

The Moods of Postmodern Metafiction: Narrative and Affective Literary
Spaces and Reader (Dis)Engagement

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Abstract

The Moods of Postmodern Metafiction: Narrative and Affective Literary
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This dissertation, challenging critiques of postmodern and contemporary metafiction as humanly, politically, and socially irrelevant, acknowledges the incredible diversity of self-reflexive literature and then goes on to argue that self-reflexive writing, creating connections between art and life, offers rich ways of reflecting upon human emotional experience as a personal, social, and political phenomenon. Little scholarship has considered the ways in which the personal and the political converge in self-reflective texts, and yet the fact that metafiction foregrounds acts of making meaning as it explores writing, reading, and affect as semiotic processes, suggests that such a study is long overdue. As self-reflexive stories, I argue, underscore the processes of narration, writing, and reading, they may consider the realm of fiction alongside our everyday experiences and perceptions, thus inviting readers to make connections between their everyday lives and narrative practices.

Through close readings Carole Maso's *The Art Lover* (1990), Paul Auster's *City of Glass* (1987), W. G. Sebald's *Austerlitz* (2001), and Gayl Jones' *Corregidora*

(1975), my dissertation places narrative on center stage, looking at the intersections between content and form, while also considering the historical and social contexts that are crucial to making sense of any literary work. Central to my consideration of these text's representations and elicitations of feeling are conceptions of narrative and perceptual space. Considering self-conscious literature's frequent use of narrative layers and how this structure encourages modes of reader engagement which may be understood in terms of (affectively charged) relational closeness and distance, I argue that the act of reading may be understood through spatial metaphors. Building upon the notion that we perceive not just physical objects, but also thoughts, emotions, and relationships, in (dynamic) spatial terms, my project explores the intersection between metafiction and affect both within and beyond text.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
List of figures	ii
Chapter 1: Introduction	1
Chapter 2: The Narrative, Social, and Affective Spaces of Metafiction.....	30
Chapter 3: The Poetics of Loss in Carole Maso's <i>The Art Lover</i> "	68
Chapter 4: Engendered Emotion and Paul Auster's <i>City of Glass</i>	115
Chapter 5: Urban Wanderings and Places of Memory in W.G. Sebald's <i>Austerlitz</i>	169
Chapter 6: Sounding Emotion: Music, Rhythm, and Silences in Gayl Jones' <i>Corregidora</i>	230
Conclusion	276
Bibliography.....	279

LIST OF FIGURES

Figure Number	Page
1.1. Gary Falk, <i>Untitled</i>	101
1.2. “Carole and Gary”	113
5.1. Uncaptioned image from <i>Austerlitz</i> (Liverpool Street Station).....	182
5.2. Uncaptioned image from <i>Austerlitz</i> (building facades)	192
5.3. Uncaptioned image from <i>Austerlitz</i> (doorways).....	193
5.4. Uncaptioned image from <i>Austerlitz</i> (doorways).....	193
5.5. Uncaptioned image from <i>Austerlitz</i> (eyes of animals and men).....	200
5.6. Uncaptioned image from <i>Austerlitz</i> (exterior of fortress)	213
5.7. Uncaptioned image from <i>Austerlitz</i> (interior hallway).....	214
5.8. Uncaptioned image from <i>Austerlitz</i> (archive).....	223

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Chapter 1: Introduction

In 1967, with his essay “The Literature of Exhaustion,” John Barth shook up writers, readers, and literary scholars by declaring the death of the novel, a form that he claimed had done and said all it could. His seemingly apocalyptic text has generally been misunderstood as a pronouncement of writing’s inevitable dead end. However, in actuality, Barth was speaking not of a futility in writing, but rather of the new possibilities for storytelling that the historical and cultural moment, in his mind, demanded. Describing in 1967 writing’s growing tendency to reflect upon itself as process, Barth argued that the “exhaustion” of narratives need not be a reason for despair; rather, this “inward turn” could be the beginning of a break away from the limitations of literary convention.

Barth was not the only novelist in the late 1960s to find significance in the increasingly self-conscious nature of narrative. Reflecting on Barth’s description of fiction’s introversion, William Gass created the term “metafiction” for “fiction about fiction,” or, in other words, stories which exhibit self-knowledge, often through embedded narratives and ironic self-distance. A common critique was made of the first writers labeled as metafictionists in the 1960s and 1970s: they were predominantly white, socially privileged American men, whom numerous critics argued were oblivious to the social concerns relating to race, class, and gender. Particularly before Linda Hutcheon’s work on historiographic metafiction, “narcissistic narrative” was often

viewed as a self-indulgent form which primarily delighted in mocking a powerless reader at the mercy of the author. This view is expressed, for example, in Wayne Booth's claim that such fiction is immoral because one can't determine the author's moral viewpoint (quoted in Wooley 3-4). Christopher Lasch's *The Culture of Narcissism* (1979) similarly attributes self-conscious writing to an excessive concern with the self that he sees as characteristic of the late twentieth century. Patricia Waugh comes to self-conscious narrative's defense in "What is Metafiction and Why are They Saying Such Awful Things About It?," contesting the critical tendency to see metafiction "as a form of the self-indulgence and decadence characteristic of the exhaustion of any artistic form or genre" (46), but she too recognizes the potential for self-reflexive writing to become socially irrelevant. "The problem facing writers who attempt authentically to represent conditions of rapid social change," she writes, "is that they may themselves produce works of art which are ephemeral and even trivial. [...] The practitioners of so-called 'aleatory art' (which attempts to be totally random in order to suggest the chaotic, frenetic and colliding surfaces of contemporary technological society) are open to these charges" (48).^{1 2} I, like Waugh, would agree that self-reflexive writing has the potential

¹ In addition, Philip Roth has described self-reflexive literature as "not so much an attempt to understand the self, as to assert it" (Stonehill 5), and Gore Vidal, expressing a common critique of metafiction, describes the self-conscious work of John Barth as "written not so much to be read as to be taught" (Stonehill 7). Philip Stevick's "Metaphors for the Novel" (1974) similarly describes a disconnect between self-conscious play and human experience. Deborah Anne Wooley reflects on such criticism when she states that "Humanist critics see self-reflexive fiction as evidence that fiction, having degenerated into avant-garde formalism or 'mere' exercises in language, is dead or dying. It is condemned as humanly irrelevant or self-indulgent or both" (2). Elaborating on Naomi Leibowitz's comments in *Humanism and the Absurd in the Modern Novel*, Wooley writes that "Self-reflexive fiction is seen as an aberration of novelistic tradition, a sort of mutant devoid of moral, social, or other human meaning" (3). William Gass, in "On Experimental Writing," also recognizes the potential for self-reflexivity to become humanly

to become overly self-indulgent, at the same time that I object to blanket statements that does not acknowledge the diversity of such writing.

Though more recent scholarship on self-conscious writing has pointed to the political relevance of much of metafiction, the category's negative image has continued. As metafiction was identified as a label for a small number of (mostly white American male) experimental writers including Barth, Gass, Donald Barthelme, Robert Coover, Guy Davenport, David Foster Wallace, David Eggers, and Gilbert Sorrentino, self-reflexive writing became misunderstood as an invention of the late twentieth century

irrelevant: "Many times metafiction, because they caressed themselves so publicly, behaved more like manifestoes than stories. They were more 'explanatory' than 'experimental' [...] they became tutorial [...] teaching the reader how to read, admonishing him for his traditional bourgeois expectations and directing his attention to art instead of nature, to the reality of the work instead of the reality of the world" (27). Brian Stonehill describes an elitism in the self-conscious novel which stems from its elusive references, which lead to "a sense that those who do not share a certain body of knowledge are excluded from the implied audience" (7). The critique of metafiction as unconcerned with human experience can be applied more generally to anti-mimetic art as well. As Alan Singer notes in *A Metaphysics of Fiction: Discontinuity and Discourse in the Modern Novel* (1983), "the antirepresentational stance in modern fiction is characteristically an attempt to invalidate the claims for an ontological link between work and world" (24).

