the ship's original crew and, albeit unsuccessfully, the novel's protagonist Ebenezer Cooke (551 ff.). Another example would be the prolonged narratives of rape and mass rape from *The Last Voyage of Somebody the Sailor,* commencing both in the main storyline (e. g., 416 ff.) and in the detailed biographical accounts of "Jaydā the Cairene," a story-within-the-story (e. g., 154 ff.). In more realistic or contemporary settings, examples would be the seemingly endless chain of successive rape, gang rape, and torture of the female protagonist's sister in *Sabbatical* (62 ff.), the "rape and torture" of the principal female character at gunpoint by her then-husband as one of the pivotal events in *The Tidewater Tales* (302 ff.), or the story of the "Duct-Tape Rapist" told from the rapist's perspective in "Ever After," part of a collection of connected short stories in *The Book of Ten Nights and a Night* (214 ff.).

Furthermore, there are numerous incidents of sexual intercourse technically counting as rape: when a *no* is not taken as such even by the protagonists (e. g., Ambrose Mensch in *Letters* 62 ff.; Simon Behler in the contemporary chapters of *The Last Voyage of Somebody the Sailor* 129 ff.); date rape (*The Book of Ten Nights and a Night* 282 ff.); and incestuous

relationships constituting statutory rape (*The Last Voyage of Somebody the Sailor* 83; 316-17), bordering on statutory rape (*Letters* 565; 705*)*, or, even if fully consenting, commencing with a daughter once conceived by means of rape (*Chimera* 302–03). Accompanying these and other major events, a multitude of brief and less detailed incidents of rape, and references to rape, occur throughout all texts.

As cruelly detailed as these events already are, there is an observable tendency for even more cruelty to occur if the events do not happen in the narrative's "present" but are itself narrated or recounted. For all the violence of *The Sot-Weed Factor*'s rape scenes, it is still surpassed by hyperbolic narratives as the following from the character Henry Burlingame:

> "In a trice the ruffians stripped 'em and fetched 'em to the rail. 'Tis e'er the pirates' wont to take their captives at the rail, you know, whether bent on't backwards or triced hand to foot o'ertop. A mate of mine saw a maid once forced by thirteen brigands in the former manner, with the taffrail at the small of her back, till at last they broke her spine and heaved her over. 'Tis but to make the thing more cruel, methinks, they do it thus: Captain Hill once told me of an old French rogue he'd met in Martinique, that swore no woman pleased him save when staring at the sharks who'd have her when the rape was done, and that having once tasted such refined delights he ne'er could roger mistresses ashore." (140)

In *Chimera*, Bellerophon relates how King Iobates brags about the capture of Amazons who are "'dandy captives while they last, eh?'":

> '*Seduction is for sissies*,' he said; '*the he-man wants his rape*. Heh heh. We used to prong 'em and then watch them kill themselves. How about lunch before you knock off King Amisidoros for me?' (230)

In *Giles Goat-Boy,* the character Stoker brags with his anecdotal knowledge about the most unlikely crimes committed by the "Siegfrieders" against the "Moishians" in the Second Campus Riots, including having trained their dogs "to hump the Moishian co-eds in their extermination campuses" (170). And the abovementioned tale-within-the-tale of "Jaydā

the Cairene" in *The Last Voyage of Somebody the Sailor* consistently reads at least as bad as the following quotation:

> When my father saw me led away by that fierce and filthy fellow, my hair and clothing already disheveled, as if in token of what was to come, he set up a grand howl against Allah for His indifference to pious pilgrims. His cater-waul so offended my abductors, who were themselves devout, that instead of raping their young captives on the deck of their fishing boats then and there, before the eyes of parents and husbands, as was their custom, they paused a moment to slit my father's throat for his blasphemies and dispense him to the sharks. (154–55)

Likewise, in Barth's contemporary settings the most brutally detailed narratives do not proceed in the text's "present," but are "told"; and the most torturous experiences, in turn, are told "second hand" by a third person who was not personally involved.

While the overall narrative tone in the contemporary settings is carefully tuned—true to the idea of *catharsis,* even if somewhat clinical at times—to arouse sympathy and compassion, the narrative tone of the more fantastic or mythical settings is subjected to irony throughout, and any possible "genuine compassion" broken on multiple levels. An apt example is Ebenezer Cooke's interior monologue in "Rape of the *Cyprian*," which, for the sake of the argument, shall be given in full:

> From outside came another cry, a hard, high protest that trailed into lamentation. There was an ancient ring to it, an antique sorrow, that put the poet in mind of Philomela, of Lucretia, of the Sabine virgins and the daughters of Troy, of the entire wailing legion of the raped. He went to the companionway, and climbing it looked skyward at the stars. How trifling was the present scene to them, who had watched the numberless wars of men, the sack of nations, and the countless lone assaults in field and alley! Was there a year in time when their light had not been dimmed, somewhere on earth, by the flames of burning cities? That instant when he stepped out on the deck; how many women heard—in England, Spain, and far Cipango—the footfall of the rapist on the stair, or in the path behind? The ranks of women ravished, hundreds and thousands and millions strong, of every age and circumstance—the centuries rang and echoed with their cries; the dirt of the planet was watered with their tears! (261)

Even without being familiar with the character or the text itself, this sounds suspiciously self-aggrandizing. And indeed, not genuine compassion but the "poet" Ebenezer's urge to aestheticize the world in dramatic verse is what this monologue is about. In the aftermath—rather an intermission, as it turns out—when the pirates carouse and some women "were being obliged to perform some trick against their will," while some others even "join in the general laughter and encouragement," Ebenezer amends:

> "So lightly they accept their fate!" He thought again of the Trojan widows, advised by Hecuba to resign themselves without protest to being concubines and slaves. (262)

But his "compassion" is subjected to irony even further. Not only does he subsequently lose his composure and goes after one of the women himself, with momentous consequences for the plot, but when he is taken prisoner much later by the "savages" of the New World, his presumed compassion for the "legion of the raped" is revealed, by way of rhetorical repetition, to have been a rather self-centered brand of "compassion" indeed:

> Ebenezer and Bertrand were bound each to a post by the ankles and wrists; the feel of his position brought the poet near to swooning, so clearly did it recall the legion of martyred men. How many millions had been similarly bound since the race began, and for how many reasons put to the unspeakable pain of fire? But he strove to put by the swoon, in hopes of resummoning it when he would need it more desperately. (543)

Even his swooning seems effected less by genuine terror than by his admiration for his own poetic ingenuity.

Before developing this pending argument further and before proceeding to Barth's own remarks in *Further Fridays* and to the possible ramifications of such repetitions of rape in the context of narrativity and aestheticization, two statements touching upon the significance of "narrating rape" should be quoted, voiced by the principal narrators from *The*

Last Voyage of Somebody the Sailor and *Sabbatical*, respectively:

> The instant their officers stepped from *Zahir* onto *Shaitan*, the pirate sailors fell upon their shrieking victims and upon one another as well, for order of possession. And the teller of this tale, who through fifty years of a sordid century had managed never to witness sexual violence, either, now beheld ...
>
> What I beheld, and what would be mere prurience to recount. (418)

> Susan, Fenwick says: let's stop this story right now. It's enough to know that your sister was gang-raped [...] The details are just dreadfulness, even between ourselves.
>
> Susan doesn't agree. Rape and Torture and Terror are just words; the details are what's real. Fenn's a writer of sorts; he must understand that. (65–66)

In the first quotation, the choice of "prurience" is remarkable. Simon Behler, the first person narrator, has been thrown into the world of Sindbad's Travels, or rather an alternative version of it. Of course, many voices relate many different stories in the novel, but all these stories, technically, are renarrated by Behler. "Prurient" as main entry for "prurience" is given in Webster's dictionary as "having, inclined to have, or characterized by lascivious or lustful thoughts, desires, etc." What the narrator beheld, he beheld—and that "would be mere prurience to recount." "Mere prurience" pertaining to whom? Not to the reader, syntactically. And what would prurience have to do with watching mass rape in the first place? Could this be read, after all, as an oblique acknowledgment regarding the involvement of "male delight at seeing a woman in distress"? If that is the case, the narrator's restraint seems a smidgen slow on the draw, as it were.

In the second quotation, the characters "Susan" and "Fenn" are actually Barth's "First Person Plural" narrator in *Sabbatical.* That way, both positions—"the details are just dreadfulness" and "the details are what's real"—are, in a way, conflicting positions "within" the narrative position. But what seems to be a conflict is no conflict at all, as it turns out, even though the exposure of this inner dialog's faulty logic might sound esoteric at first.

To begin with, nothing prevents the details to be dreadful *and* real. Then, details cannot be "just" dreadful in the sense that they lack being real: they could surely be real though not dreadful, but they could not be dreadful without being real ("real" on the narrative plane). So one could say that such a conflict can arise, and can only arise, if the "realness" as such is indeed in question. If there is only "text" to begin with, details come to "life" and to "dreadfulness" only by way of being told, and these details, after all, are indeed all there is when there is no real event they refer to. Which would be something a "writer of sorts," undoubtedly, would understand.

In his essay "A Body of Words" from 1987 from *Further Fridays,* Barth wonders "what on earth" he is doing:

> Sometimes I wonder. I don't mean, in this instance, what it is that impels me to imagine and to depict in English words the sexual violation of this splendid though imaginary woman, Katherine Sherritt Sagamore, who is as real to me in her way as I am in mine. That may be a legitimate question—for what clinical interest the datum may have, I note that rapes (usually though not invariably of women by men) are to be met with in no fewer than seven of my nine book-length works of fiction—but it is not the question I want to ask (or face) just now. (131)

Rather surprisingly not, one might feel impelled to add to this elaborate deflection. But before proceeding with the quotation, the statement "not invariably of women by men" deserves some verification. In the more fantastic settings of *The Sot-Weed Factor, Giles-Goat Boy,* and *The Last Voyage of Somebody the Sailor*, there can be noted a comical rape attempt at Ebenezer in *The Sot-Weed Factor* (234) and some instances of men raped by men that are mentioned in passing without details—perpetrated either by "seamen," "predatory faggots" in prison (*Giles Goat-Boy* 531), and characters running hyperbolically amok raping "two co-eds, one male freshman, a trustee's maiden aunt, a blue-ribbon gilt, and a cast-bronze allegorical statue in heroic scale of Truth Unveiled" (540) or similar antics. In contemporary settings, the only reference can be found in *The Tidewa-*

ter Tales in the form of quotations from a dictionary of "prison parlance" with numerous terms relating to male rape, and the only incident involving men raped by women can be found in *The Sot-Weed Factor*, as the whore Mary Mungummory refers to having "more than once myself [...] been employed to rape young men" (414)—an "employment" that projects these rapes to third parties who, one can legitimately surmise, would probably not be female.

In addition to the number given of book-length publications containing rape, finally, Barth states that "Happily, if not significantly, in my novel-cum-memoir *Once Upon a Time: A Floating Opera*, nobody gets raped" (131). But the repetition of rape has indeed already affected Barth's novel-cum-memoir: the reference to the childhood event "It was Doctor Me, not Doctor Schreiber, who took my patient's rectal temperature with a forest-green Crayola in second grade" (177) is enacted in detail in *The Tidewater Tales* where it serves as the preparatory event—by way of the "nutshell technique"—for the female protagonist's rape and torture at gunpoint already mentioned above.

Now, the quotation given above from "A Body of Words" continues:

> I mean what on earth am I doing in that "Do the Woman" chapter, for example: the thing that I do four or five mornings a week, and that Richardson and de Sade and Jane Austen and Anne Tyler and every other novelist did or does too, each in his/her way: dreaming people up and choreographing marriages and murders among them, rapes and ratiocinations, epiphanies and peripeties, lurches and perpetrations?

This deflects the question even more sweepingly by broadening the accusation, in a brazen case of the strawman argument, from the repetition of rape to storytelling as such. Thus, when Barth gets back to the rape issue several pages later, he does so on safer ground:

> The validity of such verbal constructs as that newspaper rape account, like the validity of eloquent case histories written by Sigmund Freud or Oliver

> Sacks, depends upon our presumption that beyond the words lies an actual, historical person, and it would so depend even if it could be shown that in fact Freud or Sacks stretched a few things here and there. Katherine Sherritt's dear validity, on the other hand—the special quality of her being—depends oddly upon the reader's presumption that my words do *not* describe any actual, historical person, even if it could be shown that in fact they do. (134)

After a quotation by William Gass about writers and sculptors who create "the dangerous feeling" that real characters live "beyond the page," Barth closes his essay with the statement:

> Take our worlds for these minds and bodies, without mistaking those words for minds and bodies. (135)

Almost magically, the safer ground became the high ground, and the questions supposedly addressed have, after all, not been addressed at all: the final statement has no bearing whatsoever on the repetition and the detailed description of rape. Details, to be sure, bring "minds and bodies" to life, but are minds and bodies brought to "life" by detailed descriptions of torture and rape? One could argue they might—but would that still be aesthetically true in the case of "mass repetition"?

Before drawing any conclusions, and before closing the argument begun with Ebenezer's monologues from *The Sot-Weed Factor*, what is at stake might warrant a look at some formidable examples where rape, repetition, and the question of details are approached in different manners.

About the exact nature of the "violation" of Tess, as Miller provisionally calls it in his reading of Hardy's *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* in *Fiction and Repetition*, many arguments have been exchanged in critical writings. Any detailed report of this violation is missing in the text: this includes not only the incident as such, but also Tess's later reports in the form of a misplaced letter and an oral confession to her husband, both "paraphrased" by the narrator. Its interpretation as rape or as seduction or as something

in between, therefore, depends not only on different definitions of the nature of rape and seduction as such, but on how the missing text is "read." Some critics, such as Ellen Rooney in "'A Little More than Persuading': Tess and the Subject of Sexual Violence," argue that the text's omissions and its failure to represent the events from Tess's point of view are connected to a necessary insistence on "purity" on Tess's part to guarantee "her right to our sympathy":

> Hardy is unable to represent the meaning of the encounter in The Chase from Tess' point of view because to present Tess as a speaking subject is to risk the possibility that she may appear as a subject of desire. (97)

The scene of sexual violence as well as Tess and the female subject appear, according to Rooney, "as radically unreadable figures" (97). Miller, on the contrary, argues in *Fiction and Repetition* that the omissions are embedded in the working of the text of *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* as such. To call the violation of Tess either a rape or a seduction "would beg the fundamental questions which the book raises, the questions of the meaning of Tess's experience and of its causes" (116), which applies to the narrator as well as to the critic. Moreover, many if not all instances of violence are "effaced" from the text in similar ways, from the killing of Tess's horse when she falls asleep at the reins to the murder of her violator and eventually her execution:

> [These events] happen only offstage, beyond the margin of the narration, as they do in Greek tragedy. They exist in the novel in displaced expressions, like that gigantic ace of hearts on the ceiling which is the sign that Alec has been murdered, or like the distant raising of the black flag which is the sign that Tess has been hanged. (118)

Concomitantly, there is also a repetition involved which is equally effected by a "lack of details," albeit in different ways. According to Miller, the violation of Tess is a "story about repetition" in which Tess's life "both exists in itself as the repetition of the same event in different forms and at the same

time repeats the previous experience of others in history and in legend"
(116). Based on Tess's "precursors," most importantly a male ancestor of
hers involved in a story of attempted rape and murder, of which the viola-
tion of Tess itself can be read as a reenactment, Miller argues:

> The physical act itself is the making of a mark, the outlining of a sign. This
> deprives the event of any purely present existence and makes it a design re-
> ferring backward and forward to a long chain of similar events throughout
> history. Tess's violation repeats the violence her mailed ancestors did to the
> peasant girls of their time. In another place in the novel, Tess tells Angel
> Clare she does not want to learn about history and gives expression to a vi-
> sion of time as a repetitive series. (120)

As soon as an event becomes a sign, the event itself "ceases to be
present." Thus, "Tess's violation and the murder must not be described di-
rectly":

> They do not happen as present events because they occur as repetitions of
> a pattern of violence which exists only in its recurrences and has always
> already occurred, however far back one goes. (140)

In *Tess*, "rape" takes center stage by way of a multi-faceted effacement.
Furthermore, it is the very omission that induces compassion in the Aris-
totelian sense with its double gesture of putting the events "off-stage" and
putting the reader directly into the position of the "observer": the questions
posed by the narrator are not answered by the text, and every reader has
to "read" the signs herself or himself.

Besides details and repetition, the presumed innocence of aestheticiz-
ation in bringing minds and bodies to life can also be questioned. The aes-
theticization of rape, instead of foregrounding suffering and arousing
compassion, can efface rape quite effectively, but certainly not in the way
the "decisive moment" is effaced in *Tess of the d'Urbervilles.* Rather, as
Johnson calls it in *The Feminist Difference*, aestheticization "codes" rape
into something else. In Keats's "Ode on a Grecian Urn," the "freeze frame"

just prior to the maiden's "ravishment" is the poem's "privileged aesthetic moment":

> But how does pressing the pause button here make us sublate the scene of male sexual violence into a scene of general ecstasy? How does the maidens' struggle to escape congeal into an aesthetic triumph? (135)

From there, Johnson traces this motif "to the primal scenes of Western literature," among them Apollo's pursuit of Daphne and her transformation into a laurel tree in her "desperate attempt to avoid rape." Apollo then plucks off a laurel branch which becomes the sign for artistic achievement. This "achievement," moreover, depends on a context where the failure of rape is coded as "loss":

> Thus, "any mourner" must identify with Apollo, not Daphne, and the fact that Apollo does not carry out the intended rape is coded as "loss"—a loss that becomes a model for the aesthetic as such. The rapist is bought off with the aesthetic. And the aesthetic is inextricably tied to a silence in the place of rape. (136)

This "aesthetics of silence," perpetuated in literature and literary criticism, "turns out to involve a male appropriation of female muteness as aesthetic trophy accompanied by an elision of sexual violence" (136).

Coming back to the pending conclusions with regard to the repetition of rape in Barth's texts, one might be compelled to ask whether rape in these texts is also somehow "coded" into something else, "silenced" through aestheticization. But has it not been shown that it is precisely the aestheticization of rape that is subjected to irony in *The Sot-Weed Factor*? Certainly—but subjecting something so brilliantly to irony, in turn, is itself an aesthetic achievement behind which rape is easily obscured; even more so since repetition as well as the display of details "in plain sight" characteristically conceal rather than reveal. And the opposing principle makes itself equally felt: while the all too visible mass repetition of rape becomes almost invisible behind the aesthetic achievement, references

that insistently point to rape reside in precisely those texts the author has declared as being "free from rape," from his earliest texts *The Floating Opera* and *The End of the Road* to his autobiographically inspired *Once Upon a Time: A Floating Opera.*

Chapter III:
Fragmentation

While the first two chapters on *Formations* and *Iterations* complement each other with their respective focus on violence on the narrative plane, connected to either origins or repetitions, and proceed from there to numerous superordinate levels including aspects of writing, publishing, the conditions of literature or even of democracy, this chapter on *Fragmentation* and the following chapter on *Composition* equally complement each other, but take more formal aspects as their starting points: narrative style in *Fragmentation* and narrative techniques and figurative and rhetorical language in *Composition*. The term "narrative style," not easily narrowed down toward a binding definition in any case, has been adopted as an umbrella term for a number of instances where violence can be observed as relating to *how* stories are told, in contrast to *what* stories are being told, even though the latter is tightly linked to the former, as will be seen. Strong connections, to begin with, can immediately be established between this chapter and the preceding chapters with regard to the consistent and rather determined preoccupation of the texts with ideologies and power structures. In the first chapter, violence has been traced alongside their origins and formations; in this chapter, violence will be traced alongside attempts to force such ideologies and power structures out into the open in radical ways, especially from places where they are most effectively concealed: in established and supposedly "neutral" narrative forms. This, for example, can even involve as seemingly natural and ubiquitous devices as having a beginning, a middle, and an end.

Radically overcoming established structures, of course, is tantamount to "revolution" which, besides war, is an event massive violence is most often associated with. In literature, "revolution" pertains to new ways of

writing and the questioning of reading habits and traditional perspectives. This, of course, is in no way restricted to postmodern literature, and neither is any of the radicalness involved. It could be said, though, that radicalness is more recursively reflected upon in postmodern texts, facilitated by the strategies discussed in the chapter on *Iterations*, which makes any radicalness more visible and more playful at the same time.

Playfulness, however, is generally *not* associated with revolution or, more broadly phrased, with politics as such. This leads to an interesting paradox. While practically all the texts under scrutiny are immensely political in one way or another, from thematic undercurrents that radically question social and political ideologies including acquired ideas about history—"ideology" especially in the Foucauldian sense as an apparently neutral condition—to overt attacks on the powers that be, they lack the "seriousness" deemed mandatory for a political perspective in the first place: an imposition which, not surprisingly, is considered part and parcel of the predominant perspective postmodern texts set out to undermine. While parody and satire belong to the canon of serious critique, playfulness does not, and the radical undermining of conventional notions of seriousness in postmodern texts became a pitch that could be batted as "irresponsible aloofness" deep into the field of public knowledge.

But "fragmentation," as an important and very visible weapon in this "revolution," cannot be easily dismissed in such a way. It comprises various narrative tactics and strategies that will be explored in the following subchapters: "surgically applied" tactics of entropy and dismemberment as well as "large-scale" strategies of collage and pastiche and the mixing of genres, with the forced breakdown of seriality as the most important common denominator of these means, wielded as a most effective weapon on the literary and critical battlefield.

1. Serial's Killer: Style Wars

Alongside the question whether "revolutionary" narrative tactics and strategies are capable in principle of disrupting established structures and effecting change, violence will be traced in this subchapter from examples on the narrative plane to a writers' symposium to assessments in critical theory which indicate that narratives might not be as smooth and seamless to begin with, but already constituted by violent and disjointed forces. After presenting, in a second step, some aggressive examples of what has been staged by several writers as a kind of "terrorist" writing, where not only form and content but eventually language itself breaks down, the possibility will be discussed whether even the most disruptive assaults on form and the most shocking narratives might indeed *not* be immune to being naturalized or, according to Fredric Jameson, to being co-opted and turned into a commodity.

Guerilla Warfare

Can art be revolutionary and if so, how powerful can it be and what kinds of change can it effect, if any? In Barthelme's texts, the question remains ambiguous at best. In the already quoted "A Shower of Gold" from *Come Back, Dr. Caligari*, the "President" destroys the artist's work with a "sixteen-pound sledge" while "twelve Secret Service men" hold the artist "in a paralyzing combination of secret grips," shattering his notions of his "new relationship" with the President (176). Similarly, in "This Newspaper Here" from *Unspeakable Practices, Unnatural Acts,* a "learned man" with "several degrees in Police Engineering" and a gun threatens the writer—"we can hear the presses in the basement with sensitive secret recording devices"—and kicks his "toothpick scale model of Heinrich von Kleist in blue velvet to splinters on the way out" (36–37). In *Snow White*, there is

the double-edged "President's war on poetry":

> Of course we had hoped that he would take up his sword as part of the President's war on poetry. The time is ripe for that. The root causes of poetry have been studied and studied. And now that we know that pockets of poetry still exist in our great country, especially in the large urban centers, we ought to be able to wash it out totally in one generation, if we put our backs into it. But we were prepared to hide our disappointment. (55)

Again, the President's power seems overwhelming even if the slightly self-subversive propaganda tone does protest too much. In "The Emerald" from *Sixty Stories*, the possible power of artistic achievement is put in doubt again, this time through the implied insignificance of the artist as such. Not only does the writer contemplate the employment of witchcraft to help him against the "editor-king, as he's called around the shop," or, "Mr. Lather. Editor-imperator," but insignificance and silliness are heightened by his very complaint:

> He takes my stuff and throws it on the floor. When he doesn't like it.
>
> On the floor?
>
> I know it's nothing to you but it *hurts me*. I cry. I know I shouldn't cry but I cry. When I see my stuff on the floor. Pages and pages of it, so carefully typed, *every word spelled right*— (401)

At the writers' symposium "Nothing but Darkness and Talk?" with Barthelme, Coover, Hawkes, Gaddis, Fiedler, and Scholes, among others, Barthelme indeed answers the question of "change" and whether his and Coover's texts are driven by "rage about what the world is" with the utmost carefulness, only conceding a "lingering desire to change" or, more carefully even but certainly tongue-in-cheek, "a lingering desire to set up a direction that might at some future time possibly result in a small action of a particular kind, which might be viewed, in the most favorable light, as being helpful" (253).

Coover, being, as he puts it, "probably a little more political as a writer

than some of my friends here," has more radical views on this subject, as might be expected:

> I suppose that, given my feelings, what I probably would most like to have is one of those fancy new rocket launchers, but since I haven't got one, what I've been handed instead is an old blunderbuss, and I've got to make do. (253)

While aware of the limited impact that writing can have, especially if there are not that many readers to begin with, Coover identifies "form" as his foremost target in trying to effect change:

> One thing that did seem possible to do inside the form—and it was something that became a fascination for me—was the assault on form itself; it seemed that there were structures in the world that could be damaged. I knew that there were things out there I really didn't like, and that they had a shape, and that they created stories. They *shaped* stories, in fact. The stories had beginnings, middles, and ends, according to these ideologies, theologies, and so on. There was a way to use storytelling to disrupt that somehow —to get in and elbow around, push things away. (253–54)

But, as he points out, this is "not all iconoclasm and rage," it is also "love and fun." The "blunderbuss" reference actually can be augmented with an example that sets this archaic firearm to work in a way quite illustrative of Coover's ideas. In the protagonist's maybe most precarious adventure during a public festival in Coover's *Pinocchio in Venice,* a group of puppets comes to Pinocchio's rescue with a hazardous mock-up fight designed to throw the crowd into a panic (292–94). The puppets go at it with an "immense blunderbuss," scimitars, and other weapons of choice closely associated with pirates. The spectacle generates hilarious fun and massive amounts of gore, and the festival, a tableau of the worldly and religious powers that be, is effectively dispersed by the puppets who, fittingly, are members of the "Great Puppet Show Punk Rock Band," labeled by the authorities as the "Puppet Brigade" terrorists, already mentioned in the chapter on *Formations*. And the authorities, even if not in this particular scene, have every weapon from the modern arsenal at their disposal and

send out helicopters, machine guns, and flame throwers against the pup-
pets' blunderbuss and scimitars.

The means to effect change against the authorities, or dominant per-
spectives, are anything but on a par with the powers these authorities
wield. Therefore, "frontal assaults" might not necessarily be the best
means of engagement, as the publication history of Coover's *The Public
Burning* vividly demonstrates. More subversive and surreptitious forms
might be more effective, and one of these forms is playfulness. Discussing
the repercussions of postmodern theory in the field of feminism in *The
Feminist Difference*, Johnson argues against the notion that "stylistic play-
fulness" is "fundamentally at odds with feminist earnestness" because
playfulness would not correlate with the "intensity and urgency" that moti-
vates feminist projects (185–86). For Johnson, postmodern style's playful-
ness is precisely what could be put to use:

> Indeed, a style that challenges linear arguments and undermines singular,
> dominant interpretations may well have oppositional force. If linearity and
> clarity are themselves instruments of the system that enforces existing power
> relations in society, then stylistic experimentation might operate as a kind of
> guerilla warfare on the level of language. (186)

Presupposing that language is the very medium where individual realities
as well as social contexts are constituted, this "level of language" is much
more important than it might sound. There are, moreover, some aspects to
linearity on the level of language that can unbalance the conception of lin-
earity even before it comes under attack. In *Ariadne's Thread: Story Lines*,
Miller observers that the "line" is the dominant figure in traditional terms for
storywriting or storytelling. But this image is already a trope, and a cata-
chresis at that:

> The term *narrative line*, for example, is a catachresis. It is the violent, forced,
> or abusive importation of a term from another realm to name something
> which has no proper name. The relationship of meaning among all these

areas of terminology is not from sign to thing but a displacement from one sign to another sign that in its turn draws its meaning from another figurative sign, in a constant displacement. (21)

What seems to be smooth and seamless to the eye turns out, under the microscope, as the combined effect of violent and disjointed forces. In addition to breaking up linearity in storytelling, guerilla warfare on the level of critical theory might be equally effective in making linearity's underpinnings visible and vulnerable.

In her essay "Postmodernism" in *Bodies of Work,* Acker stresses the idea that by using words one always takes part in "the constructing of the political, economic, and moral community" in which the discourse takes place: "All aspects of language—denotation, sound, style, syntax, grammar, etc.—are politically, economically and morally coded. In this sense, there's no escaping content." (4) In a world where "ownership is becoming more and more set" and "things no longer change hands," social mobility only occurs "in terms of appearance" within a complex system of signs:

> There is no more right-wing versus working class: there is only appearance and disappearance, those people who appear in the media and those people who have disappeared from the possibility of any sort of home. In such a society as ours the only possible chance for change, for mobility, for political, economic, and moral flow lies in the tactics of guerrilla warfare, in the use of fictions, of language. (5)

Therefore, postmodernism "for the moment, is a useful perspective and tactic" (5).

Artful Terrorism

What can be labeled "guerilla warfare" can, like Coover's puppets, be easily relabeled as "terrorism" by the authorities. And while most of the texts adopt more subtle means from mere resistance to playful hit-and-run charades, Coover's "frontal assaults" and Acker's experimental writings

often do invite such a relabeling indeed. In her early novella *The Burning Bombing of America: The Destruction of the U.S.,* Acker assaults traditional linear writing on every conceivable level from chapter titles to orthography. Stripped almost entirely of commas and periods, *The Burning Bombing* "rages" through images of apocalyptic violence from the personal to the political, from gender to the world, from its first words "armies defect first in the woods and polluted lakes the cities small towns are covered with the blood of God" to its last sentence "EAT THE REST OF MY HEART" from the final chapter, which bears the title "Outer Space Messages: Total Chaos!" (139; 201). Socialist, or communist, "class-critique" permeates the novella, but as a means, not as an end: employed mainly on the level of "words", i. e., language, than on the level of actual or factual content, this move rather serves to enhance anxieties and exact greater destruction through the biblically phrased clashing of capitalism and communism as classical antagonistic superpowers.

During the 1980s, about a decade after *The Burning Bombing of America*, Acker's literary "terrorism" has become at once more refined and more visible through techniques of embedding and recursive self-reference, respectively. In *Great Expectations,* violent apocalyptic images of war, again with rudimentary syntax and orthography, are seamlessly interwoven with "conventional" storylines. In *My Death My Life by Pier Paolo Pasolini,* in contrast, the war images themselves form a comparatively coherent storyline that combines the Greco-Persian Wars with elements from science fiction settings, but here it is language itself, the words itself, that come to a grinding halt in an imitation of a complete breakdown of a marching pattern, visually enacted on the page (cf. 242 ff.). In all these texts, the "breakdown of language" and the "terrorism" employed to reach this end are persistently recursively reflected upon. In the final pages of *Great Expectations,* following a dialog between "Propertius" and "Mae-

cenas," a narrator takes over, not without a reference to Horace's "prickly poets":

> Well you can say I write stories about sex and violence, with sex and violence, and therefore my writing isn't worth considering because it uses content much less lots of content and all the middle-ranged people who are moralists say I'm a disgusting violent sadist, Well I tell you this:
>
> "Prickly race, who know nothing except how to eat out your own hearts with envy, you can't eat cunt, writing isn't a viable phenomenon anymore. Everything has been said. These lines aren't my writing: Philetas' DEMETER far outweighs his long old woman, and of the two it's his little pieces of shit I applaud. [...] Go die off, oh destructive race of the Evil Eye, or learn to judge poetic skill by art: art is the elaboratings of violence. Don't look to me to want to do anything about the world: I'm out of it." (123)

In Acker's *My Death My Life by Pier Paolo Pasolini*, revolution reads:

> For any revolution to succeed nowadays, the media liberals and those in power have to experience the revolt as childish irresponsible alienated and defeatist; it must remain marginal and, as for meaning, ambiguous. [...] Now the cops no longer bother us because we don't exist. My life doesn't exist. What did I learn in school? This music isn't non-music; it's violence. *This text is violence*. (298–99)

The more aggressive style of postmodern "punk" notwithstanding, Acker's texts gradually seem to draw nearer to a rhetoric more reminiscent of Barthelme's careful ambiguities than Coover's frontal assaults, as outlined at the aforementioned symposium. But the underlying goal largely remains the same: in her essay "William Burroughs's Realism" from 1990, reprinted in *Bodies of Work*, she still insists that in the United States, whose "cultural, social, and political behavior" resembled that of a "giant baby, perhaps mongoloid, almost uneducated and increasingly uninterested in questioning and education, who not maliciously but unknowingly breaks everything it meets as it crawls around in chaotic paths"—a culture that she comes to define, based on an argument by Piaget, as technically insane. And the deployment of "well-measured language, novels which structurally depend on the Aristotelian continuities, on any formal continui-

ties, cannot describe, much less criticize, such culture" (1–2).

Fall Back & Regroup

The predicaments and even possible paradoxes involved in advancing change by means of "guerilla warfare" or "artful terrorism" as such may pose another formidable obstacle. In *Empire of the Senseless,* a narrative voice concedes:

> Ten years ago it seemed possible to destroy language through language: to destroy language which normalizes and controls by cutting that language. Nonsense would attack the empire-making (empirical) empire of language, the prisons of meaning.
>
> But this nonsense, since it depended on sense, simply pointed back to the normalizing institutions. (134)

The breakdown of language, after all, might not achieve a thing. Change would demand something different:

> [It] would demand the use of a language or languages which aren't acceptable, which are forbidden. Language, on one level, constitutes a set of codes and social and historical agreements. Nonsense doesn't per se break down the codes; speaking precisely that which the codes forbid breaks the codes. (134)

Naturally, every "language" in this sense is always already part of the code, and Acker's texts become an increasingly complex effort to trace—on the structural level as well as on the level of the storyline—the "language" of tattooing, which is at once a "forbidden" language and a language residing outside the code. The passage above continues, without a break, back into the story that has been "freeze framed" during a looming knife fight between the character Agone and a tattooer, and Agone finally "allows the unallowable":

> This new way of tattooing consisted of raising defined parts of the flesh up with a knife. The tattooer then draws a string through the raised points of flesh. Various coloration methods can be used on the living points. (134)

But would it indeed not be possibility, besides such means that somehow appear both lateral and desperate, to effect change "within" the code by violently breaking it up? Quite a number of theoretical considerations indeed point into this direction. Regarding the fact that breaking the rules of the "genre" is one of most consistently used "terrorist" weapons in post-modernism's arsenal, including Acker's, an argument that would be supportive of Acker's notion of impossibility is articulated by Culler in *Structuralist Poetics* in his discussion of the manifold workings of *vraisemblance*, a term conceptually related to the "naturalization" of texts. Culler points out that any disruption of "genre" would not really disrupt the understanding of "genre" as such but only raise *vraisemblance* to a higher level. This naturalization makes even the most violent disruption readable as, e. g., "a statement about writing itself," "a narrator's exercise of language and production of meaning," or a "critique of mimetic fiction, an illustration of the production of a world by language" or similar (cf. 149–50). This naturalization, as Culler observes in *The Pursuit of Signs*—based on Stephen Mailloux's "investigation of critics' ways of coming to terms with the 'maimed' text of *The Red Badge of Courage*"—seems also at work when a text is disrupted or mutilated by chance instead of by design, through the "force of conventional narrative expectations, especially those linked with a genre" (cf. 66–67).

Ironically, moreover, guerilla tactics that render a text "senseless" in certain ways can be intended to achieve results almost antipodal to trying to effect change, social and otherwise. According to Culler's reading in *Flaubert: The Uses of Uncertainty,* Flaubert radically seeks to "invalidate the communicative contract by purging references to it, by refusing to make assumptions to be shared, by shifting narrative points of view so that no authorial source of messages might be identified" in order to "make the novel an aesthetic object rather than a communicative act":

> That he recognized the destructive consequences of this form of guerilla activity is amply shown by references in his correspondence to the desire to 'dérouter le lecteur'; the victim must be uncertain what he is supposed to think, unsure whether he is being made fun of, suspicious that the book may after all have been written by an imbecile, even—though this project seems not to have been realized—led astray by false bibliographical references. (15)

The principle of naturalization, however, is not restricted to the level of genre, and it can be surprisingly far-reaching. What Culler calls "naturalization" on the level of reading is coined "co-option" on the level of politics by Jameson in *Postmodernism*. In the course of co-option, any aesthetic activity is reintegrated into commodity production, and postmodernism itself has become "the consumption of sheer commodification as a process" (x). In her essay "The Efficacy of Shock for Feminist Politics: Kathy Acker's *Blood and Guts in High School* and Donald Barthelme's *Snow White*," Ann Bomberger would concede such a possibility of commodification, but argues—drawing on texts by Ellen G. Friedman and Miriam Fuchs—that postmodernism can in principle be a "political, feminist tool" by "exploding" or "rupturing" dominant or traditional forms which can "produce an alternate fictional space" (cf. 189–90). But even Acker's most "scandalizing" form of "contemporary experimental feminist writing" could nevertheless be co-opted and "reinstitutionalized" in the Jamesonian sense, and there is a possibility that Acker, not despite, but precisely because of her violent "mixing of genres and styles" and the attempt to "shock through overt sexuality and politicism," can be "institutionalized" more easily than, for example, Barthelme. According to Bomberger, Barthelme sees like Acker "the bridges that connect sexuality and textuality and similarly uses humor to help expose that linkage to others," but shares "Jameson's skepticism on the effectiveness of shock as a tool for change" (196):

> However, just because Barthelme is skeptical of shock's political effectiveness does not mean he doesn't use it in a revised form. He employs many of

> the same shock tactics which Acker does—sexualizing icons of innocence, including sudden outbursts of violence, and disrupting expectations of some kind of narrative—but he whitewashes those shocking scenes by making characters react in bored, unimpressed ways. (197)

In Barthelme's world, no one can be shocked by anything, "no matter how extreme the situation," and the "predominating emotion is boredom." For Bomberger, "Jameson's visions of a shock-proof society are realized in the fictional world of *Snow White*" (199).

This is, to a considerable extent, also true for Coover's fictional worlds where even the most outrageous violent, sexual, or political occurrences completely fail to shock the characters involved—and where, as a mirror image, shock and outrage can be induced by the most trifling incidents instead. *Gerald's Party,* e. g., introduces this principle right at the novel's opening: "None of us noticed the body at first. Not until Roger came through asking if we'd seen Ros" (7). From there, the first person narrator digresses for five pages before coming back to the topic: "We all looked down: there she was, sprawled face-down in the middle of the room. She must have been there all the time" (12). Only the bloody corpse's husband is agitated beyond belief, but it has already become clear that this is his regular behavior, triggered by everything that is even remotely connected with his absurdly promiscuous wife. *Gerald's Party*, in particular, intensively uses an array of disruptive and fragmenting narrative strategies that will be examined in the following subchapter.

However large the capacity of readers or societies to naturalize or co-opt the aesthetically or politically shocking, postmodern literature must logically, practically, and by definition be itself endowed with the selfsame capacity. And, as many examples show, there are indications that it seems to be able to co-opt and incorporate the very mechanisms of naturalization and co-option which threaten its aesthetic and political potential.

2. Violence Out of Joint: Entropy & Dismemberment

The dark side of de-serialization or fragmentation—as an effect and a property—is uniformity. The more linear a text becomes, as a rule of thumb, the more "clustered" events are in meaningful ways, and the higher is the potential for differentiation. This can make navigating through a linear text as easy as navigating through a countryside with distinctive landmarks. The more fragmented and de-serialized a text becomes, the more evenly distributed are its elements, and the potential for differentiation rapidly decreases. Navigating through a fragmented text can be as difficult as keeping one's bearing in a jungle or in a desert; uniformity and the mechanisms of entropy, after all, are what chaos is all about.

While the possibility of reversing the real world's arrow of time—which, in turn, is what *entropy* is largely about—can be ruled out at least on the macroscopic scale, texts that employ techniques of entropy and fragmentation are free to manipulate time's arrow, and they often do so by emulating cinematic techniques. A second field some of the means of manipulating time's arrow in the texts have been inspired by is data processing. Here, "de-serializing" not only means switching to parallel instead of serial data transfer, so to speak, but to a so-called "packet mode," a technique to be explained in context, that causes its own peculiar effects in plot development.

In the following sections, violent events are followed that illuminate a number of different strategies employed to fragment and de-serialize, with a strong focus on the dismantling of master-narratives in the second section. There, strategies of repetition-cum-variation can be found that have already been encountered, in a different context and from a different perspective, in the chapter on *Iterations*. Finally, building on what has already been observed with respect to the "storyline" in the preceding subchapter,

a number of critical considerations will be discussed which strongly suggest that fragmentation, dismemberment, and discontinuity are always already at work under the smooth surface of texts, especially when tropes and the effects of figurative language are taken into account.

Entropic Fragmentation

In Coover's texts, one de-serialization technique consists not so much of breaking up a given storyline, which will be examined in-depth soon, but to combine fragments from different plots into a chaotic "whole." This can be observed in the already mentioned story "The Phantom of the Movie Palace" from *A Night at the Movies*, where the projectionist's world is inextricably interlocked with the worlds from violent genre movies. The projectionist's world of the movie theater is, as the story's title already suggests, itself a genre movie, woven into as well as out of its fragmented contents:

> The man with the axe in his forehead steps into the flickering light. His eyes, pooled in blood, cross as though trying to see what it is that is cleaving his brain in two. His chest is pierced with a spear, his groin with a sword. He stumbles, falls into a soft plash of laughter and applause. His audience, still laughing and applauding as the light in the film flows from viewed to viewer, rises now and turns toward the exits. Which are locked. Panic ensues. (14–15)

It does not stop here: fragments from higher levels, theoretical and compositional, are equally embedded. While the events proceed and the crowd is frantically trying to break down the doors, the mentioned axe appears again along these lines:

> "*Oh my god! Get that axe!*" someone screams, clawing at the door, and another replies: "*It's no use! It's only a rhetorical figure!*" "*What—?!*" This is worse than anyone thought. "*I only came for the selected short subjects!*" someone cries irrationally. (15)

While Coover's short story "Intermission," also mentioned earlier, similarly weaves together fragments from different plots, the selected movie plots

are much more "mainstream" as is the overall effect since the fragments are strictly serially arranged, and the reader is unlikely to miss or lose the thread of the "master plot." Coover's "Lap Dissolve," in contrast, also from *A Night at the Movies*, represents a kind of middle ground. Not as severely fragmented as "The Phantom of the Movie Palace" on the one hand but lacking the clearly discernible master plot from "Intermission" on the other, the story races the reader through highly incompatible plot fragments without making readers lose their bearings. Sometimes, though, the plot speed is raised to a high pitch:

> "Anyway, there were these midget league baseball players who turned out to be prehistoric monsters, and all of a sudden they attacked the city, only even as they went on eating up the people, the whole thing turned into a song-and-dance act in which the leading monster did a kind of ballet with the Virgin Mary who just a minute before had been a lawn chair. The two of them got into a fight and started zapping each other with ray guns and screaming about subversion on the boundaries, but just then the ship sank and everybody fell into the sea. (85)

Elsewhere, transitions in "Lap Dissolves" are less hectic, but equally brutal. This rather undermines the story's title since a lap dissolve is a classic cinematic technique that provides smooth transitions between takes. Even though the transitions in "Lap Dissolves" are smooth in a *formal* sense which includes the frequent use of "match cuts" to connect successive scenes through matching motifs, the breakdown of serial storytelling on the plot level approaches French New Wave cinema which, among other things, was famous for abandoning "smoothing techniques" wholesale, including lap dissolves.

Similar fragmenting techniques can be found in Acker's texts, but with a twist. The bigger the "chunks" of plot become on the structural level, i. e., the slower the plot speed, the more incomprehensible and fragmented the individual chunks often appear, and the more abruptly executed are the transitions. Conversely, the smaller the plot chunks, i. e., the higher the

plot speed, the more comprehensible are the fragments and the smoother the transitions, down to fast-forward micro plots like the following example from *Rip-Off Red, Girl Detective*:

> Nightmares I'm endlessly abandoned and betrayed by lover after lover, I live on the streets of New York without money a gang of boys drive a stake through my eyes in a fight I'm blind I live in a shed with a jazz player who helps me to live again, to begin to paint and become world famous, wake me up, screaming. (113)

What often keeps texts fragmented by such techniques from falling apart is a dream-like quality. Of course, neither dreams nor nightmares are easily differentiated from non-dreams and non-nightmares on the textual level especially in Acker's and Coover's texts but also often in Barthelme's or Pynchon's; in the face of the iterative qualities of the texts and their countless tiers of "imaginings" stacked on top of each other, such attempts at differentiation are more often futile than not. Instead, corresponding to Coover's match cuts that utilize motifs and metaphors common to successive plot fragments, the fragments in Acker's texts are often held together by metonymic displacements, utilizing powerful conceptual units such as "cutting" or "madness" with the capacity to evoke, either consciously or subconsciously, the connectedness of a broad range of violent and/or sexual imagery.

Associative connectivity, though, works both ways—it connects and fragments at the same time. Confronted in an interview conducted by J. D. O'Hara in *Not-Knowing* with yet another theory about "Indian Uprising," Barthelme explains:

> The arrows of the Comanches but also sensory insult, political insult, there are references to the war there to race, to torture, jingoism. . . . But none of the references in the story were picked at random, and none are used simply as decor. If they seem random it's probably because the range of reference is rather wide for a short piece—you have Patton and Frank Wedekind and the Seventh Cavalry coexisting on the same plane—but the crowding is part of the design, *is* the design. (280)

While entropic fragmentation raises the difficulty level of navigating through a text in several ways, it can at the same time express, and work toward, a "deeper" or "richer" connectedness by way of a higher density of interrelated elements.

Gibson, with the notable exception of frequent "jump cuts" to emulate the aforementioned character Slick's Korsakov syndrome and his fragmented experience of reality in *Mona Lisa Overdrive*, employs entropic fragmentation not on the structural level but on the levels of motif and character in order to disrupt familiar seriality and causality and, at the same time, work toward a deeper connectedness between the elements on the story level. In *Neuromancer,* for example, the thoroughly fragmented and "reconstructed" personality of Armitage/Corto—who eventually collapses in a kind of mental "heat death" of maximum entropy where all events exist for him at once and happen "now"—extends the range of reference to the world's girder structure of political, social, and historical events for readers and characters alike. As an example for this technique on the level of motif, the break-up of a "murder" in *Neuromancer* uniformly distributes the "deed" and tightly knits together the different parties on the character level as well as substantial parts of the storyline:

> Molly turned. She crossed the room to Ashpool's chair. The man's breathing was slow and ragged. She peered at the litter of drugs and alcohol. She put his pistol down, picked up her fletcher, dialed the barrel over to single shot, and very carefully put a toxin dart through the center of his closed left eyelid. He jerked once, breath halting in mid-intake. His other eye, brown and fathomless, opened slowly.
> It was still open when she turned and left the room. (185–86)

This seems straightforward at first: technically and for all practical purposes, the female lead character kills the immensely rich magnate Ashpool by putting a dart with Shellfish toxin through his eye. But things are not that simple. As it turns out, Molly happened to have walked right into

the scene of an ongoing suicide: Ashpool had already swallowed "an expert overdose" (202) to kill himself. Then again, the main reason for him to commit suicide is caused by the machinations of one of his (cloned) daughters, 3Jane, who "sent him over the edge" by having figured out "a way to fiddle the program that controlled his cryogenic system" (205). So it was basically 3Jane who killed him. But not quite: while 3Jane concedes that her father's suicide was the result of her "having manipulated the safety margins of his freeze," she adds: "I had help. From a ghost. That was what I thought when I was very young, that there were ghosts in the corporate cores. Voices." (229) These voices, as it turns out, were no one else's than Wintermute's, the artificial intelligence in whose service the protagonists infiltrate *Villa Straylight* where Molly then happens to stumble into Ashpool's exit scene.

In *Pattern Recognition,* Gibson's first mainstream novel, this fragmenting technique is embedded in the plot structure. Mysterious fragments of a "movie" turn up on the Internet, brilliantly conceived and executed, but completely mysterious as to origin, content, order, or storyline. Some elements resemble certain artifacts, and the street layout in one of the fragments, found by pattern recognition software, resembles "one specific part in the manual arming mechanism of the US Army's M18A1 Claymore mine" (284), a remote-detonated mine packed with explosives and tiny steel balls. But the movie supposedly promoted by guerilla marketing through these mysterious fragments does not exist—there are only fragments. These fragments include, on a superordinate level, the fragment of a Claymore mine that lodges in the brain of a severely injured Russian girl, "balanced too deeply, too precariously within her skull, to ever be removed" (314), who survived the assassination of her parents during the post-soviet crime wars and conceives of these movie fragments, which are then rendered by her uncle's powerful computer farm and uploaded to the

Internet. Fragments are all there is. But fragments are all there is in an advanced sense that delineates a postmodern, or late-capitalist, market where marketing campaigns are the "product"—economically more important, more intelligently designed, and more artistically accomplished than the products they supposedly promote.

One of the outstanding characteristics of these ostensible movie fragments in *Pattern Recognition* is the undecidability of their supposed sequence, or timeline, which is hotly disputed in Internet discussion groups throughout the text. Entropic fragmentation, as has been mentioned, can be employed to manipulate or reverse the arrow of time, especially by emulating cinematic techniques. This effect is highly scalable, from the macro to the micro level. The most outstanding example on the macro level is Coover's *Lucky Pierre* where the chaotic and fragmented world of the protagonist, a "famous actor" living in pornographic movies, consists of a series of "meta"-pornographic movies that are scripted, directed, shot, edited, cut, recut, and resequenced unceasingly while he lives in this "cinematic" world as a perpetually puzzled, but nevertheless sentient being. The first *Extar* scene illustrates this technique. While Lucky Pierre is in-character—"in-character" also means that he identifies almost completely with his respective role—as a small boy being punished by his teacher, the *Extars* disrupt the scene. These *Extars* are actually "extras" who want to revolutionize the movie business, under the catch phrase "no more stars!" (cf. 61–67). In this scene, they are massacred by the police in an extended bloodbath—up to a point where the events suddenly "rewind," i. e., the arrow of time is reversed, up to and including the aforementioned "school" take:

> Severed heads and limbs fly back in place, bodies gather up tissue and spew out bullets, which the cops suck up into their guns with pops and bangs [...] The walls reassemble themselves, the Extars disappear, he finds himself bent over the desk with his pants down, a whistling sound in the air and—

whop!—the teacher cracks his butt ferociously with the belt. (67)

This "take" is actually one of the more manageable examples; the overall complexity of *Lucky Pierre*'s constant entropic fragmentation and de-fragmentation is staggeringly difficult to quote or paraphrase.

Barthelme's title story from *City Life*, by contrast, shows how fragmentation and the arrow of time's reversal can work on the micro level:

> Everybody in the city was watching a movie about an Indian village menaced by a tiger. Only Wendell Corey stood between the village and the tiger. Furthermore Wendell Corey had dropped his rifle—or rather the tiger had knocked it out of his hands—and was left with only his knife. In addition, the tiger had Wendell Corey's left arm in his mouth up to the shoulder. (178)

While the content is fairly incomplex, the structural workings are rather effective. The reversal is not located in the narrative voice and/or in the minds of the characters, as in *Lucky Pierre*, and the cinematic technique evoked in the first sentence is actually a ruse. Instead, the reversal is directly projected onto the reader: what has been reversed, brilliantly deadpan, is the arrow of time of the observer's perception process itself. The fragmentation, in other words, does not happen on any of the levels discussed so far, but on the level of perceptive coherence.

De-Serialization

Another instrument to break up serial storytelling is repetition, or repetition with variation, which figured prominently in the chapter on *Iterations*. Coover, especially, develops this strategy to considerable heights, "damaging" certain structures mentioned by him at the writers' symposium on "Nothing but Darkness and Talk?": "beginnings, middles, and ends" and "ideologies, theologies, and so on" (254). This surely affects Coover's choice of backgrounds for his at times excessive repetition-cum-variation strategy, focusing—with the exception of *Spanking the Maid*—on myths,

fables, and especially fairy tales as forms of introduction, or indoctrination, into some of the most prominent ideologies. A suitable example for Coover's "assault" on form and ideologies, besides those mentioned in the chapter on *Iterations*, is *Hair O' The Chine: A Documentary Film Script*. On the "tableau" of *Hair O' The Chine,* two alternating scenes are played out in endless variations, one by a man and a woman, the other by a pig and a wolf. Some mirrorings and role changes take place while a voice-over drones on about theological, historical, political, and anthropological implications of the story about the wolf and the three little pigs and its controversial interpretations and, indeed, "exegeses" throughout the ages, almost constantly counterpointed by a "wild squeal of pigs as at a butchering." But, again, repetitions and variations notwithstanding, there is an overall progress. The wolf, finally, and contrary to the tale's regular ending which is also taken for granted by the voice-over, blows down the pig's brick cottage and kills the pig while the man flees inside the cottage to stay there behind the window, exactly as the pig did prior to its demise:

> The Maid lunges forward, sinks her teeth in his buttocks. The Man opens his mouth to cry out—
>
> Abruptly: the wild squeal of a pig as at a butchering. Frantic chase [...]
>
> With a final desperate lunge, the Man breaks free, stumbles on all fours, bloodied, pants around his ankles, through the cottage door, slams it shut. [...]
>
> The wolf's black jaws sink into the pig's pink throat. Maddening squeals. Spray of blood.
>
> Abrupt silence. The Man at the cottage window, staring out, indefinable expression. The Maid thrusts her plump ruffled behind at the door in disdain, peers back over her left shoulder.
>
> Abruptly: the wretched squealing of the pig, close-up of the wolf's jaw and face, glistening with blood, his teeth sunk deeply into the pig's soft throat. The squeals become choked and bubbly, then cease altogether. Silence. The pig is dead. (53-55)

One prominent target of this strategy is the "master narrative," satirized in the form of the voice-over which raises the tale to absurdly high levels of

universality on the one hand, while it is constantly contradicted by what is actually happening on the other. One of the things the story obviously tries to accomplish is to force the reader to put cherished and seemingly innocent stories under scrutiny. But since the voice-over's "exegesis" of the text clearly self-deconstructs, this scrutiny is meant to become more radical than the sample questions Culler outlines in "In Defense of Overinterpretation" for a text's possible "overstanding" as an alternative to traditional "understanding," a concept originally developed by Wayne Boothe:

> Understanding is asking the questions and finding the answers that the text insists on. "Once upon a time there were three little pigs" demands that we ask "So what happened?" and not "Why three?" or "What is the concrete historical context?," for instance. (114)

"Why three?" or "What is the concrete historical context?" are indeed questions the voice-over in Coover's story is ludicrously engaged in. It is rather the radical questioning of the "beginnings, middles, and ends" and "ideologies, theologies, and so on" the text is interested in. Only, this goes farther than expected: even cherished and most sophisticated ways of *questioning* are no longer exempt from getting attacked and ridiculed.