² John Barth notes that "the idea of the controlling artist has been condemned as politically reactionary and even fascist" (163). In *Playing the Reader: The Homoerotics of Self-Reflexive Fiction* (2000), Michael Hardin articulates this view, calling to question the assumption "that because of the seeming openness of the text to the reader, metafiction is the type of writing that is constructed most by the reader" (15). For "[o]nce one enters into the novel [...], you automatically affirm the existence and role of the author, as played by the narrator/protagonist writer in the text, and place yourself under his/her control" (15). "The game, then, is not one of preset rules and assumptions, but one in which the reader is at a clear disadvantage; the narrator is seducing the reader into the text, into a relationship based upon manipulation and domination" (16). Deborah Anne Wooley also calls attention to this characteristic of self-reflexive writing when she argues that the such literature commonly thematizes power relations: "the basic feature of the narrator-reader relationship, as of the narrator's relationships to language and narrative convention, is a game of manipulation or a tension based on power" (10). She, however, describes this as a productive exploration of the text-reader dynamic which also involves the reader's deliberate involvement.

and as a form that solely reflects a particular postmodern aesthetic and mode of thought that is disconnected from social and political realities.³

The misunderstanding of metafiction as needlessly complex and obscure reflects how the category has frequently been misunderstood and dismissed. First of all, self-reflexivity is hardly a postmodern innovation. Despite Aristotle's assertion in his *Poetics* that "The poet should speak as little as possible in his own person, for it is not this that makes him an imitator" (quoted in Stonehill 1), self-conscious narrative has a long literary tradition dating back to Greek oral culture and continuing on throughout Western literature.⁴ Consider, for example, Homer's *The Iliad* (c.800 B.C.), Cervantes' *Don Quixote* (1605), Shakespeare's plays within plays (c.1592-1616), Xavier de Maistre's *Voyage around My Room* (1790), Henry Fielding's *Tom Jones* (1749), Lawrence Sterne's *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy, Gentleman* (1759-67), Joaquim Maria Machado de Assis's *The Posthumous Memoirs of Bras Cubas* (1880), or Lewis Carroll's *Alice through the Looking Glass* (1871). Unless we dismiss these texts as mere reflections of erudite elitism, as many critics have done with postmodern metafiction, we might consider the possibility that self-consciousness is a significant

³ With the advent of modern avant-garde writing, metafiction began again to flourish. Among the literary movements associated with modern and postmodern metafictional avant-garde writing are the French *nouveau roman* of the 1950s (Alain Robbe-Grillet, Marguerite Duras, Jean Recardou, and Michael Butor), the 1960s work of the (mainly French) group of Oulipo ("Ouvroir de littérature potentielle") writers (including Georges Perec and Italo Calvino), and the long-evolving metafictional British novel (Lawrence Sterne, Henry Fielding, Henry James, James Joyce, Virginia Woolf, Doris Lessing, John Fowles, A. S. Byatt, Salman Rushdie, and Ursula LeGuin).

⁴ Though self-conscious literature before the late eighteenth century (with the exception of Cervantes' *Don Quixote*) is not commonly mentioned, Gabriel Josipovici, in *The World and the Book* (1971), suggests that self-reflexive tendencies can also be seen in the medieval allegories of Langland and Dante, as well as in Lope de Vega Rebelais's *Gargantua and Pantagruel* (1532-34).

characteristic of fiction of both the past and the present. Self-reflexivity is also key to a wide span of literary traditions. This is evident, for example, in the playfulness and magical realism of so many Latin American writers (e.g. Julio Cortázar, Carlos Fuentes, Claric Lispector, Jorge Luis Borges, and Gabriel García Marquez), as well as in African-American oral traditions whose self-reflexivity, as Henry Louis Gates points out in *The Signifying Monkey* (1988), dates back to slavery, as can be traced through such modern and contemporary writers as Nora Zeale Hurston, Ralph Ellison, Ishmael Reed, Gayl Jones, Toni Morrison, and Toni Cade Bambara. And since the 1970s metafiction's breadth has grown tremendously. This is evident in the work of recent feminist, gay, and lesbian writers including Carol Maso (*Ghost Dance* 1986, *The Art Lover* 1990), Margaret Atwood (*Alias Grace* 1996), Samuel Delany (*Dhalgren* 1974, *Tales of Nevèryon* 1993), Jeanette Winterson (*Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit* 1987, *Written on the Body* 1993), Bertha Harris (*Lover* 1976), and Nicole Brossard (*These our Mothers, or, The Disintegrating Chapter* 1977), as well as in postcolonial narratives like Theresa Hak Kyung Cha's *Dictee* (1995), Maxine Hong Kingston's *China Men* (1980), Jessica Hagedorn's *Dogeaters* (1990), Karen Tei Yamashita's *Through the Arc of the Rainforest* (1990).⁵

Hence, as Robert Alter argues in *Partial Magic* (1975), it would seem that self-reflexivity does something with narrative that does not apply exclusively to postwar

⁵ Other such post-colonial novels include Lawrence Chua's *Gold by the Inch* (1988), Rabih Alameddine's *I, The Divine* (2002), Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* (1980), André Brink's *States of Emergency* (1988), Flann O'Brien's *The Third Policeman* (1999), and Hubert Aquin's *Prochain episode/The Next Episode* (1965).

writing. Rather, literary self-consciousness and its questioning of literary convention are apparent in the novel's very beginning (often identified with Cervantes' *Don Quixote*). That this "erosion of belief in the authority of the written word" (Alter 3) begins so early in the novel's history demonstrates that metafiction's rise, its "eclipse" in the nineteenth century, and its rebirthing in the 1960s are linked the sociohistorical moments in which they surface. Since the seventeenth century, Alter argues, social, political and economic circumstances, accompanied by "the concomitant transformations in belief and world view, are not only reflected in the novel but also have very significantly determined the nature of the novel" (2-3). This statement seems to support Richard Walsh's thesis in *Novel Arguments: Reading Innovative American Fiction* (1995) that the common criticism of experimental writing (including metafiction) as disengaged with the world oversimplifies the complexity and significance of a great deal of literature.⁶

Though there are some significant reasons for why postmodern metafiction has sometimes been denounced⁷, critiques of this entire category tend to oversimplify an

⁶ Such criticism of experimental writing is expressed in John Gardner's *On Moral Fiction*, Gerald Graff's *Literature Against Itself*, John Aldridge's *The American Novel and the Way We Live Now*, and Charles Newman's *The Post-Modern Aura* (Walsh 12). These books appear to align themselves with Jameson's critique of postmodernism as politically inert. Graf, for example, reiterates Jameson when he writes that "The artist's alienated stance had ceased to represent a critical relation to society, but become normative" (Walsh 12).

⁷ According to Walsh, the dismissal of metafiction occurs through "a collaborative series of misinterpretations and misrepresentations of the fiction itself, of the statements of its practitioners and of its theoretical context" (2-3). Among the criticism which leads to these views of metafiction are Barth's "Literature of Exhaustion," commonly read as a declaration of narrative's dead end; Susan Sontag's "Against Interpretation," which emphasizes art for art's sake; and Gass's excessively formalist literary analysis (Walsh 3-4). Criticism of metafiction can also undoubtedly be attributed to an elitism expressed through esoteric allusions to other texts and scholarship. As Stonehill explains, works like Sterne's

incredibly complex and diverse set of writings. While I will not disagree with critics that metafiction's delight in play may, at times, reflect metafiction's love with itself more so than social concerns, the notion of metafiction as narcissistic is clearly reductionist. Not only do more "canonical" metafictional works like Paul Auster's *City of Glass* (1984) engage themselves in questions central to social and emotional experience. A large number of writers like J. G. Ballard (*The Atrocity Exhibition* 1990), Doris Lessing (*The Golden Notebook* 1960), Susan Daitch (*L.C.* 1986), and Alasdair Gray (*Lanark* 1962), to name only a few, suggest the unique possibilities for self-reflexive works to open doors for the representation of affective experience and emotion's connections to the social and the everyday world and to the acts of writing and reading.

This dissertation, challenging some of the presumptions that have been made about postmodern and contemporary metafiction (critiques that have primarily been directed at American fiction), considers the incredible diversity of self-reflexive literature, and then goes on to explore a number of self-conscious texts that I will argue intensely reflect upon human, social, political, and cultural experience. Metafiction, I will argue, by drawing attention to human, social, and personal experience, engages itself in questions about how we make sense of those experiences, especially through affect. While a good deal of criticism on individual self-aware texts explores questions

Tristram Shandy and Gaddis's *The Recognitions* created a sense among the reading public "that those who do not share a certain body of knowledge are excluded from the implied audience" (7). Walsh argues, however, that authors' own elitist attitudes later seemed to dissipate and their concerns with social reality to increase. This paradigm shift is reflected in Barthelme's essay "Not Knowing," in which he disowns his former assertion that the literary work is an object in its own right. Instead he states, "art is always a meditation upon external reality" (Walsh 24-25).

of memory and subjective perception, few studies to my knowledge have closely considered metafiction in relation to the affective components of narrative and the reading process.⁸ Moreover while discourse on metafiction occasionally mentions the category's relation to emotion, little scholarship has considered the ways in which the personal and the political converge in self-reflective texts. And yet the fact that metafiction foregrounds acts of meaning making and hence often connects writing, reading, and affect as semiotic processes suggests that such a study is long overdue. Following a cultural narratological approach that brings together close reading and cultural studies, this project places narrative on center stage, looking at the intersections between content and form, while also considering the historical and social contexts that are crucial to making sense of any literary work.

Critical Discourse on Postmodern Metafiction

Before beginning such close readings in the following chapters, this introduction positions self-reflexive writing in relation to the critical discourse on it. The general view of metafiction as a pure product of aesthetic arrogance and dispassionate analysis may be aligned with a larger critique of postmodernism, most often associated with Fredric Jameson's *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (in 1984

⁸ Linda Hutcheon (*Narcissistic Narrative*) and Grant Stirling (*The Narrativity of Narcissism: Cultural Contexts of Contemporary American Metafiction* (1998)) have considered metafiction in psychoanalytic terms. The dissertations of Melissa Anne Stewart (*Metafiction and Memory in the Works of Ana Maria Moix and Montserrat Roig* (1992)) and Kathleen A. Doyle (*Women Reading, Writing and Remembering: The Construction of Carmen Martin Gaité's Protagonists* (1999)) explore metafiction in relation to memory.

published as an article, and in 1991 expanded into a book). Here, Jameson argues that postmodernism has lost the social and political efficacy that marked modernist literature, for postmodern writing, having lost any sense of individual style or expression, only represents history through pastiche images that, as products of a capitalist society, result in a degraded historicism. As John Duvall explains, “while Jameson sees potentially political urge in modernism being diffused and even institutionalized, in postmodernism he sees it as coopted” (3). For Jameson, “postmodernism can’t envision change because aesthetic production has been subsumed by commodity production, thus emptying modernist aesthetic of affect and of political effect” (Duvall 3-4).

Linda Hutcheon challenges Jameson’s assessment of postmodernism as socially and historically disengaged in *A Poetics of Postmodernism* (1988), and later in *A Politics of Postmodernism* (1989), through a description of what she calls “historiographic metafiction,” literature which consciously and self-reflexively draws attention to history’s authority and power while also underscoring its constructed nature.⁹ While I find her distinction between the characteristics of self-conscious writing before and after the 1970s (according to which “late modernist radical metafiction” consistently marginalizes the historical (“Historiographic Metafiction” 75)) overly simplistic, her argument that metafiction of more recent decades has

⁹ Hutcheon draws a connection between historiographic metafiction and Hayden White’s argument in *Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth-Century Europe* (1973) that all historians take events that have occurred and then create a story out of those events. In this sense, history is a human and social construction.

become more intensely engaged in the historical does, I believe, offer a productive reconsideration of postmodern self-consciousness. For Hutcheon, postmodern culture, best understood for its “self-conscious, self-contradictory, self-undermining statement” (*Politics 1*), seeks “to de-naturalize some of the dominant features of our way of life; to point out that those entities that we unthinkably experience as ‘natural’” are actually cultural (*Politics 2*). Questioning Jameson’s reading of postmodern fiction as historically irrelevant, she contends that

Works like Coover’s *The Public Burning* or Doctorow’s *The Book of Daniel* do not rewrite, refashion, or expropriate history merely to satisfy either some game-playing or some totalizing impulse; instead, they juxtapose what we think we know of the past (from official archival sources and personal memory) with an alternate representation that foregrounds the postmodern epistemological question of the nature of historical knowledge. Which ‘facts’ make it into history? And whose facts? (*Politics 71*)

Hutcheon hereby presents metafiction as intensely politically engaged.

Both Hutcheon and Jameson hereby express extreme views of postmodernism: while for Jameson works belonging to this aesthetic category *consistently* and *completely* remove themselves from the social and the political, Hutcheon claims just the opposite: that postmodern texts *always* address these same concerns. If it is true that, as Brian McHale contends in *Constructing Postmodernism* (1992), the postmodern is best described by its very resistance to definitive categories, then such oppositional statements do not hold. While the view of postmodern literature as socially disengaged certainly applies to some contemporary writing, the idea that all things postmodern are socially and politically irrelevant encourages readers to overlook the cultural concerns so vital to much of postmodern fiction. Vice-versa, to say that all contemporary writing centers on the historical suggests that this literature is far less diverse and complex than it in reality is.

Jameson and Hutcheon's polarizing arguments about literature since the 1960s nonetheless offer productive ways of thinking about contemporary writing, as they ask us to consider the degree to which a postmodernist aesthetic does or does not challenge the practices and mind sets of our consumerist culture. Though I would argue that some metafiction, like those of Borges, do not foreground historicity and sociocultural context, Hutcheon's argument proves most relevant to this dissertation because my project focuses on metafiction which, I will argue, *do* convey their political, social, and personal relevance. Although Hutcheon's argument both overextends and oversimplifies the concept of postmodern metafiction by claiming not only that *all*

postmodern writing demonstrates a concern for history, but also that it does so through self-reflexivity, her description of historiographic metafiction as concerned with history proves crucial to the texts with which this project engages.

Critics like Larry McCaffery and Patricia Waugh have, along with Hutcheon, made apparent the historical relevance of self-conscious narrative, which actually begins much earlier than the 1960s. As these scholars show, the inward turn that becomes apparent in this decade is a *re*-discovery of a self-referential tendency that has been central to oral and written narratives for centuries. Hence, when considering postmodern metafiction, the question is not so much how it comes to exist, but rather why it returns at a given historical and cultural moment.

Hutcheon, in particular, has explored the question of why metafiction reemerges in the 1960s and how it is unique to the postmodern age. In *Narcissistic Narrative*, she points to how self-reflective stories, like postmodernism, unveil the artifice of social construction, performativity, and ways in which human perception and experience are shaped by fictionalized interpretations of our surroundings. “Self-reflexive narrative’s more modern version,” she explains, “differs mostly in its explicitness, its intensity, and its own critical self-awareness” (18), and this progression perhaps reflects the need for “an aesthetic mode of dealing with modern man’s experience of life as being unordered by any communal or transcendent power – God or myth – and his new skepticism that art can unproblematically provide a consolatory order” (19). Hutcheon hereby

underscores the reality that modern and postmodern literature frequently portray the present-day experience as one of anxiety and confusion.