Two prominent and again differently structured examples of assaulting master narratives by fragmentation are Pynchon's fictitious movie *Cashiered!* from *The Crying of Lot 49* and Coover's short story "The Babysitter" from *Pricksongs & Descants. Cashiered!*, a war movie laced with elements from family entertainment and situation comedy, accomplishes this in several ways. The principal plot, as told by the character Metzger to Oedipa Maas, is set against the backdrop of the Allied forces' disastrous Gallipoli campaign in World War I. It features a former British soldier, his son Baby Igor, and Murray the dog—"the father, son, and St. Bernard"—as they harass and torpedo the Turkish ships from a midget submarine named *Justine* while the "dog sits on periscope watch, and barks if he sees any-

thing" (19). Oedipa Maas's disbelief —"You're kidding"—encourages Metzger to propose a betting game on what happens next, a kind of strip poker which Oedipa of course loses, and whose antics accompany the movie's ongoing massacres. For Oedipa Maas, it would be all but impossible to win since the plot completely defies narrative expectations, ending with "the father, dog, and Baby Igor trapped inside the darkening *Justine*, as the water level inexorably rose":

> The dog was first to drown, in a great crowd of bubbles. The camera came in for a close-up of Baby Igor crying, one hand on the control board. Something short-circuited then and the grounded Baby Igor was electrocuted, thrashing back and forth and screaming horribly. Through one of those Hollywood distortions in probability, the father was spared electrocution so he could make a farewell speech, apologizing to Baby Igor and the dog for getting them into this and regretting that they wouldn't be meeting in heaven [...] (28)

As if this game were not already well-nigh impossible for Oedipa Maas to win, who, as has been mentioned, can also be read as a cypher for the reader, the reels of the movie have all been confused so that the narrative, from commercial break to commercial break, becomes increasingly incomprehensible. A temporary power out caused by a blown fuse courtesy of the punk band "The Paranoids" finally manages to throw even Metzger off course, and the fragments begin to defy his expectations too although he has seen the movie before.

In Coover's "The Babysitter" from *Pricksongs & Descants*, the master narrative is not only eliminated altogether, but the "reels" of the story's various levels and meta-levels and the narrative viewpoints as such become confused. Repetition and variation are also employed by blending and superimposing the miscellaneous fantasies and imaginations of the father, the babysitter, and the babysitter's boyfriend, which are influenced by and at the same time mixed into a running television program that includes westerns, murder mysteries, spy movies, and newscasts. After a barrage of fist fights, rapes, and homicides, the story not only ends inconclusively

as to what really happened but also refers to the lack of its own potential to shock despite its vivid display of sex and violence. The last but one paragraph offers an idyll with the baby asleep, the parents back, and a concluding "'Why how nice' Mrs. Tucker exclaims from the kitchen. 'The dishes are all done!'." Thereafter, the final paragraph reads:

> "What can I say, Dolly?" the host says with a sigh, twisting the buttered strands of her ripped girdle between his fingers. "Your children are murdered, your husband gone, a corpse in your bathtub, and your house is wrecked. I'm sorry. But what can I say?" On the TV, the news is over, and they're selling aspirin. "Hell, *I* don't know," she says. "Let's see what's on the late late movie." (239)

While an excited "exclamation" is roused by the first ending's ultimate triviality, the alternative ending in ultimate carnage has its characters react in exactly the "bored, unimpressed ways" Bomberger notes about Barthelme's characters, as mentioned above. But to be shocked by violence is, after all, a rather ordinary and largely trivial process. And a well adjusted one, too: ultimately, the whole concept of arousing "fear and pity" belongs to a set of ideologies Coover's texts set out to put into question.

Still another tactic to produce effects of fragmentation, and an important one at that, resembles methods for data transfer in information technology. To sketch this briefly, "packet transmission" has, for various reasons, become the communication method of choice for large distributed networks including the Internet. Information is broken up in numerous fragments, "enveloped" via protocols and sent as individual packets to their destination. These packages do not have to travel in their original "order" nor do they have to travel the same route. Packages are constantly mixed and remixed en-route until processed at their destination, at which point the packages that belong together are put together and "serialized again" into intelligible information. Individual packages get lost all the time, and are resent on request.

While techniques of interleaving and entangling different pieces of information within one and the same textual unit can be found quite often in the texts, from the chapter level down to paragraphs or even sentences, the "packet writing" technique as a means for fragmentation is especially frequent in Coover's and Barthelme's texts. Not surprisingly, it might be added, in the face of Barthelme's expressed affinity to collage and Coover's expressed affinity to hypertext. Also, it should be noted that Coover, among related activities, is the co-founder of the non-profit *Electronic Literature Organization.* Most pronounced and most persistently executed is this technique in Coover's *Gerald's Party.* The chaotic "world" of the party is constantly compartmentalized into small and medium sized chunks—or packets—of information, each one meticulously describing certain situations or conversations, each one sooner or later abruptly abandoned in favor of another chunk of information, and returned to when the next packet "arrives."

While Coover's packet writing technique has been noticed by readers and critics, its unorthodox execution via a first person narrator easily escapes attention. More common in this respect are Barthelme's techniques: in "Will You Tell Me" from *Come Back, Dr. Caligari,* e. g., a story is told in alternating information packets on the paragraph level through several third-person perspectives who relate how the character Paul's life proceeds from throwing non-lethal can bombs at his father to putting a shotgun into his mouth (the pulling of the trigger is ascertainable solely by inference). In the information packets on the sentence level in "Bone Bubbles" from *City Life,* a narrative voice is all that remains, and in extended passages in *The Dead Father*, on the level of one-liners and dialog lines, the narrative voice has been eliminated altogether.

The first-person perspective adopted by Coover in *Gerald's Party* makes the effect of packet writing more intimate and the execution more

difficult at the same time. With considerable skill, Coover wrenches the first-person narrator's focus from one situation to the next and finally back again—thereby, as a collateral, satirizing classic suspense techniques by blending out of and back into the novel's numerous microplots of murder and mayhem with infuriating frequency. Gerald, as the party's host, "obviously" has to constantly keep moving and shifting his attention to attend his guests and their various needs, to keep up with the demands of the police investigation, and to follow agendas of his own. It helps a lot, though, that Gerald is quite easily distracted and, most importantly, seems to be thoroughly immune to being shocked. Even after he has to shoot his best friend in assisted suicide, his agitation disappears with the next distraction. There is only one exception toward the end of the novel, concerning his own agendas, when it dawns on him that he, at some point during the evening, has inadvertently sent a woman he is strongly attracted to and vice versa down into the "dart room" where something terrible has happened to her. The exact nature of this event can only be inferred, but several clues provided by Gerald's thoughts and reactions point into the direction of mass rape. Together with the guest's behavior already outlined above, Gerald's perspective also adds to the foreclosing of "shock" in the face of violent events.

Disjointed Dance

In *S/Z*, Roland Barthes divides Balzac's "Sarrasine" into 561 fragments and five codes. In *The Critical Difference*, Johnson describes the purpose and the effect as follows:

> The purposes of these cuts and codes is to pluralize the reader's intake, to effect a resistance to the reader's desire to restructure the text into large, ordered masses of meaning [...] In leaving the text as heterogeneous and discontinuous as possible, [...] Barthes thus works a maximum of disintegrative violence and a minimum of integrative violence. (6–7)

This would effectively imply two things: that it is impossible to *not* inflict violence upon texts through reading, and that texts, to a certain extent, are *already* discontinuous and fragmented. The degree, then, to which narrative structures support, strengthen, or even coproduce ideologies by "smoothing over" discontinuities through seeming linearity and beginnings, middles, and ends, would be contingent on the direction and the degree to which they are necessarily violated by the reader. That, in turn, would signify what has been indicative for the target of "terrorist writing" all along: that the culprit is not texts, but reading habits. But how do a text's discontinuities, and how its apparent smoothness, come about?

Focusing on Kleist's essay "Über das Marionettentheater" in *The Rhetoric of Romanticism,* de Man traces the "continuity of the aesthetic form that does not allow itself to be disrupted by the borderlines that separate life from death, pathos from levity, rising from falling." This condition is articulated in Kleist's "puppet" which "inhabits both sides of these borders at the same time" (287). The puppets achieve this by being subjected to *dem blossen Gesetz der Schwere,* the pure law of gravity, where their motion exists "only for the sake of trope" which "guarantees the consistency and predictability of truly graceful patterns of motion," but is at the same time "antigrav" insofar as they can rise and leap "as if no such thing as gravity existed for them" (286). On these opposing characteristics, i. e., gravitation and seriousness (*Schwere/Schwermut)* on the one hand and levity, un-serious-ness on the other, de Man comments:

> Caught in the power of gravity, the articulated puppets can rightly be said to be dead, hanging and suspended like dead bodies: gracefulness is directly associated with dead, albeit a dead cleansed of pathos.
>
> But it is also equated with a levity, an un-serious-ness which is itself based on the impossibility of distinguishing between dead and play. (287)

Whence the "continuity of the aesthetic form that does not allow itself to be disrupted by the borderlines that separate life from death, pathos from lev-

ity, rising from falling" is brought about. Moreover, Kleist's text "evokes the puppet's dance as a *continuous* motion":

> A nonformalized, still self-reflexive consciousness—a human dancer as opposed to a puppet—constantly has to interrupt its motions by brief periods of repose that are not part of the dance itself. (287)

But by eliminating discontinuities toward gracefulness as the necessary condition for aesthetic form, the puppet—and with it figurative language which will be addressed in the chapter on *Composition*—acquires a "machinelike, mechanical predictability." This mechanical dance is also "a dance of death and mutilation":

> One must already have felt some resistance to the unproblematic reintegration of the puppet's limbs and articulations, suspended in dead passivity, into the continuity of the dance: "all its other members (are) what they should be, dead, mere pendula, and they follow the law of pure gravity." (288-89)

The precarious connectivity of dead limbs, after all, is covered up by the seemingly fluid and graceful continuity of the puppet's dance, movements that are induced by the "crank-turning puppeteer" who, with his "nonformalized, still self-reflexive consciousness" does not remain unaffected, and neither does the text:

> When, in the concluding lines of Kleist's text, K is said to be "ein wenig zerstreut," then we are to read, on the strength of all that goes before, *zerstreut* not only as distracted but also as dispersed, scattered, and dismembered. The ambiguity of the word then disrupts the fluid continuity of each of the preceding narratives. (290)

What is suggested here by the examination of tropes has also been suggested numerous times by Johnson, Culler, Miller, or Spivak: that texts are far from being "whole," and far from bearing unequivocal messages. However continuous a text and however coherent its argument appears, a close reading will always find that discontinuity, disjointedness, and dismemberment will be involved.

Again, this suggests that texts always insist on retaining a certain amount of plurality, certain minimum assets in the currency of ambiguity, inconsistence, and undecidability, and that the construction of individual and social realities is less a narrative process than a process of reading— the reading of texts, at that, which always already beg to differ, and even beg to differ from themselves.

As a final example, against the background of violent tropes, Miller's discussion of prosopopoeia in *Versions of Pygmalion* shall be outlined. Personification "is not just any trope having the potential to generate a narrative":

> Personification is the inaugural trope of narration, and without it there is no storytelling. This means that the deconstruction of this particular trope pulls the rug, so to speak, out from under the whole enterprise of narration. (220–21)

It is often presupposed, according to Miller, that the reading of stories has "a positive ethical function," wherefore prosopopoeia "must not be disabled or undermined," and that narratives "cannot carry out their good work unless their readers yield to the 'real illusions' generated by anthropomorphisms." But, paradoxically, one of the lessons to be learned by reading texts—especially, in this context, versions of the Pygmalion motif—is that the trope of prosopopoeia cannot be trusted, and that yielding to this figure "is by no means wholly innocent or an entirely constructive social act" (221). The more so as the conferred wholeness of personification is firmly based on "fragmentation, disfigurement, or disarticulation":

> [T]he actual articulation of prosopopoeia in language always dismembers. It names bits and pieces of the human body here and there throughout the world. Dismemberment is already there in the technical definition of prosopopoeia. It does not, according to that definition, confer a soul, an anima, on the absent, the inanimate, or dead. It ascribes, through language, a face or a mask, a voice, and a name to representatives of one or another of those three classes. Prosopopoeia projects not the wholeness of a self, body and soul together, but fragments that stand for the whole, as the face stands for

> the person who presents that face to the world. Each prosopopoeia therefore contains in itself the traces of its inaugural violence and artifice. (222)

Tracing the presence of this mutilation beneath the surface of personification through texts of Kleist, Blanchot, Melville, and Henry James, among others, Miller concludes:

> Just as any naming substitutes for the immediate presence of what is named and presupposes some form of unavailability, so personification kills just when it ascribes life. It presupposes the absence, inanimation, or death of what it resurrects. (222)

When texts are already constituted not only by integrative but by disruptive processes as well, processes where wholeness is based on dismemberment, fluid motions on dead and disjointed bodies, and bringing to life on killing, then it would follow that fragmentation strategies and guerilla warfare in postmodern writing would be less effective in terms of the disruption of serial storytelling, but in laying bare those structures that are already at work in a text but smoothed over by dominant modes of reading.

3. Violent Composites: A Pastiche of Genres

One of the rare strategies with the potential to, at least temporarily, resist the recursive naturalization of "genre" as outlined above is pastiche—possibly one of the reasons why it is so liberally employed in the texts, from borrowed styles and fabricated quotations to chapter-scale collage and full-fledged genre simulation. Naturalization is bound to catch up sooner or later, and sometimes the mark is missed altogether when "collage" is willfully or inadvertently relabeled as "plagiarism," an example of which will be presented in the chapter on *Reality*. While fragmentation's disruptive potential has already been discussed, this subchapter sets out to inquire how violent content is involved in, and affected by, pastiche, and how this

relates to the "revolutionary" intents and purposes discussed so far. Screening for elements of pastiche with violent content, the majority of occurrences in the texts fall into three categories. The first comprises the "archetypal" genres myth, fable, and fairy tale; the second comprises creature, horror, war, and martial arts from genre movies; the third comprises literary mainstream, a domain especially favored by Acker. Beyond these, tv family entertainment shows, westerns, pornography, murder mysteries, or the super-hero genre are also utilized, but only scatteringly.

Archetypal

Myth, fables, and fairy tales already teem with violence. How these high levels of violence are handled when characters and storylines are embedded in postmodern texts varies from writer to writer, as it turns out, but each writer handles it by and large consistently.

Despite the constant use of archetypal motifs, pastiche in Pynchon's texts far more frequently mines the genre movie category, which will be discussed in-depth in the following section. Generally, Pynchon tends to tone down the violence compared to source texts, as the "Lambton Worm" narrative in *Mason & Dixon* (587–95) shows. Acker, Barth, and Barthelme keep the violence more or less on their original level, slightly toned down instead of raised if modulated. Purposes and effects differ sharply, though. In Acker's texts, the violence is often verbatim or at least congruent with its source. What makes it stand out nevertheless is the surprise effected by making visible how many details from "archetypal" texts manage to bypass conscious scrutiny when read within their original contexts. Turning up or down the volume of violence would only counteract this effect. Building upon this attention, the motifs and the structural logic of the tales are taken apart to a great extent, from subtle to extensive reworkings and even pastiches-within-pastiches. In *In Memoriam to Identity,* e. g., Acker picks vari-

ous elements from the numerous traditional endings of the tale of Jason and Medea—all equally gruesome—and fabricates a new one that inserts, among others, the Caine motif: Jason "wandered homeless from city to city and everyone hated him" while Medea "didn't die, but became immortal and reigned in the fields of Heaven" (87). In *Eurydice in the Underworld*, Orpheus's tale is recast in terms of art and mourning strikingly reminiscent of Johnson's observations regarding the aestheticization of rape as outlined in the chapter on *Iterations*. Orpheus "looked into her face because he didn't, because he wanted her body closed to him, her face sealed shut by death." It is not Eurydice he wants, "but that moment when he disobeyed the gods" in a gesture—here, Acker refers to Blanchot—where "Eurydice is the extreme to which art, Orpheus's art, can attain" (23). Or, in *Pussy, King of the Pirates*, Acker reinterprets Pandora's jar and how evil entered the world in the Prometheus tale with a sudden metonymic displacement:

> "When the man, because he couldn't resist beauty, opened up Pandora's cunt, her evil excretions, her excrescence, smelled up the world. So badly that all those who could smell those smells—that is, men—wanted to die, and would have if they couldn't get rid of that which lies within women. (274–75).

With the notable exception of the considerably increased violence in Sindbad's travels in *The Last Voyage of Somebody the Sailor*, Barth usually retains the original levels of violence but "defuses" this violence with numerous techniques, among them the "modernization" of the viewpoints taken by the characters, up to and including aspects of political correctness as discussed in the chapter on *Formations*. Simultaneously, high proportions of the carnage enacted by "heroes" are reattributed to purposes of defense, to inadvertence, and to unsolvable predicaments. Another of Barth's defusing techniques consists of shifting accounts of atrocities into increasingly nested narratives, a technique mentioned in the chapter on

Iterations. From the massive employment of myths in texts like *Giles Goat-Boy* or *Chimera* to more limited embeddings like the "blinding of the bard" in *The Tidewater Tales* (cf. 191–92) and other instances where the return of Odysseus is retold and/or carried further against contemporary back-drops, Barth harnesses myth's rich materials for his intricate storylines. Contrary to Acker, his rewritings do not so much try to undermine the source texts or make assumptions visible otherwise overlooked: it rather seems as if Barth's retellings aim at salvaging or rehabilitating as much as possible from the "mythical heritage" by redeeming it of its more odious qualities.

Barthelme also tends to tone down or defuse the original violence, either by way of extreme wryness or by way of modernizations and ration-alizations not unlike Barth. But the low-level violence in Barthelme's archetypal settings is sometimes disrupted by sudden high-amplitude out-bursts that even surpass the violence found in the source texts. While Sir Gawain's occasional, and accidental, "swapping off" of a "damosel's head" in *The King* (9) is a rather whimsical example, the collective "fantasy of anger and malevolence" in *Snow White*, a fantasy of roasting Snow White on a spit, is not (109–10). In "Bluebeard" from *Forty Stories*, similar "peaks" of violence are achieved not by temporarily raising the level of vio-lence over that of the original text, but by displacing it in unexpected ways:

> I had trusted my husband to harbor behind the door nothing more than rotting flesh, but now that the worm of doubt had inched its way into my con-sciousness I became a different person. (94)

> In the room, hanging on hooks, gleaming in decay and wearing Coco Chanel gowns, seven zebras. My husband appeared at my side. "Jolly, don't you think?" he said, and I said, "Yes, jolly," fainting with rage and disappoint-ment. . . . (97)

Not surprisingly, on account of what has been observed so far, Coover regularly turns up the violence of the source texts to remarkably high

volumes. Oftentimes, this goes hand in hand with reversals of perspective: violence tagged by myths, fables, or fairy tales as "good" or "just" is told from the perspective of those it is inflicted upon. Not unlike Barth, Coover "modernizes" his characters' perspectives to a high degree, but it is not the violence of the heroes and heroines that is defused or redeemed, but their antagonists' "crimes." The self-righteousness and naked brutality incorporated by heroes and heroines, once put into plain sight, is so convincingly obvious as to become almost embarrassing. Outstanding examples can be found in Coover's aforementioned *Stepmother* or "The Dead Queen" from *Child Again*. There are some notable exceptions to this: the more psychologically reflective adaptation of *Little Red Riding Hood* in "Grandmother's Nose" or the punchline-focused adaptation of the Bluebeard motif in "The Last One," both from *Child Again*, or *Pinocchio in Venice*. The level of violence in *Pinocchio in Venice,* especially, is comparable to that of the original text but with sudden spikes similar to Barthelme's treatments, and a certain disposition to shift the most outrageous instances of violence into threats, imaginative dialogs, and nested narratives, reminiscent of Barth's.

Cult Classics

Excursions into the world of genre movies are particularly numerous in Pynchon's and Coover's texts. Acker, in her occasional forays into this category, either ventures into slightly more respectable fields like film noir, big budget science fiction, or murder mystery as in, e. g., *Rip-Off Red, Girl Detective;* into more exotic fringe genres as, e. g., Japanese ghost-horror in her rendering of *Yotsuya Kaidan* in *My Mother, Demonology* (cf. 104–07); or, not to forget, into x-rated territory altogether. Gibson, not mentioned so far concerning pastiche, also employs many elements from genre movie categories, but the label "pastiche" does not quite fit for two reasons. Cyberpunk itself is a "genre," and one almost singlehandedly

developed by Gibson himself. Secondly, cyberpunk almost by definition blends preceding genre elements into something new. According to one of Jameson's several asides aimed at cyberpunk in *Postmodernism*, this genre is determined by "an orgy of language and representation, an excess of representational consumption" (321). By and large, the attempt to differentiate between authentic text and pastiche in cyberpunk would be a rather futile endeavor.

Barthelme's texts occasionally tap into the huge reservoir of genre movie imagery, but not in a systematical way that could be labeled "pastiche" without stretching it too far. When he incorporates motifs and images from genre movies, these elements are usually stripped of their most defining elements, as the zombies in "The Zombies" from *Great Days,* who act most un-zombielike, or the "Comanches" in "Indian Uprising," who are, all things considered, not particularly "native" at all. What Barthelme often incorporates, though, are idioms and dialogs strongly indicative of genre movie scripts, a language not normally known for its achievements in excellence. This borrowing seems not to be incidental. As Barthelme remarks in *Not-Knowing,* commenting on his short story "Paraguay":

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

For this enterprise, genre movie scripts are indeed a rich source for ugly sentences with the potential to become, via "cultification," somehow beautiful. A quotation from Barthelme's "Hiding Man" from *Come Back, Dr. Caligari*—which does not require any contextual support—might illustrate this technique to a certain degree:

> Mutant termites devouring puppet people at a great rate, decorations for the scientists, tasty nurse for young lieutenant, they will end it with a joke if possible, meaning: it was not real after all. (30)

Comparing Coover's and Pynchon's respective handling of genre movie pastiche, Coover generally retains more violence found in the original texts than Pynchon. This is especially apparent in the "horror" category. While Pynchon builds up suspense that would still be suitable for a PG-13 rating, Coover's nightmares seem to be aiming straight at the "not rated" label found in the direct-to-video market or on extended director's cuts. The dreamlike road Brock Vond travels down to his final demise in Pynchon's *Vineland,* for example, ends with a strong image modeled after suspense horror movies, but without the graphic violence:

> Across the river Brock could see lights, layer after layer, crookedly ascending, thickly crowded dwellings, heaped one on the other. In the smoking torch- and firelight he saw people dancing. An old woman and an old man approached. The man carried objects in his hands that Brock couldn't make out clearly. Then he began to notice, all around in the gloom, bones, human bones, skulls and skeletons. "What is it?" he asked. "Please."
>
> "They'll take out your bones," Vato explained. "The bones have to stay on this side. The rest of you goes over. You look a lot different, and you move funny for a while, but they say you'll adjust. Give these third-worlders a chance, you know, they can be a lotta fun."
>
> "So long, Brock," said Blood. (379–80)

A similar image, incidentally, can be found in Gibson's *Count Zero,* where it almost manages to spook one of the leading characters—who provides security at an outdoor movie set—into "preventive" murder through a displacement from connotative to denotative meaning:

> "You know," the man said, the way someone might comment on a team that wasn't doing particularly well in a given season, "those seismics you're using really don't make it. I've met people who could walk in there, eat your kids for breakfast, stack the bones in the shower, and stroll out whistling. Those seismics would say it never happened." He took a sip of his drink. "You get A for effort, though. You know how to do a job."
>
> The phrase "stack the bones in the shower" was enough. Turner decided

to take the pale man out. (90)

In Coover's "The Marker," part of the "Seven Exemplary Fictions" in *Pricksongs & Descants,* the road to perdition for the main character begins by putting a marker into his book, turning off the light, and following his wife into bed. Inexplicably, he keeps bumping into pieces of furniture in the bedroom that seem to have wound up in the wrong places, but he finally manages to locate the bed:

> Although in the strange search he has lost his appetite for the love act, he quickly regains it at the sound of her happy laugh [...] He is surprised to find her dry, but the entry itself is relaxed and gives way to his determined penetration. In a moment of alarm, he wonders if this is really his wife, but since there is no alternate possibility, he rejects his misgivings as absurd. He leans down over her to kiss her, and as he does so, notices a strange and disagreeable odor. (90)

From there, a lengthy scene develops which spans from the character's sudden awareness that he is glued to the imaginatively depicted rotting corpse of his wife to the suddenly intruding police and their leading officer who, among other things, pulls the man's genitals "out flat on the tabletop" and pounds them "to a pulp with the butt of his gun" (91). Immediately after that, though, the officer engages in an intellectually phrased soliloquy about why he is "not, in the strictest sense, a traditionalist." Further examples for Coover's techniques in this respect have already been provided in the chapter on *Iterations*, including the samples from the projectionist's horror trip in "The Phantom of the Movie Palace" from *A Night at the Movies.* Which does not mean, it must be added, that it is Coover who provides the most violent scenarios. As will be seen in the chapter on *Humanity*, it is Pynchon who raises the bar in this respect, and there is also the incessant and vivid carnage of his famous Jacobean Revenge Play in *The Crying of Lot 49,* the status of which as genre or mainstream pastiche is not easily defined. But concerning "cult classics" pastiche, Pynchon rather tends to defuse the original violence. His frequent employment

of, e. g., "war action" and "martial arts" templates also attests to this. In several instances of the former, chiefly found in *Gravity's Rainbow* (cf. 251; 690 ff.; 632 ff.)*,* from imagined commando raids to leftover kamikazes to single-handed infiltrations, clichés from war action movies are employed with respect to mood, setting, and dialog, but without the grim bloodshed these are usually associated with. Similarly, Pynchon's pastiche from "martial arts" movies—most conspicuously drawn up around the tough-minded, motorbike-riding ninja Darryl Louise, or "DL," in *Vineland*—generally gets by without the spectacular violence this genre has always been notorious for, in both its traditional genre movie appearances and its high budget *Kill Bill* and *Kill Bill*-inspired incarnations from the twenty-first century's first decade.

As one more example, the "creature movies" category should be mentioned. Here, differences in execution between Pynchon and Coover are not so clear-cut. Pynchon's surreal "Giant Adenoid" narrative from *Gravity's Rainbow*, for example, retains much of the original violence of its inspirational templates (14 ff.). In Coover's *John's Wife*, in contrast, the storyline around the character Pauline who mutates into a giant, bumbling monster who is eventually hunted down by a barely controlled mob reminiscent of those in Frankenstein-inspired genre movies, generates almost the least amount of violence in *John's Wife,* compared to its numerous competing storylines.

In contrast to what has been observed regarding pastiche from "archetypal" texts, most instances of "cult classics" pastiche do not seem to follow any agenda of salvage or subversion—barring the possible intention of subverting highbrow expectations, of course—but to provide familiar and entertaining backdrops against which more complex and less familiar events can unfold. Or, to provide pockets of comic relief, if "relief" is the right word for it, from increasingly complex and serious plots. Some-

times, though, especially in Coover's texts, it *is* meant to shock: especially when highbrow art and lowbrow art, both at their most extreme, are pitched against each other within the space of a paragraph.

Mainstream

Each writer also makes use of mainstream literature, classical or contemporary. Barth, especially, is famous for liberally embedding medieval, renaissance, and colonial American literature, including, e. g., Chaucer's "The Reeve's Tale," texts from John Smith, and, famously, Ebenezer Cooke's satire "The Sotweed Factor, or A Voyage to Maryland." Pynchon and Coover embed pieces from Renaissance plays, American folk literature, Washington Irving, and many more. Barthelme—even though, as mentioned, it would in most cases not qualify as "pastiche"—embeds elements from all these sources and some European too, e. g., his "story-within-a-story" Kleist spoof in "The Dolt" from *Unspeakable Practices, Unnatural Acts* (cf. 67–71). In texts by Barth, Barthelme, Coover, and Pynchon alike, moreover, elements of gothic romance and the Victorian novel abound. In most cases, it can be summed up, the violence inherited from these sources either retains its lighter tone when the source text is not altogether serious in the first place, or is raised to satiric proportions where it is.

The most extensive use of mainstream literature, as has been remarked, can be found in Acker's texts. Pastiche is one of Acker's principal strategies; thus, the list of sources is quite comprehensive. Most notable are, e. g., her integrated biographies: of historic murderesses in *Rip-Off Red, Girl Detective* (cf. 47 ff.) and *The Childlike Life of the Black Tarantula by the Black Tarantula* (2 ff.), of contemporary U.S. prisoners in *I Dreamt I Was A Nymphomaniac: Imagining* (176 ff.), of artists such as Lautrec and Rimbaud in *The Adult Life of Toulouse Lautrec by Henri*

Toulouse Lautrec and *In Memoriam to Identity,* respectively, or of Pier Paolo Pasolini in the form of excerpts from the police investigation files in *My Death My Life by Pier Paolo Pasolini*. Acker lifts considerable amounts of plots and characters from such diverse sources as William Shakespeare and Harold Robbins, Mark Twain and Norman Mailer, Noh dramas and William Faulkner, Charles Dickens and Miguel de Cervantes, Frank Wedekind and William Gibson, and also makes liberal use of movie plots, among them Visconti's *The Leopard (Il Gattopardo), Live and Let Die, Rebel Without a Cause, or Key Largo,* to name a few.

The violence of the original texts is maintained in the form of a bleak and depressing overall mood, most of the time, but not markedly concerned with its details. Sometimes it is defused by stylistic devices the most conspicuous of which, not unlike Barthelme's at times, is her idiosyncratic narrative tone, a combination of pseudo-naïve inquisitiveness and casual outrage, rounded off with a penchant for "ugly sentences" to strip some especially cherished bestsellers or scripts of their dazzling robes and lay bare their embarrassingly racist or sexist assumptions. Examples would comprise the retelling of the James Bond movie *Live and Let Die* in *My Death My Life by Pier Paolo Pasolini* (292 ff.) or a chapter from *The Pirate* by Harod Robbins in *The Adult Life of Toulouse Lautrec by Henri Toulouse Lautrec* (239 ff.). Sustained incongruity by way of incessant blending, interlacing, and nesting of many different source texts into a puzzling mélange also adds to it that the violence is often felt to be less pronounced than in the original texts. Outstanding examples are *Pussy, King of the Pirates,* where the quest of the female pirates blends source texts from writers as diverse as Robert Louis Stevenson, Anne Desclos, or Antonin Artaud; the storyline of *Empire of the Senseless* is knit together from texts by William Gibson, Mark Twain, and the Marquis de Sade; or, at its most extreme, *The Adult Life of Toulouse Lautrec by Henri Toulouse*

Lautrec contains partially nested, partially concatenated plots of a strange fable involving a bear and a monster, the aforementioned chapter from Harold Robbins, and the plots of *Rebel Without a Cause* and *Johnny Rocco*, held together by a murder mystery and a love story, the former involving Lautrec, van Gogh, and Hercule Poirot, the latter James Dean and Janis Joplin—padded, to round it off, with various lectures about the military economy of the U.S. after World War II and similar topics.

Thematically, Acker's violent pastiche often revolves around oppression and liberation, ranging from the subjective to the political, from the individual to the historical, from leaving home to revolutions, connecting back to the "revolutionary" aspects and propositions this chapter on *Fragmentation* is largely about. Against the backdrop of a Paris overtaken by the "Algerians," *Empire of the Senseless* combines many of these elements, and the following example shows how violence, revolution, and identity are often conjoined. The narrative voice belongs to Abhor, a character amalgam modeled after Molly from Gibson's *Neuromancer* and Jim from Twain's *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*:

> These masters, white, had poured burning wax on parts of other bodies, arms and hands and shoulders, emptied boiling cane sugar over heads of their slaves, burned others alive, roasted some on slow fires, filled some other bodies with gunpowder and blown them up by a match, buried others in sand or dirt up to the necks then smeared the heads in honey so that huge flies would devour them, placed some next to nests of red ants and wasps, made others drink their own piss eat their own shit and lick off the saliva of other slaves. The minds of whoever survived lived in and were pain. [...]
>
> Memories of identity flowed through my head. I got up slowly, my eyes fixed on the muzzle of a black automatic pistol. The barrel seemed to be attached to my throat by a taut string. I couldn't see the string. (65)

The chapters "Teenage Macbeth" and "Adult Now: For Arabia" in *The Adult Life of Toulouse Lautrec by Henri Toulouse Lautrec* (323 ff.), as a final example, blend Shakespeare's *Macbeth* with IRA thriller elements and a variety of historic events (and later adds elements from *Julius Caesar* and

The Merchant of Venice):

> **King Edward of England** (*walking over to a crowd of Pakistanis, rats, sailors who lost their legs in the Falklands, and self-lobotomized kids*): No more poverty.
>
> (*Inside the pub*.)
>
> **Malcolm** (*through the window, watching King Edward*): The English King is good.
>
> **Ross** (*entering the pub, to Macduff*): The IRA burnt down your house and slaughtered your child and wife. (343)

But in *Lautrec* as well as in *Empire of the Senseless*, the revolutions in turn generate their own oppressive systems, and new forms of freedom deteriorate with the emergence of new dependencies. Almost always in Acker's texts, and often essentially so, these "revolutions" between freedom and oppression are also versions of the "revolutions" between new ways and traditional ways of writing. Such revolutions have, in large parts, become a doubtful enterprise also in terms of effectiveness; less because of resistance but owing to processes of naturalization and co-option. Disrupting narrative alone might not suffice, and a complementary disruption of reading habits, enacted on the figurative plane as assaults on the reader, will be a recurrent motif in the following—and complementary—chapter on *Composition*.

Chapter IV:

Composition

This chapter, as the second of two chapters concerned with more formal aspects of postmodern writings, will follow occurrences of violence with respect to both the use of and the reflections upon narrative techniques and figurative and rhetorical language. In the first subchapter, the possibility of innate violence in the creative act and in certain narrative techniques will be explored, introducing aspects related to the father-son cycle that complement the more content-based investigations and findings on this topic from the first two chapters on *Formations* and *Iterations*. Irony as the postmodern mastertrope will be the focal point of the second and more theoretically oriented subchapter about tropes as such, while the third and final subchapter will look into which particular forms of figurative violence are applied in the literary texts, and to what effect. Disruption, as will be seen, will again be found as being used throughout: but as a disruption of reading processes, complementary to the disruption of the narrative line discussed in the preceding chapter on *Fragmentation*.

1. Authorial Force: The Violence of the Letter

This subchapter focuses on three aspects of the narrative process related to occurrences of violence that could be described as "authorial violence." The first is the creation of stories perceived or performed as a violent act that encompasses, among other aspects, the possible survival value of storytelling juxtaposed with storytelling's possible incommensurabitily with things happening in the world, aspects of forced conception, and the writing on the body of women. The second and third aspect are the use of certain narrative techniques which are, at least figuratively, "harmful" to the

reader, and the use and abuse of characters as means and not also as ends. Ethics, again, figures large, tying in with motifs explored in the first chapter on *Formations*. In the wake of "creative violence," moreover, which manifests itself in the texts not only in the urge to create but, and more importantly, in the urge to reflect upon this urge to create, many motifs encountered in the first two chapters on *Formations* and *Iterations* constantly resurface in forms associated with the use of tropes, related especially to creation myths and the violent cycles of sons and fathers.

The Violence of Writing

A great deal of evidence in the texts points to creative activity as a compulsive and possibly even obsessive-compulsive activity that also relates —with victimization in view—to repetition compulsion. In Barth's title story from *Lost in the Funhouse*, the character Ambrose experiences a proliferation of possible stories with the potential to propel the teller into paralysis or even into the loss of the self, hazards akin to the problem of *choice* explored in Barth's *The End of the Road* and *The Sot-Weed Factor*. This motif is, as in Barth's *On With the Story*, later connected with the possible futility of creating stories in the first place:

> Or it turns out that their connection doesn't turn out; both parties soon enough recognize (he the more painfully, given the cost of his misstep) that things between them had better remained at the *amitié amoureuse* stage, better yet at the cordial occasional-lunch stage. Or it does work out, anyhow looks to be working out, when alas the MD-80 ferrying them to St. Bart's on holiday is blown out of the Caribbean sky by Islamic-fundamentalist terrorists; or perhaps Elizabeth, attending to some urban business, is shot dead by an irked carjacker when she resists his heist of her saddle-brown Jaguar.
>
> In each and any case, so what? One more short or not-so-short story of bourgeois romance, domestic tribulation, personal and vocational fulfillment or frustration, while the world grinds on. (50–51)

Similar sentiments are expressed by the narrator in *Coming Soon!!!,* fancying a fatal car crash, a propane gas leak, and a biological doomsday

device employed by Islamist terrorists (261). What is explored in these and other passages is the seeming irreconcilability of the urge to tell stories and that activity's ultimate futility and perverse profanity in the face of real violence and suffering in the world. It is also partly implicated, partly articulated, that the urge to create might become stronger the more irreconcilable it appears in the face of ever greater violence in the world, actual or perceived. Often, not only for Barth's characters but also, e. g., for the character-narrator Aesop in Coover's *Aesop's World*, this urge to create appears at its most compulsive in the face of imminent death. Juxtaposed to the ferociously violent world of his fables (cf. 10–11), Aesop brings about his own death through his unceasing and unstoppable verbiage, hastening ever more frantically from story to story to his demise, brought about by an ever more irate audience (cf. 34–35). This motif is also visible in Coover's *Briar Rose*. The fairy's narratives continually loop between two modes: a) she tells the sleeping Briar Rose variations of the Briar Rose tale, and b) she tells the reader about her telling the sleeping Briar Rose variations of the Briar Rose tale, and why she keeps doing that. Ostensibly, she "wants to prepare her moony charge for more than a quick kiss and a wedding party," but that does not cover all of her motives. Another reason why the fairy does not simply settle with telling the "regular" story, even if that means telling it over and over again—for her a possible option since Briar Rose's "limboed head" would neither mind nor remember—is to not become lost herself either in sleep or in Briar Rose's dreams:

> But, for her own sake more than her auditor's, fearing to lose the thread and sink away herself into a sleep as deep as that she inhabits, thus gravely endangering them both, she has sought, even while holding fast to her main plot, to tell each variant as though it had never been told before, surprising even herself at times with her novelties. (56)

Not only is the urge to create stories understood as an attempt to fend off death and oblivion, it even appears as an unconditioned reflex. True to the

nature of such reflexes, they can backfire in a changed environment, as in Aesop's case where doubtlessly story telling itself is what brings his death about. But most of the time, unconditioned reflexes keep making sense, and in Barth's texts this storytelling reflex is treated as such throughout. From *Chimera* and *The Friday Book* on, Scheherazade's fending off death by telling stories is a recurrent motif in Barth's fictional and non-fictional texts alike, supported by similar tales like, e. g., the confessions of the Florentine assassins, mentioned in the chapter on *Iterations*. In *The Book of Ten Nights and a Night,* the "author" and his muse "WYSIWYG"—the principal characters from the short story collection's narrative frame—discuss this motif specifically and emphatically. After denouncing Scheherazade's predicament, WYSIWYG proceeds to the characters from the narrative frame of the *Decamerone*:

> "Great Plague of 1348 devastates city of Florence! People dropping like flies from the Black Death that'll kill one out of every three Europeans over the next dozen years! Corpses piling up in the streets; law and order down the drain, if they'd *had* any drains—and in the face of this horror, what do Boccaccio's three young lords and seven young ladies do? [...] they amuse themselves with witty and/or racy *stories* [...] while the world dies unnoticed offscreen [...] and go back to their town houses and on with their lives and business." (6–7)

Whereof the "author" commences to explain that people, in the face of catastrophes, "spin their yarns" not nevertheless but *therefore,* and that especially telling "*irrelevant* stories in grim circumstances is not only permissible, but sometimes therapeutic" (7). This ties in with Barth's recurring question as to how one can defend telling "puny stories," and making a living therewith, "while the world grinds on" in a way that it is a miracle that it "does not between subject and predicate explode" (*On With the Story* 50; *The Tide-Water Tales* 361).

But even if death cannot be fended off by telling stories after all, death does not equal oblivion. Some kind of survival might be secured if one's

stories, in the same way "real" offspring do, happen to live on. But stories as offspring and vice versa, as has been explored in the chapter on *Iterations*, do not guarantee reciprocal benevolence, as this rather intricate example from Barthelme's "Florence Green Is 81" from *Come Back, Dr. Caligari* shows:

> "Then there's my novel," I say, "it will be twelve years old on Tuesday." "Published?" she asks. "Not finished," I say, "however it's very violent and necessary. It has to do with this Army, see, made up of children, young children but I mean really well armed with M–1's, carbines, .30 and .50 caliber machine guns, 105 mortars, recoilless rifles, the whole works. The central figure is the General, who is fifteen. One day the Army appears in the city, in a park, and takes up positions. Then it begins killing the people. Do you understand?" "I don't think I'd like it," Joan says. (10–11)

As soon as stories become one's offspring by means of prosopopoeia, they might commence to try and kill their father; another violent facet of the already discussed lethal relationship between writer and written, parent and child, and especially father and son.

Ambrose Mensch is a principal character in several stories from Barth's *Lost in the Funhouse* and one of the seven letter writers in *Letters.* But, cross-textually designed, Ambrose is more than that. Firstly, he is a failed "modernist" writer. Secondly, he is the main character of one of Barth's failed and aborted projects, also somewhat modernist in nature, some passages of which found their way into *Letters* as a fragment allegedly written by Ambrose Mensch under the alias of Arthur Morton King. Finally, he is a stand-in for the "author John Barth" himself.

In *Letters*, Ambrose's failure to "create" a text on account of its "weak," in the sense of outdated, literary form runs in parallel with his failure to father a child on account of his insufficient sperm count. Throughout, Ambrose tries to "force" conceptions in both departments with considerable violence, in the latter especially by terrorizing Lady Amherst who is

not altogether enthusiastic about becoming pregnant and having a baby. Taking away every means of contraception and forcing her to behave and dress at his whim is "not the sum of his despotism, no": he also forces her into physical submission conducive to conception (237; 248–49). Forcing the issue as an issue can be found elsewhere in Barth's text; in *The Last Voyage of Somebody the Sailor,* e. g., it is the young Baylor, the first person narrator, who forces his sperm on his childhood friend Daisy in flagrant violation of his promise to retract (129–31). Young Baylor is not a "modernist," but the period during which he tries to become a writer is precisely the period in which high modernism developed. Are there, possibly, indications for a portrait of the rapist as a young man?

Technically, neither Mensch nor Baylor can be called a "rapist" but the habit of Barth's protagonists to "force the issue" is nevertheless connected to the repetition of rape discussed in the chapter on *Iterations*. There is, though, a fundamental difference: while Barth's rapists do not aim at impregnating their prey, this is precisely what Ambrose, and possibly Baylor, are aiming at. Which does not make it less violent, and neither do the women's ambiguous reactions. On the contrary: that both Lady Amherst or Daisy not only acquiesce to this treatment but positively wound up being thrilled by it would, in a way, double the violence on the level of writing as a creative act: by forcing the muse to conceive and to cover the violence by means of the muse's delight.

Without intending to engage in the history of the muse, the tribulations an artist traditionally goes through often seem deliberately scripted to mirror giving birth to a child with reversed gender roles. But whereas the "literal" act of giving birth has, again traditionally, not been taken "serious" insofar as the man can still be cast as the child's "true" father and creator, this is not the case in its figurative reversal: it is again the male author, not his muse, who is the true father of the text or of the work of art in general.

What becomes apparent here is a perceptible imbalance between the figurative and the literal as pertaining to questions of seriousness and gender, a question that will be further explored in the context of tropes later in this chapter. If the muse is cast as a character, though, as she has already been encountered in several examples connected to the "fathering" of texts-as-children or children-as-texts in the chapter on *Iterations*, the original conditions' centerpiece has to be restored so that the muse inspires *and* gives figurative birth to works of art which, nonetheless, firmly remain the male writer's creations.

If a text is born not only of the muse but also by means of being forced on the muse, it would be possible to say that writing, or at least a certain kind of writing, is executed on the body of women. In Barth's "Anonymiad" from *Lost in the Funhouse,* the stranded bard—who just invented writing— is hunting the goats on his island in a constant search for parchment:

> Had Merope—aye, Trojan Helen herself—trespassed on my island in those days, I'd have flayed her as soon as I'd laid her, and on that preciousest of parchments scribed the little history of our love. (194)

Female bodies subjected to violent writing is reflected upon in numerous ways in Acker's texts, intimately related to Johnson's findings concerning the recoding of rape into aesthetic triumph, as has been discussed in the chapter on *Iterations*. In *My Mother, Demonology*, the "father," who "hates violence" and is "both a liberal and a humanist even though today both these concepts are treated with disdain," is commissioned to paint the horrors of New York. After failing to come up with a suitable subject, he ponders:

> "I can't see anything until I'm it. Since in my normal life I'm too habituated to horror to see it, horror must occur outside my perceptual habits for me to see it:
>
> "In order for me to paint horror, I have to see the horror in myself." (98)

Whereof he concludes that "[to] paint horror, I have to eradicate all distance between horror and me":

> Father said, "The point is that when I saw those flames and thought that people were dying, I felt joy. Not horror. The horror has to do with me. In order to paint horror as horror actually is, or a portrait of New York, I need to show myself doing what's most horrible for me to do."
> The mayor said, "Shit."
> Father said, "I have to paint myself killing my own daughter." (109)

The daughter is bound and gagged and left in a car that is set on fire. Her father watches, but she is able to free herself and survives. In the public controversy after the painting is finished, some want to give the father "the death sentence for what he has done," while others argue that "his painting of New York City, the centerpiece of which was a portrait of his daughter in flames, was one of the masterpieces of art in the twentieth century, that century in which totalitarianism vied with humanism" (115). The father, then, kills himself. The lethality, or potential lethality, of writing on the body of women is also connected with Acker's motif of tattooing as discussed in the chapter on *Fragmentation*, a form of writing on the body that is outside the code and that cannot be naturalized. Her last project for a novel, outlined in *Hannibal Lecter, My Father*, possibly calls these notions into question, after all. It features a Japanese wood-cutter who comes to America to "transfer the art and become a tattooist," making "the perfect tattoo":

> One day a young girl comes to his studio and he knows she's the one he has to tattoo, so he drugs her, but she doesn't live through the tattoo, she dies from it. He wants to escape but she comes back to him as a ghost and they have a night of very hot sex in a graveyard. Then he's free to go. (22).

But what if the aspiring writer is a woman? Would not the violence of writing perpetrated on the bodies of women necessarily be directed against herself? Precisely this question is explored in the final chapters of Acker's *Empire of the Senseless* where Abhor/Molly occupies the place of "Jim"

from the final chapters of Twain's *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, Shivai/Case the place of "Huck," and a third person, not accidentally called "Mark," the place of "Tom." Shivai and Mark plot numerous mock-escapes for Abhor, who wound up in the new regime's prison, plots which include various mutilations including the proposition to saw off one of her legs. In the course of these plottings, it becomes clear that Abhor's "imprisonment" is also, in the sense of arrested development, the imprisonment of the female writer. The tool supposed to cut her own leg becomes a penknife, and finally a pen (this chapter's first person narrator is Shivai):

> I said, instead of a penknife, we'ld smuggle Abhor a pen. The pen is mightier than the sword. That way Abhor could write down, with her own blood as ink, how we rescued her, how brave our hearts were, how strong our arms. All of human posterity would hold us in their esteem. (200–201)

The men go on to propose that she has to get permanently and seriously maimed in her escape from jail "because escaping from jail is a difficult and dangerous thing for a man to do"; Abhor's protests that she is not a man are met by the assertion that in that case she is not getting out of jail, and she is given "lots of huge safety pins so she could draw lots of blood out of her skin with which to write down lots of memoirs" because she was probably "going to be shut in jail the rest of her life" (202).

But it does not stop there. Shivai and Mark's next scheme is to turn Abhor "into a great writer so that she'ld have a reason for being in jail for the rest of her life. And at that time, society needed a great woman writer" (203). They slice her thumb and then the other four fingers of her right hand with the penknife because "writers need disability or madness they can overcome in order to write" (203). She eventually escapes the prison by her own means, and finds a voice, but self-mutilation has become an integral part of this voice:

> [...] I feel like I'm taking layers of my own epidermis, which are layers of

> still freshly bloody scar tissue, black brown and red, and tearing each one of them off so more and more of my blood shoots into your face. This is what writing is to me a woman. (210)

Here, creative violence is still directed against the woman, forced upon herself by the female writer in a perpetuated traumatic experience connected to repetition-compulsion.

But the violent traumatic experience of motherhood, one of the most precarious endeavors throughout most of human history, is also involved. From the female perspective, the metaphor of conceiving and giving birth to a text involves certain aspects not generally thought of in the liberal use of the "muse" by male writers. In the chapter "My Monster/My Self" in *A World of Difference,* Johnson discusses an interpretation offered by critics that "Victor Frankenstein's disgust at the sight of his creation" might be described as "a study of postpartum depression" and who, on this premise, relate "the entire novel to Mary Shelley's mixed feelings about motherhood":

> Having lived through an unwanted pregnancy from a man married to someone else only to see that baby die, followed by a second baby named William—which is the name of the monster's first murder victim—Mary Shelley, at the age of only eighteen, must have had excruciatingly divided emotions. Her own mother, indeed, had died upon giving birth to her. (149)

Being kissed by the muse entails, after all, an impregnation—a figure that traditionally focuses on the male writer as creator and his sundry throes of giving birth to his texts as "children," but not especially on non-figurative woman which could be said to be quite central to this figure. Hence, this figure is bound to derail in the context of the female writer: who has ever heard of a muse dying in the delivery room, or of a muse rejecting her child? The latter is, according to Johnson, a tangible proposition; when Mary Shelley describes Dr. Frankenstein as a parent "who flees in disgust from the repulsive being to whom he has just given birth," it could be "a

possible critique of the *role* of the mother" that "touches on primitive terrors of the mother's rejection of the child" (150). There seems to be something "monstrous" to it, and when the muse has turned into a writer and, violently, conceived a text *of her own*, this could be perceived as monstrous even more than before. According to Johnson, readers of Mary Shelley's novel have frequently expressed the feeling "that a young girl's fascination with the idea of monstrousness was somehow monstrous in itself" (150), and it is not impossible that Mary Shelley herself had a similar feeling:

> When Mary ends her introduction to the reedition of her novel with the words, "And now, once again, I bid my hideous progeny go forth and prosper," the reader begins to suspect that there may perhaps be meaningful parallels between Victor's creation of his monster and Mary's creation of her book. (150)

With the creation of texts as a creation of monsters, possibly unwanted pregnancies of the writer, stillborn children, postpartum depressions, and many more aspects linked to this figure for creating narratives, the "birth" of the female writer explodes, one should think, the metaphor of the muse. Which makes it the more puzzling to encounter the muse in some of the texts as being alive and not particularly well and still be written upon, and in others as struggling with herself, with male texts, and with her own voice.

The Violence of Composition

Narrowing down the act of writing from an all-encompassing creative activity to more mundane elements like narrative techniques and stringing lexical units together to the rules of a given syntax in order to arrive at meaningful images, three related modes of violence with noticeably heightened frequency and characteristically playful self-referentiality can be observed. All three are related to "abuse": the figurative employment of narrative techniques, lexical units, and syntax as weapons against the

reader; full-scale assaults on the reader's sensibilities; and the systematic destruction of the "set." While all three can be said to "show off," as it were, by making the skillful execution of narrative techniques visible, they are also directed, by and large, against acquired reading habits to complement some of the strategies outlined in the chapter on *Fragmentation*.

In Barth's *Sabbatical*, for example, attention is called to the process of writing by way of a "first person plural" narrator, Fenwick and Susan, who almost constantly argue over, or at least refer to, the techniques employed to develop the ongoing story. How to appropriately handle the exposition is, appropriately, one of the first arguments to ensue:

> In Sue's opinion it would be a breach of verisimilitude for either of us to review that case to the other as we sail along, when both of us know the details painfully well. That particular narrative lapse is called Forced Exposition; Susan's name for it, in the classroom, is Corning the Goose. For as the hapless goose must feel, when to enlarge its liver for pâté de foie gras the French commercial goose farmer rams a hose down its gullet and blows its belly full of corn, so must the reader feel when fictional characters say things to each other that between them should go without saying, just to get the author's exposition done. There'll be none of that, Susan says, in our story. (85)

They agree to have the author put it "straight out" instead of putting it into the mouths of the characters, but "adroitly" so in order to avoid "Author Intrusion."[28] After this exposition has been executed in a rather long-winded way, the effect of the intended "efficient" exposition is curiously described in a manner manifestly more violent than the force feeding that has been rejected for its crassness:

> That's good, Suse.
>
> Thank you. But we're a long way from efficient, Fenn, which was what this Paisley digression was all about. It's been no quick surgical strike in the

---

[28] Since the "author" are Fenwick and Susan, the proposition immediately voids itself not only with regard to the proposed (and usually valid) difference between "author" and "characters," but also to the proposed (and usually valid) difference between the two exposition techniques.

area of narrative exposition. (112)

Where does this leave the reader for whose benefit the expositorial considerations are presumably about? Would the reader rather be the target of such a surgical strike if it were successful, or suffer from the collateral damage a not-quite-so-surgical strike would bring about?

"Strikes" against the reader can also be found in Barthelme's and Coover's texts. In "Sentence" from *City Life,* for example, Barthelme describes the techniques of composition in the most colorful ways:

> [...] even though it is true that in our young manhood we were taught that short, punchy sentences were best (but what did he mean? doesn't "punchy" mean punch-drunk? I think he probably intended to say "short, *punching* sentences," meaning sentences that lashed out at you, bloodying your brain if possible [...] they could have noticed that their sentences weren't having the knock-down power of the new weapons whose bullets tumble end-over-end (but it is true that we didn't have these weapons at that time) [...] (116-17)

Not unlike Barth, who progresses from force-feeding to surgical strikes, Barthelme proceeds from punches to 5.45 mm NATO cartridges—introduced at the time when "Sentence" was written—whose tumbling effect undermined the Hague Convention's prohibition of so-called dumdum rounds by effecting body tissue on impact in similar ways but by different means. In an interview with Larry McCaffery in *Not Knowing*, Barthelme remarks:

> I suppose the theater has the possibility of doing this in the most immediate way. I'm on the stage and I suddenly climb down into the pit and kick you in the knee. That's not like writing about kicking you in the knee, it's not like painting you being kicked in the knee, because you have a pain in the knee. This sounds a bit aggressive. Forgive me. (265)

Without the findings from the chapter on *Fragmentation* with regard to the undermining and disruption of storylines, this extension to reading habits and why a reader should be kicked in the knee in the first place would be rather difficult to comprehend.

In the course of yet another and even for Coover's standards disproportionally gory shootout between the aforementioned "Extars" and the police in *Lucky Pierre,* the all-pervasive but not altogether real but rather "reel" violence surrounding the protagonist eventually affects the orthography. While bullets rip apart and "pepper their lethal graffiti" on a girl that tries to rescue Pierre, the shooting finally "stops like a sentence," followed by a "final fierce blast of rifle and small-arms fire like an explanation mark" (240). The inscription "punched out" of the girl's body by this lethal typewriter is, or is not, inadvertently filled in a way most repellent to general taste while she falls from a ladder's elevated position down on top of Lucky Pierre—who is starring in a series of porno flicks, after all. This frontal attack against the average sensibilities of the reader already blends into the second type of violent composition to be outlined in detail below.

If words and syntax and even punctuation can be armed to the teeth, it stands to reason that the texts so violently composed can turn into battlefields. The battle itself, in turn, can be either directed against the reader, as Barthelme's kick in the knee, or against other texts. A text can be a "ticking bomb" or a "booby trap," it can fly "sorties" against the the reader's "bourgeois consciousness" (Barthelme on Joyce, Burroughs, Mailer, Selby, et al.; *Not-Knowing* 8–9); it can violently "invade" and "colonize" readers to make them their "mindless servants" (Coover on popular tales and stories from the Bible, "I am an Intransigent Realist" n. p.); a literary magazine can become the "neglected battlefield littered with the empty cartridge boxes and dead horses of the Revolution of the Word" (Barthelme, *Not-Knowing* 6); or texts can be invaded by other texts, e. g., by "tiny numbers" of reference markers that march into the text, subdue it with a "species of literary judo" and reduce it to the status of a footnote (18–19*).*

When the meaningful images arrived at are dispatched to assault the reader, there is one form that appears to be particularly representative of

the playfulness and display of self-consciousness with regard to the texts' own modes of operation and their effects on the reader. While a text cannot physically harm a reader with a "kick in the knee" in the same way a computer virus cannot physically harm a computer's hardware with a blow to its hard disk, it can, under certain circumstances, induce such a nausea as to set off a physical reaction considered harmful indeed—much in the same way a computer virus can induce driver software to act in a manner that might, under certain circumstances, be harmful to hardware components it runs on.

One of the more famous nauseating experiences provided by post-modern texts is certainly Lieutenant Slothrop's headfirst dive into the toilet and its vast drainage system in *Gravity's Rainbow*, in a prolonged but for the time being unsuccessful attempt to retrieve his lost blues harp (64–67). A less disgusting and rather whimsical example, also from *Gravity's Rainbow,* is Slothrop's mounting agony for ingesting assorted English candies forced on him by an elderly lady, each candy surpassing its predecessor in grossness:

> Under its tamarind glaze, the Mills bomb turns out to be luscious pepsin-flavored nougat, chock-full of tangy candied cubeb berries, and a chewy camphor-gum center. It is unspeakably awful. Slothrop's head begins to reel with camphor fumes, his eyes are running, his tongue's a hopeless holocaust. Cubeb? He used to *smoke* that stuff. "Poisoned . . ." he is able to croak.
> "Show a little backbone," advises Mrs. Quoad. (119)

Some are even designed after destructive weaponry:

> "Gosh, it must really be something," doubtfully taking this nasty-looking brownish novelty, an exact quarter-scale replica of a Mills-type hand grenade, lever, pin and everything, one of a series of patriotic candies put out before sugar was quite so scarce, also including, he notices, peering into the jar, a .455 Webley cartridge of green and pink striped taffy, a six-ton earthquake bomb of some silver-flecked blue gelatin, and a licorice bazooka. (118–19)

The deployment of food seems especially apt to provoke, or to pretend to *want* to provoke, a physical reaction in the reader. During a gala dinner in the final chapters of *Gravity's Rainbow*, the guests—instigated by the legendary Seaman Bodine—outperform each other in a seemingly endless ad-lib contest as to who is able to invent the most revolting dishes and specialties imaginable (715–17).

While such techniques can also be found, albeit in lower doses, in Barthelme's or Acker's texts, no one, including Pynchon, surpasses Coover's monumental efforts at making readers effectively gag. In one of his most accomplished attempts to this effect, the usual mob surrounding the protagonist in *Ghost Town* forces the latter at gunpoint to eat his own horse's "large uncooked testicles, still bloody and pulsing like a hairy heart," in a prolonged and utterly nauseating assault that comprehensively and liberally addresses every sensory input available to the human physique (29–33).

It is important to note that these occurrences only marginally advance story or character development, if at all. Primarily, they act as elements of composition that illustrate and demonstrate the power of composition and, last not least, their own accomplishments. Their function is to be "themselves," as it were—like cameo appearances of famous actors or directors playing themselves in a movie, to be recognized by connoisseurs and aficionados.

With so many battlefields and sites of assault, whatever happened to the locus amoenus? Idyllic places are central to the third kind of violence connected to narrative techniques—insofar as they are thoroughly and self-consciously trashed, thrashed, and slashed by the "author." While locations and settings are supposed to provide backdrops against which stories can unfold, and can certainly be battered while stories run their

course in meaningful ways, the rules in postmodern writings differ and involve the intent to expose. In several texts, the "author's" delight in destroying the set manifests itself more subtly through embedding gratuitous and manifestly absurd details. When pandemonium ensues in the offices of a clinic in Barth's *Giles Goat-Boy,* for example, "demented undergraduates and faculty of both sexes" not only "swung from light-fixtures" or "raced in wheelchairs," but also "coupled on the carpet" and "shat in type-writers" (623). In Barthelme's *The King,* Launcelot gives Guinevere an extensive account of a house visited by looters, where the "skeletons" of chandeliers lay in a heap in the courtyard, mattresses had been "wounded and burnt," the portraits on the walls been shot at, the "very trees" been "hacked," and "things" been "written on the walls, ungodlinesses of every kind," to name a few details (150–51). And the "cattlemen" in Coover's *Ghost Town* not only "killed all his family and burned the ranch down and shot the sheep," but also "dug up the potatoes and then pissed on everything to kill the grass and spoil the edibles" (35–36).[29] Again, the most extreme examples can be found in Coover's texts. In "The Magic Poker" from *Pricksongs & Descants*, Coover uses this technique most consistently by way of an author-narrator:

> I arrange the guest cabin. I rot the porch and tatter the screen door and infest the walls. I tear out the light switches, gut the mattresses, smash the windows, and shit on the bathroom floor. I rust the pipes, kick in the papered walls, unhinge doors. Really, there's nothing to it. In fact, it's a pleasure. (22)

The "characters," subsequently, are confronted with this "authorial" violence:

> ["It's] the people who just *destroy*, destroy because—God! because they just

---

[29] Followed by a sardonic remark, typical for Coover's texts, that the protagonist's "memory of the family he had for that time is less substantial. All he recalls is that before they got killed they ate a lot." (36)

want to destroy! Lust! That's all, Karen! See? Somebody just went around these rooms driving his fist in the walls because he had to hurt, it didn't matter who or what, or maybe he kicked them with his feet, and bashed the windows and ripped the curtains and then went to the *bathroom* on it all! Oh my God! *Why?* Why would anybody want to *do* that?" (29)

All these self-conscious and self-consciously violent elements on the level of composition vie for the reader's attention, and they do so, quite successfully, in competition with the characters. But what happens if it is not the set but the characters against which authorial violence is directed? While this is not a question that would typically come to mind with regard to postmodern literature, especially since the majority of its characters are strategically "underdeveloped" and often typified or archetyped with recourse to mythical and medieval role models, it is noticeable nevertheless because violence against characters is, once again, often self-consciously employed.

The Violence of Casting

When Sindbad tells the tale of his next-to-last voyage to his guests in Barth's *The Last Voyage of Somebody the Sailor*, the narrator paraphrases Sindbad's exposition in a rather revealing way:

> He makes it to shore, as always, this time with a handful of others, whose next job in his story is to die and leave him the sole survivor. (11)

A treatment which confirms the old adage that it is always a good thing to be the protagonist in one's story—a motif Barth also plays on in the embedded "Story of Jaydā the Jewel of Cairo" or in his second novel *The End of the Road.* Barth, all things considered, does not seem particularly perturbed by casting aside his supporting cast in general and his castaways in particular, an assumption supported by his opinions on the subject articulated in his essay "A Body of Words" from *Further Fridays*, discussed and quoted at some length in the chapter on *Iterations*. A

remarkable example can also be found on the figurative plane in Barth's *The End of the Road*:

> Only the profundity and limited duration of my moods kept me from being a suicide: as it was, this practice of mine of going to bed when things got too awful, this deliberate termination of my day, was itself a kind of suicide, and served its purpose just as efficiently. My moods were little men, and when I killed them they stayed completely dead. (34)

By means of prosopopoeia, the first person narrator endows his moods with life, and creates characters for the sole purpose to be able to kill them off.

Barthelme, in contrast, seems more wary of such conventions. His story "The New Member" from *Amateurs* relates, in the form of minutes from a meeting, part of an ongoing debate between members of an unspecified entity, discussing their current affairs and courses of action. Reviewing the excellent performance of a certain "Worth girl," the debate takes a curious turn:

> Mr. O'Donoghue said that there was, of course, the possibility that the Worth girl was doing too well.
>
> Mr. Birnbaum said there was such a thing as too much too soon.
>
> Mr. Percy inquired as to the girl's age at the present time and was told she was thirty-five. He then said that that didn't sound like "too soon" to him.
>
> The presiding officer asked for a motion.
>
> Mr. O'Donoghue moved that the Worth girl be hit by a car.
>
> Mr. Birnbaum seconded. (159)

As a first reflex, this could be read as "God" cast as a budget committee, but the story moves into a different direction:

> The presiding officer asked for discussion.
>
> Mrs. Mallory asked if Mr. O'Donoghue meant fatally. Mr. O'Donoghue said he did.
>
> Mr. Percy said he thought that a fatal accident, while consonant with the usual procedures of the committee, was always less interesting than

something that left the person alive, so that the person's situation was still, in a way, "open." (159)

And, toward the end of the story:

> Mr. O'Donoghue moved that the Worth girl be run over by a snowmobile.
>
> The presiding officer said that O'Donoghue was out of order and also that in his judgment Mr. O'Donoghue was reintroducing a defeated motion in disguised form. (161)

Among other possible effects, the story promotes a closer look at how characters can be utilized, and unscrupulously so, a technique whose proponents in Barthelme's treatment do not come across as the most skilled and agreeable ones, as the last quotation particularly attests to. But utilizing characters in dubious ways can happen to critics as well. In the second edition of *Flaubert: The Uses of Uncertainty,* Culler apologizes in no uncertain terms for having done exactly that, i. e., having utilized the protagonist of Flaubert's *Madame Bovary* for the advancement of his argument without giving it further thought:

> While proposing to examine Emma's complex role ("She is a foolish woman, but is she foolish woman made tragic heroine or tragic heroine revealed as foolish woman?" [p. 140]), my discussion takes the idea of a "foolish woman" as a given, following the critical tradition [...] although the novel provides evidence for treating this "foolishness" as a product rather than a given, a cultural effect rather than a natural circumstance. (234)

Traditional interpretation, his own reading not exempt, "has massively inclined" to take her "as a psychological type, an elementary instance of human or feminine nature":

> To see *Madame Bovary* as portraying a feminine type or feminine nature rather than problems of women's condition is not just an ideological disposition that accompanies literary interpretation. On the contrary, the theory of the novel is linked to a certain essentializing misogyny at the very moment when it appears most austerely formal: wishing to concentrate on technique alone. Critics need to take Emma as quintessentially foolish in order to give the novelistic technique their undivided attention. (236)

This is a good example as to how abusing purely fictional characters can engender questionable conclusions and subsequent modes of thought in society at large *without* having to enter into a discussion how someone who does not exist could possibly be treated "unethically." In this case, these conclusions would comprise "sexist assumptions" which elevate man's "genius" at woman's expense, as Culler enlarges upon in "Five Propositions on the Future of Men in Feminism":

> [I]t is as though Flaubert's genius were to have made something magnificent out of a subject (a female subject) so quintessentially trivial; for Madame Bovary to be seen as *un livre sur rien,* Emma must be seen as *rien*. (188)

Killing off or otherwise utilizing purely fictional characters for the sake of the story or the sake of one's argument might, after all, not be a completely innocent endeavor. Moreover, what if people who are "real and alive" are fictionalized into characters and badly or even demeaningly treated?

When people who live or once lived appear in the texts, the possible impact is usually defused by various methods, among them restricting such a character's role, changing his or her name, or designing composite characters as it is customarily done in screenplay adaptations. While there are some boundaries to how real persons are "written in" in Barth's, Barthelme's, Pynchon's, or Gibson's texts, these boundaries are consistently overstepped in Coover's and Acker's.

Coover enjoys putting his characters in particularly degrading and demeaning situations—from realistic settings as in *The Origin of the Brunists* when Vince Bonali trips over, and is trapped by, his trousers while seamlessly proceeding from a drunken rape attempt to a drunken brawl (377–79), to cartoonishly exaggerated ones as in *Pinocchio in Venice* when Pinocchio, the "distinguished emeritus professor from abroad, the

world-renowned art historian and critic, social anthropologist, moral philo-
sopher, and theological gadfly, the returning pilgrim" is discovered and
apprehended by the Venetian police with his "head buried" in the snow
and his "ancient fulminating arse high" (47–48). In his political parables,
especially his so-called Nixon trilogy, real and living people are cast into
similar situations and worse. The backdrops of all three texts are, in differ-
ent ways, outright fantastic, and two at least do not name and identify their
characters. In the tumultuous plot of *A Political Fable* a.k.a. *The Cat in the
Hat for President,* it takes some effort to pinpoint individual GOP members,
and the protagonist in *Whatever Happened to Gloomy Gus of the Chicago
Bears*, with his habit of falling into pre-programmed "routines" (cf., e. g.,
142–43) a habit that will be discussed in depth in the chapter on *Humanity*,
is not immediately identifiable as Nixon. But how hidden is "hidden" when
the "real" identity behind the character's mask is well known and well pub-
licized? However, in *The Public Burning,* real and living persons are not
concealed in any way, but called by his or her name and subjected to
ridicule at great lengths—Eisenhower, Supreme Court Justices, Con-
gresspeople, newspaper commentators, and generally every public figure
from the 1950s (cf., e. g., 31–32, 426 ff.). Though surprisingly sympathetic-
ally portrayed, Richard Nixon, protagonist and first person narrator except
for expository and interim passages, is nevertheless subjected to stagger-
ing amounts of ridicule and abuse. Which is especially true when it comes
to sexual activities—from being caught masturbating at his desk by Uncle
Sam while fantasizing about having sex with Ethel Rosenberg in her
prison cell (318) to being raped by Uncle Sam in the final chapter. During a
visit to Ethel's prison cell, in preparation for the novel's climax, Nixon's
sexual fantasies seem to approach reality at last, but somehow he sud-
denly wounds up with his pants down in Times Square on the podium
where he triggers a prolonged riot that precedes the Rosenbergs' botched
and grisly executions, initially relayed from Nixon's first-person perspective

that later switches to an interim's third-person perspective:

> The Rosenbergs' shyster Manny Bloch! I hopped forward to kick him in the face. But my feet and pants got tangled up in the flag and I went sprawling there in the puddle of stars, stripes, and inseams, engulfed yet again in belly laughs, and wondering if I could ever, like Truth, rise again. (481)

> The old lady returns Uncle Sam's wink and gives the Vice President a whacking high-buttoned boot in his henchbone, sending him flapping forward through the untangling pack-up like a clipped goose trying to take flight. People add their own toes to his general forward endeavor, holding their noses and hollering taunts at him like "Little Dick, he was so quick," and
>> "Oh you dirty beggar,
>> Oh you dirty crumb!
>> Ain't you ashamed
>> To show your dirty bum!" (498)

As the examples given so far already suggest, unruly pants and the exposure of the rear parts of the human anatomy are liberally adopted means in Coover's arsenal for treating his cast.

Names of real people in Acker's texts, which are oftentimes as highly politicized as Coover's, particularly include Nixon, Reagan, and George Bush, as might be expected. These are by and large not ridiculed in a manner comparable to Coover's treatment, and are—names notwithstanding—also usually compound characters assembled from many different public, literary, and movie characters. But how these names are cast to fit into setting and storylines is far from flattering either. In *Don Quixote,* "Nixon" and his wife are visited by the Angel of Death, all three being cast as dogs:[30]

> The Angel of Death appeared to them, while they were fucking, and barked, "I am the Angel of Death which is Despair."
> "Dicky. Can't you keep those Secret Service queens out for a moment? We're trying." [...]

---

[30] Oblique references to Nixon's famous "Nixon's Dog" speech from 1952 can be found throughout Coover's and Acker's texts.

> Mr. and Mrs. Nixon looked toward the heavy green curtain where they saw a slowly dying body turning into a white worm that had always been in its abdomen. "This," the Angel of Death woofed, "is Despair and Terror fucking. This world is holy, so whenever one and one members of it such as you fuck, Despair and Terror fuck. Hell whispers." (109)

"George Bush" in *My Mother, Demonology,* to give another example, fades in and out of several roles as America's "Supreme Dictator," modern, historical, and Shakespearean ones. In one sequence he has assassinated his sons and committed incest with his daughter, in another he eulogizes his sons who have been killed "in a far-off war," but then he goes on:

> Bush: "I want you to know about our sons who just died. A church fell on Rocco, my oldest son, and crushed him into red pulp. A religious death. Regarding my son Neil—pure accident. Some black—whateverhisname—mistook him for whoever was secretly screwing this black's girlfriend. I don't know why these people don't keep to their own race. And, ironically, while Neil was breathing his last, Neil's girlfriend was sucking someone else. A black.
>
> "Both my sons have died honorable deaths.
>
> "This is proof that God loves me and my family." (163)

Acker's and especially Coover's treatments are, at times, quite close to the bone. Even in the U.S., it took years and enormous amounts of effort before Coover's *The Public Burning* finally found a publisher, and in some European countries where defamation, libel, and slander laws have the right of way over artistic license and freedom of expression, some of these texts might even have perished altogether. But where should one draw the line, if lines should be drawn at all? In most countries, and for good reasons, politicians do not enjoy the same privacy rights like ordinary citizens, and one could argue, moreover, that nobody would take Coover's or Acker's Nixon or Bush for the "real" Nixon or Bush, and that Coover's or Acker's texts are works of fiction and their "vice-presidents" or "presidents" fictitious characters after all.

Which would at the very least loop back to the original question

whether certain narrative treatments can be unethical even if the characters subjected to these treatments are completely fictitious. It could be argued, for example, that narration needs "conflict," and that it certainly must be allowed to utilize characters to that effect. But here, two cases can be differentiated: whether antagonistic characters are merely used as "fodder" or whether they have their own consistent views and beliefs, are psychologically soundly developed, have their good sides and bad sides, and could even be identified with—certainly possible in texts where conflict is brought about by incompatible viewpoints, needs, or agendas, not by positions that are intrinsically "evil" or "good."[31] Also, it has to be taken into account that the ethicality of a character's treatment often comes under fire in hindsight, although, in terms of the prevailing zeitgeist, this treatment had once been considered to be perfectly decent. How postmodern texts will fare on this count remains to be seen. So far, the résumé seems mixed at best, but it should be kept in mind that "characters" are part of the narrative tradition postmodern texts often set out to explode.

2. Warring Tropes: Figurative Killings

Tropes, whose use has so far been followed along processes of writing and publishing in particular and whose more general use in the texts will be discussed in this chapter's third and final subchapter, are not only able to transport violent imagery, but can also be violent in the way they work. Similar to how tropes in postmodern literary texts are often consciously employed as "actors" rather than mere vehicles, tropes are also strongly focused on in postmodern literary theory. Here, again, violence can be

---

[31] As a readily visible and accessible pop culture example, the differences in treatment in this respect between animated feature movies from Hollywood and Miyazaki Hayao's Studio Ghibli, for example, are outright stunning.

found in the form of major threads in the discourse's larger tapestry, three of which will be closely examined in this subchapter. The first follows the use of violent tropes in the critical discourse *about* figurative language, the second follows irony as a mastertrope for figurative language as such. Along the third thread, the difference, or fold, between literal and figurative meaning will be explored in both the literary and critical texts, focusing on how violence is generated and articulated in this fold—which, in the form of tensions between literal and figurative reading, has already been repeatedly encountered and will, together with the use of tropes as such, also be an important aspect throughout the final chapter on *Reality*.

Tropical Battlegrounds

The text-as-battlefield motif, which has been frequently found in the literary texts, is not foreign to literary criticism either. In *Blindness and Insight,* de Man remarks that "the bases for historical knowledge are not empirical facts but written texts, even if these texts masquerade in the guise of wars or revolutions" (165), and not only texts dealing with historical subject matter masquerade in this fashion. What are the means with which these wars and revolutions are fought, and who wields these means? One of the most persistent images in postmodern criticism to this effect is Nietzsche's assessment of truth as a "mobile army" of tropes—itself a trope with grave consequences—that warrants a more thorough investigation in order to shed some light on the matter at large.

Nietzsche's approach to rhetoric is usually considered marginal. Only some lecture notes explicitly deal with this subject, and these draw heavily on textbooks available at the time. But therefore to assert that it is "far-fetched to center a consideration of Nietzsche's relationship to literature on his theory of rhetoric" is an assertion de Man nevertheless contests in *Allegories of Reading* (103 ff.). Nietzsche's enormous influence on the the-

ory of tropes in critical theory rests on his remark in "On Truth and Lie in an Extra-Moral Sense": that truth is "a mobile army of metaphors, metonymies, and anthropomorphisms." In "Anthropomorphism and Trope in Lyric" from *The Rhetorics of Romanticism*, de Man calls Nietzsche's remark a "definition of truth as tropological displacement" which is "odd" on account of two inbuilt incompatibilities: between "metaphor and metonymy" and "anthropomorphism" on the one hand, and between "army *of tropes*" and "*army* of tropes" on the other (239).

As to the first of these two incompatibilities, de Man explains that the listing of tropes is odd with regard to "anthropomorphism" since it neither complements the first two—"anthropomorphisms can contain a metaphorical as well as a metonymic moment" (240)—nor constitutes a synthesis between them—"neither metaphor nor metonymy have to be necessarily anthropomorphic" (240). When regarding truth as a collection of varied tropes, i. e., metaphors and metonymies, truth would be "the possibility of definition by means of infinitely varied sets of propositions" (241). But anthropomorphism is not just a trope "but an identification on the level of substance":

> "[It] freezes the infinite chain of tropological transformations and propositions into one single assertion or essence which, as such, excludes all others. It is no longer a proposition but a proper name, as when the metamorphosis in Ovid's stories culminates and halts in the singleness of a proper name, Narcissus or Daphne or whatever. (241)

Or, succinctly put by Johnson in "Anthropomorphism in Lyric and Law":

> The term *anthropomorphism* in Nietzsche's list thus indicates that a *given* is being forced into what otherwise would function as a pure structure of relation. (208)

Thus, returning to de Man, metaphor and metonymy on the one hand and anthropomorphism on the other are "mutually exclusive" since "Truth is now defined by two incompatible assertions: either truth is a set of propo-

sitions or truth is a proper name" (241). Because anthropomorphism is structured like a trope, though, and because it is "easy enough to cross the barrier that leads from trope to name" but "impossible to return" from it to truth's starting point, it follows that, when truth is a trope, this trope generates norms, value, or ideologies "that are no longer true" (242).

The second of these two incompatibilities, that between "army of *tropes"* and "*army* of tropes," consists of incompatible modes of power:

> Tropes are neither true nor false and are both at once. To call them an army is however to imply that their effect and their effectiveness is not a matter of judgment but of power.
>
> What characterizes a good army, as distinct for instance from a good cause, is that its success has little to do with immanent justice and a great deal with the proper economic use of its power. (241)

While the "tropes" part, following de Man's line of argument, affirms truth's epistemological power, i. e., that truth is dependent on epistemological determination, the "army" part confirms its strategic power—i. e., its independence from epistemological determination. But these modes of power can hardly coexist:

> How the two modes of power could exist side by side certainly baffles the mind, if not the grammar of Nietzsche's tale. The sentence that asserts the complicity of epistemology and rhetoric, of truth and trope, also turns this alliance into a battle made all the more dubious by the fact that the adversaries may not even have the opportunity ever to encounter each other. (243)

This is not far from the conclusion Johnson arrives at in "Anthropomorphism in Lyric and Law":

> In addition, Nietzsche calls truth an *army* of tropes, thus introducing more explicitly the notion of power, force, or violence. This is not a notion that can fit into the oppositions between epistemology and rhetoric, but rather disrupts the system. (208)

While it is true that the success of an army does not necessarily depend on the rightness of its cause, its effectiveness might not be completely

independent from it either, even if this rightness is merely perceived as such. But as soon as de Man's first incompatibility enters the fray, truth—or goodness or rightness—is no longer true by virtue of having become a proper name, a "given" immune to and independent of epistemological power. Assuming that literature, among other things, is instrumental in proposing truths by means of tropes, would that not imply that texts would inevitably wind up as battlefields where, with all due carnage, "true causes" keep being fought over that are always already no longer true?

But this might no longer be true either, because Nietzsche's definition of truth is itself a trope. Which is no reason to rejoice: statements that are untrue only when true or true only when untrue are not easily dismissed, and they can impede any search for truth ad infinitum. And there are more aspects to be taken into account. Nietzsche, as quoted by Miller in *Topologies,* goes on to say:

> What is truth? a mobile army of metaphors, metonyms, anthropomorphisms, in short, a sum of human relations which were poetically and rhetorically heightened *[gesteigert],* transferred *[übertragen],* and adorned, and after long use seem solid, canonical, and binding to a nation. Truths are illusions about which it has been forgotten that they *are* illusions, worn-out metaphors without sensory impact *[sinnlich kraftlos],* coins which have lost their image *[Bild]* and now can be used only as metal, and no longer as coins. (172)

Truth is not only an army of tropes, but also an "illusion." What possible cause does this mobile army then serve? Miller is quite clear on this:

> Those metaphors, metonymies, and anthropomorphisms are engaged in a *Blitzkrieg.* A *Blitzkrieg* against what? Presumably against the knowledge that these illusions *are* illusions. This army of tropes has force. It is a force that irresistibly brings about a forgetting. Ultimately a whole nation, *ein Volk,* using that language is bewitched by the figures into forgetting that the figures are figures, the illusions illusions. (173)

Crucial for Miller's argument is his reading of Nietzsche's passage quoted above, and especially its trope of the coin, as an alternative theory

developed by Nietzsche to the effect that "no proper language exists" and all words "are aboriginally metaphorical transferences." The problem is that truth, against this background, cannot be measured against any "attainable correct naming":

> Truth is lie in the sense that it claims a false grounding in things as they are, when in fact it is constitutive, not constative. (172)

It is exactly to the purpose of forgetting, i. e., to erase any knowledge about this false grounding, that the *Blitzkrieg* is waged by the army of tropes. Drawing on another figure from the "long series of violent figures" in Nietzsche's essay, i. e., that the human situation compares to "clinging to a tiger's back in dreams," Miller suggests that, according to these figures, the human condition is one of "extreme danger":

> We forget the figures are figures and take them as truth-telling concepts, solid, canonical, and binding. To make this aboriginal error of taking a figure literally is not a benign or noble illusion. Rather, it is like living in danger of being eaten by a tiger we do not even know is there because we are sound asleep on its back. (173)

This sounds uncanny, even disturbing, and it has possibly fueled the vigorous attacks figurative language has been subjected to in the course of literary and philosophical history. But arguments against figurative language are bound by the same rules, and the more "powerful" an attack against figurative language becomes, the more vulnerable to its own force it will be. Two examples of such attacks as presented by de Man, one from Wordsworth's essays and one from Locke's, and the violent imagery invoked shall be briefly sketched. Wordsworth's forceful and eloquent "pleading" for a "lucid language of repose, tranquility, and serenity" against the antithetical language of satire, as de Man observes in *Rhetorics of Romanticism*, is in large parts "most openly antithetical and aggressive" and *not* in the mode of repose (78–79). And the "most violent language" is saved for a certain kind of language itself:

> What is the characteristic of the language so severely condemned? The distinction between total good and radical evil rests on the distinction between incarnate thought and "a clothing for thought" [...] (79)

"Incarnate thought" and "clothing for thought" are, of course, tropes for "incarnate flesh" and "clothing," both of which are visible and accessible to the senses. When Wordsworth states, according to de Man's citation, that "the *right* kind of language" is "'not what the garb is to the body but what the body is to the soul'" (79), then Wordsworth raises "a perfectly consistent metaphorical chain: garment is the visible outside of the body as the body is the visible outside of the soul." His argument against figurative language, the language he so violently denounces, turns out to be raised and supported by the language of tropes, the "solar language of cognition that makes the unknown accessible to the mind and to the senses." But this is exactly the language Wordsworth condemns, and the garment, the "harmless veil," suddenly becomes "as deadly and violent as the poisoned coat of Jason or of Nessus" (80).

In *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, Locke's appeal for "rational" language leads him to condemn tropes most severely, and especially catachresis as an "abuse" rather than "use" of language. In *Aesthetic Ideology*, de Man points out that Locke's arguments about "mixed modes" of figurative language in general and catachresis in particular are capable of inventing "the most fantastic entities":

> They can dismember the texture of reality and reassemble it in the most capricious of ways, pairing man with woman or human being with beast in the most unnatural shapes. Something monstrous lurks in the most innocent of catachreses: when one speaks of the legs of the table or the face of the mountain, catachresis is already turning into prosopopoeia, and one begins to perceive a world of potential ghosts and monsters. (42)

Ghosts and monsters are antithetical to rational thought. But, as de Man observes, the denounced "abuse" of language is itself a trope, and a catachresis at that. Moreover, the images Locke employs to support his argu-

ment about mixed modes and the abuse of language range from "monstrous births" and "changelings" to "manslaughter," "incest," "parricide," and "adultery," an assembly of witnesses less connected to the realm of rational language and thought one would have come to expect, and which sound, as de Man puts it, "more like a Greek tragedy than the enlightened moderation one tends to associate with the author of *On Government*" (41). Here, again, the motif of the "dark fringe" surrounding the light of reason seems to make itself felt again, as it has been encountered in the chapter on *Iterations* with regard to *Oedipus Rex* and Aristotle's *Poetics*.

Might figurative language, then, be incompatible with rational thought as such? When the latter demands the presence of certain laws, e. g., the law of non-contradiction, figurative language might indeed be on the side of irrationality. Miller, defending himself in "Response to Jonathan Loesberg" against alleged "contradictions" in his work, in a manner that will warrant another look later in this chapter, does not refute the accusation of contradiction but the use of the term "contradiction" as a "logical term" that could characterize his work, and which betrayed "little understanding either of dialectical or of tropological thinking":

> [L]ogic and rhetoric are asymmetrical. Rhetoric is a region of language where the law of non-contradiction does not hold, where tropes assert that a thing is one thing and at the same time another thing. It is the realm of irony and of undecidability. (125)

Moreover, rhetoric is also connected to performative language, and with it to "catachresis as the master trope of speech act," including prosopopoeia and apostrophe:

> A catachresis is an embodied contradiction, since it both is and is not a figurative displacement. Since literature, philosophy, and criticism, including my own criticism, are permeated by the rhetorical dimension of language, they are falsified by such an application of purely logical tools of analysis as Loesberg attempts. (126)

In the context of translation and politics in *Outside in the Teaching Machine*, Spivak similarly sees at work "a jagged relationship between rhetoric and logic, condition and effect of knowing":

> There is a way in which the rhetorical nature of every language disrupts its logical systematicity. If we emphasize the logical at the expense of these rhetorical interferences, we remain safe. "Safety" is the appropriate term here, because we are talking of risks, of violence to the translating medium. [...] The ways in which rhetoric or figuration disrupt logic themselves point at the possibility of random contingency, beside language, around language. (180)

Logic, which allows to "jump from word to word by means of clearly indicated connections," is disrupted by rhetoric; rhetoric, in turn, must work "in the silence between and around words in order to see what works and how much" (181). This enters the political dimension where "wholesale" translations into English that employ logic without rhetoric "can be a betrayal of the democratic ideal into the law of the strongest" (182) by translating into a kind of "translatese," stripping the texts completely from any specific rhetoricity, ethnicity, or gender. But, true to the irrational or "non-rational" that is at work here, logic and rational thought on the one hand and rhetoricity and figurative language on the other cannot be "distinguished" in a rational operation either; Spivak acknowledges that much in *Death of a Discipline* when she states that Coetzee's *Waiting for the Barbarians* is "also a staging of what may be called logic and rhetoric—assuming that they can be so neatly distinguished" (21). But to be able to differentiate between these modes can become immensely important. Tropes, Miller affirms in *Versions of Pygmalion,* have "a terrible performative power" and "tend to materialize in the real world in ways that are ethical, social, and political":

> [Ovid's] *Metamorphoses* shows what aberrant figurative language can do. The power of the gods to intervene in human history is the allegorization of this linguistic power. (1)

Thus, the linguistic power of tropes is also and inherently a political power, politics being a realm where aberrant figurative language abounds—a rhetorical dimension that, Johnson remarks in *A World of Difference*, has gone "largely unexplored by literary critics" (184). How can one fail to study this dimension, she asks, when a discussion of "anaphora, antithesis, prolepsis, and preterition" and "many other rhetorical figures" appears in the closest possible proximity to "budgets," "operations," and "guerilla warfare" in an appendix to the CIA manual on psychological operations, designed to set up "a Machiavellian campaign of propaganda, indoctrination, and infiltration in Nicaragua, underwritten by the visible display and selective use of weapons":

> If rhetoric is defined as language that says one thing and means another, then the manual is in effect attempting to maximize the collusion between deviousness in language and accuracy in violence, again and again implying that targets are most effectively hit when most indirectly aimed at. Rhetoric, clearly, has everything to do with covert operations. (184)

But when "the politics of violence" is "already encoded in rhetorical figures as such," even more covert and uncanny operations suggest themselves:

> In other words, can the very essence of a political issue—an issue like, say, abortion—hinge on the structure of a figure? Is there any *inherent* connection between figurative language and questions of life and death, of who will wield and who will receive violence in a given human society? (184)

Apostrophe is especially susceptible to creating such momentous figures, a trope that "manipulates the I/thou structure of direct address in an indirect, fictionalized way" and makes the absent, dead, or inanimate animate:

> Apostrophe is a form of ventriloquism through which the speaker throws voice, life, and human form into the addressee, turning its silence into mute responsiveness. (185)

What is called by apostrophe is automatically and often covertly endowed with life, and when arguments against abortion are employed that utilize

this trope, "rhetoric itself can always have already answered 'yes' to the question of whether a fetus is a human being" (191), an answer that would be further affirmed, according to Miller, by the violent forgetting that this figure is a figure through the force of the trope.

It seems as if the power of tropes over life and death, their propensity for covert operations, and their opposition to logic, rationality, and serenity in favor of the monstrous and the uncanny account for the violence that so often comes in their retinue, and for the assignment of the textual "battle-field" as their dwelling ground. Indeed, reading Baudelaire's prose poems in *A World of Difference*, Johnson proposes the most intimate connection to this effect. Confronted with the prose poems' "sometimes unaccountably violent" way of "repeating and transforming traditional *topoi"* and the frequency with which they rewrite poetic figures into "poems of disfigurement," Johnson asks:

> Is this a mere symptom of Baudelaire's disturbed psyche, or is there perhaps some fundamental link between figure and violence? (100)

This, in turn, points to the place of "the co-implication of human violence and human figuration" which might also touch upon figurative language's possible property of arriving at truths when, and only when, these truths are no longer true:

> If violence is structured like figure, and figure like violence, then the study of rhetoric can hardly remain a subsidiary, trivial matter. But, like violence, it will always be a matter that involves its analyst in greater and greater tangles of its own proliferation. In our search for a language capable of understanding figure, we have indeed not been immune to the law of the Other that robs the marksman of any possession of his marks. (115)

The Case of Irony

In postmodern critical theory, irony counts among the most disruptive and

paradoxically violent techniques of composition imaginable. According to de Man, Johnson, Miller, Culler, or Spivak, irony interrupts, breaks, and undoes; it cuts with the sharp blades of a double edged knife and can explode at any time like gunpowder without being spent in the discharge; it might have brought about the hostile divide between history and poetry and disrupts the operating of the main story of finance capital and world trade. How does this come about?

To trace irony's complex development in critical theory, this section will start out with de Man's discourse on Romantic irony alongside his reading of Friedrich Schlegel, followed by two aspects articulated by Miller and Spivak. Then, the argument about the divide between essence and phenomenon and between poetry and religion will be illustrated by reading Barthelme's short-story "Kierkegaard Unfair to Schlegel" and a critical essay by Culler on Flaubert's *Salammbô*. Finally, how irony works on the side of the reader will be outlined with two readings by Culler and Miller of texts by Barthes and Hawthorne, respectively.

The tropes with which Schlegel, particularly in his *Lyceum* fragments, describes the workings of irony are "buffo," "anacoluthon," and "parabasis," all three of which point to the interruption of an ongoing narrative. In "The Concept of Irony" from *Aesthetic Ideology,* de Man describes the "buffo":

> The buffo, what Schlegel refers to in commedia dell'arte, is the disruption of narrative illusion, the *aparté,* the aside to the audience, by means of which the illusion of the fiction is broken (what we call in German *aus der Rolle fallen,* to drop out of your role). (178)

The anacoluthon, the second trope, is well known as a change or break within a sentence's syntax as either an error or a rhetorical figure. However, this change or break can effect the line of narrative and the narrative voice as well, as de Man exemplifies with the character Albertine from Proust's *À la Recherche du Temps Perdu*. A notorious liar, she begins

a sentence in the first person but somehow, "without your knowing it," has switched to the third person and "suddenly she's not talking about herself anymore but about that other person" (178). Disrupting the narrative line is also, finally, what parabasis does: the audience is directly addressed by an actor or, in Greek comedy, by the choir, sometimes with topics on behalf of the play itself or on behalf of its author, often accompanied by a sudden "shift in the rhetorical register" (177).

While all three, buffo, anacoluthon, and parabasis, cause the interruption of the narrative line, irony even goes beyond the combined characteristics of these tropes:

> But parabasis is not enough, for Schlegel. Irony is not just an interruption; it is (and this is the definition which he gave of irony), he says, the "permanent parabasis," parabasis not just at one point but at all points, which is how he defines poetry: irony is everywhere, at all points the narrative can be interrupted. (178–79)

This is a radical contradiction, something "violently paradoxical," because something that can only happen at specific points cannot be happening permanently. But, as de Man says, "that's what Schlegel had in mind," that parabasis is able to take place at all times (179). Based on an argument developed by de Man in *Allegories of Reading* about the failure of cognitive and performative rhetoric to converge within the "rhetoric of tropes," he theorizes that the interface between these two systems "can be located in a text as the disruption of the figural chain," as an "anacoluthon" or, in the language of representational rhetoric, a "parabasis, a sudden revelation of the discontinuity between two rhetorical codes":

> This isolated textual event [...] is disseminated throughout the entire text and the anacoluthon is extended over all the points of the figural line or allegory; in a slight extension of Friedrich Schlegel's formulation, it becomes the permanent parabasis of an allegory (of figure), that is to say, irony. Irony is no longer a trope but the undoing of the deconstructive allegory of all tropological cognitions, the systematic undoing, in other words, of understanding. (300–01)

Which, for his argument in *Aesthetic Ideology*, implies:

> The allegory of tropes has its own narrative coherence, its own systematicity, and it is that coherence, that systematicity, which irony interrupts, disrupts. (179)

Irony, therefore, is not a trope, a figure of speech. As Miller points out in *Fiction and Repetition,* irony "suspends the [narrative] line all along the line"; it is not in principle "locally identifiable," as tropes usually are, and can pervade the whole discourse, being "present everywhere as a persistent double meaning blurring the line of sense from one end to the other of the text" (105). For these qualities, Miller observes, irony has often been considered a dangerous tool, and not without reasons. For Kierkegaard, who will figure in a moment, irony had an "infinite absolute negativity"; for Miller, it is like a knife that cuts in both directions:

> The ironist cuts up into little bits beyond hope of reassembling the coherence of the narrative or argument he ironizes. In doing so, he cuts also himself and the alternative narrative or line of argument he presents. Irony is a dangerous edge tool. He who lives by this sword dies by it too. (105)

The equally endangered "alternative narrative or line of argument" is an important aspect that will be addressed later in this section. In *Reading Narrative*, Miller underlines irony's lethality as a "point-to-point deconstruction" that abolishes "any identifiable controlling center, even at infinity" (76) by likening irony to the explosion of gunpowder, endowed with peculiar properties:

> The gunpowder remains along the line of repetitions, however, ready to explode again at any time, since the demolition power of irony does not spend its energy when it discharges the first time. As Friedrich Schlegel says, "Irony is something one simply cannot play games with. It can have incredibly long-lasting after effects." (77)

The "line of repetition" exists because the "explosion or powdering of the line" can only take place "through the attempted production of the line"

(76). For Miller, these unlocatable explosions also and already take place on more fundamental levels of composition:

> Irony is the basic trope of narrative fiction, for example in the perpetual discrepancy between author and narrator, or between narrator and character in "indirect discourse." All irony in narrative is one form or another of that doubling in storytelling that makes its meaning ultimately indecipherable, unable to be read even as what de Man calls "allegory of unreadability. (76)

If this is true and irony's gunpowder already disperses along the axis of principal composition, it would inevitably disseminate along the axis of the narrative line as well, and every textual production would, along these lines, continuously effect its own undoing. This would go hand in hand with de Man's "systematic undoing of understanding" in *Allegories of Reading*, a quotation in parts quoted before:

> Irony is no longer a trope but the undoing of the deconstructive allegory of all tropological cognitions, the systematic undoing, in other words, of understanding. As such, far from closing off the tropological system, irony enforces the repetition of its aberration. (301)

On which Spivak comments in *The Spivak Reader*, after having quoted the foregoing paragraph:

> Rather than forging an irreducibly fragmented, untotalizable, yet "positive" or "affirmative" (words often used by Derrida) practice, such formulations as the above, as I have tried to show in my discussion of the structural unconscious and Reading, would remind us of nothing more than the inevitability of a repetition automatism, the repetition, in fact, of an aberration. (100–01)

This aberration cannot be remedied since it is the aberration within the "tropological system" that results, as mentioned above, from the failure of performative and cognitive rhetoric to converge: and the aberration, following de Man's argument, is the anacoluthon or parabasis the "disruption of the figural chain" brings about as the result of this failure, and it is forcibly repeated by irony. There seems to be a certain circularity involved, pos-

sibly connected to Spivak's assessment of an "inevitability of a repetition automatism." But what Spivak is essentially interested in is irony's power to disrupt the narrative line as such. Interviewed by Stuart J. Murray in "The Politics of the Production of Knowledge" in *Just Being Difficult?,* Spivak likens irony's permanent parabasis to the endless chain of small initiatives raising from the Third World networks, "one after the other":

> This is what I call the irony of global finance capital—permanent parabasis: constant interruption of the operating of the main story (finance capital and world trade) by a collective voice. (195)

Which, Spivak adds, would not be true for the "northern-based radical sector" and the "somewhat impatient organizational do-gooders." For those, this permanent parabasis "remains inaccessible" because their "ruptures," according to Spivak, are not "strictly speaking, interruptions" but "critically continuous with the system" (196).

But irony's disruptive qualities come with another set of implications which Kierkegaard focuses on in his critical reading of Schlegel in *On the Concept of Irony with Continual Reference to Socrates.* In Barthelme's "Kierkegaard Unfair to Schlegel" from *City Life* which is, appearances notwithstanding, a short story rather than a critical essay, the narrator feels compelled to look into Kierkegaard's argument in the wake of an annoying remark by his ski instructor:

> Now, suppose that I am suddenly curious about this amazing magical power. Suppose I become curious about how my irony actually works—how it functions. I pick up a copy of Kierkegaard's *The Concept of Irony* (the ski instructor is also a student of Kierkegaard) and I am immediately plunged into difficulties. The situation bristles with difficulties. To begin with, Kierkegaard says that the outstanding feature of irony is that it confers upon the ironist a subjective freedom. (94)

But the ironist in Kierkegaard's sense is only "negatively free," according to Barthelme's narrator. If the ironist is not bound by what he has said then

irony becomes "a means of depriving the object of its reality in order that the subject may feel free" (94). And by depriving objects of their reality, the ironist, in turn, disrupts the identity of phenomenon and essence, i. e., between the word and its meaning, an identity that is the precondition for truth: "Regarded in an ironical light, the object shivers, shatters, disappears" (94). The "actuality" of the object is destroyed, and its "new actuality" is not a "new actuality" at all but only a comment on its former actuality which does no longer exist. Now, if irony is directed not against an object but against "the whole of existence," estrangement and poetry is produced, and the ironist becomes, in the words of Barthelme's narrator, "drunk with freedom," or "lighter and lighter" in Kierkegaard's. Irony not only becomes an "infinite absolute negativity" but, "for Kierkegaard, the actuality of irony is poetry" (95). While poetry "wins over the world," for Kierkegaard it is reconciliation that should be brought about, not victory, and it is religious discourse that brings this reconciliation about. But the question whether or not "the true reconciliation is religion" Barthelme's narrator is not willing to discuss because "I have a deep bias against religion which precludes my discussing the question intelligently" (96). Which is, of course, a form of discussing it, with irony involved.

Neither can nor should the philosophical implications of a supposedly true reconciliation through religion be discussed here. But what can be discussed is how this reflects on critical discourse, and one attempt at reconciliation through the imposition of religious discourse over textual irony shall be briefly sketched. Flaubert's *Salammbô*, as Culler recapitulates in *Flaubert: The Uses of Uncertainty*, has always bewildered critics because it is exceptionally hard to make sense of the novel—the setting and characters of *Salammbô* are "utterly alien" to "our understanding of the world," and the characters themselves seem to be perpetually engaged "in a desperate attempt to understand their relation to their situation" (212). Focus-

ing on this predicament, some critics make an attempt at reconciliation by hooking into the novel's and the character's religious discourse. Along the lines of this approach, word and meaning, and poetry and the world, are reconciled by adopting the religious symbolism with which the characters describe themselves, e. g., as "human star, sworn to the moon" or "god of the sun, associate with Moloch," and construct connections and meaning by having the characters "acting out" their symbolic designations as determined by this discourse. Culler cites some examples of such readings, and goes on to ask why one should, given Flaubert's pervasive use of irony, "be so quick to accept the language in which characters choose to view themselves," and not be a little more skeptical of the language with which "characters use to identify themselves with heavenly bodies or gods" (215):

> Certainly there is much which suggests the necessity of an ironic view of religious discourse: when the Carthaginians crucify captured Mercenaries we are told "the sanction of the gods was not lacking, for on all sides crows swooped down from the heavens" (I, 747). The conjunction, as so often in Flaubert, seems to turn irony against individual or communal attempts at thinking, and we are inclined to discover irony here because of our reluctance to admit such savagery as something sacred. Similarly, when the Carthaginians are slaughtering their own children and we are told that "the God's appetite, however, was not sated. He wanted more" (I, 781), we are likely to want to distance ourselves from that language. (215–16)

The attempt to institute religion as an arbiter between actualities, i. e., between phenomenon and essence, word and meaning, or poetry and the world, should "be looked at peculiarly," to use a Barthelmian phrase, and there is indeed "much which suggests the necessity of an ironic view of religious discourse," not only with regard to Flaubert.

There is yet another aspect to irony, elements of which have already been mentioned. The "total freedom" bestowed upon the ironist can spill over to the reader, and the newly empowered reader can in turn employ this power against the text. Reading Barthes's *S/Z* in *Structuralist Poetics:*

Structuralism, Linguistics and the Study of Literature, Culler presents Barthes's point of view that, where irony is involved, the "true" meaning of a text must replace its "apparent" meaning in order to render the text more coherent, a process that constitutes yet another instance of "naturalization" as discussed in the chapter on *Fragmentation*. This "true" reading "seems to Barthes the most unfortunate feature of irony, for it arrests the play of meaning":

> It is, he writes, extremely difficult to undermine or criticize the stereotype without having recourse to another stereotype, which is that of irony itself. [...] (How can one deflate stupidity without declaring oneself intelligent? How can one code have an advantage over another without improperly setting limits to the plural nature of codes?) (*S/Z,* p. 212). How can the ironist criticize one point of view or attitude for being excessively limited without asserting the completeness and truth of his own view? (157)

This power, to be clear, is on the side of the reader: it is the reader who has become the "ironist" by calling the irony, or declaring the irony, of the text. This power engenders total freedom:

> At the moment when we propose that a text means something other than what it appears to say we introduce, as hermeneutic devices which are supposed to lead us to the truth of the text, models which are based on our expectations about the text and the world. Irony, the cynic might say, is the ultimate form of recuperation and naturalization, whereby we ensure that the text says only what we want to hear. We reduce the strange or incongruous, or even attitudes with which we disagree, by calling them ironic and making them confirm rather than abuse our expectations. (157)

But it should also follow that ironic naturalization is not a conscious act: if it were knowingly forced upon a text, it would belong to the realm of demagogy and politics instead. A truly naturalizing reading against the reader's contingent historical background ensures that texts only say what one would want them to say without the reader ever becoming aware that the text begs to differ.

One final example should be mentioned to illustrate this point. Miller,

reading Hawthorne's "The Minister's Black Veil" in *Hawthorne and History*, writes:

> Hooper dies not only still veiled, but still with "a faint smile lingering on the lips." This dimly glimmering smile is the sign of his characteristic irony, meaning by irony a perpetual suspension of definite meaning. (102)

Perpetual suspension, though, is not acceptable. There is a desperate effort to solve the question of the veil "by saying something definite and verifiable" about its meaning:

> Hooper's neighbors, the narrator, and the readers of the story are driven to extravagant unverifiable hypotheses by the juxtaposition of that faint smile and the surmounting blank black veil, marked only by its fold. (102–03)

But it remains a symbol "of the radical undecidability of all ironic expression":

> Irony keeps its own counsel. It responds to our interrogations only with a further ironic smile or with an ominously permissive, "Of course, if you say so." (103)

Miller concludes his reading with the remark that insofar Hooper's sin "is the sin of irony," it is appropriate that the story should end with his death, since "death and irony have a secret and unsettling alliance." Irony is lethal: "It is deadly both for the ironist and for those on whom the irony is inflicted. Irony puts both the ironist and his victims in proximity to death" (103). Irony itself though, Miller continues, survives the death of the ironist to continue to haunt readers "through perhaps centuries of human history."

For Miller, irony is "ultimately indecipherable." But naturalization has been there all along: since there is no way to decide whether Hooper's veil relates either to reason or irony, everybody can and must make up their own mind, from the story's characters to its readers. A reading that deciphers what is ultimately indecipherable as "irony"—and, possibly, "The Minister's Black Veil" as an allegory of irony—is a reading that necessarily

naturalizes: and Miller's reading would indeed qualify, after all, as a reading that naturalizes against its contingent historical background of postmodern critical theory.

Literalizing Figure

After violence has been traced in the postmodern discourse on tropes and the discourse on irony as the mastertrope for figurative language as such, a third and final form of violence in postmodern texts will be explored to which the use of tropes has been found to be intimately connected: a form of violence that is created in the fold between figurative and literal expressions on the one hand, and figurative and literal understanding on the other. In literary theory, the possibility has been raised that "literal" speech or language might not exist at all, or that there are perhaps only a handful of lexical units in existence that are not constituted by tropes. This coincides with theories that the development of the human language is contingent on leaving the stage of communicating by way of purely literal utterances behind.[32] In literary texts, the notion of "literal meaning" becomes even more doubtful. Possibly, any such presumably literal language in a literary text might already be figurative by virtue of being a *trope* for literal language.

Regardless of their validity, it can be said that assumptions to this effect constitute an element of composition in postmodern texts, and playful gear shiftings between supposedly "literal" and "figurative" meanings also abound within the context of violence and with violent content. Barthelme, whose technique of processing clichés and dead images will be illustrated in the following and final subchapter, is a master in unexpectedly literalizing well-worn figures. One of his techniques to bring this

---

[32] Cf., e. g., Rudi Keller's "conjectural history" in *Sprachwandel*, 33–47.

about is a sudden "down to earth" movement of lofty but rather empty figures, as in "Views of My Father Weeping" from *City Life*:

> After the ceremony I walked back to the city. I was trying to think of the reason my father had died. Then I remembered: he was run over by a carriage. (3)

Or, quite similar, in "The Rise of Capitalism" from *Sadness*:

> And then Honoré went out and got drunk, and visited his girl friend's house, and, roaring and stomping on the stairs, frightened her husband to death. And the husband was buried, and everyone stood silently around the grave, thinking of where they had been and where they were going, and the last handfuls of wet earth were cast upon the grave, and Honoré was sorry. (143–44)

As a second technique, Barthelme unexpectedly "calls the bluff" with regard to specific tropes. The effect is particularly striking when instances of prosopopoeia are called that have, over time, become completely invisible, as in "The Policemen's Ball" from *City Life*:

> In the dark, outside the Policemen's Ball, the horrors waited for Horace and Margot. [...]
>
> The horrors waited outside patiently. Even policemen, the horrors thought. We get even policemen, in the end.
>
> In Horace's apartment, a gold frill was placed on a pearl toe.
>
> The horrors had moved outside Horace's apartment. Not even policemen and their ladies are safe, the horrors thought. No one is safe. Safety does not exist. Ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha! (60–62)

Not only is an instance of prosopopoeia here uncovered as a figure, but this figure's "literalization" counterintuitively transforms the figure into a character by way of some kind of Barthelmian "super-prosopopoeia." But the movement does not necessarily stop at this point: it could be argued that figurative language as such is this story's central character, a "villain" of whom one should be aware of, and from whom there is no escape. Safety does not exist.

A differently executed example, but with similar implications, can be found in Barthelme's "The Piano Player" from *Come Back, Dr. Caligari*:

> "You wouldn't touch that piano," she said. "Not in a million years."
>
> "You really think I'm afraid of it?"
>
> "Not in a million years," she said, "you phony."
>
> "All right," Brian said quietly. "All right." He strode over to the piano. He took a good grip on its black varnishedness. He began to trundle it across the room, and, after a slight hesitation, it struck him dead. (22)

Such gear shiftings between the literal, the figurative, and the "super-figurative" can also be found in the realm of politics. Here, the movement between these levels can become an especially violent and unruly one, as will be shown by reading two examples from Barthelme and Spivak. But why would that be so? One possible answer is that if the objective is to make certain forms of violence in the world visible or more tangible by means of figurative language, it is less effective to trope violence with non-violent images. But real violence is supposed to trump figurative violence as a matter of common sense, if not as a matter of ethics. This is susceptible to enter into a feedback loop: if figurative violence sets out to illustrate literal violence and make it visible, its images have to strengthen it rather than to weaken it—but must immediately incorporate the notion that the image is surpassed by the real and literal violence because it must not, at all costs, suggest that the real violence is less grave than its trope.

This loop, like most feedback loops, can become rather "shrill" in its overall tone. A playful example of this would be the passage "Detente" from Barthelme's essay "Monumental Folly" in *The Teachings of Don B.*:

> The rope of international tensions can be taut or slack; the thing to remember is that it is tied around all our necks, and when someone tries to drive a tank across it, or many tanks, he should be looked at peculiarly. (237)

Looping between literal and figurative violence, one figure is superseded

by the next and more threatening one, but the circle is unexpectedly interrupted by turning the rising volume abruptly down with a characteristically Barthelmian understatement. Spivak, interviewed by Alfred Artea in "Bonding in Difference" from *A Spivak Reader*, uses the figure of rape as a background for the role the English language plays as a language for Indian literature. Asked whether the "choice of language, English or Bengali, for example" is "particularly significant for the writer writing in India," Spivak explains:

> Quite significant because India is a multilingual country. I have talked a lot about the concept of enabling violation. The child of rape. Rape is something about which nothing good can be said. It's an act of violence. On the other hand, if there is a child, that child cannot be ostracized because it's the child of rape. To an extent, the postcolonial is that. We see there a certain kind of innate historical enablement which one mustn't celebrate, but toward which one has a deconstructive position, as it were. In order for there to be an all-India voice, we have had to dehegemonize English as one of the Indian languages. Yet it must be said that, as a literary medium, it is in the hands of people who are enough at home in standard English as to be able to use Indian English only as the medium of protest, as mockery or teratology; and sometimes as no more than local color, necessarily from above. So, yes, there is an importance of writing in English, high-quality writing.(19)

Spivak loops back and forth between the figurative and the literal in ways that will not quite match. What is enabling, what is rejected? When rape is a loss but the child of rape is a gain, in what way is it proper to retain mixed feelings toward it? Why is it not acceptable that the child is ostracized but acceptable that the child is mocked? Where does the teratology come in? Does that mean that the twice protested enablement has created something monstrous, and "enablement" is to be understood in an entirely negative way? Or, if read as a positive enablement, would that not mean the enabling of those versed in standard English to put the monstrous, Indian English, on public display—exhibiting it in a freak show or exposing it in the pillory in one of the most public places of all, in literature?

What might effectively qualify as something monstrous in this fold

between the literal and the figurative is the figure that connects these two. The "child of rape" is a figure built on the figure of colonialism as "rape." (Spivak, it should be remarked, is much more careful and critical towards the utilization of rape for figurative ends elsewhere.) The severe malformations of the figurative child might be inherited from a certain inappropriateness of its figurative parent—its parenting figure, as it were. It is in this figure that the aforementioned contest between literal and figurative violence is already manifest and capable to feed any number of loops which lead, in turn, to any kinds of maltreatments and confusions. Figurative language as such—to round off this paragraph's own rampant use of prosopopoeia—is neither forgiving per se in its use, nor naturally benevolent in its ramifications.