Given Hutcheon's view of metafiction, it seems ironic that her term for metafiction as "narcissistic narrative" reinforces an understanding of both metafiction and the postmodern as neurotically self-interested (though she explicitly states that she does not use the term perjoratively). The implication that self-reflective story is pathological¹⁰ is apparent in the view of metafiction as the prototype for a literature written by white, privileged, American men whose abstract and epistemological questions are divorced from the realities of history, race, gender, and class. Larry McCaffery takes issue with such views of the male novelists most commonly associated with such critiques when in *The Metafictional Muse: The Works of Robert Coover, Donald Barthelme, and William H. Gass* (1982). He McCaffery indicates not only metafiction's concerns in social and political realities, but also how such issues are bound within the subjective nature of all systems of thought. "The primary impulse behind metafiction," he argues, "is therefore its awareness that our participation in the world involves the projection of our deepest hopes, fears, and needs onto reality in various fictionalized forms. These forms are embodied in cultural and ideological discourse, which play a crucial role in shaping the individual's response to reality" (6). Though McCaffery does not directly address issues of emotion, his description of "the

¹⁰ Recognizing the potentially pejorative connotations of the term "narcissism," Hutcheon explains that narcissism, according to Freud, is not a pathological condition and need not be read as such (8). However, the common understanding of narcissism as a dysfunctional condition may reinforce for some conceptions of metafiction which Hutcheon seeks to challenge.

writer/text relationship as a paradigm for all human creative activity” (7) clearly points to metafiction as inseparable from both the personal and the social.

Patricia Waugh similarly argues for the social relevance of metafiction. Though she, too, does not point explicitly to affect, her explanation of self-conscious narrative suggests the relevance of feeling as a mode of meaning making that is influenced by subjectivity and social environment. Metafiction’s continual questioning of its own process of aesthetic construction, she explains, offers “extremely accurate models for understanding the contemporary experience of the world as a construction, an artifice, a web of interdependent semiotic systems” (9). If we understand emotion as a way of making meaning of experience, as so many theorists of affect and reader response theory do (Bleich, Holland, Langer, Lutz, Opdahl, Robinson), then Waugh’s explanation of self-reflexive text as indicative of perception may be applied not only to subjective experience in general, but also more particularly to affective life.

Hutcheon, McCaffery, and Waugh’s work suggests that it is metafiction’s very distancing from the fictional worlds it presents that allows metafiction to engage in critical questions about history, culture, and subjectivity. Works like Robert Coover’s *The Public Burning* (1977) Tim O’Brien’s *The Things They Carried* (1990), engaging in historical, social, and political concerns, indicate self-conscious narratives’ abilities and tendencies, which are reflected in not just the writing of white male authors, but also that of numerous authors of minority literatures. As critics like Lisa Lowe (see Lowe’s discussion of Cha’s *Dictée* in her book *Immigrant Acts* 1996) make clear,

metafiction did not and does not equal disengagement with human experience, nor does it restrict itself to writing for and by white, middle- and upper-class American men.

While Waugh, McCaffery, and Hutcheon's understanding of metafiction's historical and political relevance is central to my reading of self-reflexive and emotion, it remains significant that their work has focused on white American male authors whose social positions limit them in their ability to represent socially marginalized groups. Moreover, these scholars' work has given little attention to the ways that metafiction presents itself in relation to emotion, which, with the rise of affective theory and trauma studies, is becoming increasingly understood as both a social and a personal experience.

Metafiction as a Representation and Evocation of Emotion

This project begins with the idea that metafiction's chief characteristic of looking back at itself as narrative offers important ways of thinking about stories and their telling in connection to human emotion.¹¹ Self-conscious narratives, by addressing the reader directly and highlighting her in relation to the text and a reading experience

¹¹ J. Panksepp's description of emotion comes closest to my understanding the term. For him, emotion refers to the behavioral, expressive, cognitive, and physiological states of being which an individual experiences (Panksepp). When referring to the reader's individual experience, I will refer in this project to emotion. However, I also evoke the term affect, making the same distinction between the two terms as does Brian Massumi. According to him, while emotion refers to a single person's experience, which is inevitably shaped by her personal memories and experiences, affect extends beyond the self: "Emotion is the way the depth of that ongoing experience registers personally at a given moment." Affect, "the capacity for affecting or being affected," involves "a stronger sense of embeddedness in a larger field of life — a heightened sense of belonging, with other people and to other places" (Zournazi). It should nonetheless be noted that definitions of emotion and affect are often disagreed upon. Because this dissertation considers both the single reader's process and her connection to the larger world, I find the Massumi's outlining of the distinctions and the connections between the terms useful.

that is necessarily subjective and personal, suggest ways in which stories and their telling are fundamental to human processes of finding and making meaning. As Brian Stonehill argues,

By dramatizing within its pages a version of its own reader, the self-conscious novel welds a bond of intimacy with its actual readers that is beyond the means of naturalistic, non-self-conscious novels. By acknowledging what they are, self-conscious novels show an honesty and a respect for the reader's intelligence which novels that pretend to be life itself do not. There is thus an alienation of the reader from the novel's action at one level [...] while at another level the reader, by being made conscious of his or her role as a listener confronted by a storyteller, is drawn into a stronger bond of intimacy. What the novel apparently renounces at one level of its engagement with the reader, it effectively reclaims at another. (7).

By calling attention to themselves as constructions and "laying bear the device," metafiction give their readers an opportunity to engage in stories that, on the one hand,

may evoke emotion and, on the other, may represent feeling from alternative vantages. Though some critics might argue that an “obsession” with inwardness indicates a narcissism that is disengaged with larger social conditions, a look at the metafictional works selected for this project indicates that self-reflexive literature can be, and often is, a means through which readers may further recognize the relationships that exist not only between fiction and empirical experience, but also between the individual and the social and the emotional and the cognitive. According to my project, as these self-reflective narratives elicit and comment on affective experience, they create for readers a sense of proximity or distance from a given text which leads them to pose questions relevant to our attitudes about and relationships to affect.

Perhaps the most obvious way in which self-conscious narrative reflects upon emotional experience is found in its emphasis on the presence, roles, and interactions of storyteller and audience. Given that reading and interpretation are inherently subjective processes which necessarily involve some degree of personal engagement on the reader’s part, as self-conscious writing reflects on narrative and its reception, it asks its audience to consider its personal relationship to a given text. Although this structure suggests that the genre is particularly well-suited to the consideration of emotion as a both personal and socially engaged activity, scholarship has generally associated metafiction with an intellect that involves little to no emotion. Mark Currie’s description of the category as a bridge between literature and critical discourse, for example, suggests that the introverted novel is foremost about theory (Currie 2).

The understanding of self-reflexivity as void of affect is, moreover, related to a common misconception that emotional distancing and estrangement equal an absence of feeling. But, as texts like Samuel Beckett's *Molloy* (1951) and Theresa Hyak Kyung Cha's *Dictée* demonstrate, an experience of estrangement is often affectively charged and may convey a number of emotional states, including anxiety, frustration, alienation, existential confusion, and comic relief. Such representations may be viewed as creating little more than obtuseness that needlessly frustrates the reader, when these depictions of human experience actually convey experiences of alienation or confusion. In such an instance, disorienting narratives may concern themselves in the exact issues which they are said to avoid.

Reading Text and Emotional (Dis)engagement

As reader-response criticism and affective theory have shown, the connection between reader and text, like the reading process, offer valuable ways of understanding affect as a social and a personal phenomenon. When an audience experiences a narrative as distantly foreign or as closely familiar, or when it is led to critically examine a given affective state or to uncritically become immersed in an emotional experience, an audience's relationship to feeling can be understood in terms of affective closeness and distance.

In Paul Auster's *City of Glass* (1984) (discussed in greater detail in chapter three), for example, the distance the reader experiences in relation to the diegesis is vital

to the creation of a world where characters experience present-day life as filled with uncertainty and anxiety. The audience, by maintaining a sense of detachment from Auster's fictional realm, may consider the extent to which feelings of existential angst are characteristic of modern life. Readers may witness anxieties of contemporary life while remaining detached (to some extent) from characters headed towards existential crisis and both emotional and cognitive paralysis. As an audience actively engages in the making of text's meaning from a critical distance, it maintains a relationship to the story.

Texts like *City of Glass* make clear that reader engagement and estrangement are not distinctly separate experiences. Rather, an audience's sense of closeness or distance from the diegetic realm rests upon a continuum. While metafiction on the one hand may remove a reader from the story by pointing to its artifice, self-reflexive literature also underscores the relationship between reader and a narrative in which she is at times affectively absorbed.

The emotional relevance of the text-reader relationship becomes particularly evident in the similar structures of metafiction and testimony. As discourse on trauma and testimony has shown, literature that addresses intense emotion often foregrounds the act of storytelling, presenting narrative as a means of coping with or of coming to terms with difficult emotional experiences (Caruth, Felman & Laub, LaCapra). The ways in which testimony points to itself and its audience, inviting readers to become witnesses of intensely affective experience, reflects the fact that narratives intensely

concerned with emotion frequently exhibit metafictional characteristics. Texts like Art Spiegelman's *Maus I & II* (1986, 1991), Gayl Jones' *Corregidora* (1975), Lawson Inada's *Legends from Camp* (1992), and Theresa Hyuk Kyung Cha's *Dictee* (1984) show how metafiction's awareness of its audience often demands that readers become witnesses, viewing moments of personal and social history that have otherwise been neglected. Foregrounding the ways in which the past continues into the present, narratives like these make evident their relevance to the reader and her historical and social moment.

Looking closely at texts including some of those mentioned above, this project takes as its starting point the idea that metafiction's narrative structure asks its reader to engage – and sometimes disengage – with emotional experience in ways which are significant to our understandings of feeling as a personal, social, and cultural phenomenon. Because affect is not simply a product of individual experience, but rather is complexly shaped by culture and history, my analysis is historically and culturally specific. However, I also consider the connections between stories that represent emotion in similar ways, while addressing different social and historical circumstances. Exploring Western postwar metafiction (primarily though not exclusively American texts written from the late 1960s onwards), this study will consider the resurfacing of narrative self-consciousness as a mode of formal innovation at a time when, according to critics pronouncing the death of the novel, everything in the literary realm has already been said and done. When the subject, author, and reader have been

deconstructed, the novel declared dead, and contemporary life described by Frederic Jameson as a “waning of affect” (*Postmodernism, or The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* 1991), metafiction returns. Fictional frames and mirrors surface, reflecting that, contrary to what Jameson and numerous other literary critics have argued, affect still very much resonates with our understanding of human existence and our desire to make sense of it.

By considering metafictional works which reflect on emotion in relation to the narrative process, I seek to begin filling a gap in the literary discourse on both emotion and metafiction. Partly because of literary criticism’s greater emphasis on theory since the introduction of cultural studies, and also because of oversimplified understandings of the category of metafiction as culturally irrelevant, it has not, to my knowledge, been explored from this particular angle.

Questions to Be Explored

As this study of metafiction explores feeling as a human, personal, and social experience, it raises a number of questions that remain central to the critical discourse on emotion and affect.¹² How do metafictional texts represent and reflect upon emotion, how do they evoke feeling within the reader, and how do they invite the reader to engage or disengage in affective life? What connections do these texts make between emotion as an individual and as a collective or cultural occurrence? How might self-reflexive stories construct, affirm, deconstruct, or challenge social attitudes about affect? More

¹² For an explanation of my use of the terms emotion and affect, see footnote 10

specifically, how does metafiction relate to the processes of writing, storytelling, and reading to emotional experience?

These questions address not just personal, but also ethical and political concerns that cannot be resolved simply or, most often, conclusively. To inquire into the social significance of representations of affect, I will continually revisit a number of questions. For example, does self-conscious literature, by highlighting emotion, assert or deny an ethical responsibility to respond to human and social suffering and social injustice? How do metafiction position individuals and social groups as agents of stasis or change, and are there socially responsible or “appropriate” ways of doing so? What social or political implications are involved in metafiction’s breaking of literary conventions? Does the writer have an indebtedness to literary realism when portraying historical events? Or, alternatively, are there problems with asserting “proper” methods for narrating history? If emotional intensity is beyond representation, as so much theory, particularly that on trauma, claims them to be, is it necessary to portray affective experience through literary modes other than realism?

The complexity of such questions suggests the many ways in which discussions on emotion frequently become invested in ethical, social, and political issues. The ethical and political stakes involved in questions about feeling have become particularly apparent within discourse on trauma, which overlaps with cultural theories of affect but has also become a field in its own right. This dissertation confronts many of the same issues discussed in trauma studies, and a large number of the literary texts I have chosen

thematize what a psychoanalytic model would define as trauma. However, the focus of my project is not trauma per se, but rather more widely emotion, which at times involves human pain and suffering, but which also includes pleasurable experiences. While a psychoanalytic model of trauma, as well as other theories articulated within trauma studies and psychoanalysis, may at times be relevant to my work, I am wary of imposing a given structure, like that of psychoanalysis, onto literature before examining it from a (cultural) narratological perspective.

Centrality of the Literary

Taking a cultural narratological approach, this project foregrounds close reading and textual analysis that is informed, but not foremost shaped by, cultural and social theory. In distinguishing this project from the common discourse on trauma literature, I furthermore wish to emphasize that I will read the chosen texts *as literature* and not as truth claims, as trauma studies sometimes have. I make this assertion because there has been a tendency within much of the scholarship on trauma to make testimony sacred and to equate trauma literature with a testimonial truth that cannot be ascribed to other texts. Such a view is articulated in Kali Tal's *Worlds of Hurt* (2001), in which she critiques literary criticism's usual approach to reading trauma literature and explains that accounts of trauma must be read differently, since testimony's purpose is to create a witnessing of trauma. According to Tal, "[t]he approach of most postmodern critics is inappropriate when applied to reading the literature of trauma" because "[p]ostmodern

critics have been concerned with the problematics of *reading*. As professional readers, it is in their interest to put forward the argument that any text, properly read, can be ‘understood’ ” (17).

Tal understandably fears the possibility of testimony being removed from its historical and social context. However, her assessment of postmodern textual interpretation confuses contemporary literary criticism with a narrow and out-dated mode of thought that cultural studies has explicitly critiqued. Contrary to what Tal argues, critical analysis does not necessarily “claim to be able to divine the author’s intent [... or ...] that an author’s intent is irrelevant” (17). Neither does strong textual analysis make presumptions about authorial intent, as Tal seems to suggest it should. Her claim that literary critics should cease to “confuse fact and fiction” (75) implies that there *is* a clear line between virtual and fictional experience. Tal hereby demonstrates that very reductive interpretation which she critiques, for she reads testimony as *the* truthful representation of memory and personal experience. Such a view of testimonial writing as transcendent of critical analysis reinforces the notion of trauma as sacred, which Tal herself rightly critiques.

Tal’s envisioning of trauma as *the* true account of traumatic events overlooks the reality that individual and historical recollection and narration involve subjective experience and that history, taking the shape of narrative, is too complex to be reduced to a single, specified interpretation. To claim that testimony has a subjective but

nevertheless definite meaning is to presume that, within accounts of trauma, the hazy borders between autobiography and fiction and between history and narrative disappear.

An approach that acknowledges the fuzzy lines between fact and fiction, however, does not mean that all categories must collapse, nor does it make impossible all historical and ethical claims, as Dominick LaCapra explains in *Writing History, Writing Trauma*. Fictional forms, he asserts, may indeed convey significant ideas about history:

narrative structures may involve truth claims, either in terms of “correspondence” to lived narrative structures...or in terms of references...that may retrospectively be seen to inform processes or activities in ways that may not have been entirely conscious to participants[...]. One might argue that narratives in fiction may also involve truth claims on a structural or general level by providing insight into phenomena such as slavery or the Holocaust, by offering a reading of a process or period, or by giving at least a plausible ‘feel’ for experience and emotion which may be difficult to arrive at through restricted documentary methods. (13)

LaCapra, like Tal, recognizes the difficulty of representing history and social suffering as fiction. At the same time, LaCapra indicates that literary representations may offer productive ways of reflecting upon history which might not be possible through a writing understood to be strictly documentary. Like LaCapra, I believe that fiction can offer something of value that is not available in texts which claim to present historical details as fact. Literature, by recognizing the inevitably fictional quality of history and stories, becomes a vehicle through which we may explore our (constructed) experiences of the present and past, as well as our questions about the meanings of those experiences.