Another important aspect is the confusion, sometimes even effected in the course of willful misreadings, of literal and figurative planes, for which an example can be found in Johnson's *The Feminist Difference*. As Johnson points out, literary criticism has always had a tendency to consistently differentiate elements of masochism as either literal or figurative on the grounds of gender. After reading Petrarch, especially images of "being the prey rather than the hunter, the penetrated rather than the penetrator," she asks why it is possible "that Petrarch is not called a masochist, even though Louise Labé, using exactly the same conventions, is," and why "male masochism" is the secret "that it is lyric poetry's job to keep":

> One answer, I think, has to do with rhetoric. When men employ the rhetoric of self-torture, it is *read* as rhetoric. When women employ it, it is confession. Men are read rhetorically; women, literally. Yet within the poetic tradition, it is the rhetorical, not the literal, that is taken seriously. (123)

This opens up another barrage of questions, not the least of which is why the literal should be "the opposite of the serious" (123), a question also related to the feedback loops discussed above. If the literal is not taken

seriously in poetry and the figurative is held as inferior to the literal horrors outside of it, how would this effect the general relationship between the literal and the figurative, the real and the written?

As a "poetic paraphrase" for the collected aspects of how one could possibly differentiate between the literal and the figurative and the gear shiftings between literal and figurative levels in the realm of politics, as well as the playful endeavors to cross from the written into the real, from the medium into the world, as explored in the chapter on *Iterations*, the following paragraph from Barthelme's *Snow White* seems exceptionally well suited:

> I read Dampfboot's novel although he had nothing to say. It wasn't rave, that volume; we regretted that. And it was hard to read, dry, bread-like pages that turned, and then fell, like a car burned by rioters and resting, wrong side up, at the edge of the picture plane with its tires smoking. Fragments kept flying off the screen into the audience, fragments of rain and ethics. (105)

3. Stark Disparities: Wounding Tropes and Mixing Modes

In this final subchapter on aspects of violence related to composition, three outstanding means of how violence is put to use in the literary texts will be discussed. The first, closely related to the preceding subchapter's perspective, explores the use of tropes that are related to bodily harm. The second and third, broadening the subject to more comprehensive forms of composition again, will investigate the juxtaposition of fantastic, real, and hyperreal violence on the one hand, and the willful incongruity brought about by certain ways in which characters react to violent events on the other—the latter being a technique that, as will be seen, borrows heavily from black humor and often borders on the surreal.

Tropes on the Body

Examining the textual evidence, three distinct topics around which violent tropes on the body are clustered emerge: war, most strongly articulated in Pynchon's texts; cutting, especially frequent in Acker's; and beatings, most often found in Barthelme's. Incongruence, to be examined on a broader scale in the final section, can be traced already in this context as an important quality which is common to all three topics, as will be seen, and often includes the criss-crossing of different domains.

Pynchon's elaborate tropes often start out with something "hidden" which is subsequently revealed or transformed, paralleling and revealing to a certain extent how tropes operate as such. In *Gravity's Rainbow,* this pertains particularly often to hidden or covered bodies:

> For a moment, ten thousand stiffs humped under the snow in the Ardennes take on the sunny Disneyfied look of numbered babies under white wool blankets, waiting to be sent to blessed parents in places like Newton Upper Falls. It only lasts a moment. (70)

> Fog closes in, and the engines slow. Wrecks slide away under the keel of the white ship. Springtime corpses caught in the wreckage twist and flow as the *Anubis* moves by overhead. (468)

Hidden bodies in figures that are associated with war, moreover, are often juxtaposed with food. Not a far-fetched combination: when wars grind on, the scarcity and contamination of food can become even more life-threatening than weapons and armies. Factual correspondence notwithstanding, tropes that combine these elements are often forcefully disorienting and augmented with elements of the uncanny:

> Well, what it is—is? what's "is"?—is that King Kong, or some creature closely allied, squatting down, evidently just, taking a shit, right in the street! [...] On closer inspection, the crouching monster turns out to be the Reichstag building, shelled out, airbrushed, fire-brushed powdery black on all blastward curves and projections [...]

> [H]e's almost around the corner—here, laid side by side on the pavement, are these enormous loaves of bread dough left to rise under clean white cloths—boy, is everybody hungry: the same thought hits them all at once, wow! *Raw dough!* loaves of bread for that *monster* back there . . . oh, no that's right, that was a building, the Reichstag, so these aren't bread . . . by now it's clear that they're human bodies, dug from beneath today's rubble, each inside its carefully tagged GI fartsack. But it was more than an optical mistake. They are rising, they are transubstantiated, and who knows, with summer over and hungry winter coming down, what we'll be feeding on by Xmas? (368)

Adding elements from strongly ingrained taboos like cannibalism, incest, and, of course, sexuality in general, often by embedding tropes within tropes, Pynchon's figurative language can become quite provocative at times. What is "brought to light" is often an uncanny kinship: between the most tabooed and the most revered, between cannibalism and transubstantiation, between the destructive impulse and repressed sexuality:

> We must also never forget famous Missouri Mason Harry Truman: sitting by virtue of death in office, this very August 1945, with his control-finger poised right on Miss Enola Gay's atomic clit, making ready to tickle 100,000 little yellow folks into what will come down as a fine vapor-deposit of fat-cracklings wrinkled into the fused rubble of their city on the Inland Sea. . . . (588)

Barthelme, while also strong on tropes pertaining to war and times of catastrophe, uses a different technique. His tropes often juxtapose elements that are extremely and sometimes almost flamboyantly incongruent, an effect often brought about on the level of lexical units when attributes do not "melt" into a coherent whole. In the "vast canvas, obscured here and there by smoke and flame and dust" of Arthur's battle with Mordred in Barthelme's *The King*, for example, phrases abound like "Great mischief being hewed on helms and hauberks!", "Now that one has gouged him sorely in the ham!", "The field encrimsoned with gore of the finest provenance!", or "Many a full bold baron is today laid low from wrong thinking and knurled ideas!" (134–36). Also, most visibly in *The King* but not restricted to it, historic incongruity is put to use, an instance of which are Sir

Kay's statements that "The carnage was like a hundred auto crashes" and "the pile of the swords of the fallen" reach "as high as seven refrigerators stacked one atop another," an incongruity commented on through Arthur's reply that the figure "has a distressing modernity to it" (138–39).

From here, Barthelme's use of incongruity proceeds from the level of lexical units to more complex forms as, e. g., in "This Newspaper Here" from *Unspeakable Practices, Unnatural Acts*:

> He had several degrees in Police Engineering and the like and his tiny gun dwelt in his armpit like the growths described by Defoe in *Journal of the Plague Year*. (36)

Similarly, incongruity can be brought about by metonymic displacement, as in Barthelme's *Snow White*:

> "This dress I'll have you know cost two hundred and forty dollars when it was new." "When was it new?" "It was new in 1918, the year your father and I were in the trenches together, in the Great War. That was a war all right. Oh I know there have been other wars since, better-publicized ones, more expensive ones perhaps, but our war is the one I'll always remember. Our war is the one that means war to me." (57)

While war in Pynchon's tropes has a tendency to "absorb" people in at times shocking and provocative ways, it is rather the people in Barthelme's tropes who, in confusing and incongruent ways, "absorb" war, or aspects of war. Rising through several gradations of complexity, Barthelme's use of incongruity eventually encompasses plot and character development, a technique to be separately discussed later.

The second topic figurative language is often connected with is "cutting," frequently relating to sexuality. In Barth's texts, blades are often metaphorically or symbolically tied to corresponding plot elements in this manner. A prominent example would be Baylor's "filleting knife" in Barth's *The Last Voyage of Somebody the Sailor,* threateningly wielded again and

again in the context of father/son relationships, castration, rape, and virginity (cf., e. g., 141–42, 146–47, 277, 417 et al.). In Barthelme's texts, the tropical use of knifes and cutting tools is, once again, tied to incongruity, a brief example of which can be found in "The Apology" from *Great Days:*

> In fine, let no occasion pass to slip the chill blade of my thanks between the ribs of every human ear. (15)

In Gibson's texts, knifes, blades, monomolecular strands, and other lethal cutting tools are put to use in a way similar to Barth's texts, but the context of sexuality gives way to the context of human nature as such, where cutting tools often *interface* this nature with the world of things, or machines—a motif that will be explored in the chapter on *Humanity*.

Cutting tools as an interface between different realms and connected to incongruity can be found in Acker's and Culler's texts. The realms whose borders are both crossed and criss-crossed through incision are precisely those that have enough in common to have warranted this project all along, namely literature and criticism, but are far enough apart to engender strong effects of incongruity when criticism adopts elements of storytelling or storytelling adopts elements of literary theory, as, in the case of the former, this paragraph from Acker's *Empire of the Senseless* shows:

> The German Romantics had to destroy the same bastions as we do. [...] They cut through conservative narcissism with bloody razor blades. They tore the subject away from her subjugation to her self, the proper; dislocated you the puppet; cut the threads of meaning; spit at all mirrors which control. (12)

Visible only within the context this quotation is taken from is another angle that adds to and supports the trope. The voice in this paragraph belongs to the character Abhor who is based, in part, on the character Molly from Gibson's *Neuromancer.* With Molly's built-in blades that Abhor "inherits," the plot inherits Gibson's abovementioned use of cutting tools as interface

between human and machine, a dichotomy that Acker, in turn, slightly shifts and refocuses in *Empire of the Senseless* toward the question of the subject. Trespasses from storytelling to critical theory, as mentioned, can also be effected in the opposite direction. This is the case in the following example from Culler's "The Linguistic Basis of Structuralism," which also and incidentally leaves nothing to be desired in terms of incongruity. To arrive at a better understanding of structuralism, the text sets to work figurative "cutting tools" of its own:

> When the ferrets from each discipline are loosed for this hunt [toward a definition of structuralism] they do not converge upon a common rabbit but pursue their own hares in divergent, criss-crossing tunnels. And the observers often feel that despite the elegance of the proceedings no common quarry has been flushed. [...]
>
> So before [...] following "structure" and "structuralism" on their picaresque adventures through the various disciplines, one might try to isolate a central doctrinal core and give structuralism a specific meaning [...] And if this seems rather like pulling the rabbit out of a hat, one might at least hope that when dissected it will bear some resemblance to the hares coursed in other essays. (20–21)

True to the habit of hares or rabbits, "criss-crossing" rapidly multiplies in this slightly confusing narrative: between storytelling and critical theory, rabbits and hares, tunnels and hats. To flush hares from tunnels (who live in nests above the ground) is equally unlikely as to find a rabbit (who do live underground in burrows) in one's hat. And when the dissecting knife has criss-crossed the rabbit, in what way might it subsequently resemble the hares? But the latter, of course, might have been criss-crossed by the ferrets' teeth by now, and a striking resemblance would be discernible indeed. Which, courtesy of the trope, seems to have been the form of resemblance aimed at from the outset.

Another of Acker's uses of cutting tropes, with or without incongruity, often incorporates imagery related to apocalyptic visions or disturbing aspects of sexuality. These apocalyptic visions come in two flavors. They

can be encountered in the form of the breakdown of the individual as a "cutting up" as, e. g., in *Pussy, King of the Pirates*:

> Ange—even though she had passed out—and I were seeing our limbs cut, then spread, over all the dark, rainy Thursdays, Thursdays about to die. Thursdays are always autumns. Thursdays are the days of death because girls put on suits of earth, suits of shit, buried in the bones of corpses, they crunch on those bones, those bones of shit. (267–68)

Or they can effect the apocalyptic breakdown as a "cutting up"—or "sawing up," in this case—of the individual in the course of civilization's demise, as in *The Burning Bombing of America: The Destruction of the U.S.*:

> the government of the richies Nixon and Rockefeller and General Motors is planting long jellyfish worms in our bodies we are asked to be patient our legs are being mutilated by giant saws. medical science has advanced. the age of perfect virtue this age will be destroyed by the Teachers'-Politicians' insistence on the practice of benevolence righteousness ceremonies and music. Power to destruction and chaos to the half-men hiding beneath the streets the Cat-Women prey on dead meat their long legs come down from the sun. (165)

The third use mentioned, the use of knifes in tropes connected to disturbing aspects of sexuality, can be traced throughout Acker's texts from her earliest novel on. In *Rip-Off Red, Girl Detective*, knives are constantly "put" into the detective as a trope for, among other things, male sexuality and male dominance:

> A man walks past me; as he passes the crevice, his arms swing out to the side and he slips a knife into my body. I move sideways, race to a stairway, hide under the ice-cold steps. (21)

Related to this figure, cutting as the rupture of the hymen is another image frequently involved. The tropes are often complex and extremely violent, as the following—and necessarily more detailed—example from *My Mother, Demonology* shows:

> She felt safe.

Being Catholic, she crossed herself.

When, to test her safety, Francesca looked through the glass a second time, she saw gigantic cat's eyes looking at her and touched the bottom of the cross, her cunt.

Then an arm moved through the open window so that she could be strangled. Another hand, cased in a black leather glove, sliced her neck with a knife.

Perhaps in response to the lack of sight, the heart poured out its blood.

There's no memory of the words "I love you," but there is of the hymen being broken.

Francesca's body hung from a long Tampax string attached to the bathroom ceiling, all the way down to the luxurious tiled vestibule below. Her blood streamed out of every part of her and made all of the apartment smell like bleeding cunt.

A jagged piece of glass had cut her hymen, or identity, into two parts. (46–47)

But cuts work both ways in Acker's texts, depending on the point of departure. While the (Catholic) girl's identity is "cut up" into two parts to lethal effect, the cut can also establish female sexuality-as-identity:

She fell into a room that had no bottom, only interstices: rounds and curls of wires like razors. Monster Slinkies. The Slinkies tossed her body up and down, and when they had totally caught her, the knife that was the extension of the murderer pierced her flesh. The flesh around the entry line became a cunt. (72)

The third outstanding topic violent tropes cluster around—beatings, brawls, and blows—are used by all writers with some frequency, noticeably Coover and Pynchon, but the most creative and outstanding use can be found in Barthelme's texts. Barthelme's tropes seem especially designed not to illuminate the unfamiliar, but to make the familiar unfamiliar, as the following two examples from "Margins" from *Come Back, Dr. Caligari* and "The Royal Treatment" from *Guilty Pleasures* illustrate:

When Carl returned the two men slapped each other sharply in the face with the back of the hand, that beautiful part of the hand where the knuckles grow. (146)

> Which wouldn't prevent me from, if he got out of line, slapping him up-side the head with my velvet hand in its iron glove. (88)

To achieve the effect of de-familiarizing, incongruity is employed again. Elements can be juxtaposed from related semantic sets, as in the examples above, or from wildly different sets, like "the broken bones of the heart" from "Opening" (*Forty Stories* 27) or the "hated, despised, reviled" banks about whom the ordinary citizen would no more say a kind word "than he would bash his begonia plant over the head with a chair" (*Not-Knowing* 41). By making the familiar unfamiliar, Barthelme often exposes certain tropes which, having turned into well-worn clichés, overstayed their welcome and their general usefulness, as did the following in *Snow White*:

> We discussed the bat theory of child-raising with the mothers [...] "Spare the bat and the child rots," said the mothers. "Rots inside." "But how do you know when to employ it? The magic moment?" "We have a book which tells us such things," the mothers said. "We look it up in the book. On page 331 be-gins a twelve-page discussion of batting the baby. A well-worn page." (116)

> There was no place for our anger and frustration to go, then, so we went out and hit a dog. It was a big dog, so it was all right. It was fair. The gargan-tuan iron dog nineteen feet high commemorating the one hundredth an-niversary of the invention of meat . . . "Have a care," Kevin said. (154)

Beatings, however playful, always retain their threat potential in Barthel-me's tropes. Aptly, they often "bring something out," blood, of course, but with it new ways of thought or new perspectives. In the final paragraph of "For I'm the Boy Whose Only Joy is Loving You" from *Come Back, Dr. Caligari*, the protagonist Bloomsbury is beaten, "by friends of the family," in the face "first with the brandy bottle, then with the tire iron, until at length the hidden feeling emerged, in the form of salt from his eyes and black blood from his ears, and from his mouth, all sorts of words" (63). As "Gus Negative" reflects in his essay "Donald Barthelme" in the online magazine *The Modern Word* on Barthelme's collage or pastiche technique:

> In Barthelme's hands the technique becomes akin to certain types of "found art"—ostensibly beautiful objects gerrymandered out of the everyday bric-a-brac, refuse, and scrap found in junkyards, gutters, and antique shops. But when the medium is language, the raw materials for this type of art must naturally be constituted out of clichés, tired saws, and sound bytes. (n. p.)

This echoes Barthelme's own comment in *Not-Knowing*, quoted earlier, that he is not so much interested in a beautiful sentence but in an "ugly sentence that is also somehow beautiful" (57). Which would not be incompatible with the notion of assembling, or forging, or "beating," old clichés into fresh ideas.

Stretching Plausibilities

Broadening the subject from the use of tropes to more comprehensive elements related to composition again, several forms of violence will be explored in this section one of which will be called "fantastic." Here, though, "fantastic" violence—about which most examples will be about—is not meant to denote excessive bloodshed but events "conceived by unrestrained fancy," i.e., violence that is not noted for its scrupulous adherence to physical laws or realistic premises. The underlying rules, in this case, are frequently the laws and premises of slapstick and comedy. This kind of violence is often juxtaposed with more realistic forms of violence in the texts, as will be seen, and there is a third form that has for the purposes of this section been called "hyperreal": not in the Baudrillardian sense, but in the sense of conforming neither to fantastic nor realistic expectations.

In classical slapstick violence, beginning with fist fights, the laws of nature are largely suspended. Flow of blood and protracted pain are usually removed, hardly anyone is ever seriously injured, and really damaging events happen to always occur *almost*—duly deflected either by somnambulistic sidestepping or outrageous chance, adding to the comical effect. In Barth's texts, examples for this particular kind of slapstick violence can be

found quite often. In *Giles Goat-Boy,* e. g., Giles is given a cursory tour through the main engine room of the campus, which is operated in the way of an instituted pandemonium, precipitously balanced by desperate ad-hoc measures and outright chance, always on the brink of catastrophe and the subsequent wholesale annihilation of the campus:

> Repairmen dashed from a partly-plugged leak to cut an arcing cable that bid fair to roast a stoking-gang beneath; breaking the circuit, however, released for some reason the trap-door on a hopper of fly-ash suspended overhead from a traveling crane, and both crews were half-buried in an avalanche of grime. Fists flew instantly, along with spanners and winch-handles; one man fell smitten into the dust, whether dead or stunned I could not tell, and others surely must have joined him had not everyone's attention been diverted by a shriek from the leaky pipe abandoned earlier. (177)

This goes on for several pages, eventually to be superseded by the equally detailed description of substantially similar conditions, at least in spirit, at a celebrity party Giles attends after his tour (cf. 184 ff.). Typical elements of slapstick also figure in Barth's "Ambrose His Mark" from *Lost in the Funhouse.* A neighbor, driven sufficiently mad to step over into temporary insanity as well as over the wall into his neighbor's garden, has discharged his shotgun to great effect but no one's physical harm, and the following "battle" that includes the deployment of live bees ensues:

> But Erdmann [...] went now amok; seized up his bee-bob with a wrathful groan and lunging—for Grandfather had strode almost out of range—brought it down on his old tormentors shoulder. Futile was Konrad's shout, worse than futile his interception: Erdmann's thrust careered him square into the hammock, and when Konrad put his all into a body-block from the other side, both men fell more or less athwart my mother. The hammock parted at its headstring; all piled as one into the clover. But Grandfather had spun raging, bees in hand: the smite en route to his shoulder had most painfully glanced his ear. Not his own man, he roared in perfect ecstasy and hurled upon that tangle of the sinned-against and sinning his golden bolt. (26–27)

In all of Barth's more fantastic settings except *The Last Voyage of Somebody the Sailor*, which is exceptionally violent even for Barth's standards, slapstick and comical violence are abundant. But apart from these, there is

another and not altogether different genre where this kind of violence is enacted. Its prototype is the no-holds-barred saloon fight in Western movies, a kind of violence which, in lieu of a missing technical term, could be called "Hollywood brawl."

In such Hollywood brawls—restricted, as will be seen, neither to fists nor barrooms—many of the slapstick rules outlined above apply. Blood and pain are largely removed, sidestepping and pure chance are an important element, people are rather knocked out than permanently damaged, and plausibility is generally overruled by choreography at any given point. This kind of fight and other forms of combat that are similarly choreographed are, of course, completely fabricated. Jumping through windows and being hit over the head with a chair is deadly business indeed, and a single blow from a fist can and very often does inflict visible and crippling injuries whose healing processes take months, years, sometimes even a lifetime. Audiences all over the world are often not entirely aware of this: but humans are fragile and easily damaged on impact by even ridiculously small amounts of kinetic energy.

Like slapstick violence, Hollywood brawl has to be considered a genre, or part of a genre, and a technique on the level of composition. Postmodern texts are noted for incorporating a broad range of cinematic techniques, some of which have been explored in the chapters on *Iterations* and *Fragmentation*, and Hollywood brawl is no exception. Many examples of this technique can be found in the texts, but its master in terms of quantity and ingenuity is Pynchon.

In its purest form, it is used in Pynchon's first novel *V* where it is usually exercised by groups of navy sailors. This ranges from extended descriptions of a mass charge at a bar's tumultuous "suck hour" (16) and frequent clashes with the U.S. Navy Shore Patrol (cf., e. g., 30 ff.) to street

tournaments between English commandos and American sailors: "'What is it,' said Johnny, 'revolution?' Better than that: it was a free-for-all among 200 Royal Commandos and maybe 30 Scaffold sailors" (439). But, following postmodern etiquette, the technique is not only employed but put right on the table:

> The Crew had withdrawn to the walls, leaving Pig and Roony most of the floor space. Both were drunk and sweating. They wrestled around, stumbling and inexpert, trying to fight like a western movie. It is incredible how many amateur brawlers believe the movie saloon fight is the only acceptable model to follow. At last Pig dropped Roony with a fist to the abdomen. (287)

Less frequent and not at such a high pitch, examples regularly surface nevertheless in Pynchon's later texts, up to and including *Mason & Dixon*:

> [F]or now in this ear-batt'ring Kitchen Melee the Baby is suddenly become a Ball in a Game, being toss'd in short high arcs from one Party to another 'bout the House, as the Shelbyites go beating upon anyone in their Reach, injuring some so badly they won't make it in to Court. No more hazardous than the usual North Mountain Wedding. (578)

What becomes more frequent instead in Pynchon's later texts are Hollywood brawls with escalating armament. Preparing the ground, as it were, is the aerosol can running amok in *The Crying of Lot 49*, a scene with many ingredients of classical slapstick, i. e., Oedipa's current disposition as "a beach ball with feet" after having donned every single piece of her clothes for a strip poker session. But this scene is also notable for exhausting the aforementioned "almost-catastrophe" technique, both in terms of potential lethality and chance:

> God or a digital machine, might have computed in advance the complex web of [the aerosol can's] travel; but she wasn't fast enough, and knew only that it might hit them at any moment, at whatever clip it was doing, a hundred miles an hour. (23)

No one is harmed, and neither is anyone harmed when, in *Gravity's Rainbow,* a Sherman tank is driven right up to a casino, "treads spewing grass

and pieces of flagstone as it maneuvers around and comes to a halt," and its 75 mm cannon is pointed "through the French windows right down into the room" (247). A 3-inch shell is loaded while a hilarious panic ensues, and fired into the room:

> "Aw, no . . ." Slothrop having about decided to make a flanking run for the tank when YYYBLAAANNNGGG! the cannon lets loose an enormous roar, flame shooting three feet into the room, shock wave driving eardrums in to middle of brain, blowing everybody against the far walls. (248)

Drapes catch fire, people are knocked of their feet, and of course the projectile turns out to have been a dud, having merely "torn holes in several walls, and demolished a large allegorical painting of Virtue and Vice in an unnatural act"—after which the drapes are put out with champagne. Such suspensions of physics and reality are also effected when Slothrop, during the course of the novel, escapes hails of fully automatic fire dodging Major Marvy's troops in the subterranean reaches of the V-2 Mittelwerke complex and ducks down behind presumably functional warheads he subsequently hurls in the path of his pursuers (308–12). Or, to include an example of aerial combat, when Slothrop fends off fully armed planes in the balloon of a black marketeer with the help of a fog bank and a number of custard pies, hurled into the attacking pilots' faces (334–36).

That the most frequent and most hilarious use of these techniques can be found in Pynchon's *V* and *Gravity's Rainbow* might not be an accident. Precisely these two novels feature, at the same time, the most sustained descriptions of the most severe violence, to be discussed in the chapter on *Humanity*, with incredible amounts of cruelty and bloodshed involved. If this mode were not counterpointed by cartoon, slapstick, or Hollywood brawl violence, the genre label "postmodernity" might be in jeopardy for these texts—a genre that, last but not least, is also constituted by the playful inclusion of wildly different genres.

But this is also true on a smaller scale through the juxtaposition of comical and realistic elements within smaller units on the level of composition. In *V*'s Porpentine sequence, for example, a secret agent tumbles down the stairs at an embassy's gala reception in typical slapstick fashion, breaking glass and spraying punch, and after calmly extracting a cigarette "lay while smoking where he'd come to rest" (68–69), who is seriously killed off in personal combat thereafter. Similarly, during protests and revolutionary activities against the Venezuelan Consulate in Florence, with a cast of comical characters that includes "Ferrante, a drinker of absynthe and destroyer of virginity" or "the Gaucho" (195 ff.), comical violence replete with fistfights, general carousing, and rotten vegetables is juxtaposed with sudden and detailed atrocities:

> She saw a rioter in a shirt of motley, sprawled over the limb of a tree, being bayoneted again and again by two soldiers. [...] Inviolate and calm, she watched the spasms of wounded bodies, the fair of violent death, framed and staged, it seemed, for her alone in that tiny square. (209)

In Barth's more fantastic and/or historical settings, again with the exception of *The Last Voyage of Somebody the Sailor*, similar juxtapositions can be found, albeit executed in a different way. At work here is the amplification of violence on receding narrative planes, already mentioned in the chapter on *Iterations*: with the help of elements such as rumor, hearsay, threats, boasting, or nested tales, the narrative voice recedes in proportional dependence of the escalating violence it reports. In *The Sot-Weed Factor*, for example, the characters are free to bumble about in slapstick fashion without ever inflicting serious harm on anybody, while narrative voices revel in the most gruesome, and historically often quite accurate, violence imaginable (cf., e. g., 140, 235 f., 525, 527; *Chimera* 230; *Giles Goat-Boy* 170; and many more).[33]

---

[33] There is one single exception to this rule in *The Sot-Weed Factor*, when Captain Pound shoots a mutineer. Yet, neither the shot nor the sailor's subsequent death by drowning

Personal physical combat, to return to this classical motif, is over-whelmingly handled in a cartoon or slapstick fashion not only in Pynchon's or Barth's texts, but Coover's, Acker's, and Barthelme's as well. Each writer employs his or her technique to defuse the violence of personal combat even when it is not supposed to be comical as such: Acker by casual hyperbole; Coover with the most surreal bloodshed imaginable; and Barthelme with deadpan humor. Besides Gibson, to be discussed in a moment, only Pynchon narrates personal mêlées realistically and in detail, if only rarely, as in the "Runcible-Spoon" fight between a British commando and an American sailor in *Gravity's Rainbow*:

> Purfle yanks his runcible-spoon hand back, leaning to the side, twisting his own weapon to keep its tines interlocked with those of Bladdery's, pulling the commando off-balance long enough to release his own foot, then deftly unlinking the spoons and dancing away. Bladdery recovers his footing and moves heavily in pursuit, probing in with a series of jabs then shifting the spoon to his other hand and surprising Purfle with a slash that grazes the sailor's neck, missing the jugular, but not by much. Blood drips into the white jumper, black under these arc-lights. Sweat and cold shadows lie darkly in the men's armpits. (597–98)

But the fireworks display of realistic violence is immediately undermined when the fight approaches its final stage, one combatant having his spoon's knife edge "up and bisecting" his enemy's Adam's apple, "ready to slice in" but holding it, looking for a "thumb-signal" from the audience to tell him what to do. The reader, just like the combatants themselves, suddenly becomes aware that no one else is even watching this display:

> He looks up, around, wheezing, sweaty, seeking some locus of power that will thumb-signal him what to do.
> Nothing: only sleep, vomiting, shivering, a ghost and flowered odor of ethanol, solid Bodine counting his money. Nobody really watching. (598)

In Gibson's texts, a lot of personal combat takes place, often dramatic,

---

are visible; the focus, like a shutter lens, opens only briefly to allow a glimpse of a wounded man thrown into the sea. (249)

often including large doses of humor, and sometimes even obliquely reflecting on its own workings and premises. But where Gibson especially stands out is what might be called "hyperreal": a technique that weaves outright fantastic elements into the cloth of gritty realism—a style many years later translated into visual language by the movie industry, also with remarkable success.[34]

Especially adding to the hyperreality of violent encounters in Gibson's texts is a tight-knit media barrage embedded in the immediate backdrop, a technique for which the showdown between Molly and a vat-grown Yakuza killer in Gibson's "Johnny Mnemonic" from *Burning Chrome* shall serve as an example.

The character Molly, as has been remarked, wears cyberwear implants, among them retractable blades between her nails, "each one a narrow, double-edged scalpel in pale blue steel" (8), mirror glasses, and boosted reflexes to give her an edge in combat situations. The Yakuza killer wears a prosthetic thumb into which are coiled three meters of a so-called monomolecular filament that can be wielded like a yo-yo and passes through any material short of diamond hardness to devastating effect. For her arena, Molly chooses the habitat of the "Lo Teks," groups of people with transplanted animal faces. They live on leeched water and electricity in a habitat that is a two-hours climb up into the spaces of the vast geodesic "Fuller domes" spanning the city's Nighttown district, built out of mesh and epoxy and hovering over the abyss. One of their places is the "Killing Ground," certain features of which are not evident before the fight begins. Before proceeding to the combat's climax, watched from the

---

[34] It should be clarified that what is meant here is specifically the style of visual combat as developed for *The Matrix*. The visual language of cyberpunk as such has developed in both media largely in parallel: Gibson's "Johnny Mnemonic" was originally released in *Omni Magazine* in 1981 while Ridley Scott's *Blade Runner* hit the theaters—albeit in a disputable release format—in 1982.

perspective of the first person narrator for whose assassination the killer has been dispatched, some details of the set should be established:

> The Lo Teks parted to let him step up on to the bench. He bowed, smiling, and stepped smoothly out of his sandals, leaving them side by side, perfectly aligned, and then he stepped down on to the Killing Floor. He came for me, across that shifting trampoline of scrap, as easily as any tourist padding across synthetic pile in any featureless hotel.
>
> Molly hit the Floor, moving.
>
> The Floor screamed.
>
> It was miked and amplified, with pickups riding the four fat coil springs at the corners and contact mikes taped at random to rusting machine fragments. Somewhere the Lo Teks had an amp and a synthesizer, and now I made out shapes of speakers overhead, above the cruel white floods.
>
> A drumbeat began, electronic, like an amplified heart, steady as a metronome.
>
> [...] She began to dance. [...]
>
> He rode with it, for a few heartbeats, and then he moved, judging the movement of the Floor perfectly, like a man stepping from one flat stone to another in an ornamental garden. (19)

The scene is set, the fight commences high above Nighttown's skyline and under the blinding whiteness of flood lights, and the floor drones and screams with the dance of the fighters who duel each other to its climax, Molly with her retractable blades, the killer with his monomolecular strand:

> And at the end, just before he made his final cast with the filament, I saw in his face, an expression that didn't seem to belong there. It wasn't fear and it wasn't anger. I think it was disbelief, stunned incomprehension mingled with pure aesthetic revulsion at what he was seeing, hearing—at what was happening to him. He retracted the whirling filament, the ghost disk shrinking to the size of a dinner plate as he whipped his arm above his head and brought it down, the thumbtip curving out for Molly like a live thing.
>
> The Floor carried her down, the molecule passing just above her head; the Floor whiplashed, lifting him into the path of the taut molecule. It should have passed harmlessly over his head and been withdrawn into its diamond-hard socket. It took his hand off just behind the wrist. There was a gap in the Floor in front of him, and he went through it like a diver, with a strange deliberate grace, a defeated kamikaze on his way down to Nighttown. Partly, I think, he took that dive to buy himself a few seconds of the dignity of silence. She'd killed him with culture shock. (20)

The Yakuza killer's heavily troped demise is reminiscent of Jameson's already quoted assessment in *Postmodernism* of cyberpunk as an "orgy of language and representation, an excess of representational consumption" (321), but what remains perpetually out of Jameson's focus is that this is something cyberpunk itself, in postmodernist "best practice" one might be tempted to add, reflects and comments upon, and has done so right from the start, as can be seen here in one of its inaugurating stories. What makes the Killing Ground fight "hyperreal" is that it is neither outright fantastic nor outright realistic. On the one hand, it is actually less fantastic than Barth's repair crews brawling in the engine room or Pynchon's bar-room fist fights: no laws of physics or nature or probability are broken, and even the most fanciful details are contingent on scientific and social developments, no more, no less. Plausibility is not overruled by choreography but goes hand in hand with it much like Pynchon's Runcible-Spoon fight, but, of course, it is not realistic violence in the sense of Pynchon's Runcible-Spoon fight either. Hyperreality, as it has been named here, resides "in between." The Runcible Spoon fight could take place anytime in the here and now. There might be a time and place in a possible future where the "Killing Ground" fight or something similar becomes a possibility. But there is no possible time or place where slapstick fights could become a physical reality.

Sustained Incongruity

While incongruity has already been found to play a major part in the use of tropes in the first section of this subchapter, a sample from Barthelme's "The Emerald" from *Sixty Stories* might connect the topic of incongruity also with the preceding section's "mixed mode" techniques. One of the main characters has hired a bodyguard. After having answered questions about height, weight, and IQ, being 6'8", 249 lbs, and 146 respectively, the

job interview proceeds like this:

> What's your best move?
>
> I got a pretty good shove. A not-bad bust in the mouth. I can trip. I can fall on 'em. I can gouge. I have a good sense of where the ears are. I know thumbs and kneecaps. [...]
>
> What's your name?
>
> Soapbox.
>
> That's not a very tough name if you'll forgive me. (388–89)

Later, when Soapbox is nowhere to be seen, the following dialog ensues (the report turns out to be not entirely true, though):

> Where is my man Soapbox by the way?
>
> That thug you had in front of the door?
>
> Yes, Soapbox.
>
> He is probably reintegrating himself with the basic matter of the universe, right now. Fascinating experience I should think.
>
> Good to know. (398–99)

Soapbox, it should be added, never does anything more violent in "The Emerald" than partaking in dialog. Not only in this regard, the story "bristles with incongruities."

Incongruity can be traced back to theories of the joke and the element of surprise, and it is a staple of black humor. In postmodern texts, not unlike irony, incongruity does not have to occur at specific points: it operates across the text in much the same way permanent parabasis works in the case of irony. And irony, indeed, has a lot to do with it. Often, the difference between delimited and permanent incongruity is not easily discerned. In Pynchon's *The Crying of Lot 49,* for example, the movie *Cashiered!* watched by Oedipa and Metzger—discussed in the chapter on *Fragmentation*—seems to be a clear example of incongruity happening at a specific point. But *Cashiered!* mirrors and enhances the novel's overall design and

the outrageous incongruities at work across the whole text. The fictive Jac-
obean Revenge Tragedy *The Courier's Tragedy*, equally embedded in *The
Crying of Lot 49*, works in similar ways. After the reader, like Oedipa, has
been subjected to the play's seemingly endless chain of atrocities, the fifth
act, purportedly the play's "anticlimax," is, mercifully, only summed up in
brief:

> The fifth act, entirely an anticlimax, is taken up by the bloodbath Gen-
> naro visits on the court of Squamuglia. Every mode of violent death available
> to Renaissance man, including a lye pit, land mines, a trained falcon with en-
> venom'd talons, is employed. It plays, as Metzger remarked later, like a Road
> Runner cartoon in blank verse. At the end of it about the only character left
> alive in a stage dense with corpses is the colorless administrator, Gennaro.
> (51)

In contrast to *Cashiered!,* not only the principle of incongruity but the plays
very motifs and plot elements are disseminated and embedded throughout
the novel proper. The image of "a Road Runner in blank verse," moreover,
again juxtaposes cartoon violence with serious violence. What also works
toward incongruity here and elsewhere is sheer amplitude. Further
examples of amplitude as a purveyor of incongruity can be found in
Coover's saloon brawls—brawls that, compared to those discussed in the
preceding section, behave remarkably differently. In Coover's brawls,
"fantastic" violence means also "fantastically excessive," while cartoon and
slapstick elements are retained, including the cancellation of physical and
natural laws. The following sample from Coover's *Ghost Town* might give
an impression:

> The fat man in the boater takes a punch and careens backwards toward
> the piano player, who keeps his left hand going while raising his right elbow
> to deliver a hammer blow that sends the fat man caroming headfirst into the
> wall and nearly through it. THIS IS A SQUARE HOUSE says a sign over his head. [...]
> Thet s yer lookout, mister, says the man with the ear gone, and pulls a
> sawed-off pistol out of his pants and shoves it up the halfbreed's broad
> brown nose. Before he can pull the trigger, though, the bald piano player, in
> the long perilous beat between chorus and verse [...] rises up and head-butts
> him. The one-eared man's head splits with a pop as a clay bowl might and

his brains ooze out like spilled oatmeal when he hits the floor, by which time the next verse has commenced and the piano player's back on his stool again. (14–16)

The saloon brawl commences to even more hilarious heights thereafter, actively including—oozing-out brains notwithstanding—all participants named so far. Another lengthy brawl in *Ghost Town*, between a cowboy and the deputy, ends with the following resolve:

> Awright, awright, deppity, we take yer point, says the brawny lout irritably. But whut about our goddam cattle?
> The deputy, his vocal cords cut and dangling from the hole in his throat, cannot reply, but he turns to the bald ocarina player and gestures with his knife. (63–64)

And yes, it is the deputy who won the fight. What is achieved here is incongruity in relation to what is already "fantastic" to a high degree, which is not a small feat, and amplitude certainly assists in bringing this effect about. Further examples of classical slapstick and comedy morphing into incredible and hilarious violence can be found in Coover's "Charlie in the House of Rue" from *A Night at the Movies or, You Must Remember This*, or in "The Hat Act" from *Pricksongs & Descants.* In the latter, not only the most repelling things happen on the stage during a magician's show in the American vaudeville tradition, but the audience's responses are odd as well, to say the least.

Indeed, the most frequent and most expressive sustained incongruity is achieved by a technique that can be described as "incongruent response": the insanely rational or sanely irrational, but always completely incommensurate ways people react to momentous, if not to say monstrous events. Not all writers employ this technique. Although it might seem as if it were at work in Barth's and Gibson's texts too, ostensibly incommensurate responses on the character plane almost always turn out to be rooted in deliberately withheld premises that, once known, suffice to make the

curious response in question commensurate in one way or another. In Pynchon's texts too, this technique is used only infrequently, and not in a remarkably sustained way. It turns out that those writers who utilize incongruity in this way are precisely those who do not, or only rarely, utilize the forms of real, hyperreal, or fantastic slapstick violence presented in the preceding section.

Before proceeding to examples from Barthelme's "The School" and "The Glass Mountain," Acker's *Great Expectations,* and Coover's *Gerald's Party*, it should be added that "incommensurate response," as a sustained technique not unlike the permanent parabasis of irony, can be found in critical texts as well, if only in shorter essays and sparingly. Miller, for example, seems initially "greatful" in his already mentioned "Response to Jonathan Loesberg" for Loesberg's "attempt to see continuities in what I have written, to make a single story of it, as opposed to seeing it as a series of disconnected 'periods,' as has sometimes been done" (123). But the response proceeds to recast Loesberg's text into a bafflingly far-fetched genre on the sustained basis of which Miller subsequently raises his objections—an incommensurateness that, incidentally, belongs rather to performative than cognitive rhetoric:

> Whatever may seem ungrateful in my response should be seen in the context of my appreciation of his attempt to see me steadily and see me whole. I express gratitude in spite of the discomfort a certain obituary aspect of Loesberg's essay causes me. (123)

In Barthelme's, Acker's, and Coover's fictional worlds, incommensurate responses often seem a natural part of the respective social norms of these worlds, but this counts precisely among those elements that make the incongruity "sustained" in that sense.

In Barthelme's "The School" from *Amateurs*, the teacher-narrator tells in the most incommensurate fashion how everything and everyone intro-

duced to teach the students about nature, living things, and responsibility, sooner or later dies an uncanny death, from the reasonably explicable to the unexplained to the inexplicable, from trees planted by the students to ever more advanced animals in the evolutionary sense up to and including "this Korean orphan that the class adopted through the Help the Children program":

> It was an unfortunate thing, the kid's name was Kim and maybe we adopted him too late or something. The cause of death was not stated in the letter we got, they suggested we adopt another child instead and sent us some interesting case histories, but we didn't have the heart. (39)

Eventually, the narrator reveals that there had been an "extraordinary number of parents passing away" too, and grandparents, for that matter, and then there had been the "tragedy" that involved even some of the students: "It's been a strange year." (40) The anxiety of the students finally reaches a point where they ask the narrator to make love to the teaching assistant to see "how it is done" and because they are "frightened" and "require an assertion of value":

> I said that they shouldn't be frightened (although I am often frightened) and that there was value everywhere. Helen came and embraced me. I kissed her a few times on the brow. We held each other. The children were excited. Then there was a knock on the door, I opened the door, and the new gerbil walked in. The children cheered wildly. (41)

In Barthelme's "The Glass Mountain" from *City Life*, noble knights fall from and lie dying all around the glass mountain, after having failed their quest to obtain the beautiful enchanted, well, symbol. Throughout the story, the people in the streets and the narrator's "acquaintances" react to this carnage in curious ways:

> 34. My acquaintances passed a brown bottle from hand to hand.
> 35. "Better than a kick in the crotch."
> 36. "Better than a poke in the eye with a sharp stick."

37. "Better than a slap in the belly with a wet fish."

38. "Better than a thump on the back with a stone."

39. "Won't he make a splash when he falls, now?"

40. "I hope to be here to see it. Dip my handkerchief in the blood."

41. "Fart-faced fool." (67)

With the rising body count, this raises to a higher pitch, and the narrator's acquaintances move among the fallen knights, collecting their "rings, wallets, pocket watches, ladies' favors" and even "prising out the gold teeth of not-yet-dead knights" (68–69). The story's climax, then, is at the same time the climax of the story's incommensurate response system: after having scaled the mountain and entered, against all odds, the palace's courtyard, the narrator approaches the "beautiful enchanted symbol, with its layers of meaning," but when it changes on his touch into a beautiful princess, he throws "the beautiful princess headfirst down the mountain" to his acquaintances—"99. Who could be relied upon to deal with her" (71).

In Acker's texts, people react in incommensurate ways most of the time. Often, the sustained effect is brought about by the uninterrupted distribution of individual responses marked by a great variety of socially induced forms of madness. But there are also examples for incommensurate response systems that are uninterrupted and sustained by themselves. In *Great Expectations*, a couple's discussion in an apartment building in New York City on how to spend the Christmas holidays results in casually shooting people in the street:

> HUBBIE: Goodbye, dear. (Shouting) I'm going to Long Island to go hunting.
>
> WIFE (entering their wall-to-wall carpeted living room): But you can't leave me. It's Christmas. [...]
>
> WIFE: You promised and you can't break your promise you'd stay here.
>
> HUBBIE: Shit. (He fondles his old Winchester. He walks over to one of the large living room windows and sticks the rifle through the window. He shoots down a streetlight that's red.) Goddamn.

> WIFE: Bobby, what're you doing? Don't you know we all—the tenants—decided we'd have noise regulations during the night?
>
> HUBBIE: I can have my shooting practice right here. Bam bam (says as he shoots). Three dead streetlights. Try crossing the street now, President Carter.
>
> WIFE: Don't insult President Carter that way. [...]
>
> WIFE: You're acting just like Mother said you would when you don't get your way. All you want is attention. You're gonna be a baby until I give in to you. Well, I'm not going to. I've got myself to think about.
>
> HUBBIE: Bam. (Shoots down a four-year-old girl who's wearing a baby-blue jumper. Her junked-out mother is too shocked to scream. It begins to snow.) Guess it's gonna snow for Christmas. (19–22)

When "Hubbie" commences to complain about beggars and promises to shoot them all when they dare to enter their apartment, "Wife" rebukes him with "You'll do your shooting on the street. I just washed the kitchen floor." (22)

This is very similar to the technique Coover uses throughout many of his novels. For some texts, though, the same caveat applies that has been given for Barth's, Pynchon's, and Gibson's texts: not immediately recognizable and sufficiently complex premises as, e. g., sentient beings in (porn movie) film reels in Coover's *Lucky Pierre,* can often explain and reveal as commensurate even the most aberrant and perplexing behavior. Or, as in *John's Wife*, incommensurate responses are perfectly natural because the characters, confronted with supernatural events in an otherwise "realistic" world, go out of their way to avoid any conscious perception of these events, with all the consequences and seemingly irrational effects one would expect.

The most egregious exercise in genuine, sustained incongruity and incommensurate response in Coover's novels—besides short stories like "A Pedestrian Accident" from *Pricksongs & Descants*, which are more easily sustained in such manner—is maintained in *Gerald's Party.* Several

passages have already been quoted, including the novel's opening that immediately sets the tone: "None of us noticed the body at first. Not until Roger came through asking if we'd seen Ros." (7) The novel is full of terrible events, and people react to these events, by and large, in two different ways that are equally incommensurate: either with casual or unreasonable calm or with a kind of hysterical alarm that manages to grate even more with the party's serious mayhem.

For each type, an example will be given, starting with casual or unreasonable calm. After the police critically wounds Gerald's best friend Vic, Gerald attends his dying friend while the doctor recommends assisted suicide (224 ff.). Since the scene is frequently and protractedly interrupted by other sequences in the way outlined in the chapter on *Fragmentation*, it stretches out over more than fifty pages. Guests come and go, attending to Gerald and the dying Vic or just passing by:

> Teresa returned with a tumbler of iced bourbon. "Here," she said and, bending over, spilled her plate of food in Vic's lap. "Oops! Darn, that's all the stuffing there was left!"
>
> Cynthia took the glass and held it to his lips—he slurped at it greedily [...]
>
> "Do you mind?" asked Teresa, picking the food off his lap with her fingers and eating it. "It's a shame to waste it." (226)

The only person whose responses seem at least half-way adequate are the narrator's, as in this dialog with the doctor whose name, maybe not coincidentally, is "Jim":

> "It's Vic! *He's been shot*!"
>
> "All right," he said wearily. "Won't be a minute."
>
> "It's *urgent*, Jim!" I held up my bloody hands.
>
> He glanced over at me. "Yes, I know, it's always—say, what's the matter with your shoulder?" (227)

But even if Gerald's behavior seems more "normal" on the surface, he still

reacts to the events with a dubious logic and acts on its premises in even more dubious ways:

> "You better point it a little higher," Bob murmured, "or you'll just cause him more useless damage."
>
> Jim knelt and tipped Vic's head to one side. "The best place, Gerry, is here behind the ear . . ." [...]
>
> "One in a million," someone murmured, and my wife called out from somewhere back there: "Gerald, can you help with the coffee, please?"
>
> "Yes, in a minute." My shoulder throbbed, and something was blurring my vision. Tears maybe. I couldn't see his face at all, it was like that face in Tania's painting.
>
> "Why don't you . . . wise up, old buddy?" he gasped. I found the place. I hoped Jim was right. "There's not . . . much time . . . !"
>
> "To tell the truth, Vic," I sighed, "I wouldn't know where to start."
>
> "Famous last words," he grunted, and I squeezed the trigger. (270–71)

A brief but rather telling example for the second technique, a hysterical alarm that is equally not commensurate with the situation, would be the reactions of Ros's husband to her death:

> "*WrraAARGHH*!" screamed Roger and broke free.
>
> "Oh no—!"
>
> "*Stop him!*" somebody shouted.
>
> The two policemen managed to cut him off from the body, but they were unable to lay hold of him. He lurched violently about the room in a wild whinnying flight, blind to all obstacles, slapping up against walls and furniture, tangling himself in curtains, leaving not mere fingerprints behind but whole body blotches, and howling insanely as he went. People tried to duck out of his way, but he slammed into them just the same, knocking them off their feet, sloshing them with Ros's blood, making them yell and shriek and lash out in terror. (28–29)

Both techniques, finally, are often directly or indirectly juxtaposed, as in the following examples pertaining to how the first victim's corpse is handled by the police. It is either met with unreasonable calm:

> Bob came over, pulled a thermometer out of a hole in Ros's side I hadn't noticed before, and left the room, scowling at it. Alison had felt me flinch and

now gave a little squeeze. "They couldn't get it into her behind," she whispered, "there was something in there. They had to punch a hole through to her liver." (113)

Or it is met with hysterical alarm:

> "*They're using a goddamn fork on her down there, Gerry*!" he cried.
> "A fork?!"
> "*Those fucking cops*!" He smashed his fist into the wall. (87)

The different responses can also have a common cause:

> Bob had limped away to switch off the lamp on the microscope, shutting down the show there, and now gathered up some little boxes, plastic bags, and tools. "Shall I knock the teeth out before we bag her up," he asked, "or save it till later?" (138)

> "*Stop them*!" they cried. "*Oh my god*!" "He was using a hammer on her *mouth*!" In the middle of the room, two white-jacketed men and Jim were trying to lift Ros's body onto a stretcher, but the two police officers, grabbing a limb each, had engaged them in a kind of grisly tug-of-war. "*The Inspector*—grunt!—*says she stays*!" (139)

The bereaved is, it should be added, later terminally subdued and prevented from creating further mayhem by the police. As was the case with "harmful tropes," discussed in the first section, and with the mixed and oftentimes juxtaposed modes of the real, the unreal, and the hyperreal explored in the second, incongruity and incommensurateness work toward similar goals as many of the "revolutionary" strategies presented in the chapter on *Fragmentation*, and several aspects of looping discussed in the chapter on *Iterations* have also been encountered to work to this effect. They all disrupt seemingly coherent narratives and "beginnings, middles, and ends," either on the level of form or of plot. "Disruption," moreover, has been met with in the critical discussion on figurative language as well, manifest in the workings of tropes and of irony. But it has to be said that even the most insistent utilization and accumulation of disruptive techniques make these texts not immune to naturalization or co-option. By

multiplexing all the discussed aspects and strategies and techniques into a "super-tropological system" on the level of composition, a system that might be legitimately called "postmodern literature," an overall coherence can be preserved against even the most disruptive strategies the texts can possibly muster.

Chapter V:

Humanity

After the first chapter block on *Formations* and *Iterations* and the second chapter block on *Fragmentation* and *Composition*, which followed violent events involved in the construction and reconstruction of origins and techniques of repetition and variation on the one hand, and modes of "revolutionary" narrative style, the creative process and figurative and rhetorical language on the other, this fifth chapter explores the most prolific topics attached to occurrences of violence throughout the literary and critical texts, topics which can be subsumed into the overarching subject of *Humanity*. "Humanity," much like "narrative style" in the chapter on *Fragmentation*, is again an umbrella term that covers an extended range of topics, from systematic killings of fellow human beings to questions of what counts or still counts as "human," and how "being human" is set against that which, presumably or figuratively, is not. In this regard, the chapter on *Humanity* is first and foremost a "topical" chapter; it will combine and put to use—"in situ," so to speak—many elements and techniques that have been investigated in the preceding chapters. Thus, the investigations in this chapter will be, by and large, restricted to the narrative plane with respect to the literary texts, and will touch much less upon meta-levels with respect to critical texts than in any of the preceding chapters. This will stand in sharp contrast to the following and final chapter on *Reality*, which will specifically investigate violence *outside* the narrative frame with respect to postmodern writers, literary texts, and critical theory.

Where violence and topics relating to "humanity" coincide in the texts, four contexts clearly stand out; each of these will be discussed in the following subchapters. The first is the history of murder on a large scale: from mass murder to the extermination attempts directed against native tribes,

and from there to the Holocaust. The second is the possibility or the desire to transform more and more into a "machine," potentially but not necessarily eroding what defines humanity. The third context where "humanity" and violence visibly overlap is the emotional and physical attachment to the inanimate up to and including thingification[35]; this seems to resemble the second context but, as will be seen, actually points into the opposite direction: while the attempt to become a machine ultimately strives to cheat death and still stay at least marginally human, thingification's de-humanizing tendencies are strongly connected to the motif of the death drive. The fourth context, finally, encompasses positions of power and the ethical dimensions these entail: here, the animal kingdom as a stand-in for humanity and human behavior against animals figure prominently, as do religion and the failure of the imagination.

1. Killing Fields: From Mass Murder to Genocide

Many more references to large-scale historical violence can be found in the texts than one would expect, even if not all of them contain descriptive elements in the sense of being "explicit." These references can be divided into three categories that progress in terms of scale and determination: mass murder, genocide, and the Holocaust. In terms of textual frequency, references to the Holocaust, which also include the question of art after Auschwitz, are rather evenly distributed among the writers, but Barth's and Pynchon's texts stand out with regard to the frequency of references to mass murder and genocide, respectively. Each of these three categories will be investigated in the following sections.

---

[35] The term "thingification" derives from a major aspect of what Marx calls *Verdinglichung* (itself usually translated as "Reification") and has been in use in Marxist, psychoanalytic, postcolonial, and philosophical discourse by, or in translations of, Lukács, Lacan, Bhabha, or Levinas (cf., e. g., Levinas, *Humanism of the Other* 48).

Histories of Horrors

Barth, in what he repeatedly calls "The Tragic View of History," offers a rather bleak outlook on humankind and human history. Mostly, this view is expressed in what might be called "cumulative list" form, beginning with the complaint of the character Todd Andrews in *Letters:*

> Already by 1921 the first installment of Armageddon was astern. Farther aft lay, for example, the Napoleonic catastrophe, the genocide of native Americans, the wars of religion, the unimaginable great plagues—horror after horror, like dreadful buoys marking a channel to nowhere. (463)

Now, Todd Andrews is not averse to the occasional mass murder himself, as his attempt to blow up the "Floating Opera" in Barth's first novel *The Floating Opera* attests to. But Barth "himself" echoes these concerns almost verbatim in interviews as well as in his—heavily edited, revised, and re-composed—essays in *The Friday Book*:

> But the nineteenth century was a horror show, too: the butchery of the Napoleonic wars, the butchery of imperial colonialization. And consider the centuries before that: catastrophic, every one of them. (162)

The list grows longer. With time, it is complemented with the Chilean generals and the Argentine generals, the Khmer Rouge, the Nazis, the Soviet Stalinists, and the shah's and Khomeini's Evin Prison (*The Tidewater Tales* 247, 361); Bosnia and Rwanda (*On With the Story* 147); Kosovo and the Albanian refugees and Columbine High (*Coming Soon!!!* 302); central Africa, the Balkans, and the Middle East, as well as "whole species disappearing" from the rainforests (*The Book of Ten Night and a Night* 196)—counting only references given in the form of listings.

Figuring prominently in Barth's later texts as partaking in these atrocities is the U.S. Intelligence Community, especially the CIA, as outlined in the chapter on *Formations*. But this is more likely an effect, not a cause, and everybody is involved in how the world comes to be the way it is:

> While ethnic hatreds lacerate much of earth's burgeoning human population;
> while poverty, disease, and malignant governments afflict millions more;
> while those of us fortunate enough to be spared such miseries busily over-
> consume our planet's natural resources, despoil the environment, and con-
> front sundry crises of our own at every stage of our so-brief-no-matter-how-
> long lives, Charles P. Mason scribblescribble-scribbles! (*Book of Ten Nights
> and a Night* 95)

While specific events of murder on a massive and organized scale often serve as contexts and backdrops in Barth's texts, the topics of mass murder and the sorry state of humanity as such are rather embedded in passages that reflect, as in the quotation given above, on the "author's" or the "narrator's" writing process; some implications of these reflections on the process of writing in a world of violence have been discussed in the chapter on *Composition*. There are, though, exceptions to this rule. In *Sabbatical,* the writer-as-protagonist is physically confronted with a location closely connected to humanity's unending string of atrocities and mass murder in the form of the *Tajo* in Spain, a cliff famously but obliquely referenced by Hemingway in Pilar's story in *For Whom the Bell Tolls*. Not only did the Loyalists and Franco's soldiers throw each other into the gorge, but "the Catholics, Moors, Visigoths, Vandals, Romans, Phoenicians, Ligurians, Celts, Iberians—and no doubt the odd Hapsburg, Bourbon, and drunken tourist" too, as well as "routinely for some two hundred years, all the bulls and picadors' horses killed in that Plaza de Toros" (38). Here, Barth's history of horrors becomes part of the plot and part of the protagonist's experience, his marital crisis, and his struggle to write. With all other authors, this exception is the rule: while less frequent overall, historical events of mass murder are part of the story instead of part of the reflections on the story or the writing process. There is a wide range of different treatments as to how such events are implemented and how they function on the level of plot and storyline, from being foregrounded to being almost casually embedded in the form of brief summaries or character backgrounds—as, e. g., in the case of Dzaqyp Qulan in *Gravity's Rain-*

bow, whose father was killed by Russian settlers "in full vigilante panic" during a period of massacres where they hunted and killed "Sarts, Kazakhs, Kirghiz, and Dungans that terrible summer like wild game" (340). For this wide range of different treatments with regard to events of mass murder in the texts, the historical event of the atomic bombing of Hiroshima shall serve as a representative example.

In Pynchon's *Gravity's Rainbow*, the narrator connects the nuclear bombing of Hiroshima with targeting civilians in air raids in general, especially Lübeck and Peenemünde, by way of uncanny apparitions. During the RAF's "terror raid against civilian Lübeck" it is the "Angel that stood over Lübeck during the Palm Sunday raid, come that day neither to destroy nor to protect, but to bear witness to a game of seduction" (215). Over Peenemünde, equally impassive, are "robed figures—perhaps, at this distance, hundreds of miles tall—their faces, serene, unattached, like the Buddha's, bending over the sea" (214). The latter denotes not only to the A4 rockets fired from Peenemünde against civilians in London, but also the bombings of Peenemünde itself. Here, in a "strange gradient of death and wreckage," the "poorest and most helpless got it worst" since most of the casualties are "'foreign workers,' a euphemism for civilian prisoners brought in from countries under German occupation" (423). In Hiroshima, it is the "pale Virgin" who appears on the horizon:

> At the instant it happened, the pale Virgin was rising in the east, head, shoulders, breasts, 17° 36' down to her maidenhead at the horizon. A few doomed Japanese knew of her as some Western deity. She loomed in the eastern sky gazing down at the city about to be sacrificed. The sun was in Leo. The fireburst came roaring and sovereign. . . . (694)

This treatment contrasts markedly with the passage pertaining to the perpetrators' perspective as quoted and discussed in the chapter on *Composition*, also from Pynchon's *Gravity's Rainbow,* about the "Missouri Mason" Truman, "making ready to tickle 100,000 little yellow folks into what will

come down as a fine vapor-deposit of fat-cracklings wrinkled into the fused rubble of their city on the Inland Sea" (588). Treatments similar to this latter example can also be found in Coover's *The Public Burning* or Barth's *Giles Goat-Boy*. Reflecting on the events leading to the Rosenbergs' "high treason" and their eventual "public burning," Coover connects the bombing of civilians—Hanoi, in this case—with Hiroshima in similarly cynical and flippant tones. Uncle Sam, having "overseen the patient extermination by saturation bombing of a thousand Mau Mau terrorists" and having set off the first test hydrogen bomb, reflects "on the infancy of Hiroshima's 'Little Boy' and says that this year will see Atomic Power come of age" (10). In Barth's *Giles-Goat Boy,* the character Maurice Stoker, head of the New Tammany College's executive force, not only pokes constant fun on the attempted extermination of the "Moishians" by the "Siegfrieder Campus" during the "2nd Campus Riots," but on the text's equivalent to Hiroshima and Nagasaki as well when he proposes to "carouse the night away while he and Max recalled the grand old days when they had EATen ten thousand Amaterasu undergraduates at the cost of one Moishian forefinger" (153). The "undergraduates" roughly equal civilians, the "ten thousand" are only the beginning, as an extended description of prolonged carnage has already made clear (53–54), and the "Moishian forefinger" refers to the scientist Max Spielman, mentor of Giles, who pushed the button and, regretting it later, departed with his forefinger.

Acker features the topic of Hiroshima at some length in epistolary fashion in *My Death My Life by Pier Paolo Pasolini* (314 ff.). Written by the character Emily (Brontë) to her sister Charlotte, these letters contain an extended eyewitness report of Hiroshima after the attack, adding to the extraordinary amount of fragments that comprise this text. Part of a dialog or play related to Charlotte by Emily subsequently—a passage as opaque as the former is straightforward—has a "yellow man" speaking about hav-

ing adapted to Hiroshima as "the way we adapted to your non-adaptable civilization," a Hiroshima which is, now, "as a reality given back to you" (320–21). Barthelme's most visible take on this topic, in *The King*, has already been touched upon in the chapters on *Formations* and *Iterations*. Arthur destroys the technical blueprints for the "Grail," the atomic bomb, resisting every proposition brought forward by his knights: to use it to solve all the problems at once, i. e., Mordred, the Germans, and the Italians; to demonstrate it by "'Do[ing] Essen or Kiel or one of the smaller cities'"; even to merely "notif[y] them we had it" (129–30). Finally, in Gibson's futuristic but still near-future world of the Sprawl Trilogy which includes *Neuromancer,* a third—albeit very short—world war has occurred and already assimilated into collective history. Hiroshima, like the Third Reich and many other things, have become a distant past, not unlike the Franco-Prussian War is remembered at the beginning of the twenty-first century. Not only could Hiroshima come to be reflected in a fashion, but this fashion could in turn become something nostalgic, cultivated by those living on the space station *Freeside* orbiting Earth, as a tradition to cling to far away from home:

> Beyond them, at another table, three Japanese wives in Hiroshima sackcloth awaited sarariman husbands, their oval faces covered with artificial bruises; it was, he knew, an extremely conservative style, one he'd seldom seen in Chiba. (128)

While the topic of Hiroshima and the other historical events touched upon neither exhaust the references to mass murder in the texts nor the differences in treatment, those events and treatments that have been remarked upon are, by and large, exemplary in many respects. The spectrum of referenced events as well as the spectrum of different treatments, though, will narrow down considerably in the context of genocidal extermination, as will be seen in the following section.

Specters of Genocide

Although incidents matching the UN CPPCG's[36] legal definition of genocide even without any political stretching continued to occur all over the world after World War II, there was indisputably a lack of awareness before news from Rwanda and the former Yugoslavia refreshed the Western sphere's collective media memory with a vengeance[37]. In postmodern texts, likewise, references to genocide other than the attempted extermination of the Jews by the Third Reich are either scarce or not sustained in the texts until after the turn of the millennium in terms of publishing dates, when references to Rwanda, Bosnia, or the Kurds and the Marsh Arabs in Iraq begin to surface in the texts. This scarcity, though, comes with two notable exceptions: Barth's recurring focus on the attempted extermination of Native American tribes throughout American history, and Pynchon's focus on the extermination attempts regarding the Hereros and other African tribes in former South-West Africa, perpetrated by forces of the German Reich. Both genocides, directed at African and American natives, are "spectral" in two ways: repressed or long-forgotten tenants from the attics of Western consciousness that not only pay a dreadful visit, but bring with them ghastly tidings of even more terrible things to come.

Tightly knit into the general understanding of genocide is the aspect of deadly force that is willfully directed also against the respective group's utterly defenseless members: the children, the elderly, the sick and dying, and the prisoners. This motif surfaces again and again in Barth's text, finding its ultimate and horrible expression in giving out "infected blankets &

---

[36] The "United Nations Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide," adopted in 1948 by the UN General Assembly and put into effect three years later in 1951.

[37] With Cambodia in the 1980s as a major exception, of course. While the mass killings of the Khmer Rouge seem to have involved ethnic and religious aspects, they do not fit the common UN definition for genocide because of the generally political motivation of the perpetrators. Another term that came into use is "democide."

handkerchiefs from the fort's smallpox hospital" to the native tribes, complementing the troops' standing order "that no Indian prisoners be taken; that women & children not be spared; that the race be extirpated" (*Letters* 123). For many of Barth's narrators, as in *The Tidewater Tales*, the attempts to exterminate the natives are also linked to more contemporary affairs of political violence and environmental exploitation:

> The moral paradoxes were extended back into U.S. history: The CIA's often illegal activities were shown to have a provenance back to Thomas Jefferson, even to George Washington, and to pale before the rape of the land and the near or total obliteration of species (not excluding whole nations of Indians), at the hands less often of Come-Heres than of established settlers and their local descendants down to the present [...] (107)

This is also a sustained motif in Pynchon's *Mason & Dixon.* While this text strongly focuses on slavery, Mason and Dixon and their party of surveyors are nevertheless repeatedly confronted with the traces and vestiges of acts of genocide (cf., e. g., 304–08). Here, too, the infamous hospital blankets are mentioned:

> "At the Time of Bushy Run," confides Ives LeSpark, "— and I have seen the very Document,— General Bouquet and General Gage both sign'd off on expenditures to replace Hospital Blankets us'd 'to convey the Smallpox to the Indians,' as they perhaps too clearly stipulated. To my knowledge," marvels Ives, "this had never been attempted, on the part of any modern Army, till then." (307)

What Mason and Dixon are confronted with, first in South Africa and later in America, echoes Conrad's "horror" as discussed in the chapter on *Iterations*:

> Mason did note as peculiar, that the first mortal acts of Savagery in America after their Arrival should have been committed by Whites against Indians. Dixon mutter'd, "Why, 'tis the d——'d Butter-Bags all over again."
>
> They saw white Brutality enough, at the Cape of Good Hope. They can no better understand it now, than then. Something is eluding them.
>
> Whites in both places are become the very Savages of their own worst Dreams, far out of Measure to any Provocation. (606–07)

But the most graphic and most sustained descriptions of genocidal violence in any of the texts is Pynchon's extended account in *V* of the Herero genocide in South-West Africa and the survivors' subsequent internment, after the extermination order was lifted, as slave workers in concentration camps. The chapter's main action is set in 1922, during the siege of a mansion in South-West Africa; black slaves are tortured and killed right and left, and biplanes eventually bomb and kill the insurgents. The atmosphere is eschatologically charged: the free-for-all torturing and killing heralds the return of von Trotha the messiah, and with him the ultimate deliverance from conscience, remorse, and morality:

> "Your people have defied the Government," Foppl continued, "they've rebelled, they have sinned. General von Trotha will have to come back to punish you all. He'll have to bring his soldiers with the beards and the bright eyes, and his artillery that speaks with a loud voice. How you will enjoy it, Andreas. Like Jesus returning to earth, von Trotha is coming to deliver you. Be joyful; sing hymns of thanks. And until then love me as your parent, because I am von Trotha's arm, and the agent of his will." (240)

But not before one of the characters, presumably Foppl, begins to reminisce the days of von Trotha when he himself was "a young army recruit" in 1904, the violence really becomes relentless in its insistence to numb and overwhelm (cf. 244–77). The wounded and sick are bayoneted, hanged, or slowly strangulated, Herero girls simultaneously raped and disemboweled, villages leveled with Maxims and howitzers, the genitals of prisoners squashed and their owners clubbed to death with rifle butts. As the second-tier narrator describes it:

> Most of the time, thank God, you were with your own kind: comrades who all felt the same way, who weren't going to give you any nonsense no matter what you did. When a man wants to appear politically moral he speaks of human brotherhood. In the field you actually found it. You weren't ashamed. For the first time in twenty years of continuous education-to-guilt, a guilt that had never really had meaning, that the Church and the secular entrenched had made out of whole cloth; after twenty years, simply not to be ashamed. (257)

Heaven, here, is being free from guilt and shame. But Foppl's story does not end with the killings: the slave labor camps follow, and especially the sexual exploitation and torture of the female prisoners who—coming from tribes not covered by the *Vernichtungsbefehl* where only the men had been systematically killed—are in the majority. Again, patriarchal elements are exposed as being intimately related to the perpetrator's mindset:

> The barren islets off Lüderitzbucht were natural concentration camps. Walking among huddled forms in the evening, distributing blankets, food and occasional kisses from the sjambok, you felt like the father colonial policy wanted you to be when it spoke of Väterliche Züchtigung; fatherly chastisement, an inalienable right. (267)

As has been remarked, the passages are strewn with messianic references that forcefully "transcend" the abovementioned moral teachings of the "Church and the secular entrenched," and the respective imageries invoked in the textual development from the *Vernichtungsbefehl* to the concentration camps are suggestive of the developments from the Tanakh, as the Hebrew Bible or the Christian Old Testament, to the Christian New Testament. While the god of the former wholeheartedly endorses genocidal slaughter, the god of the latter lifts the *Vernichtungsbefehl*, so to speak. But whereas death in the former really means the end, and with it the end of suffering, the latter introduces the concept of hell, and with it eternal torment and suffering that truly does not end.

Also positively implicated, and alluded to, are Auschwitz and the Holocaust. Not only does the narrator comment on the numbers, that von Trotha has "done away with" about 60,000 people, which is "only 1 per cent of six million, but still pretty good" (245), Pynchon himself, in his often quoted "Letter to Thomas F. Hirsch" from 1969, draws this and other parallels explicitly, including the treatment of the Native Americans by the colonists (240–43).

With the *Schwarzkommando,* a fictitious Herero unit and part of the Deutsche Wehrmacht under the command of Oberst Enzian, also a Herero, Pynchon returns to the motif of the Herero genocide in *Gravity's Rainbow*. The descendants of the survivors are haunted by what they have come to feel as their genocidal history's utter senselessness:

> Forty years ago, in Südwest, we were nearly exterminated. There was no reason. Can you understand that? *No reason*. We couldn't even find comfort in the Will of God Theory. (362)

And they also, or because of it, have adopted an acute sense of precariousness as to their actual existence in time and space:

> "Well, I think we're here, but only in a statistical way. Something like that rock over there is just about 100% certain—it knows it's there, so does everybody else. But our own chances of being right here right now are only a little better than even—the slightest shift in the probabilities and we're gone—schnapp! like that." (362)

Related to this is the agenda of a faction of the Herero soldiers to "carry on what began among the old Hereros after the 1904 rebellion failed": a negative birthrate in order to, as Oberst Enzian puts it, "finish the extermination the Germans began in 1904" by means of "racial suicide" (317). Though collective traumatization, and especially the possibility of passing trauma on to the next generation, is far from scientifically established at the time of this writing, the mythically structured plausibility Pynchon is aiming at, which is also connected to the lost or distorted messages that bring death instead of life, as discussed in the chapter on *Formations*, should not be missed:

> There may be no gods, but there is a pattern: names by themselves may have no magic, but the *act* of naming, the physical utterance, obeys the pattern. (322)

Taken together, an inverse mirroring of genocide on the side of the Hereros is effected by shedding theistic world views; renouncing reproduction

through a negative birth rate and with it the patriarchal principle; and fore-closing any motivational possibility of engaging in activities as powerful and assertive as genocide by putting the probability of their very existence into doubt. Thus, the structural logic of these three related elements or impulses—theistic, patriarchal, and genocidal—is utterly rejected. But is this a feasible proposition? After all, believing in patterns is not so different from believing in myth, as the first chapter's discussion on patterns and conspiracies has shown. Then, there is an unmistakable "fatherliness" emanating not only from Oberst Enzian, most visible when dealing with the Americans and Major Marvy. Finally, the *Schwarzkommando* was detailed to Nordhausen's A4 operations, after all. Once manifest, genocide's trauma and its structural logic cannot be escaped, it seems, and the most drastic countermeasures imaginable will not cancel out its effects.

Approaching Auschwitz

Except for a set of theoretical and critical aspects that will be explored later in this section, it seems almost as if the subject of the Holocaust could indeed only be approached but never actually arrived at, or touched but never firmly grasped. Motifs surrounding the Third Reich's attempted extermination of the Jews are noticeably present in many of the literary texts, but almost never in direct, sustained, and unmediated ways. The approach to genocide through the *Vernichtungsbefehl* against the Hereros in Pynchon's *V,* discussed in the preceding section, and its effects on future generations in *Gravity's Rainbow*, is a far closer approach to the Holocaust than any passage found in the texts, even those that address the Holocaust less obliquely. What can be found are, to begin with, many references to historical pogroms, spanning the historical distance from 200 BCE's Ptolemy IV Philopator (Pynchon, *V* 77–78) to 1321's Philippe de Valois, Count of Anjou (Acker, *My Mother, Demonology* 74–76) to early

19th century Cossacks (Barth, *Letters* 486) to the Iron Guard in Romania in 1941 (Pynchon, *Gravity's Rainbow* 491). Also, many motifs are at least by connotation reminiscent of the German death camps, from the multi-branched plot of processing human remains into commodities in Pynchon's *The Crying of Lot 49* to Todd Andrews's brief musings about oysters in Barth's *Letters* and how their "two million separate dyings" might help to comprehend the Holocaust (562), or a dialog in Barthelme's *Paradise* about the large-scale killing of chicken and that the killing proceeds only in the nighttime so "people don't realize the extent" (61–62).

Three modes of treatment can be differentiated: the tangential, the economical, and the aftermath approach. All three shall be briefly outlined. In the tangential mode, the Holocaust is touched upon, but only peripherally on the story's trajectory to completely different topical destinations. This kind of utilizing the Holocaust for the sake of argument is generally undertaken by characters whose morals and motivations are presented as dubious in certain ways. One example from Barth would be the narrator's wife's diatribe in *Sabbatical* against the perceived combination of brutality and ineptness of the Spanish people, an extended argument that incorporates the Holocaust:

> [...] Missus Turner went on in effect—she'd been reading up on reciprocal atrocities in the Guerra Civil—that the sunny Spanish could never be guilty of an Auschwitz, for example. In the first place, your ovens would have died, like our kitchen stove, instead of your Jews, whom you'd got rid of anyhow in the sunny Fifteenth century, no? And in the second place the whole idea of extermination camps would've been too impersonal for your exquisite Moorish tastes. (37)

All the brutalities and atrocities she lists before and after the quotation are, of course, true, but tying the perceived ethical backwardness of the Spanish people to the technical backwardness of their household items severely undermines the argument and casts doubt on the speaker's actual intentions. Not without reason, in the light of the story's develop-

ment—but then again, does the narrator, on a meta-level, not perpetrate the same crime by severely overreaching his argument in order to expose Missus Turner's "backwardness" in terms of character?

Another example of the tangential mode is the dialog between Richard Nixon and Ethel Rosenberg in Coover's *The Public Burning*, developing into some kind of atrocity contest:

> "Six million of our coreligionists and millions of other victims of fascism went to the death chambers before us!"
>
> "All this crap about fascism is a lotta hooey, and you know it!" I shouted, jabbing my homburg at her. "The only mass executions these days are on the other side of the Iron Curtain!"
>
> "That's not true!"
>
> "Oh yeah? What about Stalin's purges? The death camps in Siberia? The massacres in Poland? What about Rudolph Slansky just last fall in Prague? Eh? He and about ten more of your coreligionists, as you like to call them! Or the Doctors' Plot—that was a good one! And just yesterday over in East Berlin, poor Willi Goettling, not even any goddamn trial, just dragged out and shot! And more being massacred right now!"
>
> "Spies!" she shrieked, trying to drown me out. (431)

Here, some overreaching is involved too; Nixon's intentions are exposed by giving him leeway in his effort to expose Rosenberg's intentions as perceived by Nixon, whereas elsewhere it is rather Rosenberg who holds the moral high ground. A third and rather complex example would be the character Profane's conversations with SHROUD, a synthetic human developed for Air Force tests, on his night watch at "Anthroresearch" in Pynchon's *V.* After an initial argument that SHROUD, as an inanimate thing, should rather be junked instead of burned or cremated if it could die, like the "Acres of old cars, piled up ten high in rusting tiers," SHROUD argues:

> Of course. Like a human being. Now remember, right after the war, the Nuremberg war trials? Remember the photographs of Auschwitz? Thousands of Jewish corpses, stacked up like those poor car-bodies. Schlemihl: It's

already started.

"Hitler did that. He was crazy."

Hitler, Eichmann, Mengele. Fifteen years ago. Has it occurred to you there may be no more standards for crazy or sane, now that it's started?

"What, for Christ sake?" (295)

What has started is the revenge of the inanimate, introduced in a vignette several pages earlier by way of a clever sleight of hand with actual event statistics. But the conversation is an imaginary one—or so one hopes. Profane certainly does. He is the one who, throughout *V*, tries to understand people's attachment to, and the seductive power of, inanimate things, a topic to be explored in depth later in this chapter. Now, who is it in this case who overreaches his or its argument by juxtaposing Jewish corpses with piled up cars on a junkyard? Whereto is the figurative expression supposed to be directed? These questions are further complicated by the fact that corpses are no more and no less inanimate than cars, on the one hand, and that there is a general human tendency to impose personalities on cars in a constant prosopopoeia that often makes cars more human than corpses on the other. What renders the corpses in this case animate, of course, is their continuing and persistent accusation on behalf of their very existence.

The second mode, the economical perspective, is once again most strongly represented in Pynchon's texts. Jews become subjected to economical transactions in the sense of commodities. By both sides: in Nazi Germany, Jews have their businesses burned down, and the owner gets "blamed, fucked under by the courts, attached till he was bankrupt, and, in the fullness of time, sent east along with many others of his race" (*Gravity's Rainbow* 582). On the side of the allied forces it is the intelligence system that trades in Jewish families to give credibility to its spies, as the character Katje is "credited with smelling out at least three crypto-Jewish families" (97). But this is only the tip of the iceberg, as the following pas-

sage shows, necessarily quoted at some length:

> Wim and the others have invested time and lives—three Jewish families sent east—though wait now, she's more than balanced it, hasn't she, in the months out at Scheveningen? [...] She asks this seriously, as if there's a real conversion factor between information and lives. Well, strange to say, there is. Written down in the Manual, on file at the War Department. Don't forget the real business of the War is buying and selling. The murdering and the violence are self-policing, and can be entrusted to non-professionals. [...] The true war is a celebration of markets. Organic markets, carefully styled "black" by the professionals, spring up everywhere. Scrip, Sterling, Reichsmarks continue to move, severe as classical ballet, inside their antiseptic marble chambers. But out here, down here among the people, the truer currencies come into being. So, Jews are negotiable. Every bit as negotiable as cigarettes, cunt, or Hershey bars. Jews also carry an element of guilt, of future blackmail, which operates, natch, in favor of the professionals. (105)

This sounds rather severe. It could be argued that *Gravity's Rainbow*, among many other things, is an elaborate argument for this assessment and its extension to economical and technical progress as such. In his essay "Is It Okay to Be a Luddite?", in parts already quoted in the chapter on *Formations*, Pynchon explicitly connects industrialization's technical progress and the production of commodities with modern means of mass destruction:

> By 1945, the factory system—which, more than any piece of machinery, was the real and major result of the Industrial Revolution—had been extended to include the Manhattan Project, the German long-range rocket program, and the death camps, such as Auschwitz. (n. p.)

This view already points to the third mode, the aftermath perspective. Certain kinds of technical progress in America after 1945 are repeatedly and relentlessly linked with Nazi scientists extracted from the "zone" and protected from persecution: physicists and rocket scientists, mainly, in Pynchon's and Coover's texts, physicians and medical scientists, mainly, in Acker's. There are certain incongruities that are felt and articulated in many of the texts. On the one hand, there are Curt Herzstark's *Curtas,* rare exemplars of an early and most beautiful pocket calculator the inven-

tion of which saved Herzstark's life in Buchenwald, which become collector's items for dubious dealers and run-down collectors (Gibson, *Pattern Recognition* 30, 241, et al.). On the other hand, there are the technical innovations created with the help of those who became leading scientists and intelligence advisers: the dealers of death from the A4 development teams—Pynchon does not neglect to describe the Mittelbau-Dora camp where 20,000 slave laborers died during the German *Vernichtungswaffe*'s construction and deployment (*Gravity's Rainbow* 432)—and from the medical staffs who conducted experiments on prisoners in German concentration camps (Acker, *Empire of the Senseless* 142 ff.).

Taking these circumstances into account, further and ever more difficult implications loom. What becomes of the memory of Auschwitz when, apart from the Nuremberg Trials and a handful of similar high profile proceedings, perpetrators are assimilated into America's progress, and followers into global markets? The moral high ground has become uncomfortably shaky, and so has, in the wake of Auschwitz, art's. The discussion on whether art is possible after Auschwitz, including its subset whether—and if "yes," how closely—the Holocaust itself can be approached by art, has by and large run its course. But it is far from "solved." The approaches to Auschwitz discussed so far, none of them "direct" in comparison with other topics, might at least in part be influenced by such deliberations, and certain questions to that effect surface in the critical texts too, most notably against the background of cultural studies and cultural criticism. The principle question is, according to Barth's paraphrase in *Further Fridays*, whether art may be "effectively rendered spurious" by the Holocaust because it constitutes an "evil so appalling in its scale and nature" that it becomes an "unassimilable fact" that may "call into question the very values that make art meaningful, that give our art its cultural validation" (57).

This, it turns out, would also relate to merely studying art and "high-brow" culture. In *Literary Theory: A Very Short Introduction*, Culler argues that the debates about the relation between literature and cultural studies are "replete with complaints about elitism and charges that studying popular culture will bring the death of literature":

> In all the confusion, it helps to separate two sets of questions. The first are questions about the value of studying one sort of cultural object or another. The value of studying Shakespeare rather than soap operas can no longer be taken for granted and needs to be argued: what can different sorts of studies achieve, in the way of intellectual and moral training, for example? Such arguments are not easy to make: the example of German concentration camp commanders who were connoisseurs of literature, art, and music has complicated attempts to make claims for the effects of particular sorts of study. But these issues should be confronted head on. (53–54)

While this discussion originally related more strongly to European sensibilities because high-brow literature in America always had a strong subtext that regarded low-brow as a virtue,[38] the debate between literature and cultural studies departments upset sensibilities in America too. Indeed, the discussion was well alive even before cultural studies entered the fray: in the context of postmodernity as such, postmodern writing had already been constantly attacked by the right and the left as undermining the values of high-brow literature and as being elitist at the same time, objections akin to other pairs of mutually exclusive accusations leveled against postmodern writing or deconstruction as encountered in the chapter on *Formations*, and to be encountered again in the final chapter on *Reality*.

Art, moreover, came also under suspicion through the aestheticization of politics undertaken by fascism in general and the Third Reich in particular. Building on Walter Benjamin's remarks in his "The Work of Art in the

---

[38] Referring to Huck Finn and his terror of becoming "sivilized," Culler writes: "Traditionally the American is the man on the run from culture. When cultural studies denigrates literature as elitist, this is hard to distinguish from a long national tradition of bourgeois Philistinism." (*Literary Theory* 53)

Age of Mechanical Reproduction" about fascism's aestheticization of poli-
tics and the politicizing of art as communism's response, Miller argues in
Illustrations that to "politicize art" is "one project of cultural criticism as it
has rapidly developed into a leading way of organizing teaching and
research in the United States and in Europe." This happened in the form of
a countermovement against ideas that art "expresses the essential nature
of some nation or race," and that wants to assert that art is embedded in
history and is not just a "cultural product but a cultural force" (11). The real-
ization that the celebrated values of the purely aesthetic can be employed
to "treat human beings as though they were the raw materials of a work of
art," manipulated and shaped "to fit some rigid scheme, just as dancers
are swept into a dance and must obey its pattern, according to a figure
used by both Schiller and Yeats" (10), has produced a culture shock
whose waves have yet to abate. Returning to Benjamin again, Miller sur-
mises that aestheticizing politics can only culminate in war as the only
available "goal for mass movements on the largest scale" (52). Coover,
against the background of the 1930s in *Whatever Happened to Gloomy
Gus of the Chicago Bears?*, mocks this aestheticization of politics by clev-
erly embedding it in discussions between artists, most of them socialists,
about American Football. As a "form of art," Football commutes between
the political and the aesthetic by reflecting American society's sickness,
naked aggression, and celebration of violence—"A game of Fascists!"—as
well as balance, speed and weight, bursts of freedom, and beauty—"In
football, as in politics, the goal, ultimately, is not ethical but aesthetic" (89–
90; 92–93).

Could it be that approaches to Auschwitz in literature in general and
postmodern literature in particular are to a certain degree arrested by the
thought that such approaches would, in a way, also "treat human beings
as though they were the raw materials of a work of art" on a different level,

thereby running the risk of reproducing what one wants to open up for imagination and understanding? Has "imagining" ever so slightly become something one has to be suspicious of? Before his brief summary about "art after Auschwitz" in the quotation given above from *Further Fridays*, Barth had started out with the writer's imagination:

> Let us suppose a strong, mature artistic imagination, soundly ballasted (but not swamped) by information and experience both of life and of the artist's particular medium; powered by high intelligence and energy; controlled and focused by artistic discipline and training to the point of mastery. Is anything beyond the reach of such an imagination? Are there, in the history of the medium, effects that it cannot hope to surpass? Are there subjects that it cannot compass, or should not even attempt? (56–57)

The transition between this proposition and Barth's paraphrase of the Auschwitz question reads:

> Some knowledgeable people have certainly thought so. In our time, the grim test case has been the Nazi genocide of European Jewry, an evil so appalling in its scale and nature that some critics have argued *not only that art fails in the face of it*, but that the unassimilable fact of it may call into question the very values that make art meaningful, that give our art its cultural validation. [italics added] (57)

The link, it should be remarked, between the failure of the writer's imagination and the questioning of the values that make art meaningful is syntactically effected by the "not only" construction which conflates art and imagination. On the failure of art-as-imagination in the case of the Holocaust, Barth himself remains undecided but could "nevertheless *imagine* the imagination's doing what some 'post-Holocaust' critics, for example, declare that it cannot do" (61). However, the question remains unapproached what "fail" actually means. "Fail" as one can fail an effort, a test, and fall short of expectations? Or failing morally, by falling short of one's ethical standards, duties, or responsibilities? Either way, this proposition by "some critics" seems somewhat misguided since, as has been discussed in a different context in the chapter on *Formations*, there are strong

implications that the ethical and the imagination are not only closely connected, but mutually dependent.

In Barthelme's "Florence Green is 81" from *Come Back, Dr. Caligari,* the elderly lady Florence encounters the news of the concentration camps in a copy of *Life* in 1945:

> It was the issue containing the first pictures from Buchenwald, she could not look away, she read the text, or a little of the text, then she vomited. When she recovered she read the article again, but without understanding it. What did *exterminate* mean? It meant nothing, an eyewitness account mentioned a little girl with one leg thrown alive on top of a truckload of corpses to be burned. Florence was sick. (10)

Florence, who has always made it a habit to purchase canes wherever she travels, later travels to Germany:

> The first German man she saw was a policeman directing traffic. He wore a uniform. Florence walked out into the traffic island and tugged at his sleeve. He bent politely toward the nice old American lady. She lifted her cane, the cane of 1927 from Yellowstone, and cracked his head with it. He fell in a heap in the middle of the street. Then Florence Green rushed awkwardly into the plaza with her cane, beating the people there, men and women, indiscriminately, until she was subdued. (13)

Before approaching the question whether Florence's act is an ethical act or not, one should, by way of imagination, put oneself in her position. Not only is she utterly unclouded by pragmatic considerations, it is not even clear whether Florence imagines anything at all. Is there any imagining at work between her reading the *Life* article and going out and acting on it? If "Florence Green is 81" can be read as an allegory of imagination, is there not strong evidence that it is precisely the *lack* of imagination, or its impossibility, that lies at the heart of Florence Green's action? And if that is the case, would that be a bad thing? But to approach the question of her action's ethicality, the imagination is already at work, and with it the kind of "as if" in the sense Miller arrived at by reading Kant, discussed in the

chapter on *Formations*. Looming circularities notwithstanding, without ima-
gining, without "as if," there may be no way to arrive at an ethical perspec-
tive and an ethical stance, even in cases where what is at stake comes as
close to being unimaginable as it possibly can. But many critics indeed
seem to think otherwise, and too much imagination can bring writers into
critical trouble, as Johnson shows in *Mother Tongues* in her reading of
Sylvia Plath's poems and the criticism directed against her images of the
Holocaust (cf. 153 ff.). The writer's imagination, somehow, has become
personal experience's bad changeling. But while accepting something
monstrous as unethical on the basis of facts might be a valid and a true
assessment even without troubling oneself with any "as if" in the form of
imagining, telling stories, or producing "art," it does not provide the slight-
est clue as to how to *behave* ethically in the face of it, and one might
indeed be stuck with beating people up as the only course of action.

2. Human Essentials: Body Parts & Parting Minds

As has been remarked upon in the chapter introduction, the title *Humanity*
serves as an umbrella term for contexts where violence can be found as
being embedded in or attached to questions of humanity. Consistent with
the fact that the nature of life and especially the nature of death are pos-
sibly the most profound and most persistently engaged questions in
human history, the will to live and the wish to die are indeed visibly and fre-
quently approached in the texts. Both will be focused on in this and the fol-
lowing subchapter, respectively.

One of de Man's most radical propositions was his claim that death is
a displaced name for a linguistic predicament (*The Rhetorics of Romanti-
cism* 81). We cannot possibly know what "death" is like, because there is

no empirical knowledge attainable whatsoever, so the word "death" is a substitute—i. e., a trope—for that what we do not and cannot know, and any "as if" can only elaborate on the trope. This would also implicate that any attempt to "cheat death" is an attempt to defer the figure's irrevocable dis-figurement. The following two sections will trace two major motifs connected to bringing this deferment about: cybernetic augmentation as an attempt to incorporate more durable or efficient components into one's own body and/or become the extension of a machine, and the attempt to leave one's flesh altogether. If the first section focuses on the "bodily" part and the second on the part of the "mind," it should be noted that this merely reflects two different and at times rather playful approaches to a common question and should not be taken to indicate that the texts, save some unavoidable distinctions dictated by language, hold them to be fundamentally different in the Cartesian sense.

Cheating Death

For human beings, the earliest and most trivial method employed to become something in the way of a cyborg might actually have been an overdetermined attachment to television sets. Fergus, a character from Pynchon's *V*, effects this in the following way:

> He'd devised an ingenious sleep-switch, receiving its signal from two electrodes placed on the inner skin of his forearm. When Fergus dropped below a certain level of awareness, the skin resistance increased over a preset value to operate the switch. Fergus thus became an extension of the TV set. (56)

This motif has evolved to considerable complexity. Instead of merely being "addressed" by the actors while standing in front of a wall-sized TV set as in Bradbury's and Truffaut's *Fahrenheit 451*, the mother of the teenage character Bobby in Gibson's *Count Zero* is glued to a Hitachi set that combines Virtual Reality with a TV soap. Even though their shabby apartment

in one of the sprawl's gigantic housing complexes does not really transform into the "labyrinthine complexities of *People of Importance*, whose female protagonist's life she'd shared through a socket for almost twenty years," the latter becomes as real and as important as the former. That way, Bobby can effectively put an end to his mother's constant intrusions into the private sphere of his room when, one day, "he was big enough to walk into the front room with a ballpeen hammer and cock it over the Hitachi; you touch my stuff again and I'll kill your friends, Mom, all of 'em. She never tried it again." (35) Bobby, it should be added, is an aspiring net runner like Case in *Neuromancer—Count Zero* is the second installment of Gibson's Sprawl trilogy—and sufficiently familiar with different realities himself; a topic that will be further explored in the following section. Becoming an "extension" of an entertainment device is not, in postmodern literature, restricted to TV sets or computers; in Italo Calvino's *If on a Winter's Night a Traveler* it is the reader who becomes an extension of the novel by cybernetic means. But here, progress is slow: "'Not one novel being produced holds up. Either the programming has to be revised or the reader is not functioning.'" (128). As Gabriele Schwab writes in her essay "Cyborgs and Cybernetic Intertexts: On Postmodern Phantasms of Body and Mind":

> This and related thought experiments that fantasize about a technological reconstruction of the human sphere by reconceptualizing body and mind have captured our imaginations during the postmodern era: Samuel Beckett's experimental bodies, Thomas Pynchon's cybernetic organisms, Laurie Anderson's high-tech mutants, David Byrne's techno-citizens, and the organless bodies and disjunctive minds in Deleuze and Guattari's *Anti-Oedipus*— all exemplify our fascination with the conversion of organisms into machines. (193)

It could be argued that the line between "prosthesis" and "cybernetic augmentation" is a very thin one, and that the difference, ultimately, is entirely figurative. But whereas prostheses try to make up for a loss and a lack, cybernetic augmentations enhance one's abilities from running faster to

living longer, from making split-second decisions as a rule to processing vast amounts of information in the blink of an eye. Repair and augmentation seem distinct in many respects. Augmentation, in this sense, frequently figures in practically all of the texts, and while the prosthesis can be understood in principle as an *effect* of violence, augmentation here is often found to be its *cause*. In contemporary and not overly futuristic settings, cybernetic augmentation can be met with on an intermediary level. The German spy's knife-switch in Pynchon's "Under the Rose" from *Slow Learner*, in a condensed form later incorporated in *V*, serves as a threat of enhanced physical capabilities to the British agents present at the scene, and at the same time to scare a child through the implication that its wearer is a puppet running on switches and electricity, "simple, and clean":

> Shiny and black against the unsunned flesh was a miniature electric switch, single-pole, double-throw, sewn into the skin. Thin silver wires ran from its terminals up the arm, disappearing under the sleeve. (115)

While knife-switches might not have been that uncommon, electric ones surely were, and they were most certainly not "sewn into the flesh" around 1898, the year of the Fashoda crisis the story is set against. Bongo-Shaftsbury's knife-switch seems to constitute a fitting precursor to Molly's retractable blades in Gibson's Sprawl trilogy. Moreover, the abovementioned fluency of the body/mind distinction already shows its import: body and mind overlap through the combination of the physical enhancement with the implication of being or having become an automaton. In Pynchon's *V*, augmentations and bodily enhancements become part of the major story line. The artificial eye of "Fräulein Meroving," to give an example, has not much in common with a prosthesis; inside it are "delicately-wrought wheels, springs, ratchets of a watch, wound by a gold key which Fräulein Meroving wore on a slender chain round her neck," a mechanism which represents the workings of an intricate watch, setting in motion "twelve vaguely zodiacal shapes, placed annular on the surface of

the bubble to represent the iris and also the face of the watch" (237). Following through with this principle, one can imagine, as the character Stencil daydreams in Pynchon's *V*, a cyborg woman with "servo-actuators" to "move her flawless nylon limbs," a "platinum heart-pump," and a "vagina of polyethylene" (411). Like Bongo-Shaftsbury's knife-switch, Fräulein Meroving's artificial eye also has its equivalent in Gibson's Sprawl trilogy. In *Count Zero*, artificial eyes are not only capable of seeing but also of recording, and actors have their real eyes replaced by implants in order to produce the high-res experience of "looking through one's eyes" as described above in the context of the TV soap. And these eyes are, of course, a commodity, which becomes particularly clear after the gruesome murder of an actor the protagonist tried to but could not prevent:

> "Damn it, Turner," the man jerking free, the handle of the case clutched in both hands now. "They weren't damaged. Only some minor abrasion on one of the corneas. *They belong to the Net. It was in her contract, Turner.*"
>
> And he'd turned away, his guts knotted tight around eight glasses of straight Scotch, and fought the nausea. And he'd continued to fight it, held it off for nine years, until, in his flight from the Dutchman, all the memory of it had come down on him, had fallen on him in London, in Heathrow, and he'd leaned forward, without pausing in his progress down yet another corridor, and vomited into a blue plastic waste canister. (94)

Comprising cast and audience, cybernetic augmentation develops from artful clockworks and daydreams to the realities of production and commodity, spanning actors' optical enhancements "worth several million New Yen" as well as cheap "Hitachi sets." This development, then, makes it also possible to save Turner's life in *Count Zero* after he is killed by "a kilogram of recrystallized hexogene and flaked TNT"—but, true to the laws of commodification, only because it is also met by the monetary means:

> Because he had a good agent, he had a good contract. Because he had a good contract, he was in Singapore an hour after the explosion. Most of him, anyway. [...]
>
> It took the Dutchman and his team three months to put Turner together

again. They cloned a square meter of skin for him, grew it on slabs of collagen and shark-cartilage polysaccharides. They bought eyes and genitals on the open market. The eyes were green. (1)

Where classical prostheses are involved in texts with non-futuristic settings, they are also often reinterpreted to something resembling augmentation, as in the cases of the Russian operative Tchitcherine in Pynchon's *Gravity's Rainbow* or the Dead Father in Barthelme's *The Dead Father*. Tchitcherine, wounded countless times in the course of the second World War—"Steel teeth wink as he talks. Under his pompadour is a silver plate. Gold wirework threads in three-dimensional tattoo among the fine wreckage of cartilage and bone inside his right knee joint"—is known for his almost superhuman acquired capabilities: "In and out of all the vibrant flesh moves the mad scavenger Tchitcherine, who is more metal than anything else." (337). Barthelme's Dead Father's artificial leg not only serves him well in terms of practicability and subterfuge:

> The left leg, entirely mechanical, said to be the administrative center of his operations, working ceaselessly night and day through all the hours for the good of all. In the left leg, in sudden tucks or niches, we find things we need. Facilities for confession, small booths with sliding doors, people are noticeably freer in confessing to the Dead Father than to any priest, of course! he's dead. (4)

And he has not come by it by "accident":

> How did you come by it? asked Thomas. Accident or design?
>
> The latter, said the Dead Father. In my vastness, there was room for, necessity of, every kind of experience. I therefore decided that mechanical experience was a part of experience there was room for, in my vastness. I wanted to know what machines know. (13)

And what do machines "know," besides how to ceaselessly work for the good of all? "They dream, when they dream, of stopping. Of last things." (13) But machines, when incorporated into the body, the Dead Father not excluded, are more often employed to stopping someone else, like Bongo-

Shaftsbury's knife-switch, Molly's razors, or the Yakuza assassin's artificial thumb with its monomolecular filament, mentioned in the chapter on *Composition*.

Moreover, violence seems attached to cybernetic augmentation in yet another manner. The very moment organic integrity is superseded by distinctive and replaceable components, the fear of dying is more and more reduced but compensated for by the concurrently increasing threat of disassembly. This, again, can manifest itself in numerous ways from the visionary to the realistic. In Pynchon's texts, this ranges from the character Profane's dreams related to the story of the boy who searches far and wide to have a golden screw removed residing in his navel, only to have "his ass fall off" when the curse at last is lifted (Pynchon, *V* 39–40), to the violent disassembly of the "Bad Priest," actually a woman, trapped under a cellar's fallen beam after an air raid on Valletta, by a group of children (*V* 341–44). But, once established, the motif of disassembly does not stop at augmented characters: still fully human beings on one side of the spectrum and sentient puppets on the other are also disassembled in the texts. In Coover's counterpart to Oedipa's and Metzger's strip poker game from *The Crying of Lot 49*, there is the "unlucky gambler who bet and lost, one by one, all his body parts" (*Ghost Town* 15), and in Barthelme's "Subpoena" from *Sadness*, a character proposes to disassemble himself, starting with the head, in lieu of paying an enormous sum for a "Paid Companionship Tax" (113–14). For puppets, disassembly usually spells death as well, and in Coover's *Pinocchio in Venice*, many puppets are cruelly tortured and disassembled by the authorities (cf., e. g., 141, 146, 246–48). But with Pinocchio himself, the motif's structural logic of life and death is suddenly reversed: here it is the puppet's highly sexualized disassembly by the fairy through which Pinocchio not only "transcends" his fear of disassembly but becomes a human boy (220–22).

Violent disassembly, at least in some areas, has come to be identified as a motif of postmodern culture as such. Schwab, in her abovequoted essay "Cyborgs and Cybernetic Intertexts," calls attention to how this motif has, for example, been applied to the successful manufacture of the so-called "Garbage-Pail Kids" from bubblegum pictures "traded on the margins of commercial toy culture under the desks of schoolchildren." These pictures are depictions of "violently attacked or abused cyborg paper dolls" who are "all technologically or otherwise mutilated" and whose "market and exchange value among children again reveals a cultural obsession with phantasms of the fragmented body":

> And finally—how could he be missing from this American crew of postmodern kids?—there is Adam Bomb, the tough guy with a joystick and the crucial button he must just have pressed, because pieces of fragmented bodies and severed limbs are flying all over the place. (197–98)

In postmodern criticism too, a certain preoccupation with puppets, death, and disassembly can be encountered. In *The Rhetorics of Romanticism*, de Man's reading of Kleist's "Über das Marionettentheater," de Man actually warns to "avoid the pathos of an imagery of bodily mutilation and not forget that we are dealing with textual models," but goes on to say:

> When, in the concluding lines of Kleist's text, K is said to be "ein wenig zerstreut," then we are to read, on the strength of all that goes before, zerstreut not only as distracted but also as dispersed, scattered, and dismembered. (289)

This has been quoted before: but whereas the "dance of the puppets" was foregrounded in the chapter on *Fragmentation*, there is another passage in Kleist's essay, the "briskly told story of an English technician able to build such perfect mechanical legs that a mutilated man will be able to dance with them in Schiller-like perfection" (287), blurring the line between prosthesis and augmentation. Like the dance of the puppets, the perfect mechanical dance is also "a dance of death and mutilation," a grace won by way

of mutilation like the puppets' life is won by way of death. This follows a trajectory that is not altogether different from the movements and counter-movements of assembly and disassembly in the literary texts. Two final examples of such movements will be given, from Coover's *Lucky Pierre* and Gibson's *Neuromancer*, respectively. Both are, again, highly sexual-ized throughout—a treatment that can be found, perhaps fittingly, quite often in conjunction with assembly and disassembly, including Pinocchio's and that of the false priest from Pynchon's *V.*

In *Lucky Pierre*, Pierre receives a parcel that turns out to be a former colleague of his. But "slight assembly" is required:

> —Wait a minute! I recognize you now! Aren't you old Kate from the ani-mation studio?
>
> —Useta be, afore they disassembled me into that box and put me out in circulation, but travel puts a strain on your ol' reckanizables. Which reminds me: I ain't peed since the days a wooden dildos—should I use that big cistern over there, or—? (110)

Needless to say, Lucky Pierre puts her together in a rather crude fashion, hampered by a confusing assembly plan, broken or missing parts, and his own general ineptitude:

> He sifts through the components, sorting out the parts, pairing them up, inspecting them for nicks and bruises, matching broken bits. He locates pieces of backbone and, by sizing them, manages to assemble a more or less recognizable spine, a frame for the rest. There are fragments missing at both ends, so he juryrigs linkups to the head and hips with wire. [...] He finds what looks like a slab of shouldered torso and an upper arm, but the screw threads don't match. (108)

This done, Kate becomes his partner through several adventures in Pierre's celluloidal world, and this particular circle closes when Lucky Pierre himself is disassembled, albeit only temporarily. Schlegel, or at least Romanticism, is also involved:

> He is in the operating room. The operating theater, as the doctor calls it,

> for she is giving a lecture there to a large audience on the disease of romanticism, using his body for her demonstration. She has disassembled it, the better to display the deep structure of the malady, and the parts lie scattered about on the operating table, which is more like a large butcher's block. He has lost the sensation in all these parts except for the penis, which, standing on the table all alone, is so hard it hurts. (300)

But being "scattered about" is not always fun; in literary and critical texts alike, it is rather the dark side of augmentation. The second example, from Gibson's *Neuromancer*, also explores cybernetic augmentation's movement between assembly and disassembly, life and death. Observed by an audience that includes the protagonists Molly and Case, the psychopathically sadistic and violent character Riviera, physically a cybernetically enhanced illusionist and mentally a "product of the rubble rings that fringe the radioactive core of old Bonn" (97), gives a public performance with his holographic abilities. A life-sized projection of "himself" methodically assembles a holographic projection of "Molly" which, after completion, begins to disassemble its assembler:

> Now limbs and torso had merged, and Riviera shuddered. The head was there, the image complete. Molly's face, with smooth quicksilver drowning the eyes. Riviera and the Molly-image began to couple with a renewed intensity. Then the image slowly extended a clawed hand and extruded its five blades. With a languorous, dreamlike deliberation, it raked Riviera's bare back. Case caught a glimpse of exposed spine, but he was already up and stumbling for the door. [...]
>
> He could guess the end, the finale. There was an inverted symmetry: Riviera puts the dreamgirl together, the dreamgirl takes him apart. With those hands. Dreamblood soaking the rotten lace. (140–41)

Case feels that Riviera's performance will greatly accelerate his eventual demise at the real Molly's hands, though her reactions to Riviera's performance are covered by her lens implants: "Her face was blank; the colors of Riviera's projection heaved and turned in her mirrors" (140). But more threads are woven into this motif: cybernetic implants are expensive, and Molly once paid for them by "renting out" her body as a puppet and, unwittingly, participated in someone else's disassembly as well, a motif to

be explored later in the third subchapter.

Leaving the Flesh

Diametrically opposed to but concomitant with the desire for cybernetic augmentation is the drive to leave the flesh. While this might sound familiar, leaving the flesh in postmodern texts is very different from spiritual traditions. The body might at times be still a "burden" in the classical sense, but in most cases the mind's final destination turns out to be as mundane as the circumstances of its transformation are fantastic. A great many possibilities are played through in the texts to unbind characters' "minds" from their bodies or any specific part of it.

The unbinding can come about, e. g., through the peculiarity of the protagonist's existence as Pinocchio's or Lucky Pierre's in Coover's texts. Not only are both protagonists able to consciously follow and survive their complete disassembly; both are ultimately unbound from their physical existence by being or becoming a film reel, in Pierre's case, or the text of his very own adventures in Pinocchio's; both kinds of existence being, incidentally, infinitely reproducible in principle. Or it is achieved by a certain style, as Acker's protagonists are not bound to the bodies they inherit at one point of the story or another: shifting from one piece of pastiche to the next, the same minds can inhabit different characters from different backgrounds. This happens, for example, when the continuously identifiable characters Abhor and Shivai take on many different "roles" in Acker's *Empire of the Senseless,* starting out as Molly and Case from Gibson's *Neuromancer* and ending up as Jim and Huck from Twain's *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*. In Barth's earlier books, characters are not only identifiable as encoded "authors" but they have a habit of impersonating other characters so excessively that their lives in the texts border on the incorporeal, and sometimes they dissolve into myth altogether. Other charac-

ters in Barth's texts, like Coover's Pinocchio, are actually star constellations, or documents, or the very story they are telling—but they do not necessarily know that, and they have often to follow outrageously twisted storylines with considerable amounts of bloodshed to arrive at this knowledge both in the sense of the text's final revelation and the characters' own realizations of this fact. Pynchon's Lieutenant Slothrop from *Gravity's Rainbow,* who "fades" in the novel's final chapters into increasingly remote and insubstantial artifacts, could arguably figure too as a character who sheds his corporeal existence—instead of merely escaping physically from those entities that try to regain control over his physical and sexual life, a control they had wielded over Slothrop since his conditioning shortly after birth.

As one would come to expect, the means in Gibson's texts are more technical in nature, but the desire to exist in a different medium, especially in the sense of "media," and to become "reproducible," are similarly structured. Characters like Johnny from "Johnny Mnemonic," Case from *Neuromancer*, or Bobby or Slide from *Count Zero* all watch the body with contempt. This is especially obvious when the story is told from a first person perspective. In "Johnny Mnemonic," the narrator is prone to use images as "Ralfi wasn't alone. Eighty kilos of blond California beef perched alertly in the chair next to his, martial arts written all over him" (2) or "He was clutching his wrist white-knuckle tight, blood trickling from between his fingers. [...] He was going to need a tendon stapler." (5). Case, after he "stole from his employers" in *Neuromancer*, has his net running talent chemically damaged in retribution; the process is reversible, but Case does not know that yet:

> They damaged his nervous system with a wartime Russian mycotoxin.
>
> Strapped to a bed in a Memphis hotel, his talent burning out micron by micron, he hallucinated for thirty hours. The damage was minute, subtle, and utterly effective.