The fact that I will approach the chosen literary works *as literature*, regardless of the extent to which they are based on historical or biographical events, does not deny the high stakes involved in representations of history and social and individual suffering. This project will express an on-going concern with the social significance of metafiction as, from a cultural narratological perspective, it brings together issues related to with narrative form and to cultural context.

Postmodern theory and narratology have explored the prominence of self-conscious literature, while psychoanalytic theory, theories of emotion, reception theory, feminist studies, and cultural studies more generally have pointed to the significance of representations of affect and emotion in literature. This close textual analysis of postmodern metafiction draws upon these approaches in various moments, while concerning itself particularly with textual and paratextual space, the environments

created through writing and narrative not only within a literary work, but also through the interaction between text and reader. As I have been suggesting, this engagement is particularly apparent in metafiction's narrative structure and in the text-reader relationship, both of which I explore in terms of spatiality. Self-conscious writing's narrative layering and mirroring, as well as its construction of the text-reader relationship as one of relational closeness and distance (an oscillation between reader empathy and aesthetic distancing), indicate the relevance of spatial metaphors to literature, particularly in the case of self-referential texts which underscore the spaces of narrative, its production, and its reception. The fact that we can understand both affect and self-conscious narratives in terms of spatiality, I will argue, suggests a commonality between how we conceptualize emotion and why metafiction is relevant to the study of feeling. This reading of metafiction in terms of both structural and metaphorical space challenges the notion that the "inward turn" of narrative reflects a postmodern conception of art as irrelevant to human and social experience.

The following chapter two explores the intersections in metafiction between diegetic and paratextual space and how these crossroads connect to our social, cultural, and emotional experiences of space. The chapters thereafter focus on close readings of a number of postmodern metafictional works, each of which demonstrates the diversity of self-conscious writing that concerns itself with affective life as it relates not only to the individual, but also the social, historical, and the political. Chapters three and four consider Carole Maso's *The Art Lover* and Paul Auster's *City of Glass*, respectively, as

experimental texts which demonstrate how narrative form and the text-reader relationship are spatially constructed. Moreover, these sections reflect upon the ways in which narrative spatial form may be read as representative of a reading and social space marked by gender. In comparing the writings of Maso, who has advocated the need for a feminine mode of writing (Maso “Except Joy”), and Auster, who has commonly been viewed as an excessively male-centered writer, I contend that metafiction by both women and men authors can, and often do, explore the very issues (like that of gender) which Auster has been accused of neglecting.

The fifth and sixth sections of this project turn to self-conscious writing’s representation of feeling, especially in relation to memory. These chapters, moreover, point to self-conscious literature’s frequent intermediality, which is evident in W. G. Sebald’s incorporation of photographs in *Austerlitz* and in Gayl Jones’ thematization of blues music in *Corregidora*.

Chapter five examines Sebald’s *Austerlitz* (2001), a novel about the Jewish holocaust and postmemory which, through descriptions of interior and external spaces that collapse into one another and through haunting and usually peopleless photographic images, similarly disintegrate the spaces of audience and text.¹³ Finally, I explore Gayl Jones’ *Corregidora*, which, through the creation of performative spaces filled by music, lyric, and silence, blurs the boundaries between the private and the public, making a

¹³ Other examples of metafiction foregrounding visuality include Sebald’s *Die Ausgewanderten/The Emigrants*, Maso’s *The Art Lover*, Cha’s *Dictée*, Gass’s *William Masters’ Lonesome Wife*, and Danieliewski’s *House of Leaves*.

space for the personal to be recognized as political.¹⁴

As I will argue through the use of these textual examples, self-conscious writing, by reflecting upon its own process and at the same time resisting narrative closure, offers itself as both a critical and an affective mode through which the reader can create meaning, at the same time that she acknowledges the messy, open-ended, and inconclusive reality of emotive experience. Metafiction's tendency to present shifting narrative perspectives through the construction and representation of space, I will argue, proves particularly useful in recognizing the complexity of emotional life and the social and ethical quandaries which it points to.

¹⁴ Musicality is also central to self-reflexive novels including Toni Morrison's *Beloved* and *Jazz*, Jones' *Corregidora*, Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*, Ingeborg Bachmann's *Malina*, Anne Michaels' *Fugitive Pieces*, and Lawson Inada's *Legends from Camp*.

Chapter 2: The Narrative, Social, and Affective Spaces of Metafiction

In the preceding introductory chapter, I argued that metafiction has often been disregarded as disconnected from social significance and human experience and reduced to being the product of a few white, male writers, when in actuality self-reflexive writing demonstrates great breadth and often engages itself in complex social, historical, political, and emotional matters. This chapter explores how self-conscious narrative's form, content, and paratext (a term coined by Genette to refer to the relationship between literary work and reader) call for reflection upon affective life. Considering metafiction's use of narrative layering and its emphasis on the reading and writing processes, I argue here that the act of reading, in part involving one's affective relationship to a text, may be understood through spatial metaphors. Building upon the notion that we perceive not just physical objects, but also thoughts, emotions, and relationships, in (dynamic) spatial terms, my project explores metafiction's engagement with emotional experience within and beyond the text.

Because metafiction brings human perception and subjectivity into the spotlight, I find self-reflexive narrative particularly useful for considering questions of affect. As such stories underscore the processes of narration, writing, and reading, they repeatedly consider the realm of narrative alongside our everyday experiences and perceptions, thus inviting readers to make connections between their everyday lives and narrative practices. My understanding of contemporary metafiction in terms of both structural and

metaphorical space challenges the notion that the narrative “inward turn” is irrelevant to human and social experience.

The crossroads where metafiction and space meet is probably most apparent in narrative techniques such as diegetic framing, layering, and mirroring. These structural devices not only build the fictional world of the text; they also help to establish the reader’s relationship to it. In this way, narrative structure and the text-reader connection are interdependent – to consider one is necessarily to reflect upon the other. The connections between narrative structure and reader perception are especially well demonstrated in self-reflexive stories that foreground a labyrinthine journey. When, for example, Lewis Carroll’s Alice of *Through the Looking Glass* (1871) dreams of her journey through Wonderland, she, like the reader, leaves behind one fictional world to enter another where time and space are perceived in new ways. Such a journey of both physical and psychological disorientation is also evident in Mark Danieliewski’s *House of Leaves* (2000), Jorge Luis Borges’ *Labyrinths* (1964), John Barth’s *Lost in the Funhouse* (1988), and Italo Calvino’s *Invisible Cities* (1974). All of these narratives draw connections between the worlds of their fictions and of their readers, suggesting that book and audience meet in a common space. As the reader, like a text’s characters, moves within the text, she experiences varying relationships of closeness and distance to the worlds in which she finds herself. While the experience of intimacy with the text may be viewed as one of empathy, the sense of removal between audience and text involves a process of defamiliarization which I will often refer to as reader

estrangement or distanciation.¹⁵

Framing devices provide an example of how diegetic structure and the reader's process may be understood in terms of such relational closeness and distance. In such books as Sterne's *Tristram Shandy*, Calvino's *If on a Winter's Night Traveling* (1981), and Felipe Alfau's *Locos: A Comedy of Gestures* (1988) narrators often interrupt embedded narratives to address the reader directly and to remind her of the constructed nature of fiction. In such cases, the closer the reader is to the outermost frame story and the narrative's teller, the further removed she is (metaphorically speaking) from the text's other diegetic worlds. While on the one hand such disruptions create a critical distance between the reader and a given story world, they simultaneously may foster a sense of immediacy between reader and narrator. (In the case of autobiographical metafiction like Kurt Vonnegut's *Slaughterhouse-Five* and Tim O'Brien's *The Things They Carried*, for example, the audience-storytelling interaction becomes especially significant when the speaker becomes synonymous with an author who is personally and emotionally invested in telling his autobiographical tale of war and trauma). As the lines delineating fiction and external reality blur through techniques like direct address, what exists within a narrative and what lies beyond it often becomes difficult to

¹⁵ The term "distanciation" is first used by Paul Ricoeur in his essay "The Hermeneutical Function of Distanciation" (1981). For him, distanciation is a process in which human discourse, when objectified in a work of art and decontextualized from space and time, can be recontextualized and thus unconstrained by meanings to which it might otherwise be limited. I use this term, more specifically, to indicate a removal between text and reader which, as in Ricoeur's theory, offers new possibilities for reader response.

determine, just as clearly separating narrative, writer, and reader may become challenging. The reader is thus encouraged at once to believe in the authenticity of these accounts and to recognize their status as constructions. Thus, she oscillates between experiences of immersion in and separation from the text before her.