> For Case, who'd lived for the bodiless exultation of cyberspace, it was the Fall. In the bars he'd frequented as a cowboy hotshot, the elite stance involved a certain relaxed contempt for the flesh. The body was meat. Case fell into the prison of his own flesh. (5–6)

Attempts to leave this flesh are numerous. In Gibson's "The Winter Market" from *Burning Chrome*, the terminally ill dream-movie artist Lise is "translated" into ROM:

> "She wasn't the first." Traffic drums past overhead.
>
> "No, but she's sure as hell the first person *you* ever met who went and translated themself into a hardwired program. You lose any sleep when whatsisname did it, three-four years ago, the French kid, the writer?"
>
> "I didn't really think about it, much. A gimmick. PR . . ."
>
> "He's still writing. The weird thing is, he's going to *be* writing, unless somebody blows up his mainframe. . . .
>
> I wince, shake my head. "But it's not *him*, is it? It's just a program."
>
> "Interesting point. Hard to say. With Lise, though, we find out. She's not a writer." (129)

But not only does leaving the flesh for a piece of ROM merely exchange the prison of the flesh with the prison of the mainframe, it also cannot escape the laws of the market:

> "When you have to edit her next release. Which will almost certainly be soon, because she needs money bad. She's taking up a lot of ROM on some corporate mainframe, and her share of *Kings* won't come close to paying for what they had to do to put her there. And you're her editor, Casey. I mean, who else?"
>
> And I just stare at him as he puts the glasses back on, like I can't move at all. (141)

In *Neuromancer,* one of the principal characters, Dixie, is also a piece of ROM, and occasionally he is referred to as "construct," a term usually reserved for artificial intelligences. But unlike others, Dixie would rather prefer to be erased:

> When the construct laughed, it came through as something else, not

> laughter, but a stab of cold down Case's spine. "Do me a favor, boy."
> "What's that, Dix?"
> "This scam of yours, when it's over, you erase this goddam thing." (106)

But while Lise or Dixie are somehow controllably "mapped" into their virtual existences, there is an even more eerie proposition in *Neuromancer*'s final chapter. When Case, at the locus amoenus of a tropical beach in the artificial intelligence's virtual space finally meets his girlfriend Linda again, who was killed early in the novel and possibly even by the AI, she is not "real" even in the increasingly relaxed sense of the word. She exists as a reconstruction, a pure construct, brought back to life by the AI—who just revealed its "true" name as "Neuromancer," a name denoting "the lane to the land of the dead." And Linda does not know that she is living in virtual space, and neither does she know that she is not herself:

> "I *am* the dead, and their land." He laughed. A gull cried. "Stay. If your woman is a ghost, she doesn't know it. Neither will you." (244)

In the second and third installment of Gibson's Sprawl trilogy, the artificial intelligence set free in *Neuromancer* roams the net, having spliced itself up into numerous manifestations of voodoo gods in order to communicate with those who are able to enter virtual reality. With time, indications accumulate in the real world as well as in the net that it has somehow become possible to transfer one's mind into the net completely—which, without any supporting hardware, represents a huge leap forward compared to either being forced to keep one's vulnerable body alive or being mapped onto an equally vulnerable piece of ROM. The knowledge as the "key" to how this might be achieved is pursued by several characters, and one of those who pursue this key most violently and ruthlessly is the incredibly rich Josef Virek, "confined for over a decade to a vat" in "some hideous industrial suburb of Stockholm. Or perhaps of hell." (*Count Zero* 13) But being part of the net, with or without a "backup" body in the real world, still does not

make one immune from being killed, as Virek and his bodyguard software (the "child") have to find out in Virek's virtual Spain—especially when confronted with an angry god whose realm virtual space has become, temporarily "borrowing" the voice of Bobby, one of the protagonists:

> The child spun, the little pistol blurring . . . And crumpled, folded into himself like a deflating balloon, a balloon sucked away into nothing at all, the Browning clattering to the stone path like a forgotten toy.
>
> "My name," a voice said, and Bobby wanted to scream when he realized that it came from his own mouth, "is Samedi, and you have slain my cousin's horse . . ."
>
> And Virek was running, the big coat flapping out behind him, down the curving path with its serpentine benches, and Bobby saw that another of the white crosses waited there, just where the path curved to vanish. Then Virek must have seen it, too; he screamed, and Baron Samedi, Lord of Graveyards, the loa whose kingdom was death, leaned in across Barcelona like a cold dark rain. (232–33)

What the net is for Gibson's characters is the "Electroworld" for Tyrone Slothrop in Pynchon's *Gravity's Rainbow*. Most of the major motifs are present, and there is the additional aspect of the use and abuse of drugs, an aspect that also frequently appears in Acker's treatments of the parting mind motif, especially foregrounded in her rendering of Gibson's *Neuromancer* in *Empire of the Senseless* (cf., e. g., 33–34). For Slothrop, these motifs become connected in an imagined or remembered dialog with his father:

> —Listen Tyrone, you don't know how dangerous that stuff is. Suppose someday you just plug in and go away and never come back? Eh?
>
> —Ho, ho! Don't I wish! What do you think every electrofreak dreams about? You're such an old fuddyduddy! A-and who sez it's a dream, huh? M-maybe *it exists*. Maybe there *is* a Machine to take us away, take us completely, suck us out through the electrodes out of the skull 'n' into the Machine and live there forever with all the other souls it's got stored there. *It* could decide who it would suck out, a-and when. Dope never gave *you* immortality. You hadda come back, every time, into a dying hunk of smelly *meat*! But *We* can live forever, in a clean, honest, purified Electroworld— (699)

How the possibility of the survival of the "mind" in virtual space and the possibility of its complete annihilation, to round this section's discussion off, might already be inextricably linked at the beginning of the twenty-first century, has been outlined by Miller in *Black Holes*. For him, the "transformation of that limited military network into today's immense worldwide cyberspace" generates a paradox. On the one hand, this space increasingly becomes the "archive" of our culture, arguably able to survive the destruction of humankind:

> On the one hand, cyberspace may easily be thought of as a postapocalyptic survival. It is as though when we enter cyberspace we are living virtually beyond the end of the world. We are using what would survive if all the books, manuscripts, and other material archives were destroyed in a nuclear holocaust. [...] [T]he Internet is like the survivor of a nuclear war that has not yet occurred. (115)

On the other hand, in case the military who designed the decentralized Arpanet for the survival of information "were not so smart as they thought," there is the possibility that cyberspace could be "erased" by the enormous magnetic fields a conflict fought with nuclear weapons would generate. In that case, besides the destruction of civilization, the remainderless and irreversible destruction of the archive might still be thinkable, and the "total destruction of the basis of literature and criticism" once invoked by Derrida "may be a danger we still face after all" (115). This danger is exacerbated by the fact that newly generated information is increasingly created directly in the medium of the net, and the transformation and translation of accumulated knowledge into this medium's digital language has also gained considerable momentum—transferring humankind's "mind," as it were, bit by bit into pieces of ROM and other forms of non-volatile memory, a space which might turn out, for the cultural archive as the "mind" of humankind no less than it did for the parting minds of the characters, to be not such a safe place after all.

3. Death Desire: The Calling of Things

Augmenting the body and leaving the flesh as discussed in the preceding subchapter are both affirmative of life as elaborate efforts to enhance one's abilities and life span. Becoming an object in the form of a machine or a puppet or a thing, in contrast, is indicative of the wish to free oneself from one's own troubling mind, to become that which does not and cannot be hurt: not "a parting mind," but "parting with one's mind" becomes the issue. And while the mind without body holds the promise of deferring death, i. e., deferring the trope's dis-figurement possibly forever, the body without mind, in a move of counter-prosopopoeia, holds the promise of breaking the figure's spell altogether. Similar to the operations of prosopopoeia itself, as discussed in the context of tropes in the chapter on *Composition*, and similar to the processes involved in the preceding subchapter's topic of parting minds, violence seems intrinsically involved.

It is certainly not a coincidence that the attempt to break the figure's spell by "parting with one's mind" touches upon the Freudian concept of the death drive which balances and complements the survival instinct in psychoanalytic theory. As will be seen, there are many facets that connect this drive with the desire to become an object. For Pynchon's texts, though, a caveat has to be added in advance: the desire to become an object is intertwined with what has come to be called Pynchon's fetish world of inanimate things. Here, the desire to become an object can also and additionally be read as an autoerotic desire that involves the desire to become one's own fetish. This perspective, though, has been taken care of in critical literature to a great extent and will not be rehearsed in this chapter. Instead, the following two sections will trace violent events along transformations into machines and along "thingifications," where human beings turn into things by means of identification.

Dreaming Machines

However strong the desire to extend one's life happens to be, there seems to be a complementary and equally strong desire for one's life to "come to a halt." This cannot be called "death" in the sense the word is ordinarily used, except in its form as a "displaced figure" which the desire's fulfillment would utterly rob of its power. It has a long history, and it has been brought to extraordinary artistic heights in Romanticism. Here, the "longing for death" not necessarily equals "death" in the ordinary sense, but rather a status of mindlessness that blends the motif of "Erstarrung"—often literally "freezing"—with the motif of grinding on in machine-like ways as a peculiar state resembling neither life nor death. In „Der Leiermann", for example, the 24th stanza from Wilhelm Müller's poem and Schubert's song cycle *Die Winterreise*, the traveler-narrator finally identifies with an old organ grinder, surrounded by ice and snow, mindlessly grinding on —"Und er läßt es gehen alles, wie es will, dreht, und seine Leier steht ihm nimmer still"[39]—while accompanied by Schubert's music with a *Bordun-quinte* (a droned bare fifth) in the piano's left hand part that is incessantly and most mechanically repeated to the most devastating effect. In post-modern texts, this desire corresponds to the desire of a continued existence as an object or a machine.

As a first step toward this "mindless" state, there is the pure fascination with and the passionate attachment to machines. How far does this fascination go, up the inanimate's "evolutionary" ladder? On its bottom rung, there are complex, and especially particularly dangerous, pieces of mass-produced machinery to which passionate love attaches itself in the texts. Examples comprise an MG sports car and a .30-caliber machine gun in Pynchon's *V* (22–23); an Uzi submachine gun in Pynchon's *Vine-*

---

[39] Roughly, "And he lets everything go by, just as it will, grinding on, his organ never ever standing still."

land (104–05); motorbikes in Acker's *My Mother, Demonology* (203); the Maxim machine gun and accurately, almost ceremonially classified military hardware in Barthelme's "Bluebeard" from *Forty Stories* (95) and *Snow White* (68), respectively; or Gibson's Stuka and other military "icons" in *Pattern Recognition* (74–75, 307). The attachment, be it to vehicles or guns, is a highly emotional and also quite obsessive one, as a rule, and the danger of losing life and limb is inextricably involved:

> One bike was leaning over a white Olds whose driver had crossed lanes into the Rebel; another bike, found in the brush well below the freeway, had left blood painted across the highway concrete. Girls lost their legs. Bikers limped into secondhand dealers to buy new death machines. Along one highway in the emptied Southwest, a motorcyclist was still driving, his black helmet, which an eagle had just sailed into, split in half, still hanging around his neck. The biker had lost consciousness and was riding upright without a mind on the road. (Acker, *My Mother, Demonology* 203)

Higher up the ladder are automatons, playing on humankind's fascination with these special kind of machines, especially the eighteenth century's "automaton craze" involving Vaucanson's Duck or Flute Player, the chess-playing Turk (which was a fake), Maillardet's Painter-cum-Poet, and Frederick the Great of Prussia's purported obsession with such mechanical devices. Automata surface in contexts ranging from Prussia's already quoted battlefields to modern warfare, in Pynchon's *Mason & Dixon* and Acker's *Pussy, King of the Pirates*, respectively:

> ["]They are us'd to tales of Frederick's rank'd Automata, executing perfect manoeuvres upon the unending German Plain,—down here in the American Woods, that same War proceeded silently, in persistent Shade, one swift animal Death at a time . . . no Treaty can end it, and when all are dead, Ghosts will go on contending. 'Twas the perfect War. No mercy, no restraint, pure joy in killing. It cannot be let go so easily." (659–60)

> "Human-size automata, female, military, eight of them, in two lines, began to advance. A leg rises straight up, another, military style—1, 2, 1, 2—someone must have first activated them, they kept on closing in on us, for they were planning to annihilate us. That was their one purpose in life.["] (242–43)

Further up the ladder, there are automatons which evolved into sentient beings, or almost so. The most sustained storyline that features a sentient automaton is Pynchon's fantastic and hilarious variation on Vaucanson's Duck in *Mason & Dixon*: an invisible, indestructible duck called "*le Bec de la Mort*, the . . . 'Beak of Death'." This duck initially assails the surveying party's French chef in order to avenge its more vulnerable brethren the chef has slaughtered throughout his career, but ends up as his most vigilant protector (374 ff.). Its futuristic counterpart in this case are Gibson's vehicle anti-theft systems that make less fantastic, but equally semi-serious use of this special case of prosopopoeia, with temperaments ranging from the aggressive to the resolute to the respectful:

> He gave the Porsche a wide berth; cars like that tended to have hypersensitive anti-theft systems, not to mention hyper-aggressive. (*Virtual Light* 59)

> But her bike is there, on B-2, behind a column of nicked concrete.
> "Back *off*," it says when she's five feet away. Not loud, like a car, but it sounds like it means it. (*Virtual Light* 50)

> "Please step back," said the Hawker-Aichi. "Respect my boundaries as I respect yours." It had a beautiful, strangely genderless voice, gentle but firm. (*All Tomorrow's Parties* 53)

On the machine's evolutionary ladder's highest rung, finally, resides the god machine:

> If patterns of ones and zeros were "like" patterns of human lives and deaths, if everything about an individual could be represented in a computer record by a long string of ones and zeros, then what kind of creature would be represented by a long string of lives and deaths? It would have to be up one level at least—an angel, a minor god, something in a UFO. It would take eight human lives and deaths just to form one character in this being's name —its complete dossier might take up a considerable piece of the history of the world. (Pynchon, *Vineland* 90–91).

From there, the fascination with and obsessive attachment to the object, the inanimate, and the machine, smoothly crosses over into the desire to

become a machine oneself: not in the sense of cybernetic augmentation as explored in the preceding subchapter, but in the sense of becoming a "mindlessly grinding on" automaton, a mindless puppet. Two phantasmagorial examples, one from Pynchon's *V* and one from Gibson's *Neuromancer*, will be presented in order to establish a sense for the psychoanalytic motifs and highly sexualized imageries involved in this desire, the first connected to arousal, the second to angst.

In Pynchon's *V*, the character Mélanie has a dream or vision "where the dreamer is unclear whether he is asleep or awake." A figure who doubles for "Papa" and "The German" stands over her bed, watching her, then turns her over in order to be able to reach between her shoulder blades:

> He placed his hand under her shoulder, turned her. The skirt twisted on her thighs: she saw their two inner edges blond and set off by the muskrat skin on the slit of the skirt. The Mélanie in the mirror watched sure fingers move to the center of her back, search, find a small key, which he began to wind.
>
> "I got you in time," he breathed. "You would have stopped, had I not . . ."
>
> The face of the lay figure had been turned toward her, all the time. There was no face.
>
> She woke up, not screaming, but moaning as if sexually aroused. (401–02)

In Gibson's *Neuromancer,* Molly sells her body as a so-called "meat puppet" in order to earn the money for her various cybernetic augmentations. As a meat puppet, the owner is unconscious while the body is running on "software for whatever a customer wants to pay for":

> ["]Joke, to start with, 'cause once they plant the cut-out chip, it seems like free money. Wake up sore, sometimes, but that's it. Renting the goods, is all. You aren't in, when it's all happening.["] (147)

But in Molly's case, the cut-out chip and her "circuitry the Chiba clinics put in weren't compatible," and she begins to have flashbacks, the "worktime

bleeding in" like bad dreams that become worse and worse, until the chip finally gives way and she "comes up" during puppet time:

> "Senator, he was. Knew his fat face right away. We were both covered with blood. We weren't alone. She was all . . ." She tugged at the temper-foam. "Dead. And that fat prick, he was saying, 'What's wrong. What's wrong?' 'Cause we weren't finished yet. . . ."
>
> She began to shake.
>
> "So I guess I gave the Senator what he really wanted, you know?" The shaking stopped. She released the foam and ran her fingers back through her dark hair. "The house put a contract out on me. I had to hide for a while." (148–49)

In many respects, the wind-up device between Mélanie's shoulders and the software Molly's body is running on are not all that different. In the course of both Mélanie's and Molly's "dream states," imageries of the unconscious become alive, being acted out by a body that has been transformed into a machine. The body as a machine running on various kinds of software is among the most noticeable postmodern extensions to the motif of the desire to become a machine, and it is, in most cases, a rather violent one. And the most effective one, too: other approaches are probed, one of which is physical fusion, but the results are not entirely satisfactory. Gottfried's fusion with the rocket in Pynchon's *Gravity's Rainbow* cannot survive its ultimate destination (cf. 750–51), and Tiny Montgomery's fusion with his fighter plane via drugs and neural interfaces in Gibson and Swanwick's "Dogfight" from *Burning Chrome* lasts only as long as it remains in a combat-ready state (cf. 155, 165–66). Still another approach to effect the transformation into a machine consists of a "drain" of human characteristics, building on the motif of industrialization's de-humanizing potential. This drain can range from the imperceptible to the aggressive. Again, dream states and the software of the unconscious come into play, when, for example, Miller writes in *Black Holes* that "the possibility that the human brain is no more than an extraordinarily powerful, complex, and

compact computer haunts us these days like a bad dream that we cannot quite remember" (113). This follows the same lines of thought as, e. g., the lively marital argument in Pynchon's "Entropy" from *Slow Learner*:

> "Miriam has been reading science fiction again. That and *Scientific American*. It seems she is, as we say, bugged at this idea of computers acting like people. I made the mistake of saying you can just as well turn that around, and talk about human behavior like a program fed into an IBM machine." (86)

There seems to be a subtext in both examples that technology has already effected transformations of the physical existence in such ways as to render these distinction almost meaningless. This subtext can be found expressed in Gibson's "'Virtual Lit': A Discussion":

> You know people always say, well, is it going to be man or the machine? And I'm always left speechless because they're already the same thing. But it takes too long to explain that. [...] Technology is not some little thing you buy from Japan that's expensive and sits on your desk. It's what we are, it's what we do, that's why we're here, that's why we're in this insane city that's eight miles high. (50–51)

The motif of such porous borders between "man and machine" is present in the texts in many forms. There are, e. g., cars as "motorized, metal extensions" of human lives that eventually *become* these lives by metonymic displacement in *The Crying of Lot 49* (8–9) or in Barthelme's "Me and Miss Mandible" from *Come Back, Dr. Caligari* (98–99). Another example with far-reaching implications is the "war" in Pynchon's *Gravity's Rainbow* as something that keeps *things* alive while the "Germans-and-Japs story was only one, rather surrealistic version of the real War," a "real War" that is always ongoing, "killing lots and lots of people" (644–45). This War is, moreover, a machinery quite unlike anything resembling organic unity—and it is precisely this machine-like quality that gives it the status of "being alive" in the meandering, Pynchonesque moves and countermoves of prosopopoeia:

> The War does not appear to want a folk-consciousness, not even of the sort the Germans have engineered, ein Volk ein Führer—it wants a machine of many separate parts, not oneness, but a complexity. . . . Yet who can presume to say what the War wants, so vast and aloof is it . . . *so absentee*. Perhaps the War isn't even an awareness—not a life at all, really. There may only be some cruel, accidental resemblance to life. (130–31)

This is immediately followed by the case of a schizoid inmate of the "White Visitation" who believes he is World War II, and measurements indeed suggest a certain correspondence between the war's development and this patient's physical conditions.

But this method, eventually, turns out to be even less satisfactory than that of fusion examined before. Being drained of human characteristics might make less human, but not necessarily "more machine." And not much could be gained even if this were the case: the machine one aspires to turn into becomes itself increasingly mindful and alive in the course of the process. It seems, then, that the most effective transformation indeed consists of becoming a puppet or an automaton that runs on various kinds of external or internal software, a motif that, beyond the two examples already given, is treated in the texts many times in numerous forms from the simple to the complex, from the character in Pynchon's *V* whose existence lies "entirely within the Baedeker world—as much a feature of the topography as the other automata: waiters, porters, cabmen, clerks" (70), to the storyline surrounding the "reconstructed" and heavily edited Corto/Armitage personality in Gibson's *Neuromancer*, introduced in the chapter on *Fragmentation*.

This approach's most sustained treatment can be found in Coover's *Whatever Happened to Gloomy Gus of the Chicago Bears?*, which, as has been outlined in the chapters on *Formations* and *Composition*, is also a most hilarious, most politically critical, and most personally insulting treatment in many respects. Set against the 1937 steelworker riots in Chicago,

the story tells in retrospect the life and death of a successful football player by the name of Gloomy Gus. The novella is widely regarded as the third text of Coover's "Nixon Trilogy" since there are many indications that the peculiar characteristics of Gus—and arguably some dialog lines—are modeled after Nixon and the "doggedly determined" way with which he pursued and terminated his political career. Gus's behavior is very much akin to late twentieth century's research and thought experiments on artificial intelligence, as he starts out with the most rudimentary algorithms at his disposal. Focusing on football and women, this forces him to build up his skills by practicing even the most trivial moves as hard and as often as any other, such as, e. g., going offside during a game or holding a woman's hand. The upside is that those skills, once acquired, can scarcely be surpassed; Gus's success in the realms of football and girlfriends are legendary. The downside is that every time he receives a wrong signal that is strong enough to rise above the "noise," he follows the appropriate program—violently tackling and injuring one of his dates and running off with her purse, or scandalizing football fans with falsely triggered behavior on the field, including public sex with a dumbstruck cheerleader which the police breaks up by giving him "the worst beating in his life." This beating is what ends his career: "The intricate mechanism comes unglued—instead of a machine, all that's left is a bag of busted-up junk" (65–68; 138–40, 142–43).

Eventually, Gus is killed during a riot. Shooting breaks out, and a gas grenade is lobbed—which Gus grabs "midair," sprinting "the whole battle line between cops and workers, dodging clubs and stones and even bullets" (33):

> In fact, before he got to the end, everybody was trying to get him, throwing or shooting whatever they had at him. [...] It was only when he'd finished his run and turned back to trot toward the cops with his arms stretched out in a V above his head that one of them shot him. This came as a complete sur-

> prise to him, of course. Leo says he just stood there, crumpling, that panicky twitching look in his face that always comes over him when he gets his signals crossed, and then the gas grenade blew up. (35)

In certain ways, Gus never ceases to have to pretend to be human, and to work hard at it. And not always does he pass, so to speak, the Turing test —or, finally, life as such. Gus's eventual failure to become a successful automaton is certainly due to his "running" on—allegorically speaking— external and extending algorithms instead of internal and evolving ones. It does not even remotely resemble the "dream states" mentioned above; he is either following his programs or, when confronted with different signals of equal strength, remains in a state of confusion until one signal becomes stronger than the other. If he is less successful than he could be—less successful, e. g., than the automata on the German plain or in Baedeker country, less successful than Mélanie or Molly as long as they keep up their "dream states"—it is because he tries to master more than one skill at once, which raises the problem of mixed signals in the first place.

But, ultimately, Molly's puppet time and her successful existence as a machine is also interrupted by "crossed signals," emanating from her newly acquired circuitries and her cut-out chip: crossed signals from the "external hardware" connected to the body's cybernetic augmentation and signals from the "internal software" connected to the unconscious that sustains her puppet state, crossed signals between the preceding and this subchapter's topics: the desire to defer the trope's dis-figuration and the desire to halt its operation.

Thingifications

Another course of action, besides becoming a machine, is the desire to become a thing. This motif too builds upon existing traditions, although more recent ones that date back to the end of the nineteenth century, influ-

encing modernist philosophy and literature.[40] In ethical discourse, turning into a thing—turning oneself as well as being turned—has come to be called "thingification." Usually, it is endowed with negative connotations, to put it mildly, and some of its most recognizable keywords are isolation, enslavement, spiritual death, dehumanization, complete absence of human feelings, and ultimate estrangement. But, true to the characteristics of the death drive, such conditions can indeed become an object of desire, and this kind of desire has a strong presence in postmodern texts. Why would that be so? Has the subject-object relation weakened? Interviewed by Wang Fengzhen and Shaobo Xie in "Stay! Speak, Speak. I Charge Thee, Speak," Miller points out that the print medium "encouraged and reinforced the assumption of the separation of subject and object" by way of unity, autonomy of the self, authority of the author, and the concepts of representation and mimesis—features that generally "depend on relatively rigid boundaries, frontiers, walls." But these boundaries have increasingly given way with cinema and television and, eventually, the Internet:

> The subject/object dichotomy on which philosophy from Descartes to Husserl depended vanishes also, since the television or cinematic or Internet screen is neither objective nor subjective but an extension of a mobile subjectivity that is "wired" into it. (n. p.)

Moreover, specific types of postmodern thought with respect to iterative phenomena as discussed in the chapter on *Iterations*, e. g., mirroring and feedback circuits, and deconstruction's two-step sequence of subverting and exposing seemingly "natural" dualities/hierarchies, further promotes this permeability. Thus, it does not come as a surprise that one of the most frequently discussed topics in postmodern criticism is the Pygmalion motif. In this context, subject and object iterate and replicate in unexpected

---

[40] "Thing Theory," as a branch of critical theory concerned with things and objects in literature, recently produced some critical readings on this topic. An introduction to the roots of America's and American literature's fascination with things can be found, e. g., in Bill Brown's *A Sense of Things: The Object Matter of American Literature*.

ways: the desire and the attempt to "objectify/thingify the other" is often shown to ultimately lead, often subtly but visibly, to self-objectification or self-thingification. Discussing the ethical implications of "using people" in "Using People: Kant with Winnicott," the violence of "colonial, sexual, and even epistemological appropriation," and the power a priori granted to the subject, Johnson places "using people" also in a context where—"less instrumentally but just as commonly"—people use other people "in the service of their own narcissistic consolidation":

> The literary elaboration of this narcissistic enslavement takes the form of idealization and thingification, from Pygmalion's beloved ivory girl to the female bodies turned to milk, cherries, pearls, and gold through the magic of poetry. (47)

This might have some far-reaching implications:

> But perhaps the problem with being used arises from an inequality of power rather than from something inherently unhealthy about *willingly* playing the role of thing. Indeed, what if the capacity to become a subject were something that could best be *learned* from an object? (49)

Against the background of these and other strands of reasoning, one of the most frequent and most important aspects of objectification or thingification in postmodern texts emerges: the desire to turn oneself into an object of art. Several occurrences already touched upon in this chapter and in those on *Iterations* and *Composition* can serve as examples: the self-fetishization of Pynchon's characters; the self-objectification of Acker's characters as a means for breaking out of the subject/object prison built by men; or many of Barth's and Coover's storylines where the heroes aspire to become, or unexpectedly wind up as, an object of art, including the text that tells the hero's story.

But turning oneself into an object of art is not necessarily beneficial for oneself or others. In the context of his colorful perspective of "destruction personified in Lucifer" and Lucifer's "high degree of intelligence to destroy

creation," the German composer Karl-Heinz Stockhausen once stated that the 9/11 terrorist attacks were a "satanic composition" and a "work of art."[41] In "Terror: A Speech after 9-11," Spivak brings forward further aspects of the potential violence of self-objectification:

> Suicide bombing—and in this case the planes were living bombs—is a purposive self-annihilation, a confrontation between oneself and oneself—the extreme end of autoeroticism, killing oneself as other, in the process killing others. It is when one sees oneself as an object, capable of destruction, in a world of objects, so that the destruction of others is indistinguishable from the destruction of the self. (95)

But how does Spivak's assessment, published in 2004, relate to the death drive theory, and would it be in line with what psychologists have written since about the mindset of suicide bombers, based on extensive research and innumerable interviews? There are at least two discrepancies here that should be briefly highlighted. The first objection would be that these intelligent and educated young men from mostly middle-class families who hijacked four planes and led them to crash into the World Trade Center, the Pentagon, and—presumably—the White House or the U. S. Capitol Building, certainly considered themselves as "tools" but not actually as "killing" themselves. For them, and for up to seventy people chosen by each, "death" was far from being an unreadable figure but instead something they could transcend by embracing it in "self-annihilation." Secondly, in the minds of these young men, by all accounts, the destruction of others figured as being clearly and unmistakably different from the act of destructing oneself in the process.

Another form of art closely related to "objects" that frequently surfaces in the texts is collage in general, and the boxes of Joseph Cornell in partic-

---

[41] Stockhausen's clarifications regarding presumably distorted versions initially circulated in the press are available as "Message from Professor Karlheinz Stockhausen." Sept. 19 2001. 1 October 2008 <http://www.stockhausen.org/message_from_karlheinz.html>.

ular. In two of the texts, Coover's *The Grand Hotels (of Joseph Cornell)* and Gibson's *Count Zero,* Cornell's boxes even become important plot devices. Coover transforms Cornell's "Grand Hotel" boxes into fantastic, dreamlike, and very introspective Grand Hotels thriving on conscious and unconscious desires so that these hotels, in a way, "become" the guests and vice versa, which is also reminiscent of what has been said in the context of the "death drive" and the software of the unconscious. In Gibson's text, in contrast, beautiful Cornell-like boxes are created by a semi-sentient machine, residing in the disused mainframes of Tessier-Ashpool's corporate memory cores at *Villa Straylight* on the abandoned orbital station *Freeside*. Precisely these "beautiful things," after surfacing on Earth, trigger the abovementioned violent race for the technical means to "cheat death" by leaving the flesh. Beautiful "found" things that most strongly intersect with the death drive can also be found, as a final example, in Gibson's "Hinterland" from *Burning Chrome.* Spaceships with a single human pilot that navigate on a certain route that comes to be called the "Highway" vanish without a trace and resurface after months or years, with a dead pilot and an object like a ring, e. g., or something resembling a seashell, composed of utterly foreign artificial or biological materials. Each object generates "an entire subbranch" of the related science, "devoted exclusively to the study" of this object, and each object yields a wealth of valuable information (65). The pilots, though, cannot be questioned as to the origin of these objects. They are either mad, dead, or absolutely and singlemindedly focused on suicide, overcoming even the most sophisticated precautions and preventive measures:

> There was no blood at all. The manipulator is a clean machine, able to do a no-mess job in zero g, vacuuming the blood away. She'd died just before Hiro had blown the hatch, her right arm spread out across the white plastic work surface like a medieval drawing, flayed, muscles and other tissues tacked out in a neat symmetrical display, held with a dozen stainless-steel dissecting pins. She bled to death. A surgical manipulator is carefully programmed against suicides, but it can double as a robot dissector, prepar-

ing biologicals for storage.

She'd found a way to fool it. You usually can, with machines, given time. She'd had eight years. (75–76)

But there is no lack of volunteers. And those who are not "taken" on the Highway become also suicidal, presumably out of "profound rejection," and are trained, if they survive, as "surrogates" to try and keep those few returning pilots alive that are neither completely mad nor have yet succeeded in killing themselves. The record of keeping a pilot alive, at the time of the story, stands at two weeks. Whatever happens on the Highway cannot be communicated after the return to the "Hinterland," it seems. Those who make it back alive have no language with which to tell their story:

> At the edge of the Highway every human language unravels in your hands except, perhaps, the language of the shaman, of the cabalist, the language of the mystic intent on mapping hierarchies of demons, angels, saints. (71)

Thus, whatever lies at the edge of the Highway is indistinguishable from death: a displaced name for a linguistic predicament, a non-space in non-time about which no empirical knowledge can be obtained, and about which no account can be given, where the figure has been irrevocable disfigured. Moreover, while the Highway's *objet trouvés* become most precious and valuable subjects of inexhaustible and infinite contemplation, the pilots turn themselves into disposable objects, self-dissected and prepared "for storage."

This does not seem to suggest, once again, that the process of thingification, the process of turning into an object of art by substitution or displacement, is something to be desired. But thingification in the texts is not an entirely negatively connotated process and can, on the contrary, become highly desirable for reasons that are not easily discerned. And indeed, thingification has complex, multibladed qualities, harking back to

its roots in psychoanalytic theory. Freud—in *Jenseits des Lustprinzips* in 1920, fused with his theory of the ego three years later in *Das Ich und das Es*—developed his death drive theory due to an initially puzzling behavior he came to call repetition-compulsion, namely, the retelling and reliving of traumatic experiences: a behavior he could not explain on the basis of the pleasure principle alone. This death drive entails the wish to "return to an inanimate state" but also, as a kind of antidote, the deflection of certain amounts of this drive into destructive physical action directed against others. Tied into this concept, incidentally, are many aspects touched upon in this subchapter, from fetishistic and self-narcissistic impulses to a transformation of destructive and auto-destructive impulses into becoming a work of art.

4. Imagining: Positions of Power

The final subject where considerable amounts of violence can be found relating to questions of humanity are acts of cruelty in the context of power structures. Without delving too deeply into poststructuralist discourse on the nature of power relations, e. g., power as a fundamental and inescapable function of discourse in the Foucauldian sense, it can at least be said that postmodern texts are heavily influenced by poststructuralist theory in this regard. Where power and violence meet in the texts, the most visible motif is "cruelty," on which this subchapter will focus: cruelty against animals; cruelty in the form of torture, slavery, and cannibalism; and cruelty as a failure of the imagination. The first, cruelty against animals, is indicative of "vertical" power relations that allegorically position humans in relation to animals in the way "godlike" positions would relate to the human condition. The second, torture, slavery, and cannibalism, are "horizontal" power relations played out on the same plane. In the third, imagination and ethics

intersect, tying in once again with observations made in this chapter and in the chapter on *Formations* about the convergence of ethics and storytelling. Each aspect will be explored in one of the following sections.

Godly Positions

When the human condition is focused on in the texts, it is often glimpsed at by means of allegory; it often involves animals; and its outlook is often bleak. "Death" looms large, again, and apart from the will to radically pretend to be in the possession of knowledge one cannot possibly possess, humanity's dominant strategy is the acquired ability to radically forget. One such example of radical forgetfulness is the character Henry Burlingame's observation in Barth's *The Sot-Weed Factor* that a party of merry people at an inn are but an island in a sea of madness, using a figure reminiscent of Nietzsche's figure of being asleep on a tiger's back, mentioned in the chapter on *Composition*:

> They remind me of the chickens I once saw fed to a giant snake in Africa: when the snake struck one of them the others squawked and fluttered, but a moment after they were scratching about for corn, or standing on his very back to preen their feathers! How is't these men don't run a-gibbering down the streets, if not that their minds are lulled to sleep? (345)

And he goes on to ask who "'sees the state of things more clearly: the cock that preens on the python's back, or the lunatic that trembles in his cell?'" (345). Another example would be the allegorical childhood memories of the protagonist in Gibson's *Count Zero*:

> Lie still, he heard a voice telling him, years away. Just lay out and relax and pretty soon they'll forget you, forget you in the gray and the dawn and the dew. [...] And his brother was always right, about the squirrels. They came. They forgot the clear glyph of death spelled out below them in patched denim and blue steel; they came, racing along limbs, pausing to sniff the morning, and Turner's .22 cracked, a limp gray body tumbling down. The others scattered, vanishing, and Turner passed the gun to his brother. Again, they waited, waited for the squirrels to forget them. (126)

There is a curious and intimate relationship in almost all of the texts between the power wielded over animals and Christian religion, as a case of direct proportionality between levels of cruelty and strength of faith. Generally, for sure, gods are indeed a rather cruel species—and why should an all-powerful being necessarily be wise and just and gracious and kind in the first place? Especially if, e. g., the Hebrew god from the Tanakh and the Christian god from the New Testament give abundant proof of the opposite, the former for worldly realms, the latter for rather repugnant afterlife continuations? There is a well-known proposition that says that power tends to corrupt, and absolute power corrupts absolutely. Interestingly, this proposition is attributed to the liberal-leaning Roman Catholic Lord Acton, who, in a letter he wrote in 1887, raised it as an argument against the dogma of papal infallibility that had just been adopted by the First Vatican Council against his and others' attempts at intervening in this matter. Furthermore, it should not be forgotten that the value of redemption from suffering does entirely depend on suffering *not* being prevented by the godlike powers who would, of course, be capable of doing so, a paradox related to the age-old problem of theodicy. In Pynchon's *Gravity's Rainbow*, the "hog trail" and the "Hund-Stadt" sequences allude to this motif, and the latter also to that of Thomas Aquinas's deus absconditus. In the former, the settler William, "one of the first Europeans in," got a "pig operation going," driving hogs "back over the long pike to Boston [...] just like sheep or cows." William enjoys their good company and comes "to love their nobility and personal freedom, their gift for finding comfort in the mud on a hot day":

> [...] and you can imagine what the end of the journey, the weighing, slaughter and dreary pigless return back up into the hills must've been like for William. Of course he took it as a parable—knew that the squealing bloody horror at the end of the pike was in exact balance to all their happy sounds, their untroubled pink eyelashes and kind eyes, their smiles, their grace in crosscountry movement. It was a little early for Isaac Newton, but feelings about action and reaction were in the air. William must've been waiting for the one pig that

wouldn't die, that would validate all the ones who'd had to, all his Gadarene swine who'd rushed into extinction like lemmings, possessed not by demons but by trust for men, which the men kept betraying . . . possessed by innocence they couldn't lose . . . by faith in William as another variety of pig, at home with the Earth, sharing the same gift of life. . . . (555)

The Hund-Stadt village in Mecklenburg where, appropriately, ideology takes the place of religion through clever substitution, is inhabited by Dobermans and Shepherds once conditioned "to kill on sight any human except the one who trained him." The dogs, who manage to defend the Hund-Stadt against soldiers and sociologists alike, think that the reflex to "kill-the-stranger" was born in them, although there "might be among them some heresiarchs" who are "careful about suggesting out loud any extra-canine source" for this reflex:

> But in private they point to the remembered image of one human, who has visited only at intervals, but in whose presence they were tranquil and affectionate—from whom came nourishment, kind scratches and strokings, games of fetch-the-stick. Where is he now? Why is he different for some and not for others? (614)

Neither betraying the pigs' trust nor using the dogs as means and not also as ends forecloses a certain sympathy on behalf of the pigs or the dogs whose suffering is thusly brought about. Pynchon applies such a mixture of betrayal and benevolence also to reverse situations where the intent is in principle benevolent, but the execution falls short of expectations. Father Fairing from Pynchon's *V*, e. g., who preaches to the rats in the sewers of New York, is not averse to cooking and eating some of his flock on a regular basis:

> He considered it small enough sacrifice on their part to provide three of their own per day for physical sustenance, in return for the spiritual nourishment he was giving them. (118)

Another motif would be to simply have the power to do so, bereft of any practical or transcendent reason, as in Pynchon's personalized history of

the extermination of the dodos in *Gravity's Rainbow* (cf. 108–10), the protagonist's behavior in Coover's *Ghost Town* who passes injured cattle after a stampede who "gaze up at him pitiably with their big wet eyes, through which he shoots them with his rifle to make their dying short but vivid to them" (60), or the narrator of Barthelme's "I Bought a Little City" from *Amateurs* who does not enjoy himself enough:

> By now I had exercised my proprietorship so lightly and if I do say so myself tactfully that I wondered if I was enjoying myself enough (and I had paid a heavy penny too—near to half my fortune). So I went out on the streets then and shot six thousand dogs. This gave me great satisfaction and you have no idea how wonderfully it improved the city for the better. (54–55)

The city's ostensible "improvement" is immediately undermined as the narrator's action leaves the city with 165,000 dogs to spare.[42]

Yet another motif would be a godlike position that is subjected to rigid cosmic laws which, in a logical somersault, must necessarily have been established by the godlike entity itself. This position is quintessentially ridiculed in Barth's *The Sot-Weed Factor*: the protagonist Ebenezer, at his accountant's desk, devises a system of rules to which ants crossing his ledger are subsequently subjected:

> The rule of the game, which he invested with the inexorability of natural law, was that every time the ant trod unwittingly upon a 3 or a 9, Ebenezer would close his eyes and tap the page thrice, smartly and randomly, with the point of his quill. Although his role of *Deus civi Natura* precluded mercy, his sentiments were unequivocally on the side of the ant: with an effort that brought sweat to his brow he tried by force of thought to steer the hapless creature from dangerous numbers; he opened his eyes after every series of taps, half afraid to look at the paper. The game was profoundly exciting. (43)

Many treatments relating to a perceived interdependence between faith and religion on one side and cruelty and violence against animals on the

---

[42] Barthelme's choice of the number "six thousand" is conspicuous, but a possible allusion to "six million" does not seem to be supported by other story elements.

other can be found across the texts, but they are not restricted to allegory; in a considerable number of examples this interdependence is put into grisly practice. "Did God watch each single Sodomite to be sure he burned?" muses the character "Junior" in Coover's *The Origin of the Brunists* while he tortures and burns ants and beetles alive by putting them into boxes and throwing them into a trash fire, watching them "scramble out and to the top, just like people running to the roof" (272). When three Catholic characters enter the apartment of one of the most ardent Brunist believers, they discover the preparations made for the Brunists' "Second Coming":

> Johnson and Bonali found him in the bathroom, staring into the tub. It was full of water. It was also full of dead cats. "I never knowed you could drown a cat without tyin' a stone to him," Johnson said.
>
> "He must've held them under," Vince reasoned. He tried to think of the antichrist, but it was getting all mixed up. (415–16)

Mixed up, indeed—especially as these three characters do not behave substantially different, only in less spectacular ways. There seems to be an extraordinarily broad range of issues that can make killing animals the most natural thing in the neighborhood of piety.

Another variety is at play in the incessant slaughter of animals in *The Swiss Family Robinson*, already discussed in the chapter on *Formations* alongside Miller's reading in *On Literature*. Here, violence against animals is enacted on a daily basis against the backdrop of colonization, protestant work ethics, and pious prayers. The killing of animals has established itself as an intrinsic feature of plenitude, not a fault but a feature of the new and improved Garden of Eden:

> Wyss's "New Switzerland" is an Edenic world of profusion, of plenitude. It is a world swarming with things to be shot, tamed, or eaten, or farmed and then eaten, if you are clever enough to know how to do so [...] (149)

It could be argued that the same thing applies to rational world views and especially science, where animals are used only as means and not as ends, and where cruelty is effected in the name of "scientist-neutrality," as one character in Pynchon's *Gravity's Rainbow* cynically puts it, relating to animal experiments (58; cf. 52, 76, 90) and "rationalized forms of death":

> "I would set you free, if I knew how. But it isn't free out here. All the animals, the plants, the minerals, even other kinds of men, are being broken and reassembled every day, to preserve an elite few, who are the loudest to theorize on freedom, but the least free of all. I can't even give you hope that it will be different someday—that They'll come out, and forget death, and lose Their technology's elaborate terror, and stop using every other form of life without mercy to keep what haunts men down to a tolerable level—and be like you instead, simply here, simply alive. . . ." (230)

The reason the speaker concedes, "to keep what haunts men down to a tolerable level," can at least be grasped and discussed on a rational basis: whether inflicting suffering on animals would be defensible on the grounds that it helps alleviate the suffering of humans. The reasons that lie at the root of religiously motivated cruelty against animals, in contrast, are neither easily discerned nor easily opposed with the help of a discourse built upon rational dialog and understanding. Moreover, the worst period of "scientific cruelty" against animals in recorded history, it should be noted, was based on mind/body distinctions and the assumption that animals, having no soul, are mindless machines that do not and cannot feel pain even if their pain looks genuine—propositions not in the least brought about, not to speak of substantiated, by rational thinking or scientific knowledge. But science left to its own devices can go astray too, a kind of "rational hubris" also often mocked in the texts as in the example from Pynchon's *Gravity's Rainbow* given above or, coinciding with patriotism, during the preparations for the Rosenberg executions in Coover's *The Public Burning* where the "workmen line up and sing 'Hail to the Chief,' then test out the chair by burning six or seven chimpanzees in it" (172).

Still another motif in this regard is violence against animals perpetrated by children. This encompasses the shooting of squirrels in Gibson's *Count Zero* mentioned above; countless instances in Coover's text; children shooting pigeons with cap-guns or pulling crabs' legs off in Acker's texts; shooting sparrows and rats with BB or .22 caliber guns in Barth's; or popping off the wings off crickets in Barthelme's. Most of these are, as one would expect, connected to images of "American Childhood" although—especially in Coover's *The Origin of the Brunists*—motivations for cruelty against animals are often reinforced by religious beliefs. The most serious example on the side of non-religiously motivated cruelty against animals in this respect can be found in Coover's *John's Wife.* John is a successful businessman whose most pronounced characteristics mirror characteristics habitually attributed to American society as such—also comprising ruthlessness and violence, but not necessarily in gratuitous or wanton ways. Where ruthlessness and violence are profit-driven, they become not only acceptable but even something to behold with admiration, though certainly not by all, as the character whose perspective dominates in the following passage testifies:

> His parents had given him his first BB gun for his eighth birthday and he had spent the following summer shooting starlings out of the trees and sparrows out of the bushes. True to form, he had even managed to turn play to profit, earning a dime a dead bird for knocking the pigeons off the roof of the flour mill, still in operation back then. His favorite game was to try to kill two sparrows with one shot, which he sometimes managed to do by popping them when they came together to mate. His nasty little pals always saw something hilarious in that. (175)

When they find two turtledoves sitting on a clothesline, John bets he could get them too with one shot, which is physically impossible. He wins the bet by shooting the first, digging out the pellet from the body, waiting for the second to return, and dropping this target too with a difficult shot. But the flattened pellet did not kill the animal:

> John poked at it meditatively with his BB gun, then put his foot over its head, hesitating for a moment as though to feel the beat of its life under the sole of his sneaker. Marge begged him to let it go, it was only wounded, she could take it home and make it well again, and he smiled at her in a generous and friendly way and said, well, he'd be glad to, but then he'd lose his bet, wouldn't he? And while he was smiling like that and giving every appearance of being reasonable and considering her appeal and the essential rightness of it, he shifted his weight onto the bird's head. (176)

Channeled into the "rationale" of maximizing profit, this motif joins religiously motivated violence and "neutral-scientific" endeavors as the third building block of cruelty against animals in the texts. Behind each of these rationales for cruelty and violence proposed by the texts, something deeply and disturbingly irrational lurks, subtly or overtly, and madness as well.

Human Positions

While positions of power in the preceding section, against which cruelty and violence enfold, were, metaphorically speaking, vertically aligned between different orders or power, the positions of power to be discussed in this section are horizontally aligned within one and the same order and differentiated, first and foremost, by unequal distribution. Three motifs stand out for their relative frequency in this regard: torture, slavery, and cannibalism. Torture is regularly invoked in Barth's, Coover's, and Pynchon's mythical, historical, or fantastic settings, and in more modern forms in Acker's and Gibson's contemporary or futuristic settings as well, and it is often concurrent with slavery, ranging from individual or organized sex slavery to de-facto slave systems on a national basis. Torture has many different faces. In Acker's texts, for example, it is often inflicted in the name of medical research, often perpetrated by former Nazi scientists (cf., e. g., *Empire of the Senses* 23 f., 51, 76 ff. et al.; esp. 142 ff.; *My Mother, Demonology* 89 f., 214–15 et al.). In Barth's texts, from *Sabbatical* onward,

it can be found in the context of American intelligence operations in South and Middle America, of the Vietnam war, or of the Shah's and later the Ayatollah's secret police, to name a few (cf., e. g., *Sabbatical* 27, 32 f., 57, 181 f. et al.). In Pynchon's texts, while instances of torture are rare (though not entirely absent, cf. *V* 461–65), it is the motif of slavery that is often foregrounded, from plotlines about individual and organized sex slavery (*Vineland* 134 ff.) to the full-fledged, novel-length exploration of the phenomenon of slavery in *Mason & Dixon*.

In the latter, the motifs of madness, profit, and religious discourse touched upon in the preceding section surface again. Madness brought about by slavery is "recycled" and utilized as a punishment directed against "particularly disobedient" female employees who are pushed into a madman's cell, a procedure they sometimes survive, and sometimes not (151–52), in madhouses that are kept not by the Cape Town authorities but by corporations into whose responsibility those slave workers who become insane quite naturally fall. And again, behind madness and maximizing profit, religion also rears its head:

> ". . . for Commerce without Slavery is unthinkable, whilst Slavery must ever include, as an essential Term, the Gallows,— Slavery without the Gallows being as hollow and Waste a Proceeding, as a Crusade without the Cross. (108)

The third motif, cannibalism, stands in close proximity to the preceding section's motif of cruelty against animals. Two treatments can be differentiated: the promotion of animals to human status and the demotion of humans to animal status.

In the course of the former, the consumption of animals becomes ethically tainted by invoking cannibalistic behavior. This treatment is most pronounced in Gibson's and Barth's texts, albeit in very different contexts. The increasing development and production of synthetic food in Gibson's

worlds entail a certain uneasiness with eating real animals. In the less futuristic Bridge trilogy, the consumption of animals and cannibalism are juxtaposed by inference, when, e. g., the kind of people who would "come down from the hills and barbecue dogs in your fireplace" in a given neighborhood are also the reason why one would not want to sleep in the car —"Kinda cannibal, around there" (*All Tomorrow's Parties* 38, 130). In the more futuristic Sprawl trilogy, the consumption of animals has also become "unnatural" to a certain extent:

> Molly and Armitage ate in silence, while Case sawed shakily at his steak, reducing it to uneaten bite-sized fragments, which he pushed around in the rich sauce, finally abandoning the whole thing.
>
> "Jesus," Molly said, her own plate empty, "gimme that. You know what this costs?" She took his plate. "They gotta raise a whole animal for years and then they kill it. This isn't vat stuff." She forked a mouthful up and chewed.
>
> "Not hungry," Case managed. (137–38)

In Barth's texts, too, animals often become "human" through figurative language, and their consumption invokes cannibalism. This can be triggered by the protagonist's suicidal moods in *The End of the Road* who envies "all dead things" including "the animals whose fried bodies I chewed at mealtimes" (111), or by the protagonist's perspective in *Giles Goat-Boy* who, raised with goats, perceives the consumption of animals as a cannibalistic act. From his perspective, a waiter pauses before him with a "tray of burnt and dismembered chicken-bodies" that almost have him "retching at the sight," or his companion, at a campfire, dumps the "charred carcasses" of "a quantity of migratory songbirds and small mammals" into his lap to comparable effect (186, 205).

Demoting humans to animal status, as a second option, oscillates between demoting those who eat and those who are eaten, as in this flashback to World War III in Gibson's *Neuromancer*:

> The last [holographic projection] was small and dim, as if it were an image Riviera had had to drag across some private distance of memory and time. She had to kneel to examine it; it had been projected from the vantage point of a small child. [...] Children. Feral, in rags. Teeth glittering like knives. Sores on their contorted faces. The soldier on his back, mouth and throat open to the sky. They were feeding. (210)

In Acker's *Blood and Guts in High School* it is a function of business, when a building in which "two families and one pimp were sleeping" is burned down by the landlord to collect the insurance money:

> The landlord sold the charred lot for lots of money to McDonald's, a multinational fast food concern. This is how poor people become transformed into hamburger meat. (56)

Often, literal or figurative cannibalism in the texts works toward establishing positions of power. After having related several instances of cannibalism, the last of which tells the story of an orderly who ate his superior—an army officer and also his lover—in accordance with this superior's last will, Acker's narrator states in *Empire of the Senseless*:

> I don't think humans fuck therefore lovingly relate to each other in equality, whatever that is or means, but out of needs for power and control. Humans relate to other humans by eating each other. (54)

In Barth's *Letters,* a character from a family line occupied with manipulating American history, writes in a letter to his son:

> More than once, Pontiac & his brothers had eaten brave captives to acquire their virtues; did he imagine that the whites could swallow whole nations of Indians without becoming in the process somewhat redden'd forever? (121)

The whites, of course, have somewhat "redden'd forever" in the sense of having blood on their hands. But in what respect do virtues become manifest, if any? And how can the physical annihilation of the enemy, be it by literally eating the flesh of individuals or figuratively swallowing whole nations, transfer such virtues from those who are eaten to those who eat,

especially when both kinds of cannibalism, the practical and the allegorical one but the latter even more so, are rather connected to establishing positions of power? However, these questions only arise if one is led astray by the historical setting; the quotation works neither on the literal nor on the figurative plane, and it becomes only intelligible in terms of myth. In myth, and in those texts that are set against mythical or fairy tale backdrops, cannibalism counts among the most dominant motifs: "eating each other," as it has been observed in the chapters on *Formations* and *Composition*, has considerable formative power and is closely related to creation and to redemption as well.

Imagining Ethics

To close this subchapter on power positions and cruelty and the whole chapter on *Humanity* as well, this final section will return to important aspects that have been encountered at the beginning of this chapter in the context of the possibility or impossibility of storytelling and art after the Holocaust, and in the context of storytelling as a viable approach to ethical positions, as has been more thoroughly investigated in the first chapter on *Formations*. Both aspects are closely linked to the question of imagination, or rather the lack thereof. In Gibson's *Count Zero*, the narrator tells the short and happy story of "The Wig," the first hacker to figure out where the "obsolete silicon," outdated hard- and software, went: to the "African backwaters," where he "felt like a shark cruising a swimming pool thick with caviar":

> The Wig worked the Africans for a week, incidentally bringing about the collapse of at least three governments and causing untold human suffering. At the end of his week, fat with the cream of several million laughably tiny bank accounts, he retired. As he was going out, the locusts were coming in; other people had gotten the African idea.
>
> The Wig sat on the beach at Cannes for two years, ingesting only the most expensive designer drugs and periodically flicking on a tiny Hosaka

> television to study the bloated bodies of dead Africans with a strange and curiously innocent intensity. (121)

What is at work here is the lack of imagination: the lack of imagination what a certain action might bring about, and the lack of imagination with regard to suffering. Of course, "death by hacking" is even more remote and impersonal as the "delivery" of smart bombs by way of phantasmagorical video images, and much has been said and written throughout the history of warfare about the increasingly remote and abstract position of the victim for those who pull the trigger or press the button. Ever since the crossbow has been invented as the first "trigger class" weapon, denoting weapons which do not depend on physical abilities at the moment of release other than aiming it at the target, questions have been raised to this effect. But is this "abstractness" really at the heart of the matter, denoting *the* hindrance to being able to imagine the suffering of others? It might not, all things considered: all through recorded history, human imagination has demonstrated its unlimited ability to be impervious to the suffering of others, even and especially in very intimate and personal contexts of violence, one of the most egregious of which, torture, has already been mentioned in the preceding section. In the first part of *The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World*, Elaine Scarry shows how far this can go—but she also points out how the lack of imagination is supported by a lack of means to express pain in an intelligible way, a thought to be returned to later.

How, then, could one's imagination possibly be expanded? Or, to phrase it in terms often used by American pragmatists, among others, how would it be possible to include more and more beings into the group of those one is able to feel compassion for?

Once more, this question leads back to Miller's reading of Kant and the categorical imperative in *The Ethics of Reading*, as discussed in the

chapter on *Formations*. According to Miller, testing a particular action's underlying maxim whether it would qualify as a universal rule, Kant's "as if," has much if not everything to do with telling stories. Arguably, humans understand the world by telling stories about the world in general: not only to each other, but also in the form of the torrent of stories humans habitually tell themselves in their unceasing and uninterrupted inner dialogs. Reading literature would, in this vein, expand the imagination, and with it the sensitivity for the suffering of others. This proposition is also voiced, for example, by Spivak in "Ethics and Politics in Tagore, Coetzee, and Certain Scenes of Teaching" with regard to "Paul Wolfowitz, the ferocious Deputy Secretary of Defense who was the chief talking head for the war on Iraq," with whom she lived, as a graduate student, in the same house:

> He was a political Science undergraduate, disciple of Allan Bloom, the conservative political philosopher. As I have watched him on television lately, I have often thought that if he had had serious training in literary reading and/or the imagining of the enemy as human, his position on Iraq would not be so inflexible. This is not a verifiable conviction. But it is in view of such hopes that humanities teaching acts itself out. (23)

For Spivak, "literary reading has to be learned," but then the literary text "gives rhetorical signals to the reader, which lead to activating the readerly imagination" (22). And it does so in a literature-specific way:

> "Literary reading teaches us to learn from the singular and the unverifiable. It is not that literary reading does not generalize. It is just that those generalizations are not on evidentiary ground." (23).

A frequently voiced objection, not only against literature in general but also against literary academic institutions in particular, is precisely that there is no such "evidentiary ground." But when the singular and the unverifiable is abandoned in favor of a more broadened approach toward such evidentiary ground, the "as if" can be turned upside down by a certain line of argument, as Culler's reading of Flaubert's notebook in *Flaubert: The Uses of Uncertainty* shows:

> To narrate the failure of a single love or the destruction of one individual's hopes would not prove that all is vanity and so seems scarcely worth doing. Far better to create a narrator who, from a position above the world, can assert that all is vanity and cite brief *exempla*. (53–54)

According to his notebook, Flaubert—at least during his earlier work—aims at a narrative position where it matters less and less that people kill each other, climbing to such heights of narrative omniscience as to be comparable to Nature or God from where one can reflect on the "pettiness of our virtues and crimes, our 'grandeur' and baseness." On which Culler comments:

> Effective distancing requires, in one sense, a lack of imagination; if one is to remain unmoved, on one's tower, by the spectacle of men killing one another, one must treat it simply as a visual scene and abandon any tendency to imagine the detail of their quarrels. If one plays the giant for whom the affairs of myrmidons are of no consequence, one will be inclined to dismiss them impatiently and ill-disposed to reconstruct the causal history of the slayings. (54)

Concomitant with charges attacking the lack of evidentiary ground is often the claim that, with regard to literature, literary studies, and academic institutions, the "real world" were elsewhere. But, as Johnson observes in *A World of Difference*, the "real world" is even elsewhere from a soldier's point of view:

> Implicit [...] is the assumption that violence is more real than safety, the physical more real than the intellectual, war more real than school. So ordinary are these assumptions that I was recently startled to come across (in some waiting-room reading I can no longer retrieve) a reference to "the 'real world,' as the G.I.'s used to say." Suddenly it became clear to me that the "real world" was constantly being put in quotation marks, always being defined as where "we" are not. (3)

Different perceptions of the real, as Johnson points out, seem "nothing other than perceptions of the boundary of institutions," and it makes no difference whether this institution is the university or the U. S. Army. The world is always "outside." But institutions itself are "*real* articulations of

power":

> They are strategies of containment (to use Jameson's phrase) designed to mobilize some impulses and to deactivate others. Always ideological, they are also heuristically, if not existentially, inescapable. (3)

While literature itself is not an institution, it certainly becomes institutionalized when studied in an organized way—which seems an almost unavoidable process if "literary reading" is, as Spivak argues, something that does not come naturally but has to be learned. Now, if the attribute of being "real" is shifted from supposedly evidentiary ground to articulations of power within institutions, literature and literary studies and its competitors for the "real" are on eye level, and there is indeed overwhelming practical and historical evidence that the "as if" in the sense of telling stories, alongside evolved and evolving behavior not easily discerned on account of its transparency and seeming neutrality, is the epistemological foundation for ethical considerations. The problem is that these stories do not have to be benign. Indeed, more often than not the most malignant stories—again, without evidentiary ground and based on the articulation of power within institutions—have been read as if they were indeed suited for becoming a universal rule. The aforementioned cruelty against animals perpetrated by "Cartesian" science, for example, was based precisely on such malignant stories that had become a universal rule and an ethical guideline.