While the notion of poetic estrangement has frequently been understood as preventing an audience from developing an affective connection to a literary work (as is suggested in the work of Eliot, Pound, and sometimes of Brecht), I contend in this chapter that distancing, like empathic reading, may be experienced on an affective level. The disorienting qualities of Lewis Carroll's invented language in "Jabberwocky" (*Through the Looking-Glass and What Alice Found There* 1872), Ingeborg Bachmann's fragmented protagonist in *Der Fall Franza* (1983), and Toni Morrison's lyrical passages conveying "rememory" in *Beloved* (1999) often parallel the confusion and frustration which their characters and their audience experience alongside one another. As the reader travels through the mazes of these texts, her very experience of disconnection may become a means through which to relate to story characters.

Donald Barthelme's "Views of My Father Weeping" (1981) demonstrates this point well by using humor and fragmentation to distance reader and narrator while also addressing the personal difficulties of loss. Though the melancholic nature of the story's title suggests that it will yield a somber reading experience, the reader's attempts to follow the disconnected parts of the text prevent her from becoming deeply involved in the unnamed narrator's memories and reflections. In addition, Barthelme's juxtaposing

of comedy and sadness pulls the reader between empathy and confusion and dejection and laughter.

Though a reader familiar with Barthelme's writing likely expects a story set in modern day life, "Views of My Father Weeping" likely takes its reader by surprise when it begins in a Victorian-like setting, though with a seemingly un-Victorian narrator whose abrupt prose opens, "An aristocrat was riding down the street in his carriage. He ran over my father.//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 carriage" (15). The narrator's terse, to-the-point, literal statements ("the reason my father had died [...] he was run over by a carriage") contrast with the personal and emotional tone that one might expect from a story of the same title. Yet Barthelme does not consistently maintain this humorous voice; moments of earnestness intrude, inviting the reader to empathize with the story's speaker. Similarly, the disjointed paragraphs present snapshots of the narrator's thoughts and experiences in a non-linear fashion. Paradoxically, she is simultaneously drawn towards and separated from the strained voice which speaks (often directly) to her.

The contemporary voice of the protagonist similarly seems to move between a sense of emotional closeness with this father and a feeling of alienation from him. This is evident early on in the speaker's alternating expressions of emotional gravity and comic levity. Soon after describing his weeping father, the narrator thinks that the man he sees is perhaps someone else, a mere stranger (116), and the possibility that the

crying man may not be the speaker's father after all lessens the potency of the moment. The weeping character, first described sympathetically, becomes comical: the man who weeps, and for whom "something is wrong" (116), "is spewing like a fire hydrant with its lock knocked off. His yammer darts in and out of all the rooms" (116-17). What is the reader to do with the contrast between a mourning son and a fire hydrant gone amok?

In addressing the topics of death, mourning, and interpersonal relationships simultaneously with levity and weight, "Views of My Father Weeping" asks the reader both to empathize with the main character and to distance herself from him. Her experience thus mirrors that of the narrator, who bounces between thinking that the crying man is his father and believing the male figure might be the parent of someone else, a character of no apparent consequence to either the speaker or his audience. "But," the protagonist asks, "if it is not my father sitting there in the bed weeping, why am I standing before the bed, in an attitude of supplication? Why do I desire with all my heart that his man, my father, cease what he is doing, which is so painful to me?" (121). Again, like the narrator, the reader might ask why she, too, feels sympathy for a stranger who is really no more than a fiction. The reading process, involving empathy, disorientation, and more distanced reflection, thus becomes an object of study. The emotional dimensions of this fiction lie not only in its moments of empathy, but also in its humor and its elicitation of confusion and critical thought. The reader's movement between relational closeness to and distance from the text allows her to develop

multiple viewpoints on that writing; she thus experiences not only the sadness of loss and the levity of playfulness, but also confusion about the feelings that a fiction may evoke. The stories examined in this dissertation, like Barthelme's short piece, guide the reader through confusion and clarity, immersing her in and removing her from the narrative worlds which she visits. In so doing, they invite her to develop a dynamic and affectively significant relationship to works concerned with the personal and often, I will argue, the political meanings of feeling.

The idea that the reader's movement between a sense of closeness to and removal from a given text has social and political resonance is especially relevant to discussions of empathic reading, which often consider the intersections between literature and social engagement (a topic to which I will soon return). The act of empathic reading, I argue, may be both conceptualized and experienced spatially as a dynamic relation between reader and text.

In her article "Empathic Engagement," Amy Copland similarly suggests spatial perception to be relevant to such a reading experience. She points out that numerous research studies in psychology have shown readers' tendencies "to adopt a position within the spatiotemporal framework of narratives," one which is based on the position of the protagonist (141). According to Copland, this research suggests the potential for reading and literature to foster a socially engaged empathy which nonetheless acknowledges and respects the separation between self and other. While some critics have been highly critical of the notion of empathic reading, arguing that it attempts to

collapse the differences between self and other by claiming another's experience to be nothing more than one's own, Copland is among the scholars who argue that empathy is not an utter dissolution of the self but rather a maintained awareness of the separation between self and other.¹⁶ While "It often gets assumed that when we engage another empathically we cannot do anything else" (144), Copland believes it is possible to be "deeply engaged in what he or she—the target of my empathy—is undergoing" without losing a separate sense of self (143). This ability to maintain a distinction between self and other is vital to what Dominick LaCapra has called *empathic unsettlement*, an empathy which "resists full identification with, and appropriation of, the experience of the other."¹⁷

Similarly, I have been arguing that the experience of reading metafiction involves neither complete identification with nor sole alienation from the fictional world of a self-reflexive text. Rather, the reader may experience a wide range of

¹⁶ Suzanne Keen draws attention to the primary critique of empathic reading, according to which narrative empathy may prevent individuals from acting in the world. "In this view," she writes, "narrative empathy is amoral (Posner 19), a weak form of appeal to humanity in the face of organized hatred (Gourevitch 95), an obstacle to agitation for racial justice (Delgado 4–36), a waste of sentiment and encouragement of withdrawal (Williams 109), and even a pornographic indulgence of sensation acquired at the expense of suffering others (Wood 36)" (Keen 223). In the sixth chapter of *Empathy and the Novel* ("Contesting Empathy"), Keen also summarizes the reasons for the common academic distrust of the notion of empathy. These include the idea that "empathic performance" may appear condescending to its object; that it may disregard the experiences of others, claiming to understand what the "empathizer" cannot really know; and it may act as a kind of Western arrogance which "imagin[es] common ground with victims of global capitalism [...] in place of the unseemly relation to consumers to the exploited." In these ways, empathy may be seen as an impediment to social change. (xiv)

¹⁷ LaCapra, Dominick. *Writing History, Writing Trauma*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001. 79.

relationships to a literary work that oscillate between these poles and which allow the reader to distinguish between her world and those within a narrative.

As Copland makes apparent, the meaning of the term empathy has often been contested, and such disagreements point to debates on the politics of the concept.¹⁸ While some feminist and postcolonial critics, for example, argue that empathy fails to respect the differences between individuals and cultures and inaccurately assumes that humans share in universal emotions, LaCapra's call for empathic unsettlement, a process of imagining another's experience while also recognizing one's own inability to fully know or understand that experience, suggests, similarly to Copland's thesis, that it is possible to experience empathy towards another while also acknowledging the differences between oneself and another.