Moreover, even if storytelling happens to expand the imagination, it does not necessarily expand the group of those one has learned to feel compassion for, and the expansion of the imagination might also meet some difficulties on the level of composition. As Scarry argues in *The Body in Pain*, whatever pain achieves, "it achieves in part through its unsharability, and it ensures this unsharability through its resistance to language" (4). From the perspective of those who suffer, pain not only actively resists language but even "actively destroys it" by bringing about a "rever-

sion to a state anterior to language, to the sounds and cries a human being makes before language is learned" (4). But, even in the case of articulate attempts, how can pain be related by language if, following Scarry's line of argument, the "as if" structure seems to be restricted to "two and only two metaphors" that "reappear again and again (regardless of whether the immediate context of the vocalization is medical or literary or legal)" and whose "inner workings are problematic":

> The first specifies an external agent of the pain, a weapon that is pictured as producing the pain; and the second specifies bodily damage that is pictured as accompanying the pain. Thus a person may say, "It feels as though a hammer is coming down on my spine" even where there is no hammer; or "It feels as if my arm is broken at each joint and the jagged ends are sticking through the skin" even where the bones of the arms are intact and the surface of the skin is unbroken. (15)

The first metaphor locates pain in the weapon, which can give pain and take it away, the second locates pain in the wound. Instead of a mental state, pain becomes a function of objects, and of objects which are not there. Of course they *could* be there; there could be a hammer and a broken bone, but this would not validate the description but make it firmly redundant instead, as when the hammer coming down would feel like a hammer coming down and the broken bone like a broken bone.

But in spite of all these difficulties, storytelling still seems to be the most promising way to go: without "external" factors like stories, "internal" experiences are rarely transferred. Certainly everybody has, at one point, experienced physical pain, but this seems only weakly related to an individual's ability to imagine someone else's pain, and it seems to bear no consequences whatsoever with regard to the group of beings whose suffering one is able to be attentive to and compassionate about. Reading Roland Barthes's *Mythologies* in *Romanticism and Contemporary Criticism: The Gauss Seminar and Other Papers*, de Man writes:

> As we say of bombs that they overkill, we can say of literature that it over-means. This referential suggestiveness, which accounts for the fact that one responds with much stronger emotion to a fictional narrative than to an actual event, is of course illusionary and something for which a science of literature (whether we call it stylistics or semiology) should account without being taken in by it. (171)

This capacity to overmean, even if or maybe precisely because it is an illusion, would certainly contribute to storytelling's principal potential to make an "as if" more vivid than one's own experience. But, as the saying goes, tracers work both ways—and the power to overmean can also cause an ethical backlash whose repercussions are proportional to the dubiousness of the story and the "as if" involved, and to the malignancy of the "law" derived from it. Theoretically, sound reasoning would be prohibitive of such developments, but it should be remembered, as discussed in the chapter on *Formations*, that even Kant's brief and seemingly well-arranged "as if's" run into possibly insurmountable problems, and to ascertain, even with the most acute and rigid reasoning at one's disposal, the suitability of much more complex and exceedingly messy "as if's" can well be called an impossible endeavor. Similar to King Arthur's decision in Barthelme's *The King* to refrain from using his power, the weapon engineers in Barthelme's "Report" from *Unspeakable Practices, Unnatural Acts* eventually refrain from using theirs. The long list of the most despicable weapon systems their brilliant minds have devised also includes the power of words:

> ["]We have a secret word that, if pronounced, produces multiple fractures in all living things in an area the size of four football fields."
>
>   "That's why—"
>
>   "Yes. Some damned fool couldn't keep his mouth shut. The point is that the whole structure of enemy life is within our power to *rend*, *vitiate*, *devour*, and *crush*.["] (61)

Though the engineers, finally, hold back these weapons out of a "moral sense," this moral sense itself seems somewhat dubious:

"We *could* unleash all this technology at once. You can imagine what would happen then. But that's not the interesting thing. [...] The interesting thing is that we have a *moral sense*. It is on punched cards, perhaps the most advanced and sensitive moral sense the world has ever known. [...]

I confidently predict, although we *could* employ all this splendid new weaponry I've been telling you about, *we're not going to do it.*" (62)

The problem with this moral sense is that it is provided by an external source, the "punched cards," and that it is the engineers' belief in this external source that causes their decision—"With the great new moral tool, how could we go wrong?" (62). If, accordingly, our moral sense is "stored" in stories in which we believe, very many things can go terribly wrong indeed, and do and did so throughout history.

Since this problem is not going to go away, the most important contribution postmodern writing has to offer, all things considered, and particularly with regard to ethics, might indeed be to make those narrative structures visible that underlie ethical positions, to cross-check formative stories against their own creative processes and probe their mechanisms of composition and performativity, to read and tell stories recursively as stories told and read by utilizing its iterative arsenal, to expose through fragmentation and other "guerilla tactics" those structural assumptions and preconditions that accompany stories as a kind of contraband, seemingly completely natural and "neutral" and therefore most effectively concealed.

Chapter VI:
Reality

While the fifth chapter on *Humanity* followed the clustering of violent events along a range of topics on the textual plane, this final chapter investigates forms of violence connected to events in the world: attacks raised in the public discourse against postmodern writers, texts, and critical theory. In these attacks, two different ways in which violence manifests itself have been found to complement each other. On the one hand, the figurative and rhetorical language employed in the attacks mirror, as will be seen, not only many of the more formal aspects of violence encountered in the chapters on *Fragmentation* and *Composition*, but often closely match forms of violence on the narrative plane that have been explored in the chapters on *Formations* and *Iterations*.

The second way in which violence manifests itself in these attacks is what is actually claimed or targeted in these attacks. From collapsing a postmodern writer with her often unstable, suicidal, and homicidal characters, or maintaining that postmodern texts promote the abandonment of civilization and the return to a world of chaos where no one is safe, to casting a postmodern critic as a war criminal who participated in the Holocaust: all these attacks would be considered crass in any public discourse.

Applying the findings from the preceding chapters, this final chapter sets out to explore how structures and processes identified as being intimately related to violence in postmodern literature and literary criticism are reproduced in these attacks and how they operate—and how they might constitute yet another instance of self-similarity at a different magnitude, adding yet another level to those where these structures and processes have already been observed to be at work.

1. Framing the Text: The Acker Construct

Censorship, conflation of writer and character, and the accusation of plagiarism are among the adversities Acker was—and to a certain degree after her death still is—subjected to. It is felt that erasing the difference between writer and character, as can be observed in the procedural rhetoric of a German censoring board and in the actions and attitudes of certain publishers, amounts to more than a mere fallacy. Rather, it ties in with topics touched upon in the chapter on *Formations* with respect to the responsibilities and irresponsibilities of art and artists, freedom of speech, and the right to keep a secret as a powerful intrinsic characteristic of literature and democracy alike. To quote Miller again from "Derrida and Literature," it should always be possible to say "I have just written a novel in which I imagine an axe-murderer and tell the story of his life" (64) without being identified with that axe-murderer and the story of his life. In the following sections, three aspects of this and related cases will be presented. The first and second section focus on literal instead of figurative readings and on statements that collapse Acker with her characters. The third section will highlight, alongside a case of alleged plagiarism, how literal reading can also be employed as a weapon to defuse a form of "guerilla writing," examples of which have been investigated in the chapter on *Fragmentation*, and to negate wholesale its implications and intentions.

Please Remove

In *My Death My Life by Pier Paolo Pasolini*, Acker describes a "daughter/ father" relationship that in no uncertain terms embodies an examination of Oedipal structures, power relations, and creative and aesthetic processes as discussed in the chapters on *Iterations* and *Composition*:

> My father is the power. He is a fascist. To be against my father is to be

> anti-authoritarian sexually perverse unstable insane. [...]
>
> To think for myself is what I want. My language is my irrationality. Watch desire carefully. Desire burns up all the old dead language morality. I'm not interested in truth. My father willed to rape me because in that he didn't want me to think for myself because he didn't think for himself. My father isn't my real father. This is a fact. I want a man. I don't want this man this stepfather who has killed off the man I love. I have no way of getting the man I love who is my real father. My stepfather, society, is anything but the city of art.
>
> I will resurrect the city of art, I mean this, because it is there I and you this is the real desire. (215–16)

Most pronounced, this motif can be found in story lines in Acker's *My Mother, Demonology* and in *Blood and Guts in Highschool*. In the former, the father-as-artist burns his daughter alive to transform horror into art, as discussed in the chapter on *Composition*. In the latter, the first person narrator, a "daughter" named Janey, lives with her "father" in a surreal sexual relationship which not only plays out many of the aforementioned motifs, but holds a strong tongue-in-cheek resemblance to bourgeois relationships, fraught with the most banal complications where one would expect rather more exciting endeavors. This is strikingly similar to Barthelme's technique in *Snow White*, which also deflates runaway fantasies by foregrounding the most banal everyday situations against the backdrop of a sexual relationship that most people would label as outrageous. Both cases offer considerable resistance against the co-option of shock as pointed out by Bomberger against Jameson and discussed in the chapters on *Fragmentation* and *Composition*. Inverted and at times uncannily disfigured motifs from the Oedipal myth and from fairy tales also play a role in *Blood and Guts in Highschool.* Yet, the setting caused the German *Federal Inspection Office for Harmful Publication to Minors* in 1986, supported by other reasons sketched in the following section, to effectively ban the novel in Germany:

> In this novel the young protagonist, Janey, gets in touch with sexual intercourse early in her life. Already at the age of 10 she has sexual intercourse with her father. As was shown in detail, they are also having anal in-

tercourse, cunnilingus and fellatio. Child sex as well as incest are belittled by these descriptions.**[43]**

How could that happen? It happens, as many cases of blacklisted publications in Germany show, by way of a literal reading. Literal reading has been encountered several times as a potent weapon from the chapter on *Formations* on, where it figured in the form of "reading literally" and "taking seriously," entailing the most rigid execution of the law and exaction of punishment. Or, in a different context in the chapter on *Composition*, it has been shown how the unconscious or deliberate decision to read literally instead of figuratively can discriminate against women's texts. As Acker herself puts it in an interview with Sylvère Lotringer, reprinted under the title "Devoured by Myths" in *Hannibal Lecter, My Father*:

> LOTRINGER: Experimentality was the major accusation?
>
> ACKER: No. First there was kindersex ...
>
> LOTRINGER: Ah ah.
>
> ACKER: Which is great. I kept wondering where's kindersex in the novel at first. That's between Janey and her father. They didn't get it that it was a double play. They thought it was real. They took everything absolutely literally. Janey has sex with her father, that's kindersex. Then there's S/M, which is probably the most correct thing they came up with. Yes, there's S/M in the book. And then there's experimentality. (19)

It should be added that in America, surprisingly, Acker had a run-in with a publisher about *Blood and Guts in Highschool* regarding not sex, but violence *(Hannibal Lecter, My Father* 216). Surprisingly because sex is most often involved in America when art is scandalized or scandalizing, whereas many European countries and especially Germany have an equally disproportionate problem with the aestheticization of violence.

But literal reading is only one of the reasons involved in the censoring

---

[43] Translated by Frank Mecklenburg in Acker, *Hannibal Lecter, My Father* 145. For the complete text of the German Inspection Office's decision see 142–48.

board's decision; another important reason cited by the board was Acker's alleged identity with characters from her texts, a topic that will be focused on in the following section.

Creative Identity

Contributing to the blacklisting of Acker's *Blood and Guts in Highschool* in Germany was that Acker once had worked as a stripper. To quote the decision's translation again from *Hannibal Lecter, My Father*:

> After being confronted with the fact that she had already written pornography before and performed in sex shows she was accused of imitating traditional literature. She was quoted by her own lines: "Blood and guts (from the original title) was an attempt to experiment with writing."
>
> All this makes clear that this novel does not reach the level worthy to be of value to the pluralistic society. (148)

Putting aside the last paragraph's puzzling non sequitur, one might wonder how this framing of a writer could possibly be justified. But there had already been numerous cases of this kind of framing, ready to be picked up on, directed against Acker's personality and character throughout her career as a writer and after her death. In the aforementioned interview with Lotringer in *Hannibal Lecter, My Father*, Acker recalls:

> After I went to California? Oh I know what happened. David Antin said to me, There's one magazine of prose work that you could publish in that's in the poetry world—Carol Berger's magazine. So I sent her some material and she sent back the usual note, Oh great stuff, lots of energy, send more. So I'm babysitting one night for David and Eleanor Antin and I see this letter on the floor. I see my name so, of course, I read the letter and it's from Carol Berger's saying, This woman is a total nutcase, lock her up in a loony-bin, thinking that these stories were all about me. It was very hard, I was very very sensitive in those days, but I remember being very fascinated that the work had had that kind of power. (6)

Again, "literal" reading seems to be involved, and again it might also factor that Acker is a female writer, in accordance with Johnson's observation in

The Feminist Difference about the consistent differentiation in critical texts with regard to reading male writers figuratively and female writers literally, discussed in the chapter on *Composition*. As has been noted in the chapter on *Iterations* on the occasion of numerous instances of self-framing in her texts, Acker integrates this framing into her writing, often in uncanny and also rather violent loops where "Kathy Constructs" freely oscillate between textual levels and meta-levels—an uncanniness that might, possibly, echo the "fascination" Acker felt when she encountered the letter from the editors to find herself cast in the role of her characters.

Which did not stop with Acker's death. Notwithstanding all her essays and non-fiction pieces and numerous statements and testimonials to that effect like Lotringer's "Well, I know for a fact that you're totally different from what you write" (20), Acker is unceasingly and unremittingly cast and quite literally "framed" as her fictional characters. With the exception of *My Mother, Demonology* and *Pussy, King of the Pirates,* the cover art of *all* fictional work by Acker in print at the time of writing employs photographic images of Acker which evoke, in some cases explicitly, a correspondence in mood or motif to the texts' respective storylines—as, e. g., the cover design of *Rip-Off Red, Girl Detective* which displays a black-and-white montage of a photograph of Acker in the foreground against a blurred and menacing Manhattan skyline. Now how would it come across if publishers consistently worked photographic images of Dickens, Dostoevsky, or DeLillo into their cover art in similar ways? And why, for example, did this not happen even once to Barth *despite* his incessant playful casting of himself as a persona in his texts and vice versa, from his casting of himself as the character "the Author" in *Letters* to the "Novelist Emeritus" in *Coming Soon!!!,* not to mention Barth's persistent innuendos in his essays and interviews to that effect? In the light of the mechanisms discussed in *Iterations* and especially Johnson's point about gender-differentiating read-

ing, many of Acker's American publishers seem to have more in common with Germany's *Federal Inspection Office* than they should be comfortable with.

Sample and Hold

In the chapter "The Law and the Doll" from *In Memoriam to Identity*, Acker tells the story of a puppet maker named Capitol who is sued by another puppet maker, "a big fat pig Capitol later thought who is old and rich and doesn't even make his own work because he's so old," on the grounds of plagiarism for "replicating not using a tiny one of his pieces" (261–62). The chapter, and with it the novel, proceeds with an imaginary trial in a court made up by her puppets and ends with wholesale beheadings, reminiscent of the showdown in Gibson's *Mona Lisa Overdrive* in which the aforementioned "Judge" and other mechanical puppets, created by the character Slick to cope with posttraumatic stress symptoms after his experiences with law and punishment, violently "redeem" their existence.

What had actually happened was that Acker had taken a rather dubious piece of writing from *The Pirate* by Harold Robbins, reworked it in a fashion quite typical for her style, and concatenated it with other plot elements in *My Death My Life by Pier Paolo Pasolini*—indeed "using" it in ways not even remotely akin to what could possibly be understood by "replicating." As Acker describes the well-publicized incident, again in her interview with Lotringer in *Hannibal Lecter, My Father*:

> Robbins is really soft core porn, so I wanted to see what would happen if you changed contexts and just upped the sexuality of the language. It's a simplistic example of deconstruction. (13)

No one could accuse Acker for being too subtle in this regard, but the effect was just the same:

> There is a scene there where a rich white woman walks into a disco and picks up a black boy and has sex with him. I changed it to be about Jacqueline Onassis and I entitled the piece "I Want to Be Raped Every Night. Story of a Rich Woman." I think the joke's quite obvious, but the journalist called my publisher and then she called Harold Robbins' publisher, and their response was that, my God, we've got a plagiarist in our midst. (12)

Whereof her publisher immediately agreed to pull Acker's novel from the bookstores and promised to have her "sign a public apology to Harold Robbins"—all this without consulting or even informing Acker on this matter. This bears not even a remote resemblance to standard operating procedures, as Acker correctly remarks:

> This is not standard literary practice by any means. This in fact is banning. When I heard about this, I said you could do what you want with your edition of the book but I'm certainly not signing a public apology for something I'm not guilty of. I'm not guilty of plagiarism. (12)

What surfaces here corresponds to what has been dubbed "guerilla warfare" in the chapter on *Fragmentation*, waged with the arsenal of postmodern writing strategies—whereupon, in this case, The Establishment Strikes Back, and quite successfully at that.

2. Debasing the Style: Postmodern Literature

Postmodern literature, just like postmodern literary criticism or literary theory, never lacked detractors of the most varied kind and the most distinguished provenance, but there were three full frontal assaults on postmodern writing launched by fellow writers that stood out: Gore Vidal's essay "American Plastic: The Matter of Fiction" from 1974, John Gardner's *On Moral Fiction* from 1978, and Tom Wolfe's essay "Stalking the Billion-Footed Beast" in *Harper's Magazine* from 1989. And, as it turned out, they also stand out when read against the backdrop of violence in terms of

what has been discussed so far.

What will be touched upon in this subchapter is the often violent imagery in the figurative language of the texts, and how violence manifests itself rhetorically in the form of ad hominem attacks, often employing the same set of violent imagery—how these purportedly critical readings seamlessly advance from attacking postmodern texts to assaulting their writers' alleged mind-sets and intentions never fails to perplex. This will be complemented by samples of figurative violence employed by postmodern writers in countering these attacks. The major focus, though, will be on the structural aspects of these attacks, with violence as an implicit element. On the one hand, this will cover how whole plots and storylines can be found to be "figuratively employed" that mirror violent narratives encountered in the texts in the preceding chapters; a prime example would be the hero's quest and the prophet's calling in Wolfe's essay, to be explored in the third section. On the other hand, this will cover the ways in which Vidal, Gardner, and Wolfe proceed to develop their respective arguments, and how these ways closely match certain types of discourse that have also been encountered in the preceding chapters: types of discourse that, particularly, have been exposed in postmodern texts as surreptitiously transporting assumptions belonging to seemingly neutral and thus often invisible ideologies. Violence in postmodern texts, after all, and this has been laid down as a major premise in the preface, can neither be said to appear as an end in itself nor as a dominant theme elaborated upon as such in the texts, but rather as a means, or a collection of tools—and one of these tools has been set to work precisely in order to expose such assumptions and to make seemingly neutral ideologies and power structures visible.

While all three texts by Vidal, Gardner, and Wolfe are, in parts or in toto, directed against postmodern literature in general, Barth is explicitly

attacked by all three writers; Coover by Gardner and Wolfe; and Pynchon and Barthelme by Gardner. Other postmodern writers are also mentioned, most notably John Hawkes and William Gaddis, but Barth, Pynchon, Barthelme, and Coover are deliberately targeted and quoted at some length. For a brief overview, criticism is explicitly aimed at Barth's *The Sot-Weed Factor* (Vidal 134), *Giles Goat-Boy* (Vidal 134–35; Gardner 94–95), *Lost in the Funhouse* (Vidal 135) and *Chimera* (Gardner 14; Wolfe 49–50); Barthelme's "Paraguay" from *City Life*, *Snow White*, "A City of Churches" from *Sadness,* and *The Dead Father* (Gardner 80–81); and Coover's "A Pedestrian Accident" from *Pricksongs & Descants* (Gardner 74–76*)* and "Beginnings" from *In Bed One Night* (Wolfe 50–51). Coover's *The Public Burning* and Pynchon's *Gravity's Rainbow (Gardner* 195–96) are also mentioned, but without quotations from the texts.

While Barth's reply to these attacks in *Further Fridays* is rather lenient toward Gardner—"Those of us who cordially knew Gardner (and we were his principal targets) merely sighed: There goes Bad John again, popping off at his peers" (137)—and widely ignores Vidal after all, his evaluation of Gardner's attack does not mince words nevertheless:

> A dozen years ago, the novelist and polemicist John Gardner laid into his fellow fiction writers at kneecap level with the AK-47 of "moral fiction": Nearly all of us, he charged, were delinquent in the fictive area of moral representation, which Gardner held to be the historical glory, indeed virtually the function, of fiction in general and the novel in particular. If one took him at his word, when the assault-rifle smoke cleared virtually no literary contemporary remained upright except the gunman himself. (137)

Barth's evaluation of Wolfe's essay employs similar violent figures:

> Now—just when you thought it was safe to re-enter the waters, or jungle, of contemporary fiction—along comes the old New Journalist and new old-fashioned-realistic novelist Tom Wolfe, packing the elephant gun of Social Realism. [...] Wolfe declares the recent literary landscape a neo-fabulist wasteland and proceeds to bang away, Gardner-style, not at the "billion-footed beast" of Reality after all, but at his fellow fictionists—until, when the

smoke clears, voilà (and déjà vu): He stands almost alone, beside an uncomfortable-looking John Updike [...] (138)

The accusations of lack of morality and literary feebleness are accompanied in all three texts from Vidal, Gardner, and Wolfe by the recurring motif of bashing postmodern literature for its "affiliations" with "university lecture halls" and "academic" writing. This parallels the suspicions critical theory arouses in certain corners merely on behalf of its academic nature; suspicions that will also play an important role in the following subchapter on de Man's wartime journalism. But why should a robust and cordial dialog between writers, teachers, and writer-teachers with some of the most talented writers on one side and some of the most advanced institutes of learning on the other be a marker for degradation and decline *unless* there is a deep-seated bias against education and higher learning in the first place? As Robert Towers—upon being quoted in Wolfe's essay—points out in his *New York Times* piece "The Flap Over Tom Wolfe: How Real is the Retreat From Realism?", complementing his point that there "never was a mass defection from realism" and that Wolfe creates "a convenient myth—or strawman—for his purposes":

> Even in the heyday of post-modernism and metafiction, a healthy pluralism existed in all the major writing programs. Good writer-teachers like John Barth and Bernard Malamud and Wallace Stegner (to name three of widely differing theory and practice) have been primarily concerned with the spotting and encouragement of talent in its many manifestations, not the production of followers and clones. (n. p.)

And, of course, there is another rather obvious argument against this perspective, voiced by Barthelme at the Writers' Symposium "'Nothing but Darkness and Talk?'" on "Traditional Values and Iconoclastic Fiction":

> [...] The discussion went on at undue length, it seemed to me, about writers working for universities. What ought to be said about that is this: that most of the best physicists in the country are affiliated with universities. No one leaps to the conclusion that because of this, they are academics—that is, less than red-blooded physicists. The same thing applies to writers. (237)

It might turn out that Barthelme's analogy is too optimistic—during periods of progressively increasing conservatism, especially religious conservatism with fundamentalist underpinnings, physicists and scientists affiliated with the academic community can fall indeed under the same suspicion as their writer-teacher colleagues.

To sum it up, the disputes followed and explored in the following three sections will be shown to reproduce, sometimes with astonishing accuracy, discursive modes discussed in the preceding chapters. Since the most outstanding examples move along lines investigated in the chapters on *Iterations*, *Composition*, and *Formations*, the sections have been named accordingly.

Iterations

Condensed from only two pages of Vidal's "American Plastic: The Matter of Fiction" (142–44), three accusations are leveled at Barth's *The Sot-Weed Factor* and *Giles Goat-Boy* that are reproduced by Vidal's text at run-time. These three accusations are that Barth's texts are a) not funny, b) syntactically awkward, and c) schoolmasterly:

> But as I read on and on, I could not so much as summon up a smile at the lazy jokes and the horrendous pastiche of what Barth takes to be eighteenth-century English [...] (134)

> The sentences would not stop unfurling [...] (134)

> But the ponderous jocosity of [*The Sot-Weed Factor*] is neither farce nor satire nor much of anything except English-teacher-writing at a pretty low level. [...] *Giles Goat-Boy* arrived on the scene in 1966. Another 800 pages of ambitious schoolteacher-writing: a book to be taught rather than read. (134)

That Vidal finds *The Sot-Weed Factor* "not funny" because he professes to take Barth's parody on eighteenth-century English at face value for how Barth imagines it to be will figure in the following section. What is interest-

ing at this point is how the attack of not being funny is raised with the glibness of a witty riposte—but which, not least through the essay's overall self-gratulatory and rather pompous tone, falls slightly short of being full of wit itself. The pompousness, as a collateral, also reproduces what Vidal's second accusation attacks, the unending and convoluted syntax:

> I can only assume that the book's admirers are as ignorant of the eighteenth century as the author (or, to be fair, the author's imagination) and that neither author nor admiring reader has a sense of humor, a fact duly noted about Americans in general—and their serious ponderous novelists in particular—by many peoples in other lands. (134)

This is directly followed by the equally supposedly witty remark that it "still takes a lot of civilization gone slightly high to make a wit" (134). The third accusation, the "schoolmasterliness," also takes care of itself:

> Barth thinks that the word "human" is a noun; he also thinks that Giles is pronounced with a hard "g" as in "guile" instead of a soft "g" as in "giant." But then the unlearned learned teachers of English are the new barbarians, serenely restoring the Dark Ages. (135)

The reason why Vidal thinks that Barth would pronounce the initial letter in "Giles" as in "guile" remains a mystery. But there is nothing mysterious about the use of the word "human." So far, no early edition of *Webster's Dictionary of the English Language* has been unearthed where the word "human" is not also listed as a noun—which would be very unlikely indeed since the *Oxford English Dictionary* lists examples for the use of "human" as a noun that date back to the 16th century. What is interesting here is that Vidal reproduces what his attack targets in two different ways at once: he reproduces the alleged "schoolmasterliness" by being the proverbial schoolmaster himself, with lessons that Geoffrey K. Pullum and other renowned linguists are fond of calling "prescriptivist poppycock,"[44] and he

---

[44] Many examples for such "prescriptivist poppycock" can be found at the "Language Log" Web site, founded by Geoffrey K. Pullum and Mark Liberman in 2003, under the corresponding category. 1 December 2008 <http://languagelog.ldc.upenn.edu/nll/>

reproduces the alleged deficit in the mastery of the English language "on schoolmaster level" by grating against dictionary entries and common usage with his own accusation.

Similar strands can be found in Gardner's *On Moral Fiction.* The treatise is a fierce and vicious attack from an alleged ethical high ground, launched against a kind of literature found severely wanting in morality and purpose. In the light of the absence of any reflection on the nature or validity of this very high ground, there is a curious and rather accurate self-description of which Gardner does not seem to be aware of in the least:

> Too often we find in contemporary fiction not true morality, which requires sympathy and responsible judgment, but some fierce ethic which, under closer inspection, turns out to be some parochial group's manners and habitual prejudices elevated to the status of ethical imperatives, axioms for which bigotry or hate, not love, is the premise. (74)

One could hardly put it better, and it is not the only instance that generates a strong sense of déjà vu. Leaning heavily into Barth's *Giles Goat-Boy*'s lack of morality, Gardner remarks:

> *Giles Goat-Boy* pushed human tolerance further. Despite some dazzling plays of wit (not always a good thing), the book is all but unreadable—arch, extravagantly self-indulgent, clumsily allegorical, pedantic, tiresomely and pretentiously advance guard, and like much of our "new fiction" puerilely obscene. (95)

In a completely bogus "Publisher's Disclaimer" before the novel proper begins, Barth has four fictive editors discuss the merits and demerits of *Giles Goat-Boy,* trying to decide whether the novel should be published or not. One of these editors, "Editor A," rejects *Giles Goat-Boy* on the grounds that is lacks morality, that it is badly written, and that it embraces the obscene:

> [H]ere fornication, adultery, even rape, yea murder itself (not to mention self-deception, treason, blasphemy, whoredom, duplicity, and willful cruelty to others) are not only represented for our delectation but at times approved of

and even recommended! On aesthetic grounds too (though they pale before the moral), the work is objectionable: the rhetoric is extreme, the conceit and action wildly implausible, the interpretation of history shallow and patently biased, the narrative full of discrepancies and badly paced, at times tedious, more often excessive; the form, like the style, is unorthodox, unsymmetrical, inconsistent. (xiii)

There are more echoes, or rather pre-echoes, to be found in the statement of "Editor A," and of "Editor D" as well. If a critic so unwittingly takes on the voice of a character, one begins to wonder.

As a final example for iteration, there is a passage that—instead of reproducing what it denounces—reflects equally unwittingly on its own ethical premises in revealing ways. It does so in much the same way as de Man's reading of Locke's sexist assumptions, discussed in the chapter on *Iterations*, on the basis of which Johnson shows how subtle grammatical shifts in de Man's text reveal a hidden bias residing on the same plane as the assumptions he just denounced in Locke's. Gardner, introducing yet another argument in favor of all art's moral obligations, states:

> If we agree, at least tentatively, that art does instruct, and if we agree that not all instruction is equally valid—some people would persuade us to murder for kicks, some would urge us to treat all women as sex objects and all bankers as insensitive clods—then our quarrel with the moralist position on art comes down to this [...] (41)

What happens here in the list of examples for non-valid instructions, syntactically, is not a steady decline in validity, which *should* have read "some people would persuade us to murder for kicks, some would urge us to treat women as sex objects, and some would teach us to think of all bankers as insensitive clods." But this is not the case, and there is something wrong with this picture. The "murder for kicks" is juxtaposed to both "treating all women as sex objects and all bankers as insensitive clods," which leaves the right side of the equation monstrously out of balance. It would have been dubious enough if it had simply read "treating

women as sex objects and all bankers as insensitive clods," but no: it had to be "all" women, as if there were women who are sex objects in the same way that there are bankers who are insensitive clods, but it would be wrong therefore to treat *all* women as sex objects as it would be wrong therefore to treat *all* bankers as insensitive clods. The "moral instruction" delivers a solid, roundabout swing and knocks itself out in the same manner as de Man's "instructive example" does about the disruptive scandal of a real woman in a gentlemen's club.

Composition

Professing to read literally is a powerful tool, as has been mentioned: it works very well in disrupting rhetorical figures, and extraordinarily well in denying any effects and implications of irony. While nothing is to be gained through such a reading in terms of illumination or edification, it provides for a most practical "power tool" to punch through complex texts with ease. In "American Plastic," for example, Vidal enlarges on ridiculing Barth for getting "eighteenth-century English" wrong in *The Sot-Weed Factor*:

> But as I read on and on, I could not so much as summon up a smile at the lazy jokes and the horrendous pastiche of what Barth takes to be eighteenth-century English (""'Tis not that which distresses me; 'tis Andrew's notion that I had vicious designs on the girl. 'Sheart, if anything be improbable, 'tis ...'"). I stopped at page 412 with 407 pages yet to go. [...]
>
> I can only assume that the book's admirers are as ignorant of the eighteenth century as the author (or, to be fair, the author's imagination) [...] (134)

As a matter of fact, one of the many functions Barth's fake eighteenth-century English performs is to incessantly deflate the protagonist's pompousness (who is indeed the speaker in Vidal's example); a pompousness that reflects very specifically on the protagonist's boastful self-image as, appropriately, a writer and a poet. But Vidal goes even a step further in his literal readings. In *Giles Goat-Boy*, as introduced in the chapter on *Iterations*,

Giles attends a performance of the play *Taliped Decanus*, an outrageously funny and academically phrased parody on *Oedipus Rex* which also creates a mythical past in accordance with the novel's "world as a university" theme. Vidal reads this "play" completely literally:

> I suspect that this will prove to be one of the essential American university novels and to dismiss it is to dismiss those departments of English that have made such a book possible. The writing is more than usually clumsy. A verse play has been included. "*Agnora:* for Pete's sake, simmer down, boys. Don't you think / I've been a dean's wife long enough to stink / my public image up?" (135)

However, Vidal is not alone in carrying this tactic to considerable heights. Gardner too, in *On Moral Fiction*, refuses to read figuratively, and he too generates failed readings of comic proportions. The most bizarre example would be Gardner's reading of a hilarious chapter ending in Doctorow's *Ragtime,* which reads, in Gardner's citation, "He was clutching in his hands, as if trying to choke it, a rampant penis which, scornful of his intentions, whipped him about the floor, launching to his cries of ecstasy or despair, great filamented spurts of jism that traced the air like bullets and then settled slowly over Evelyn in her bed like falling ticker tape." Gardner comments:

> [T]he falsity of this passage runs much deeper. Though he can speak feelingly of women's rights, taking a stand that is moral, Doctorow's writing is meretricious, or at the very least frigid in Longinus' sense: the writer is not deeply involved in his characters' lives. Things do not happen in the world as Doctorow claims they do. Even in the hands of young and highly excited men, penises do not behave as Doctorow maintains. Doctorow's mind is elsewhere. He's after a flashy chapter ending, and reality can go knit. (78)

Here, the roaring sound of realism's elephant gun chimes in behind the bursts from Gardner's AK-47. But reading literally does not mean to forgo figurative language in one's own argument. Gardner's treatise is chock-full of the most preposterous and oftentimes violent metaphors, ranging from "All we have left is Thor's hammer, which represents not brute force but

art, or, counting both hammerheads, art and criticism" (3) or "Fiddling with the hairs on an elephant's nose is indecent when the elephant happens to be standing on the baby" (4) to:

> In a world where nearly everything that passes for art is tinny and commercial and often, in addition, hollow and academic, I argue—by reason and by banging the table—for an old-fashioned view of what art is and does and what the fundamental business of critics ought therefore to be. (5)

Here, it ceases to be funny. While it does not seem to be too difficult for a trained and watchful reader to immediately recognize what these tropes try to achieve and how they go about achieving it, it is precisely this acquired skill that Gardner subjects to a barrage of suppressive fire:

> The language of critics, and of artists of the kind who pay attention to critics, has become exceedingly odd: not talk about feelings or intellectual affirmations—not talk about moving and surprising twists of plot or wonderful characters and ideas—but sentences full of large words like *hermaneutic* [sic], *heuristic, structuralism, formalism,* or *opaque language,* and full of fine distinctions—for instance those between *modernist* and *post-modernist*—that would make even an intelligent cow suspicious. (4)

"Suspicion" is indeed what should be aroused by such a sweeping attempt to ridicule and abolish that which would make readers capable of analyzing and grasping the ramifications of an argument by understanding the rhetorical underpinnings on the level of composition—already a precarious environment in the light of the "forgetting" tropes can bring about, as discussed in the chapter on *Composition*. To prevent one's own tropes from being analyzed is a tool as powerful as its counterpart, the refusal to read tropes as tropes, and this is even more true when both these tools work hand in hand. Gardner might be given the benefit of the doubt in this respect, but where these devices are consciously and deliberately employed, they can wield and at the same time secure enormous demagogic power and exert political pressure in the most manipulative ways.

Formations

Some of the examples given in the preceding section for Gardner's use of figurative language in *On Moral Fiction* already touched upon his use of creation myths and inaugural events as the fundamental lattice for his notions of moral obligations in art and literature. The "gods" who once fought against the "enemies of order" have withdrawn, and all we have left in our struggle are the weapons of art and criticism embodied in Thor's hammer, provided we learn how to wield its hammerheads (3–4):

> The traditional view is that true art is moral: it seeks to improve life, not debase it. It seeks to hold off, at least for a while, the twilight of the gods and us. I do not deny that art, like criticism, may legitimately celebrate the trifling. It may joke, or mock, or while away the time. But trivial art has no meaning or value except in the shadow of more serious art, the kind of art that beats back the monsters and, if you will, makes the world safe for triviality. [...] Art rediscovers, generation by generation, what is necessary to humanness. Criticism restates and clarifies, reinforces the wall. (5–6)

Succinctly put, Gardner's creation myth reads like this:

> The gods set ideals, heroes enact them, and artists or artist-historians preserve the image as a guide for man. (29)

When Gardner claims that "criticism and art, like theology and religion, are basically companions but not always friends" and that, at times, "they may be enemies," he also asserts a fully self-contained cyclicity and the immutability of a status quo one has constantly to struggle to maintain. As one requisite, art/theology embodies—not accidentally structurally reminiscent of rites of passage—the cyclical characteristics of its understanding by way of "great powers of imagination," wherefore one has to become "something of an artist oneself." For the second requisite, the "proper business" of criticism/religion is "explanation and evaluation" so people who cannot "respond" to a work of art can learn how to "go back to it with some idea of what to look for" (8). In such ways, true knowledge can only be

gained by initiation, not by analytic thinking; insights are only possible through experience and imagination, not by using one's rational faculties; and the reproduction of the inaugural event forecloses largely, if not completely, the possibility of progress—morally or otherwise. Interestingly, not even the "progress" of Christian teleology which in Western culture, as observed in the chapter on *Formations*, tries to inject itself into myth's cyclicity, enters Gardner's equation. Nor does "change" or "evolvement" enter in Gardner's rather spurious application of Darwinian theory in his discussion of Barth's *Chimera* that "[t]rue art imitates nature's total process: endless blind experiment (fish that climb trees, hands with nine fingers, shifts in and out of tonality) and then ruthless selectivity" where art "in sworn opposition to chaos, discovers *by its process* what it can say" which "is art's morality" (14). Instead, the selection process boils down to the *discovery* of what has to be *re*discovered in order to fend off the enemies of order. Which does not prevent Gardner to blast Coover's "A Pedestrian Accident" for its alleged attack on Christianity by way of claiming that the scene is "of course" an ironic crucifixion with the character Paul hanging "on the street as on a cross" (75), and that Coover "angrily mocks the whole Christian way of thinking":

> Paul's assertion (and Coover's) that "There's nobody out there" is of course no more provable, except by faith, than the contrary assertion of Coover's Baptist-country childhood, and in fairness we must admit that the Baptist assertion brought with it, at least, the goals, if not always the practice, of responsibility, brotherhood, and love. (76)

Besides identifying not believing in certain propositions as a "faith" in a fashion that would also identify not mapping one's character to star constellations as a form of astrology, this assertion strongly links to Culler's question in *Framing the Sign*, also discussed in the chapter on *Formations*, whether Literary Studies might have contributed to the impression that "Americans had a constitutional right to encounter nothing that

ridicules or attacks their beliefs" (77). This link is reinforced by yet another of Gardner's arguments, similar in wording with respect to his reading of Doctorow, that he "doubt[s] that anyone would seriously maintain that the world is as Coover says it is; yet the story is repeatedly anthologized and taught" (76). Reinforced because, in contrast to Coover's "A Pedestrian Accident," Gardner at least allows for the possibility that Pynchon's *Gravity's Rainbow* can be read as a satire:

> We may defend *Gravity's Rainbow* as a satire, but whether it is meant to be satire or sober analysis is not clear. It is a fact that, even to the rainbow of bombs said to be circling us, the world is not as Pynchon says it is. That may not matter in this book—the reader must judge—but it would be disastrous in a book impossible to read as satire. (196)

The way Gardner does *not* grant Coover's "A Pedestrian Accident"—despite its alleged "ironic crucifixion"—the possible status of a satire but the mere status of an "angry mockery," namely of the "whole Christian way of thinking," fits Culler's observation all too well. This combination of claiming moral obligations on the one hand and exempting some of its embodiments from criticism on the other is by no means an innocuous one, as it can be tilted over into benevolent totalitarianism by its operator:

> Nothing could be more obvious, it seems to me, than that art should be moral and that the first business of criticism, at least some of the time, should be to judge works of literature (or painting or even music) on grounds of the production's moral worth. By "moral" I do not mean some such timid evasion as "not too blatantly immoral." [...] On the contrary, television—or any other more or less artistic medium—is good (as opposed to pernicious or vacuous) only when it has a clear positive moral effect, presenting valid models for imitation, eternal verities worth keeping in mind, and a benevolent vision of the possible which can inspire and incite human beings toward virtue, toward life affirmation as opposed to destruction or indifference. (18)

Applying observations from the chapter on *Formations* to "Stalking the Billion-Footed Beast," certain enacted aspects of myth and religion in Wolfe's essay reign equally supreme. In the landscape of Wolfe's perception of literary history, Little Nell's death in Charles Dickens's *The Old Curiosity*

Shop can figure as a crucifixion and the inauguration of a new era soon to become the "American Century"; all literature that has been written before Social Realism can be read in the light of this event and can be demoted much in the same way the Hebrew Bible is demoted when read in the light of the New Testament; and postmodernists obscure this truth as "Puppet-Masters," a term soundly familiar from having, in singular form, often been attributed to the antichrist. One of the outstanding faults of these "Puppet-Masters"—who are "in love with the theory that the novel was, first and foremost a literary game, words on a page being manipulated by an author"—is, not surprisingly, that in their texts "irony reigns supreme" (49). And this antichrist, perhaps equally unsurprising, is not only an intellectual —"in the late 1940s, American intellectuals [...] set out to create a native intelligentsia on the French or English model, an intellectual aristocracy" (47)—but indeed essentially a seducer from abroad:

> The Puppet-Masters took to calling their stories fictions, after the manner of Jorge Luis Borges, who spoke of his ficciones. Borges, an Argentinian, was one of the gods of the new breed. In keeping with the cosmopolitan yearnings of the native intelligentsia, all gods now came from abroad: Borges, Nabokov, Beckett. Pinter, Kundera, Calvino, García Márquez, and, above all, Kafka; there was a whole rash of stories with characters named H or V or K or T or P (but, for some reason, none named A, B, D, or E). (49)

By endowing Social Realism with mythical and religious attributes, it fully inherits their intrinsic authority. An authority, moreover, not to be separated from its propagator who also happens to embody aspects and character-istics easily recognizable as those of the mythical hero and the prophet, and the "American Century" throughout invoked by this prophet does not lack in visions of messianic power either. The "New Era" does not simply "start" with realism; realism is very much the inaugural event and, as it were, the "master narrative":

> The introduction of realism into literature in the eighteenth century [...] was like the introduction of electricity into engineering. It was not just another

device. (50)

These new scriptures, as one would come to expect, divinely surpass and transcend everything ever written before:

> No one was ever moved to tears by reading about the unhappy fates of heroes and heroines in Homer, Sophocles, Molière, Racine, Sidney, Spenser, or Shakespeare. Yet even the impeccable Lord Jeffrey, editor of the *Edinburgh Review*, confessed to having cried—blubbered, boohooed, snuffled, and sighed—over the death of Little Nell in *The Old Curiosity Shop.* (50–51)

This rather stark assertion is complemented by the trials and tribulations of the realist writer himself. Drawing on motifs derived from the structurally related narrative lines of the mythical hero and the prophet, Wolfe first ignores the calling several times, counting on someone else to write the "big realistic novel" (45 ff.), then fails twice when, at last, he follows his calling but falls short in relation to what "really happens" (53–55), but eventually succeeds both in terms of initiation by "wrestl[ing] the beast and bring[ing] it to terms" against all odds, which are almost overwhelming because the "imagination of the novelist is powerless before what he knows he's going to read in tomorrow morning's newspaper," and in terms of his recognition as a prophet: "But I also began to hear and read with increasing frequency that *The Bonfires of the Vanities* were 'prophetic'" (55). But even more is at stake. Akin to what has been discussed in the chapter on *Formations* on the convergence of speech act theory and inaugural events, Wolfe's essay, dubbed by Barth in *Further Fridays* a "particularly narrow and self-serving anti-Fabulist howl" (136), is indeed "self-serving" in the sense of being the first instance of what it claims as being true, having been true all along, and being self-evident. The messianic realm of Social Realism is retroactively created by its prophet, and the elephant gun is the produce of its own maiden shot.

3. Critical Writings: de Man's Wartime Journalism

In this final subchapter, even more so than in the preceding one, violence will figure as being structurally embedded in the discourse and actively engaged toward certain goals, and a great number of elements and processes will surface again that have been encountered in all of the preceding chapters. Violence will be present in three complementary and very forceful incarnations: the inherent violence of public accusations labeling de Man explicitly or implicitly a collaborator, a fascist, an antisemite, a Nazi, a supporter of the Holocaust, and an accessory to murder, i. e., the "butchery of the Belgian Jewish community, down to the babies"; the all-pervasive and almost singularly disruptive violence attached to the historical horizon that encompasses Nazi-occupied Belgium, a war-torn world, and the Holocaust; and the at times exceptionally violent imagery and rhetoric adopted in the articles and critical assessments engaged in this discourse.

After sketching very briefly the case history and naming the most important and most comprehensive sources, the first section will start out with some preparatory points, either in the form of important background information or as caveats. From there, it will proceed to how the most objectionable sentence from all of de Man's wartime articles has been read and interpreted by de Man's friends and colleagues, and how their readings stand up to scrutiny both in the light of what has been discussed in the preceding chapters and to the historical background of the first half of the twentieth century in general and the Zionist movement in particular. In the second section, the massive public assault on de Man, directed against his person as well as his writings, will be investigated, and how and why this assault broadened into a sustained barrage of accusations leveled against deconstruction, feminist theory, new historicism, cultural criticism, and even English departments and literary theory at large, and

tested for the willful and possibly even necessary neglect to read and the reproduction of a putative crime by way of its condemnation. Finally, the problem of quotation will be brought up again, not only as to how de Man's wartime articles are read within and outside of their context, but also how such quotations might relate to quotations from de Man's later writings. This will be followed by another look at critical readings of the wartime articles in this respect, closing with a return to irony as postmodernism's mastertrope and to the question of differentiating between real violence and media violence.

Most of the facts and arguments surrounding the articles written by de Man at the age of twenty-one and twenty-two for the collaborationist newspapers *Le Soir*'s and *Het Vlaamsche Land*'s literary columns in Brussels and for the literary journals *Jeudi* and *Les Cahiers du Libre Examen* in 1940–42, 1942, 1939–40, and 1940, respectively, have been sufficiently rehearsed inside and outside of academia, and those facts and arguments not immediately necessary for the following discussion will be mentioned but not repeated at any length. Nor would that be possible or even necessary: the most excellent sources are available with the publication of de Man's *Wartime Journalism, 1939–1943* and its companion volume *Responses: On Paul de Man's Wartime Journalism*, both edited by Werner Hamacher, Neil Hertz, and Thomas Keenan, and numerous references to the latter will be given throughout. The former contains de Man's articles as facsimiles, the latter provides historical material including letters, documents, and personal accounts by contemporary witnesses, and a vast number of essays—all without exception accepted as presented to the editors—from the whole spectrum of possible responses to de Man's wartime journalism. Drawing on these and other sources, some selected instances of the public discourse will be focused on.

Blindness and Insight

After the war, all Belgians who were suspected of having collaborated with the German occupation forces in any way were brought before the *Auditeur Générale* tribunal. Initially condemned in absentia by the Belgian authorities while still in exile, Paul de Man later appeared before the court and was acquitted of all charges against him while many of his former colleagues at the *Le Soir* were sentenced to jail. By way of letters and testimonials, several wartime colleagues of de Man, all of them associated with the Belgian resistance during the occupation, judged "the published accusations of antisemitism and collaborationism levelled against de Man to be simply ridiculous," and maintained that de Man had neither been a fascist, nor pro-Nazi, nor antisemitic in any way.[45] And, perhaps most importantly, no personal testimony to the contrary has been brought to anyone's attention to this date. Moreover, Paul de Man and his then wife Anaïde Baraghian, living together with their one year old son, gave temporary and of course illegal shelter to their Jewish friends Nahum and Esther Slusny and to others during 1942 and 1943.

With regard to about half a dozen articles that might be objectionable in terms of de Man's ideological outlook at the time, and to the article "Les Juifs dans la Littérature actuelle" (Jews in Contemporary Literature) as the only article that opens up the possibility of an antisemitic sentiment, five points have been made that severely contradict the picture parts of the press set out to paint, a picture some details of which will also figure in the

---

[45] For detailed accounts of the historical context cf., e. g., Lindsay Walter's introduction to de Man's *Critical Writings*, x–xii, and especially the essays by Els de Bens, Thomas Fries, Samuel Weber, and Edouard Colinet in *Responses* (85–95, 193-203, 404–25, and 426–37, respectively). For detailed biographical data, cf. "Paul de Man: A Chronology, 1919–1949" in *Responses* xi–xxi and Miller, *Theory Now and Then* 363. For eyewitness accounts see also "Paul de Man and the Cercle du Libre Examen" by Colinet, *Responses* 426–37, and a footnote to that effect in Derrida, *Memoires of Paul de Man*, Rev. Ed. 262-63 fn46, which also contains some of the quoted testimonials.

following sections. The first point affects the principal readiness of many intellectuals in the 1930s to accommodate the Nazis to a certain extent. Shortly before and early during the occupation, politics on the left and the right increasingly converged against the background of "revolutionary fervor" in opposition to capitalism and a democratic system widely perceived as morally bankrupt, and violence was equally widely unquestioned and traded as having to partake in this revolution by necessity. The biography of de Man's uncle Hendrik de Man, a leading socialist and president of the Belgian Workers' party, who worked against the rise of fascism in Belgium but nevertheless welcomed the Nazis in the early stages of the occupation for the reasons stated above, is an especially illuminating example in this respect. The second point, again pertaining to the historical context, covers the general conditions of living under military occupation. The third point relates to certain forms of critical aestheticism articulated in de Man's articles that yield, in hindsight, some peculiar and at times uncomfortable effects: a critical approach—to be discussed in the third and final section— that de Man in his later writings radically and consistently refuted. As Fredric Jameson, touching on this as well as the preceding point, puts it rather bluntly in *Postmodernism*:

> For one thing, it does not seem to me that North American intellectuals have generally had the kind of experience of history that would qualify them to judge the actions and choices of people under military occupation (unless indeed the situation of the Vietnam War is taken to offer some rough analogy). [...]
>
> What Paul DeMan [sic] clearly was, however, as the articles testify, can be seen to be a fairly unremarkable specimen of the then conventional high-modernist aesthete, and the apolitical aesthete at that. (256–57)

The fourth point is that none of de Man's articles, with the exception of the one to be discussed in depth below, were in any way suited for propaganda purposes for the Nazis whatsoever. As Rodolphe Gasché puts it, equally bluntly, in his essay "Edges of Understanding" in *Responses*,

"[T]hese articles cannot be called Nazi writings. They are not even sympathetic to the Nazi cause." (215) The fifth point, also sufficiently argued, concerns the sheer depths of willful ambiguity in this one article suited for propaganda purposes, which is also the only one he did not write willingly but under pressure, for an antisemitic special issue of Le Soir—ambiguities that cannot possibly be overlooked except by a wholesale refusal to read.

The refusal to read often equals an "erasure," and in this case, the erasure already operates upon an extensive erasure of meaning effected by the hyper-ambiguity of de Man's style in "Les Juifs dans la Littérature actuelle." Structurally similar to examples discussed in the chapter on *Iterations*, these erasures have a habit of propagating surreptitiously at the scene of reading, even if this reading is at its most scrupulous and lucid. A demonstration of the power of these mechanisms will be given by reading how the article's most objectionable passage is read not by de Man's detractors, but by those sympathetic to his cause.

While the well-documented double-play of de Man's article on the whole not only allows for but actually establishes reasonable doubt with respect to his positions on Jewish literature, there is one passage that became a source of much genuine sadness and outrage, and which became also the most frequently quoted and most widely discussed. But it is precisely this passage that has miraculously and persistently deflected analysis. Quoted from the facsimile edition of de Man's *Wartime Journalism*, 1933–1943, the passage reads:

> En plus, on voit donc qu'une solution du problem juif qui viserait à la création d'une colonie juive isolée de l'Europe, n'entrainerait pas, pour la vie littéraire de l'Occident, de conséquences déplorables. (45)

> [What is more, we see then that a solution of the Jewish problem that would envisage the creation of a Jewish colony isolated from Europe would not en-

tail deplorable consequences for the literary life of the West. *(*Kaplan, *Responses* 274)]

How this "shocking conclusion" (Kamuf, *Responses* 259) is paraphrased and dealt with is revealing with regard both to the ongoing erasure and to the actual extent of ambiguity involved. In *The Poetics of Fascism: Ezra Pound, T. S. Eliot, Paul de Man,* Paul Morrison connects "the horror of this passage" with "what was soon to become the slaughter of million," "dismissed as the potential loss of a few literary personalities of 'mediocre value'" (136). Els de Bens, in his otherwise illuminating essay "Paul de Man and the Collaborationist Press," writes "Although Paul de Man does not refer to the extermination camps, yet he does hint at the idea of isolating the Jews" (*Responses* 92). These are quite typical and in no way outstanding examples for a recurring type of reading that connects de Man's article retroactively to the actual, at the time unimagined and unimaginable, horrors waiting in the wings, co-assigning responsibility through *a posteriori* reasoning and rhetoricity.

But even at the hands of the most reliable, most precise, and most astute readers, de Man's article fares little better. In her foreword to the paperback edition of *A World of Difference*, Johnson writes:

> How can one avoid feeling rage and disgust at a person who could write such a thing? How can I not understand and share the impulse to throw this man away? The fact that "Jews in Contemporary Literature" was written for a special issue of *Le Soir* on anti-Semitism does not excuse it. The fact that it is the only example of such a sentiment expressed in 179 articles does not erase it. The fact that de Man seems not to have been anti-Semitic in his personal life in 1940-42 (and certainly showed no trace of it in later years) only points up a too limited notion of what anti-Semitism is. And the fact that, as Derrida puts it, "de Man wants especially to propose a thesis on literature that visibly interests him more here than either anti-Semitism or the Jews" is also no comfort. (xv)

And especially:

> If there had not been people who, without any particular personal anti-

Semitism, *found the idea of deportation reasonable*, there could have been no Holocaust. (xv—xvi; italics added)

In *The Wake of Deconstruction,* Johnson goes even a step further, seeing de Man as "'symptomatic' of a dominant discourse" and speaking within a world in which he takes upon himself "the right to say who is expendable":

Paul de Man, writing in his early twenties with a precocious sense of entitlement, served as a mouthpiece for a dominant ideology that belittled, demeaned, excluded, and eventually killed millions of Jews. He did not himself commit murder, but he expressed a complete failure to imagine himself in the place of the other whom he was willing to dismiss from Europe. (47)

Stating that this is "one inexcusable and unforgettable article," Miller reads this passage in *Theory Now and Then* in less harsh terms, but not substantially different manner:

European literature, the essay argues, would hardly be weakened at all if all European Jews *were put in a separate colony* [italics added]. This is an appalling idea, in itself and in view of what happened so soon thereafter, and it is an appalling untruth, but it must be recognized that this is not the same thing as saying that the Jews are a pollution of Western culture. This latter idea *is* expressed in the articles by other authors published adjacent to de Man's, and this idea is explicitly condemned by de Man as "vulgar antisemitism." "The reality," he says, is "different." (362)

At the center of all these readings, there is a blind spot, and a colossal one at that. Amazingly, even Ortwin de Graef's remark that it "should indeed not be forgotten that the idea of a Jewish colony isolated from Europe is by no means an invention of antisemites" and that the state of Israel "is there to prove it" (*Responses* 113) manages to deflect from what is glaringly missing here. No one mentions, or seems to be even remotely aware of, the efforts and endeavors of large groups of European Jews, and Jews all over the world, to establish a homeland of their own, a homeland that, in contemporary parlance and in negotiations widely covered in the press, was indeed regularly referred to as a colony. Many readings of de Man's article, in contrast, mention gentile plans and schemes to this effect, some

of which de Graef obviously has in mind too, by European countries or Nazi Germany, to either "ease the Jewish refugee burden" or to "deport," "ghettoize," "sent," or "expulse" the Jews to Madagascar, Palestine, Africa, Siberia, and other places (cf., e. g., Kaplan, *Responses* 274–75). None of these notions can be found in de Man's article, i. e., "ease," "deport," ghettoize," "sent," "put," "expulse," "deport," "dismiss," or worse.[46] What had happened to the Jewish plans and the Jewish movements which, in the 1940s, had been passionately pursued for nearly half a century in order to establish a homeland outside Europe? Movements, moreover, that had been specifically triggered by the Dreyfus case, which was still immensely famous or rather infamous at the time—de Man himself praises, for example, Charles Péguy's support for the cause of Dreyfus in another article for *Le Soir* from June 5, 1941. The Dreyfus trial's two public meetings, the only ones open to the press, were attended by Theodor Herzl, correspondent for the Viennese *Neue Freie Presse.* The rest is history, one were tempted to say, if it would not turn out that it, surprisingly, is not. For a reader naturally familiar with the Zionist movement and the Dreyfus affair that started it, and for someone equally naturally inclined to read historical documents not with 20-20 hindsight only, this "one unforgivable" and "scandalous" notion from de Man's articles fails utterly to evoke any scandal whatsoever. The Zionist movement's efforts to secure a homeland in Palestine through negotiations with Turkey or, as ultimately rejected by the Zionist Congress and the Jews in Palestine, in Uganda—a solution proposed by the British government—were well known and well publicized examples of such efforts. And there were others: Herzl's backup plans included negotiating sections of Tripoli, belonging to Italy; Mozambique,

---

[46] Even the self-consciously neutral Wikipedia article on Paul de Man had him propose to "send" the Jews of Europe to a colony isolated from Europe, a version retained until around July 2008, after which this paragraph was edited to reflect de Man's original phrasing. 1 October 2008 <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Paul_de_man#Wartime_journalism_and_anti-Semitic_writing>.

belonging to Portugal; and even the Congo, belonging to Belgium.[47] Moreover, one cannot but notice that Nazi schemes, in this case Eichmann's draft *Reichssicherheitshauptamt: Madagaskar Projekt*, issued in 1939, which outlined the plan for a Jewish super-ghetto, has not lost its power to successfully obliterate Jewish efforts from collective memory—in this case the last pre-war, 21st World Zionist Congress in Geneva in August 1939, or its predecessor 1937 in Zurich where, it should be added, the immediate "solution" of the "problem" of the European Jewry was specifically called for.

Referring once again to de Man's exact wording ("on voit donc qu'une solution du problem juif qui viserait à la création d'une colonie juive isolée de l'Europe"—"a solution of the Jewish problem that would envisage the creation of a Jewish colony isolated from Europe"), it should register that the "Jewish problem" *indeed* was a *Jewish* problem, one which the Zionist movement had tried to solve for decades and which has been persistently perceived and called as such throughout up to and including the call for "solv[ing] the problem of Jewish homelessness" in the Biltmore Program from the conference of the joint Zionist Organizations in New York City in May 1942; that the term "colony" was not negatively charged at the time— neither was the term *isolée* even if translated as "isolated" instead of as "remote"—and in circulation throughout; and that it would be quite a challenge to come up with a wording that would be more spirited and more strongly imbued with positive connotations than the terms "creation" and "envision." With regard to the term "solution," besides its use in statements

---

[47] Cf., e. g., "Herzl Timeline: 1903." *Department for Zionist Jewish Education*. 1 October 2008. <http://www.jafi.org.il/education/herzl/timeline7.html>. In a bitter ironical twist, these Jewish endeavors for a homeland now have, within the historical context of brutal European colonialism, also become the subject of ethical analysis. By that time, moreover, there had already been widespread rumors and several published reports for years about the most outrageous atrocities perpetrated by Belgians in Leopold II's privately owned Congo, leading to a formal inquiry into the matter by the British government in 1903.

from the WZO and other Zionist organizations, the article was published on March 4, 1941, roughly a year before plans were laid out for the extermination of the Jews at the infamous Wannsee conference, and before the term "Endlösung" was introduced as a thinly disguised euphemism for genocide in administrative communiques. And, to mark several other visible measures against Jews on the time axis, the curfew rules for Jewish citizens in Belgium were introduced in October 1941, and the yellow star, issued by decree in Germany in September 1941, became mandatory for Belgium and the Netherlands in June 1942, shortly before the deportations began. Later that year, the Belgian government-in-exile, broadcasting from London, called on Belgian journalists working for collaborationist newspapers to cease writing by year's end, a call de Man fully complied with; his last two articles were published in *Het Vlaamsche Land*'s and *Le Soir*'s literary columns in October and November, respectively.

To accuse de Man of unambiguously parroting an antisemitic sentiment instead of allowing for the possibility of one more highly ambiguous message within the widely agreed-upon hyper-ambiguity of the article as a whole, an article which again and again pulls the wool over the Nazi's eyes by seemingly saying one thing but actually saying another, does not only indicate an active forgetting of history, but also and foremost an erasure of *half a century's worth* of the most passionate Jewish efforts to establish, outside Europe, a homeland of their own. Measured against anything what one could possibly put forward in the realm of non-physical violence as a benchmark, this condemnation of an allegedly proposed erasure of Jewish culture from Europe turns itself into an erasure of Jewish culture of staggering proportions. By and large, though, not an insidious but an honest one: patterns of violence connected with repetition and iteration, rather, and displacement and irony, seem to be at work here, inherent to reading

and writing processes. Patterns, moreover, that seem to become stronger the more attentive and astute the reading turns out to be. Further manifestations of such iterative reading patterns, albeit much more "vulgar" ones, will be dealt with in the following section, while further manifestations of figurative language, composition, and irony will be examined in the third and final one.

Resistance to Theory

In *A World of Difference* Johnson remarks that, although de Man "had referred to his *Le Soir* articles in several contexts in the course of his life," they had remained "exposed but invisible, open but unread" like Poe's purloined letter, "until the relentless progress of archival devotion delivered them from sufferance" (xii). Johnson continues:

> [S]ome critics of deconstruction have taken this occasion to conflate the early and late work of de Man and to proclaim, as reported in *Newsweek,* that "the movement is finished. As one Ivy League professor gleefully exclaims, "'deconstruction turned out to be the thousand-year Reich that lasted 12 years'" (February 15, 1988). This "gleeful" joy in annihilation clearly draws on the energies of the evil that opponents think they are combating. (xvi)

The two most infamous and insidious articles, spawning a barrage of vertiginously mirrored and loop-fed distortions throughout the international press from the *New York Times* to the *Manchester Guardian,* from *La Quinzaine littéraire* to the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung,* were Jon Wiener's "Deconstructing de Man" in *The Nation*, January 9, 1988, 22-24, and David Lehman's "Deconstructing de Man's Life" in *Newsweek*, February 15, 1988, 63. Not only are these articles, according to Miller's assessment in *Theory Now and Then*, riddled with "extraordinary falsifications, misreadings, distortions and selective slanting of quotations, both of what de Man actually said in those writings and of 'deconstruction'" (361), they also contain carefully selected quotations the most tell-tale of which in

Wiener's article is the claim that de Man "'must have known the Jews of Belgium were being carted away. We are discussing the butchery of the Belgian Jewish community, down to the babies'" (after Rand, *Responses* 353–54), a proposition as outrageously slanderous as it is factually impossible due to the timeline outlined in the foregoing section.[48]

In the revised edition of *Memoirs for Paul de Man*, which includes the essay "Like the Sound of the Sea Deep Within a Shell: Paul de Man's War," Derrida also makes the case that the newspapers neglected caution, rigor, and honesty in their duty to inform and their right to interpret, but acknowledges that "the press' most serious lapses from its elementary duties cannot be imputed to the newspapers or to the professional journalists themselves, but to certain academics," and he expresses these neglect's operational violence in no uncertain terms:

> For this deadly war (and fear, hatred, which is to say sometimes love, also dream of killing the dead in order to get at the living) has already recruited some combatants, while others are sharpening their weapons in preparation for it. In the evaluations of journalists or of certain professors, one can make out strategies or stratagems, movements of attack or defense, sometimes the two at once. Although this war no doubt began in the newspapers, it will be carried on for a long time elsewhere, in the most diverse forms. (159–60)

For Wiener and others like him, as Derrida sees it, it is "a matter of grabbing a long-awaited, in fact, an unhoped-for opportunity," a temptation they cannot resist "to exploit at all costs," a dream that goes "something like this":

> 'What if this very singular sequence in the life of a young man allowed us to rid ourselves today at a single blow of Deconstruction [...] and put a final end

---

[48] Quoted from excerpts in Richard Rand, "Rigor Vitae," *Responses* 350–55. Although it is not considered good academic practice to quote from second sources, even from such comprehensive and sufficiently redundantly provided ones as in this case, Wiener's article is only available for a fee and the royalties such a purchase would entail seem inappropriate in the light of the damage this article has by and large engendered.

to its worrisome proliferation? Are we going to let this chance go by?'
(256fn44)

It almost seems as if attacking deconstruction mandates the exclusion of careful reading, or even of reading at all. This exclusion works in the way of running a by-pass: it short-circuits by attacking deconstruction on the basis of de Man's early criticism which holds precisely those views that these attacks on deconstruction seek to defend. To quote Johnson again, from her foreword to the paperback edition of *A World of Difference*, "No one could have been a more enthusiastic upholder of the integrity of Western thought than the Paul de Man of 1940–42":

> But what seems clearer than ever in the extreme violence and "glee" of the recent attacks on deconstruction is the extent to which any questioning of the reliability of language, any suggestion that meaning cannot be taken for granted, violates a powerful taboo in our culture. To say that deconstruction is "hostile to the very principles of Western thought" (*Newsweek*) is like saying that quantum mechanics is hostile to the notion of substances. (xvi)

It is becoming clearer now how it could come about that this "purloined letter," once put into public view for everyone to read, is not being read at all by its most vocal detractors: it is not read, willfully, and by design. First of all, the combination of the hyper-ambiguity of de Man's early writings and his critical position, closely related to the critical positions underpinning the very attacks that are launched on the basis of these writings against de Man's later work, make even the most promising strategy of a "literal" reading impossible to maintain if one's argument is to stay on course. But the strategy of not reading needs to be defended, and it turns out that this can be achieved with a simple sleight of hand. Not only is it exceptionally hard in principle to "answer an attack based on no reading with a response based on reading" (90), as Johnson observes in an interview conducted by Michael Payne and Harold Schweizer in *The Wake of Deconstruction*; it is even harder to counter the deliberately effected impression that, against the reality of the Holocaust, reading equals exculpation—which leads, as a

welcome collateral, to the most grotesque fact that "some people see Derrida as similar to Holocaust deniers" (90–91).

This double-barreled assault on intellectual integrity by refusing to read on the one hand and branding reading as dubious and complicit on the other is violent enough, but, like the sorcerer's apprentice, it summons even more sinister and powerful specters of violence by reproducing the totalitarian gesture. How is it possible that de Man's wartime journalism can effect a wholesale attack not only on deconstruction, but, as Miller points out in *Theory Now and Then*, on English Departments as such, as launched by the *Newsweek* article and a later article in the *Wall Street Journal,* and on literary theory in general, including feminist theory, new historicism, and cultural criticism? For Miller, this "rapid widening of the targets of hostility has been a conspicuous fact" (361). It is based on a chain of escalating assumptions that, "in a crescendo of distortions," starts out with equating de Man's wartime writings with fascism and antisemitism; makes, consequently, de Man himself a fascist and antisemite; asserts that his later critical writings are continuous with his early writings, "whether by being a disguised autobiographical apology for them or by continuing to affirm in new and more sophisticated forms the same ideas and commitments"; maintains that since de Man was a "deconstructionist," deconstruction must be fascist; and finally proceeds to the conclusion that one has to get rid of all academic practices even remotely associated with it. Miller concludes:

> All these propositions are false. The facts are otherwise. What is most terrifying in this argument is the way it repeats the well-known totalitarian procedures of vilification it pretends to deplore. It repeats the crime it would condemn. (361)

Ernesto Laclau, in his article "Totalitarianism and Moral Indignation" in *Diacritics,* arrives at a similar conclusion:

> [T]here has been an attempt (a) to link the meaning of the mature work of de Man to a youthful error; and (b) to derive from this a basis to judge deconstruction as a whole. What is this but the reduction of meaning characteristic of totalitarianism? (90)

This totalitarian gesture affects, quite true to its nature, everything it "touches" including layout and the principles of scientific documentation, compassing the uncanny and the outright bizarre. On the part of layout and the uncanny, the gesture is visually traceable through its printed form. Describing the original layout of *Le Soir*'s special issue that contained de Man's article in question, Els de Bens says that "the anti-semitic tones of the article are reinforced by the editorial layout, which inserts a vehement anti-Jewish quotation from Benjamin Franklin after de Man's text and name" (*Responses* 29). Tobin Sievers, in turn, observes in "Mourning Becomes Paul de Man":

> [T]he essay by Jon Wiener in *The Nation* and the one by David Lehman in *Newsweek* are riddled with error. The latter is especially disturbing because its layout, which juxtaposes pictures of de Man and Nazi soldiers on the march, bears a remarkable similarity to the original page of *Le Soir* where de Man's essay first appeared. (*Responses* 366)

On the part of the outright bizarre, one might mention that the decision to publish de Man's articles as soon as possible and even distribute them as photocopies was labeled as an act of "damage control" because they were *distributed in their original language*. In his "An Open Letter to Professor Jon Wiener," Miller relates:

> Then there is what you say about "damage control" and the publication of the "early writings" in French. I was present at that meeting in Tuscaloosa. The collective decision was to acquire good copies of all of de Man's writings of 1941–2, to distribute them in photocopy to anyone interested, and to publish them with all possible speed so they would be widely available. You speak as if you think doing that was a way of hiding them—by publishing the original documents, in facsimile, in their original language. Think about that— it is an outrageous suggestion, and a strange thing for a historian to say. Surely you know that waiting to translate 400 pages of material would have taken a very long time. [...] Our decision was for the utmost possible speed in

making all the writings widely available. Does that sound like "damage control"? What sort of historian calls complete republication of original documents "damage control"? (*Theory Now and Then* 376; *Responses* 338).

This iteration of the totalitarian gesture is not to be taken lightly. It is a very violent gesture, which the philosopher Rodolphe Gasché, who cannot be accused of having been overly sympathetic to the use of deconstruction in literary criticism in general and by de Man in particular, frankly sums up in "Edges of Understanding" as "ludicrous and delirious charges" with a manifest "hatred" that "deliberately dismissed the most elementary rules of documentation (in this case, reading for instance, the incriminating material) as well as all other standards of philological honesty and integrity, not to mention the basic ethical guidelines for any debate" (*Responses* 208). And its import is even more frightening, as it connects with the less "vulgar" occurrence discussed in the preceding section. As Gasché points out, de Man's clearance of all charges of collaboration by the *Auditeur Générale* "is evidence of the political and historical insignificance of his wrongdoings," which, therefore, have to be seen "in their proper perspective." To disregard this perspective is an "inexcusable injustice resulting either from stupidity or maliciousness":

> But it is not only an injustice regarding de Man himself—as when Jon Wiener calls him "something of an academic Waldheim"—it is also more importantly, more atrociously, an inexcusable injustice with respect to the Jewish people. To put Waldheim and de Man on the same plane is to show a staggering lack of historical discrimination which implies a shameless belittling of Nazi atrocities and the suffering of the Jewish people during World War II. (209)

The "totalitarian turn," as Laclau calls it in "Totalitarianism and Moral Indignation," is by no means restricted to fascism as, for example, can be seen in the way democratic values were used in a "terroristic and intimidating way" during McCarthyism. "Everything," Laclau concludes, "even the values we most cherish, can be given a totalitarian use" (90).

Allegories of Reading

Adding to the iterative processes mainly focused on so far, there are also aspects involved as discussed in the chapter on *Iteration* and *Fragmentation* which, in turn, will lead to aspects of composition including irony and the latter's import on formative processes with regard to mental dispositions and critical theory. In "Difficult Reading: De Man's Itinerary," Ian Balfour explores the question of the "right quotation," taking a remark de Man made "with more than a note of irony" as its point of departure: "to think is to find the right quotation." Not only has it become difficult, if not impossible, "to cite a passage from 'de Man' and imagine a single voice, if there ever was only one," but the initial journalistic accounts of his wartime writings "limited quotation to a small number of passages—usually phrases rather than complete sentences—including, understandably, the most troubling ones" (*Responses* 10). This raises questions about exemplariness and understanding. Subversion through fragmentation works both ways: while the journalistic accounts quoted in the preceding section are by no means experimental writing as discussed in the chapter on *Fragmentation*, the strategy of taking elements selectively out of their contexts and modifying and rearranging them is not substantially different in a methodological sense. Similarly, both are ultimately directed against a real or perceived "established order." The fundamental difference is that the magazine and newspaper articles on de Man, on deconstruction, and on English departments in general are not labeled as experimental writing, or even as preliminary assessments. Instead, they are most disingenuously disguised as facts which endows them with enormous and unwarranted power. And, as Balfour continues, tropes are also involved:

> Every quotation is a quotation out of context: only the degree of violence changes from case to case. Quotations tend to function as synecdoches, parts that are taken to represent a whole.
>
> Thus in the present instance journalists and scholars could pass with

apparent ease from a number of phrases from *one* article by de Man to characterizations of his wartime writing as "anti-Semitic" in general. (11)

In the chapter on *Composition*, one of the topics examined was how choices to read a text either figuratively or literally come about, and what the respective choice's effect would be. As has been pointed out in the preceding section, the hyper-ambiguity of de Man's articles makes it impossible to read them within the parameters of either figurative or literal language; here, "readability" as such is in question. While this cannot be construed as an excuse not to read them at all, this stratagem has been carried out nevertheless. But the choice of literal or figurative reading surfaces again in responses to the question how de Man's later writings relate to his wartime journalism. Several possibilities have been articulated in critical and journalistic writings, one of which, and a rather notable one at that, will be focused on as an example. Presented by Stanley Corngold in "On Paul de Man's Collaborationist Writings," it builds upon reading de Man's tropes in his later work as tropes for a presumed mindset congruent with fascist and antisemitic ideas literally manifest in his wartime articles. Instead of a possible change "suggested by concepts like exorcism or renunciation," Corngold sees in de Man's later work "certain elaborations of de Man's beginnings":

> The late work is marked by a recurrent and major tone of arbitrary violence. De Man's essay on Rousseau's *Confessions* in *Allegories of Reading* (his wildest essay, and now we may be able to understand why) declares: "Writing always includes the moment of dispossession in favor of the arbitrary power play of the signifier; and from the point of view of the subject, this can only be experienced as a dismemberment, a beheading, or a castration" (*AR* 296). This sentence is so much simply an instance of a habit and preoccupation, of a subject matter and an intellectual procedure, that I believe it represents a fascination or even complicity with violence. (*Responses* 81–82)

Another aspect of choosing to read a text either literally or figuratively, also discussed in the chapter on *Iterations*, can serve to legitimate a text's dis-

missal as not being "serious" on account of the additional parameter whether it belongs to the realm of the poetic or the realm of the real. Corngold, for whom de Man's early writings are the most serious matter indeed, effectively denies de Man's later writings any seriousness insofar as they merely constitute a conduit in the guise of figures which transport a disposition revealed as having been manifest all along. At its most extreme, Corngold's reading becomes itself the most violent trope that not only effaces any possible difference between the figurative and the literal, but any difference between text and action, word and deed, and between violence on the stage and violence in the streets:

> In *Blindness and Insight* de Man wrote the notorious epigram: "texts masquerade in the guise of wars or revolutions" (BI 165)—meaning that re-volutions are, for all that we can know of them, basically texts. Genocide, too, could basically be a text, and the persons rotting beneath the ground, for all we could know of them, basically figures.
>
> I stress that the persons whose real decomposition de Man's early hackwork may have helped bring about appear in his later writing as only the masks of a rigorous literary operation—objects of "coercive displacements" that occur, to be sure, only "tropologically" (AR 163). What Nazis and their collaborators once accomplished in fact, literature is seen as accomplishing figuratively. But the figurative text also displaces fact, so that "death," for example, becomes "a displaced name for a linguistic predicament" (RR 81) and textual events become essential historical occurrences. (82)

While it bespeaks for Corngold not only a highly political but effectively physical murderous act, the very same passage—"texts masquerade in the guise of wars or revolutions"—has, in contrast, been attacked by Frank Lentricchia and Terry Eagleton as being essentially hostile to political action or action as such. Both perspectives, Corngold's as well as Lentric-chia's and Eagleton's, seem overdetermined, to say the least. As Balfour points out in "'Difficult Reading': De Man's Itineraries":

> But the more serious and symptomatic misreading, in Eagleton and Lentricchia, is the unmotivated translation from de Man's remarks about *knowledge* to the question of *action,* political or otherwise. Nothing in de Man's passage addresses the question of political action, much less cautions

against it. The text's principal message, which approaches something of a structuralist truism, is that history comes to us linguistically mediated. (*Responses* 11)

For Miller, in "Paul de Man as Allergen," de Man rather focuses in this passage on the performative qualities of texts:

> History is wars, battles, the building of the pyramids, the invention of the steam engine, migrations of peoples, legislative decisions, diplomatic negotiations, the clearing of forests, global warming, that sort of thing. De Man's materiality of history, however, is not quite like that. For him the materiality of history, properly speaking, is the result of acts of power that are punctual and momentary, since they are atemporal, noncognitive and noncognizable performative utterances. (188)

While Corngold's literal reading of de Man's tropes seems to grant these tropes the kind of performative power Miller sees expressed in de Man's critical writings, this is in fact not the case: for Corngold, these tropes, as mentioned, function as a mere conduit for an underlying disposition. What is performed, according to Corngold, is rather the transformation, or "decomposition," of history into text, and of atrocities into tropes, in an elaborate move by de Man to cover up his ongoing complicity with violence in general and the Holocaust in particular.

Against this background, finally, de Man's "Les Juifs dans la Littérature actuelle" warrants yet another look, an article pivotal in and for every discussion on de Man not only as a writer, a critic, or a proponent of deconstruction but also as a person, a colleague, or a friend, an article that is time and again read or misread and quoted or misquoted in the most simplistic or slanderous manner, or actively not read at all. As the overwhelming majority of those critical of it has at least granted, the article is everything but easy to read or easy to understand. Up to now, the attribute "hyper-ambiguous" has been used, an attribute that implies and strongly suggests, but not automatically entails the deliberate composition toward ambiguity. Others, like Timothy Bahti in "Telephonic Crossroads: The

Reversal and the Double Cross," give it a name: he calls it deliberate "encoding." After having listed many facts that are either non-refutable or have not been refuted so far, including that the "best evidence available today suggests that de Man refused several times the editorial demand," Bahti states:

> Independently of the testimonies of those who knew him, and who attest that he was not to the slightest degree an anti-Semite, these historical circumstances suggest, then, that the article in question is weirdly encoded in and determined by a tactics and perhaps a strategy of wartime publication in occupied Belgium and France. (*Responses* 1)

What seems to be at work in this article, and numerous instances to that effect have been pointed out by many readers, is a most rigorous double play that, like irony, works as a "permanent parabasis" as outlined in the chapter on *Composition*. After analyzing this and a later article that seems to comment on the former, Bahti sees irony at play in both cases:

> That the later article is specifically an ironic rewriting and rereading of the first would probably have been known by de Man's friends from *Les Cahiers du Libre Examen* [...] Under the code of *Le Soir*'s antisemitic "special page" ("Les Juifs et nous: Les aspects culturels"), under its specific form of censorship, de Man wrote the *resistance* of literature and its reading. (3)

Bahti nevertheless maintains, it should be added, that de Man "was able to write and sign a piece of literary antisemitism and erring reading," although "[w]e can know that Paul de Man was not a Nazi, or a fascist" (4). To add yet another term, Heidi S. Krueger, in "Opting to Know: On the Wartime Journalism of Paul de Man," speaks of "design":

> I would submit that what is wrong with "The Jews in Contemporary Literature" is not that it is, in the first instance, anti-Semitic, but rather that if we read it in isolation, it is almost impossible to tell where it stands with regard to the situation of the Jews. This frustration of the reader's ability to pin down a position is, moreover, the dominant characteristic of the essay, one hard not to see as the result of design. (*Responses* 305)

Again, the author remains critical of what she perceives as irony, espe-

cially in the light of the articles that surround de Man's article in this special edition of *Le Soir*. What she also perceives is a certain cleverness on de Man's part that misfired in hindsight:

> "The Jews in Contemporary Literature" stands at one extreme of the articles in *Le Soir*, written at a point in time, and with a cockiness, that suggests that the young de Man still thought he would be able to get by the censors by his wits. (306)

Finally, David S. Sperling, Professor of Bible at the *Hebrew Union College —Jewish Institute of Religion*, who refers to himself in "Observations on Occupation" in *Responses* as an "outsider" among "distinguished literary theorists and philosophers," should be added as a third and final voice. He also sees irony at work, but again from a slightly different perspective. After drawing on several instances of and reflections on conduct under occupation by foreign powers as described in the Hebrew Bible and in the Talmud, he puts his finger on some of the discrepancies de Man's article contains, especially when compared to the predominant mode of anti-semitism voiced by the texts that surround the article in *Le Soir.* In the light of his readings of these juxtaposed texts, Sperling observes that "[s]everal of de Man's early pieces recall a spirit markedly similar to these ancient Jewish texts," and that de Man's essay "contains the seeds of its own negation." Sperling concludes:

> The irony that an occupied people employs to vent its frustrations and hopes is, by necessity, subtle. Indeed Jewish rabbinic sources abound in irony. Belgium, in many ways, shared aspects of the Jewish experience of uncertain identity and subjugation, elements that would have been most pronounced during the Nazi occupation. Perhaps the parallels from Jewish sources cited here will aid in the understanding of Paul de Man and his work. (369)

It appears all too fitting perhaps that at this particular time and in this particular place, during the months of 1941–42 in Nazi-occupied Belgium, a juncture appears where the keywords of violence that emerged by sifting

through tens of thousands of pages of postmodern literature and literary criticism seem to be present in one form or another—formations, iterations, fragmentation, composition, humanity, and, of course, reality. And irony: at a particular time and place which mark both figuratively and literally a disruption, a momentous break in individual consciousness and history, as it is described in the following quotations by Johnson and Miller, respectively:

> It is as though de Man had tried to theorize the disruption of his own acts of theorizing, had tried to include the theory's own outside within it. But that theory's outside was precisely, we now know, always already within. And he could not, of course, control the very loss of control he outlined as inevitable and defined as irony. "Irony comes into being precisely when self-consciousness loses its control over itself," he told Robert Moynihan. "For me, at least, the way I think of it now, irony is not a figure of self-consciousness. It's a break, an interruption, a disruption. It is a moment of loss of control, and not just for the author but for the reader as well." (xii)

> I add here that the juxtaposition of de Man's early and late writings is a starkly dramatic way to confront the fact that the triumph of Nazi totalitarianism in Germany, the Holocaust, and the Second World War were a decisive transformation of Western culture and even a break in world history. Whatever we say, do, or write, do by writing, thereafter takes place against the background of those events, whether or not we know it or wish it. (357fn7)

With these two final quotations, the first from Johnson quoting de Man in her preface to the paperback edition of *A World of Difference*, the second a footnote from Miller in *Theory Now and Then*, this chapter and with it the one long argument will draw to a close.

WORKS CITED

Acker, Kathy. *The Adult Life of Toulouse Lautrec by Henri Toulouse Lautrec. Portrait of an Eye: Three Novels*. New York: Press, 1997. 185-310.

_____. *Blood and Guts in Highschool.* New York: Grove, 1989.

_____. *Bodies of Work: Essays by Kathy Acker*. London: Serpent's Tail, 1997.

_____. *The Burning Bombing of America: The Destruction of the U.S. Rip-Off Red, Girl Detective.* New York: Grove, 2002. 135–201.

_____. *The Childlike Life of the Black Tarantula By the Black Tarantula. Portrait of an Eye: Three Novels*. New York: Press, 1997. 1–90.

_____. *Don Quixote*. New York: Grove, 1986.

_____. *Empire of the Senseles*s. New York: Grove, 1988.

_____. *Eurydice in the Underworld*. New York: Grove, 1996.

_____. *Great Expectations*. New York: Grove, 1994.

_____. *Hannibal Lecter, My Father.* New York: Grove, 1996.

_____. *I Dreamt I Was A Nymphomaniac: Imagining*. Portrait of an Eye: Three Novels. New York: Press, 1997. 91–184.

_____. *In Memoriam to Identity.* New York: Grove, 1990.

_____. *My Death My Life By Pier Paolo Pasolini. Literal Madness.* New York: Grove, 1988. 171–393.

_____. *My Mother: Demonology*. New York: Grove, 1994.

_____. *Pussy, King of the Pirate*s. New York: Grove, 1996.

_____. *Rip-Off Red, Girl Detective.* New York: Grove, 2002.

Barth, John. *The Book of Ten Nights and a Night*. Boston: Houghton, 2004.

_____. *Chimera*. Greenwich: Fawcett, 1973.

_____. *Coming Soon!!! — A Narrative*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2001.

_____. *The End of the Road*. New York: Avon, 1967.

_____. *The Floating Opera.* New York: Bantam, 1972.

_____. *The Friday Book: Essays and Other Nonfiction*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1997.

_____. *Further Fridays: Essays, Lectures, and Other Nonfiction 1984-1994*. Boston: Little, 1995.

_____. *Giles Goat-Boy or, The Revised New Syllabus*. New York: Anchor, 1987.

_____. *The Last Voyage of Somebody the Sailor*. New York: Anchor, 1992.

_____. *Letters*. Frogmore, Herts.: Granada, 1981.

_____. *Lost in the Funhouse: Fiction for Print, Tape, Live Voice.* New York: Anchor, 1988.

_____. *On With the Story.* Boston: Little, 1997.

_____. *Once Upon a Time: A Floating Opera*. London: Hodder, 1995.

_____. *Sabbatical: A Romance*. Illinois: Dalkey, 1996.

_____. *The Sot-Weed Factor.* New York: Anchor, 1987.

_____. *The Tidewater Tales*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1997.

Barthelme, Donald. *Amateurs*. New York: Farrar, 1976.

_____. *City Life*. New York: Bantam, 1971.

_____. *Come Back, Dr. Caligari*. Boston: Little, 1964.

_____. *The Dead Father*. New York: Farrar, 1975.

_____. *Forty Stories.* New York: Penguin, 1989.

_____. *Great Days.* New York: Pocket, 1980.

_____. *Guilty Pleasures.* New York: Farrar, 1974.

_____. *The King*. New York: Harper, 1990.

_____. *Not-Knowing: The Essays and Interviews.* New York: Vintage, 1997.

_____. *Overnight to Many Distant Cities*. New York: Penguin, 1985.

_____. *Paradise.* New York: Penguin, 1987.

_____. *Sadness.* New York: Bantam, 1974.

_____. *Sam's Bar: An American Landscape.* Illustr. Seymour Chwast. Garden City: Doubleday, 1987.

_____. *Sixty Stories.* New York: Penguin, 1996.

_____. *Snow White*. New York: Atheneum, 1982.

_____. *The Teachings of Don B.* New York: Vintage, 1992.

_____. *Unspeakable Practices, Unnatural Acts*. New York: Atheneum, 1982.

Baym, Nina. "Actually, I Felt Sorry For the Lion." *New Critical Approaches to the Short Stories of Ernest Hemingway.* Ed. Jackson E. Benson. Durham: Duke UP, 1990. 112–120.

Blaine, Diana York. "Death and *The Crying of Lot 49." Thomas Pynchon: Reading from the Margins.* Ed. Niran Abbas. Madison: Fairleigh Dickinson UP, 2003. 51-70.

Bomberger, Ann. "The Efficacy of Shock for Feminist Politics: Kathy Acker's *Blood and Guts in High School* and Donald Barthelme's *Snow White*." *Gender Reconstructions: Pornography and Perversions in Literature and Culture.* Ed. Cindy L. Carlson, Robert L. Mazzola, and Susan M. Bernardo. Aldershot, UK: Ashgate, 2002. 189–204.

Bortz, Jürgen, and Nicola Döring. *Forschungsmethoden und Evaluation für Human- und Sozialwissenschaftler.* Heidelberg: Springer, 2006.

Bremont, Claude, and Thomas Pavel. "The End of an Anathema." *Thematics: New Approaches*. The Margins of Lit. Ed. Claude Bremond, Joshua Landy, and Thomas G. Pavel. Albany: SUNY P, 1995. 181-92.

Brink, André. "An Act of Violence: Thoughts on the Functioning of Literature." *Pretexts: Studies in Writing and Culture* 3 (1991): 32–47.

Brown, Bill. *A Sense of Things: The Object Matter of American Literature*. New Ed. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 2004.

Calvino, Italo. *If on a Winter's Night a Traveler.* Transl. William Weaver. San Diego: Harvest, 1982.

Coover, Robert. *Aesop's Forest.* Brian Swann. *Plot of the Mice.* Capra Back-to-Back Volume VIII. Santa Barbara: Capra, 1986.

_____. *After Lazarus: A Filmscript*. Lim. Ed. Bloomfield Hills, Michigan, and Columbia, South Carolina: Bruccoli Clark, 1980.

_____. *Briar Rose*. New York: Grove, 1996.

_____. *Child Again*. San Francisco: McSweeny, 2005.

_____. *Gerald's Party*. New York: Grove, 1997.

_____. *Ghost Town*. New York: Grove, 2000.

_____. *The Grand Hotels (of Joseph Cornell)*. Providence: Burning Deck, 2002.

_____. *Hair O' The Chine: A Documentary Film Script*. Columbia, SC: Bruccoli Clark, 1979.

_____. "I am an Intransigent Realist: Interview with Susana Pajares Tosca." *Espéculo: Revista de estudios literarios* 12 (1999). 1 October 2008 <http://www.ucm.es/info/especulo/numero12/cooverin.html>

_____. *In Bed One Night & Other Brief Encounters*. Providence: Burning Deck, 1983.

_____. *John's Wife.* New York: Scribner, 1997.

_____. *Lucky Pierre*. New York: Grove, 2002.

_____. *A Night at the Movies or, You Must Remember This*. Illinois State U: Dalkey, 1997.

_____. *The Origin of the Brunists*. New York: Grove, 2000.

_____. *Pinocchio in Venice*. New York: Grove, 1997.

_____. *A Political Fable*. New York: Viking, 1980.

_____. *Pricksongs & Descants*. New York: Groove, 2000.

_____. *The Public Burning.* New York: Grove, 1998.

_____. *Spanking the Maid.* New York: Grove, 1997.

_____. *Stepmother.* San Franciso: McSweeney 2004.

_____. *A Theological Position*. New York: Dutton, 1972.

_____. *The Universal Baseball Association, Inc., J. Henry Waugh, Prop*. New York: Plume, 1971.

_____. *Whatever Happened to Gloomy Gus of the Chicago Bears?* New York: Linden, 1987.

Culler, Jonathan. "Defining Narrative Units." *Style and Structure in Literature: Essays in the New Stylistics.* Ed. George Fowler. Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1975. 132–42.

_____. "The Disputed Ground: Deconstruction and Literary Studies." *Deconstruction Is/in America: A New Sense of the Political.* Ed. Anselm Haverkamp. New York: New York UP, 1995. 41–51.

_____. *Ferdinand de Saussure*. Rev. Ed. Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1986.

_____. "Five Propositions on the Future of Men in Feminism." *Men Writing the Feminine: Literature, Theory, and the Question of Genders*. Ed. Thaïs E. Morgan. Albany: State U of New York P: 1994. 187–88.

_____. *Flaubert: The Uses of Uncertainty*. Rev. Ed. Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1985.

_____. *Framing the Sign: Criticism and Its Institutions*. Oxford: Blackwell, 1988.

_____. "In Defence of Overinterpretation." *Interpretation and Overinterpretation*. Umberto Eco with Richard Rorty, Jonathan Culler, Christine Brooke-Rose. Ed. Stefan Collini. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1992. 109-123.

_____. "The Linguistic Basis of Structuralism." *Structuralism: An Introduction*. Wolfson College Lectures. Ed. David Robey. Oxford: Clarendon, 1973. 20-36.

_____. *Literary Theory: A Very Short Introduction.* Oxford: Oxford UP, 1997.

_____. _On Deconstruction: Theory and Criticism After Structuralism._ London: Routledge, 1994.

_____. "Political Criticism." _Writing the Future_. Ed. David Wood. Warwick Studies in Philosophy and Lit. London: Routledge, 1990. 192-204.

_____. _The Pursuit of Signs: Semiotics, Literature, Deconstruction_. London: Routledge, 1981.

_____. _Structuralist Poetics: Structuralism, Linguistics and the Study of Literature_. London: Routledge, 1975.

Culler, Jonathan and Kevin Lamb, eds. _Just Being Difficult? Academic Writing in the Public Arena_. Stanford: Standford UP, 2003.

Darwin, Charles. _On the Origin of Species: A Facsimile of the First Edition._ 1819. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2003.

de Man, Paul. _Aesthetic Ideology._ Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1996.

_____. _Allegories of Reading: Figural Language in Rousseau, Nietzsche, Rilke, and Proust_. New Haven: Yale UP, 1979.

_____. _Blindness and Insight: Essays in the Rhetoric of Contemporary Criticism._ Rev. Ed. Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1983.

_____. _Critical Writings, 1953–1978._ Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1989.

_____. _The Rhetoric of Romanticism_. New York: Columbia UP, 1984.

_____. _Romanticism and Contemporary Criticism: The Gauss Seminar and Other Papers._ Ed. E. S. Burt, Kevin Newmark, and Andrzej Warminski. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1993.

_____. _Wartime Journalism, 1939–1943_. Ed. Werner Hamacher, Neil Hertz, and Thomas Keenan. Lincoln: U of Nebraska P, 1988.

Derrida, Jacques. _Dissemination._ Transl. Barbara Johnson. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1981.

_____. _Memories: for Paul de Man._ Rev. ed. Trans. Cecile Lindsay, Jonathan Culler, Eduardo Cadava, and Peggy Kamuf. New York: Columbia UP, 1989.

Freud, Sigmund. *Der Witz und seine Beziehung zum Unbewußten.* Frankfurt/Main: Fischer, 1958.

Gardner, John. *On Moral Fiction*. New York: Basic, 1978.

Gibson, William. *All Tomorrow's Parties*. New York: Berkley, 2003.

_____. *Burning Chrome*. New York: Ace, 1987.

_____. *Count Zero*. New York: Ace, 1987.

_____. *Idoru.* New York: Berkley, 1997.

_____. *Mona Lisa Overdrive*. New York: Bantam, 1989.

_____. *Neuromancer*. New York: Ace, 1984.

_____. *Pattern Recognition*. New York: Berkley, 2004.

_____. *Virtual Light.* New York: Bantam, 1994.

Gibson, William, and Pamela McCorduck. "'Virtual Lit': A Discussion." *Biblion: The Bulletin of The New York Public Library* 5 (1996): 33–51.

Gould, Stephen Jay. *The Structure of Evolutionary Theory.* Cambridge: Belknap of Harvard UP, 2002.

Hamacher, Werner, Neil Hertz, and Thomas Keenan, ed. *Responses on Paul de Man's Wartime Journalism*. Lincoln: U of Nebraska P, 1989.

"Herzl Timeline: 1903." Department for Zionist Jewish Education. 1 October 2008 <http://www.jafi.org.il/education/herzl/timeline7.html>.

Jameson, Fredric. *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism.* Durham: Duke UP, 1991.

Johnson, Barbara. "Anthropomorphism in Lyric and Law." *Material Events: Paul de Man and the Afterlife of Theory.* Ed. and introd. Tom Cohen, Barbara Cohen, and J. Hillis Miller. Ed. Andrzej Warminski. Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 2001. 205–28.

_____. *The Critical Difference.* Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1992.

_____. *The Feminist Difference: Literature, Psychoanalysis, Race, and Gender.* Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1998.

_____. "Introduction." *Freedom of Interpretation: The Oxford Amnesty Lectures 1992*. Ed. Barbara Johnson. New York: BasicBooks, 1993. 1–16.

_____. *Mother Tongues: Sexuality, Trials, Motherhood, Translation*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard UP, 2003.
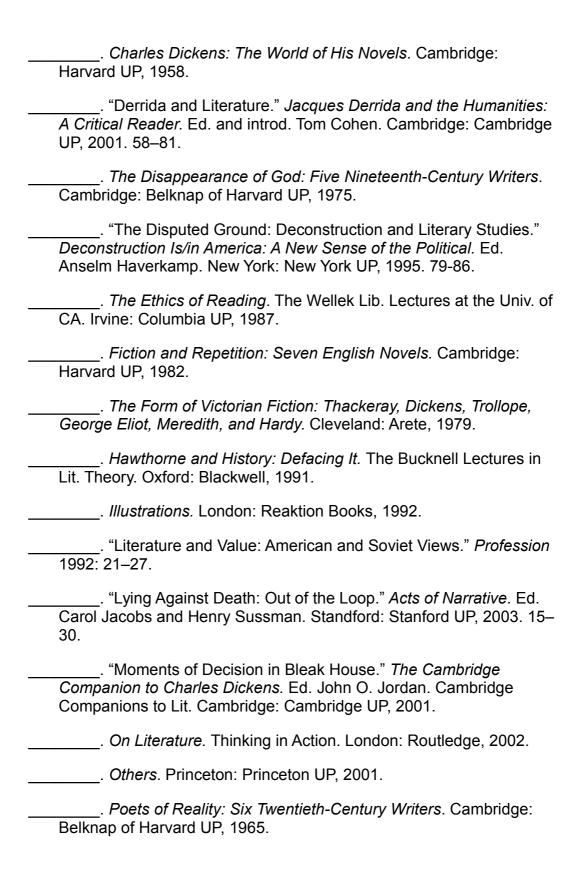
_____. "Using People: Kant with Winnicott." *The Turn to Ethics.* CultureWork. Ed. and introd. Beatrice Hanssen and Rebecca L. Walkowitz. New York: Routledge, 2000. 47–83.

_____. *The Wake of Deconstruction.* The Brucknell Lect. in Lit. Theory. Cambridge: Blackwell, 1994.

_____. *A World of Difference.* Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1991.

Johnson, Barbara, and Marjorie Garber. "Secret Sharing: Reading Conrad Psychoanalytically." *College English* 49 (1987): 628-40.

Keller, Rudi. *Sprachwandel*. Tübingen: Francke, 1990.

Kittler, Friedrich. "Media and Drugs in Pynchon's Second World War." *Reading Matters: Narratives in the New Media Ecology.* Ed. and introd. Joseph Tabbi and Michael Wutz. Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1997. 157-72.

Laclau, Ernesto. "Totalitarianism and Moral Indignation." *Diacritics: A Review of Contemporary Criticism* 20 (1990): 88-95.

Language Log. 1 December 2008 <http://languagelog.ldc.upenn.edu/nll/>

Levinas, Emmanuel. *Humanism of the Other.* Transl. Nidra Poller. Introd. Richard A. Cohen. Urbana: U of Illinois P, 2006.

Levy, Peter B. *Civil War on Race Street: The Civil Rights Movement in Cambridge, Maryland*. Gainesville: UP of Florida, 2003.

Maryland State Archive: Archives of Maryland Online. Acts of the General Assembly hitherto unpublished 1694-1698, 1711-1729. 1 October 2008 <http://www.msa.md.gov/megafile/msa/speccol/sc2900/sc2908/000001/000038/html/am38--463.html>.

McHale, Brian. "Whatever Happened to Descriptive Poetics?" *The Point of Theory: Practices of Cultural Analysis*. Ed. Mieke Bal and Inge E. Boer. New York: Continuum, 1994. 56–65.

Miller, J. Hillis. *Ariadne's Thread: Story Lines.* New Haven: Yale UP, 1992.

_____. *Charles Dickens: The World of His Novels*. Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1958.

_____. "Derrida and Literature." *Jacques Derrida and the Humanities: A Critical Reader.* Ed. and introd. Tom Cohen. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2001. 58–81.

_____. *The Disappearance of God: Five Nineteenth-Century Writers*. Cambridge: Belknap of Harvard UP, 1975.

_____. "The Disputed Ground: Deconstruction and Literary Studies." *Deconstruction Is/in America: A New Sense of the Political.* Ed. Anselm Haverkamp. New York: New York UP, 1995. 79-86.

_____. *The Ethics of Reading*. The Wellek Lib. Lectures at the Univ. of CA. Irvine: Columbia UP, 1987.

_____. *Fiction and Repetition: Seven English Novels.* Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1982.

_____. *The Form of Victorian Fiction: Thackeray, Dickens, Trollope, George Eliot, Meredith, and Hardy*. Cleveland: Arete, 1979.

_____. *Hawthorne and History: Defacing It.* The Bucknell Lectures in Lit. Theory. Oxford: Blackwell, 1991.

_____. *Illustrations.* London: Reaktion Books, 1992.

_____. "Literature and Value: American and Soviet Views." *Profession* 1992: 21–27.

_____. "Lying Against Death: Out of the Loop." *Acts of Narrative*. Ed. Carol Jacobs and Henry Sussman. Standford: Stanford UP, 2003. 15–30.

_____. "Moments of Decision in Bleak House." *The Cambridge Companion to Charles Dickens.* Ed. John O. Jordan. Cambridge Companions to Lit. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2001.

_____. *On Literature.* Thinking in Action. London: Routledge, 2002.

_____. *Others*. Princeton: Princeton UP, 2001.

_____. *Poets of Reality: Six Twentieth-Century Writers*. Cambridge: Belknap of Harvard UP, 1965.

————. *Reading Narrative.* Oklahoma Project for Discourse and Theory Vol.18. Norman: U of Oklahoma P, 1998.

————. "Response to Jonathan Loesberg." *Victorian Studies: A Journal of the Humanities, Arts and Sciences* 37 (1993): 123-28.

————. *Speech Acts in Literature.* Stanford: Stanford UP, 2001.

————. "'Stay! Speak, Speak. I Charge Thee, Speak': An Interview by Wang Fengzhen and Shaobo Xie." *Culture Machine* 2 (2000). 1 October 2008 <http://culturemachine.tees.ac.uk/Cmach/Backissues/j002/Articles/art_miller.htm>.

————. *Theory Now and Then*. Hertfordshire: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1991.

————. *Thomas Hardy: Distance and Desire*. Cambridge: Belknap of Harvard UP, 1970.

————. *Topographies*. Stanford: Stanford UP, 1995.

————. *Tropes, Parables, and Performatives: Essays on Twentieth-Century Literature.* Hertfordshire, UK: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1990.

————. *Versions of Pygmalion.* Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1990.

————. *Victorian Subjects.* Durham: Duke UP, 1991.

————. "Zero." *Glossalalia: An Alphabet of Critical Keywords*. Ed. Julia Wolfreys. Edinburgh: Edinburgh UP, 2003. 369–90.

Miller, J. Hillis, and Manuel Asensi. *Black Holes / J. Hillis Miller; or, Boustrophedonic Reading.* Transl. Mabel Richart. Stanford: Stanford UP, 1999.

"Mind-Bending Disclosures." *Time Magazine* 15 Aug 1977. 1 October 2008 <http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,915244,00.html>.

Morrison, Paul. *The Poetics of Fascism: Ezra Pound, T. S. Eliot, Paul de Man*. New York: Oxford UP, 1996.

Muller, John P., and William J. Richardson, ed. *The Purloined Poe.* Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1988.

Negative, Gus. "Donald Barthelme." *The Modern Word.* 1 October 2008 <http://www.themodernword.com/scriptorium/barthelme.html>.

"'Nothing but Darkness and Talk?': Writers' Symposium on Traditional Values and Iconoclastic Fiction." *Critique: Studies in Contemporary Fiction* 31 (1990): 233-255.

Pratap, Anita. "Romance and a Little Rape." *Time Magazine* 13 Aug 1990. 1 October 2008 <http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,970891,00.html>.

Prince, Gerald. "Notes on the Categories 'Topos' and 'Disnarrated.'" *Thematics Reconsidered: Essays in Honor of Horst* Daemmrich. Int. Forschung zur Allg. u. Vgl. Lit.-Wiss. 9. Ed. Frank Trommler. Intr. Theodore Ziolkowski. Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1995. 127-132.

Pynchon, Thomas. *The Crying of Lot 49.* London: Picador, 1979.

_____. *Gravity's Rainbow.* London: Picador, 1975.

_____. "Is it O.K. to be a Luddite?" The New York Times Book Review 28 Oct. 1984: 1, 40-41. 1 October 2008 <http://www.themodernword.com/pynchon/pynchon_essays_luddite.html>.

_____. "Letter to Thomas F. Hirsch, January 8, 1969." *The Fictional Labyrinths of Thomas Pynchon.* Ed. David Seed. Iowa City: U of Iowa P, 1988. 240–43.

_____. *Mason & Dixon.* London: Vintage, 1998.

_____. *Slow Learner: Early Stories.* London: Picador, 1985.

_____. *V.* London: Picador, 1975.

_____. *Vineland.* London: Minerva, 1990.

Rimmon-Kenan, Shlomith. "What Is Theme and How Do We Get at It?" *Thematics: New Approaches.* The Margins of Lit. Ed. Claude Bremond, Joshua Landy, and Thomas G. Pavel. Albany: SUNY P, 1995. 9-20.

Rooney, Ellen. "'A Little More than Persuading': Tess and the Subject of Sexual Violence." *Rape and Representation.* Ed. Lynn A. Higgins and Brenda R. Silver. New York: Columbia UP, 1991. 86–114.

Samuels, Shirley. *Romances of the Republic: Women, the Family, and Violence in the Literature of the Early American Nation.* New York & Oxford: Oxford UP, 1996.

Scarry, Elaine. *The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World.* New York: Oxford UP, 1985.

Schwab, Gabriele. "Cyborgs and Cybernetic Intertexts: On Postmodern Phantasms of Body and Mind." *Intertextuality and Contemporary American Fiction.* Ed. Patrick O'Donnell and Robert Con Davis. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1989. 191-213.

Sielke, Sabine. *Reading Rape: The Rhetoric of Sexual Violence in American Literature and Culture, 1790-1990.* Princeton: Princeton UP, 2002.

Sollors, Werner. "Thematics Today." *Thematics: Interdisciplinary Studies.* Ed., pref., and introd. Max Louwerse and Willie van Peer. Amsterdam: Benjamins, 2002. 217-236.

Sophocles. *Sophocles I: The Complete Greek Tragedies.* Ed. David Grene and Richmond Lattimore. Transl. and introd. David Grene. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1991.

Spivak, Gayatri Chakravorty. "At the Planchette of Deconstruction Is/in America." *Deconstruction Is/in America: A New Sense of the Political.* Ed. Anselm Haverkamp. New York: New York UP, 1995. 237–49.

_____. *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason: Toward a History of the Vanishing Present.* Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1999.

_____. *Death of a Discipline.* New York: Columbia UP, 2003.

_____. "Ethics and Politics in Tagore, Coetzee, and Certain Scenes of Teaching." *Diacritics: A Review of Contemporary Criticism* 32 (2002): 17–34.

_____. "From Haverstock Hill Flat to U. S. Classroom, What's Left of Theory?" *What's Left of Theory? New Work on the Politics of Literary Theory.* Eds. and introd. Judith Butler, John Guillory, and Thomas Kendell. New York: Routledge, 2000. 1–39.

_____. *In Other Worlds: Essays in Cultural Politics.* New York: Routledge, 1988.

_____. "The New Historicism: Political Commitment and the Postmodern Critic." *The New Historicism.* Ed. and introd. H. Aram Veeser. New York: Routledge, 1989. 277–92.

_____. *Outside in the Teaching Machine.* New York: Routledge, 1993.

_____. "The Politics of the Production of Knowledge: An Interview with Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak." *Just Being Difficult? Academic Writing in the Public Arena*. Ed. Jonathan Culler and Kevin Lamb. Stanford: Standford UP, 2003. 181–98.

_____. *The Spivak Reader: Selected Works of Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak.* New York & London: Routledge, 1996.

_____. "Terror: A Speech After 9-11." *Boundary 2: An International Journal of Literature and Culture* 31 (2004): 81-111.

Stockhausen, Karlheinz. "Message from Professor Karlheinz Stockhausen." Sept. 19 2001. 1 October 2008 <http://www.stockhausen.org/message_from_karlheinz.html>.

Thoreen, David. "The Fourth Amendment and Other Modern Inconveniences: Undeclared War, Organized Labor, and the Abrogation of Civil Rights in *Vineland*." *Thomas Pynchon: Reading from the Margins*. Ed. Niran Abbas. Madison: Fairleigh Dickinson UP, 2003. 215-33.

Towers, Robert. "The Flap Over Tom Wolfe: How Real is the Retreat From Realism?" *The New York Times* 28 Jan 1990. 1 October 2008 <http://query.nytimes.com/gst/fullpage.html?res=9C0CE1DF153EF93BA15752C0A966958260>.

Vidal, Gore. "American Plastic: The Matter of Fiction." *United States: Essays 1952-1992.* London: Deutsch, 1993. 121–46.

The Vinland Sagas: The Norse Discovery of America. Transl. and introd. Magnus Magnusson and Hermann Pálsson. Middlesex: Penguin, 1965.

Vries, Hent de, and Samuel Weber. Introduction. *Violence, Identity, and Self-Determination*. Ed. and introd. Vries and Weber. Stanford: Stanford UP, 1997. 3–13.

Wolf, Philipp. "Why Themes Matter: Literary Knowledge and the Thematic Example of Money." *Thematics: Interdisciplinary Studies.* Ed., pref., and introd. Max Louwerse and Willie van Peer. Amsterdam: Benjamins, 2002. 341-52.

Wolfe, Tom. "Stalking the Billion-Footed Beast: A Literary Manifesto for the New Social Novel." *Harper's Magazine* Nov. 1989: 45–56.

Ziolkowski, Theodore. Introduction. *Thematics Reconsidered: Essays in Honor of Horst Daemmrich*. Int. Forschung zur Allg. u. Vgl. Lit.-Wiss. 9. Ed. Frank Trommler. Intr. Theodore Ziolkowski. Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1995. 5-12.

Vita

Martin Wallerius, born in Düsseldorf, Germany, studied modern and medieval German literature, historical linguistics, and comparative religion at the Rheinische Friedrich-Wilhelms-Universität Bonn, Germany, without obtaining a diploma. After several years of freelance work as a writer and editor, he enrolled for a teacher's exam in English and German at the Heinrich Heine Universität Düsseldorf, Germany, and later switched toward an M. A. degree in modern and medieval English literature and modern German literature. After graduating in 1998/99 with a thesis on identity strategies in John Barth's novels and shorter fiction from 1956–79, he enrolled for additional studies in Modern Japan at the Heinrich Heine Universität Düsseldorf from 1999–2003, co-founded the freelancers network Sinnflut-Projekt for advertising professionals in 2000, engaged his dissertation project seriously in 2004, and passed the exams to become a certified computer technician in 2006. Currently, he lives in Düsseldorf and Hamburg as a freelance writer and copywriter under the pen name of J. Martin. He is a member of the German writers guild *Freier Deutscher Autorenverband* (FDA).