J. Brooks Bouson, drawing upon the work of the psychoanalyst Heinz Kohut, also expresses such a view. In *The Reader: A Study of the Narcissistic Character and the Drama of the Self* (1989), she points out that while some regard the notion of empathy as a complete dissolution of the self, Kohut defines empathy as the "capacity to think and feel oneself into the inner life of another person" while "simultaneously retaining the stance of an objective observer" (quoted in Bouson 22). Extending Kohut's understanding of empathy to the reading process, Bouson contends that

¹⁸ The misunderstanding of the concept of empathy stems largely from its conflation with sympathy, the latter of which does not make the same distinction between self and other. While empathy, translated by E. G. Titchener in 1910 from Rudolph Lotz and Wilhelm Wundt's German term *Einfühlung*, means a "feeling into," sympathy, or *Mitgefühl*, is a "feeling with" (Basch). As Allison Barnes and Paul Thagard note, empathy thus "signifies the ability to comprehend another's state without actually experiencing that state" (n.p.).

empathic reading, involving both immersion and cognition, is “[b]oth subjective and objective,” “a dynamic process involving the critic/reader’s participation in but also active observation and interpretation of the text’s intended manipulation of its audience” (28). Bouson hereby aligns herself with literary critics like Murray Schwarz, who states that “Optimally, critical interpretation is an empathic art,” and its “potential space” is “the area between objectivity and subjectivity...in which we are free to engage in active interplay between ourselves and the external world of persons and objects” (quoted in Bouson 171).

This approach to literature, Suzanne Keen writes in “A Theory of Narrative Empathy,” may foster in readers a greater capacity for empathy and thus ultimately promote social and political change. Drawing on psychological studies which indicate that people across cultures share common responses of “primitive empathy” (214) and that affective brain areas respond to both real and imagined pain (as shown by Tania Singer and her colleagues) (211), Keen postulates that “If novels could extend readers’ sense of shared humanity beyond the predictable limitations [we empathize most readily with those most like us], then the narrative techniques involved in such an accomplishment should be especially prized” (214), for they might prompt “empathetic responses as a sort of witness to an alternative perspective” (223), responses which “call to us across boundaries of difference” (223). Though in Keen’s book *Empathy and the Novel*, published a year after “A Theory of Narrative Empathy,” she expresses much reservation about the potential of literature to foster empathic responses conducive to

social change, she also contends that the effects of narrative empathy require further investigation within psychology and the social sciences. I, like Keen, do not deny that reading alone does not guarantee the advancement of social justice, but I do remain hopeful that literature, particularly when discussed in public discourse and in classrooms, can raise awareness in individuals which offer the beginnings for social change.

To consider questions about the reading process in relation to empathy and to metafiction, one might explore what actually happens during a reader's processing of such texts. How does an audience respond to self-reflexive formal devices and narrative content, and does the treatment of subject matter actually foster an engagement that encourages reflection? While it is beyond the scope of this project to study scientifically what kinds of effects such texts actually have on readers, I approach these same questions from a cultural narratological perspective, closely analyzing several metafictional works and how a reader might respond to their affectively-charged and (I argue) socially engaged writing.

Modernist Aesthetics and Reader Empathy and Estrangement

Before turning to close readings of actual metafictional works, it proves useful to consider how literary critics have commonly approached the concepts of literary estrangement and empathic reading, two concepts which traditionally have been seen as mutually exclusive but which I argue function in complementary ways. Again, I

consider empathic reading and poetic estrangement as complementary reading experiences, the latter in which a greater distance is perceived between reader and text. Calling upon Joseph Frank and Girard Genette's theories of literary and readerly space (further discussed later in this chapter), I contend that this increased distance does not necessarily preclude an audience's emotional response; it merely changes the nature of the affective reading experience. As Sianne Ngai writes in *Ugly Feelings* (2005), "there are ways that feeling facilitates aesthetic engagement besides through sympathy and empathy of reader" (82).

But literary criticism traditionally has presented aesthetic distancing, most frequently associated with modernist and experimental writing, as a process vacant of feeling. This is particularly evident in the work of T. S. Eliot, who, emphasizing the autonomous and objective text, promoted an aesthetics of impersonality: "Poetry is not a turning loose of emotion, but an escape from emotion; it is not the expression of personality, but an escape from personality," he writes in "Tradition and Individual Talent" (58).¹⁹

Bertolt Brecht's aesthetic ideal, according to which the audience should separate

¹⁹ Like the work of Frank, Genette, and other literary critics concerned with the paratext and aesthetic reception, my look beyond formalist analysis and to reception calls into question the High Modernist notion that an "objective" literature can (and does) present objects and ideas in a purely intellectual and emotionally detached way. This project, in acknowledging the text-reader interaction as largely subjective, challenges the New Critical "affective fallacy," according to which the literary work, existing as an autonomous object independent of its writer, reader, and sociohistorical context, should not be confused with the response which it elicits (Wimsatt and Beardsley 1946). Though reader response criticism and much of cultural studies have called into question the notion of the text as a self-contained entity, this idea continues to powerfully influence literary analysis, as is especially apparent in discussions on aesthetic distancing, which frequently present literary estrangement as equivalent to a reading experience void of affect. Such an understanding of aesthetic distancing as emotionally vacant is in keeping with the view of metafiction as a purely intellectual enterprise.

itself from an artistic work, shares similarities with Eliot's "objective correlative," though Brecht does not claim that emotional experience must be altogether eliminated from the theater. According to Brecht's *Verfremdungseffekt*, the theater's political function – to facilitate the creation of an egalitarian, socialist society – is only possible when audience members do not empathize with characters and instead experience a critical distance between themselves and a given performance. In "Das epische Theater"/ "The Epic Theater" (1963), he writes,

Von keiner Seite wurde es dem Zuschauer weiterhin ermöglicht, durch einfach Einfühlung in dramatische Personen sich kritiklos (und praktisch folgenlos) Erlebnissen hinzugeben. Die Darstellung setzte die Stoffe und Vorgänge einem Entfremdungsprozeß aus. Es war die Entfremdung, welche nötig ist, damit verstanden werden kann. Bei allem 'Selbstverständlichen' wird auf das Verstehen einfach verzichtet. [...]

The spectator was no longer in any way allowed to submit to an experience uncritically (and without practical consequences) by means of simple empathy with the characters in a play. The production took the subject matter and the incidents shown and put them through a

process of alienation: the alienation that is necessary to all understanding. When something seems “the most obvious thing in the world” it means that any attempt to understand the world has been given up.

As art distances its audience from the fictional world, Brecht believes, individuals are able to perceive their sociopolitical reality from a larger perspective and to gain insight into the actual sociopolitical circumstances that shape life and culture.

Though one might read the above passage as a demand that theater be free of feeling, Brecht’s comments in “Short Description of a New Technique in Acting which Produces an Alienation Effect” suggest otherwise: “The rejection of empathy,” he writes, “is not the result of a rejection of the emotions, nor does it lead to such. The crude aesthetic thesis that emotions can only be stimulated by means of empathy is wrong” (101). While one might argue that in plays like *Mutter Courage und ihre Kinder/Mother Courage and her Children* (1939) a viewer may well experience moments of empathy, Brecht’s points that 1) this is not the only affective experience of art and 2) that distanciation can produce emotional responses, is too often overlooked.

The idea that poetic distance can be experienced emotionally – and even viscerally – is most pronounced in the formalist Viktor Shklovsky’s notion of defamiliarization. In Shklovsky’s essay “Art as Device” (1917), he creates the term *ostranenie* to describe a kind of aesthetic distanciation that reawakens human sensations and feelings that the conditions of modern life tend to deaden. For him,

If we examine the general laws of perception, we see that as it becomes habitual, it also becomes automatic. So eventually all of our skills and experiences function unconsciously – automatically. If someone were to compare the sensation of performing this same operation for the ten thousandth time, then he would no doubt agree with us. (4-5)

It is the job of art to counteract this process of “automatization,” for

[i]f the complex life of many people takes place entirely on the level of the unconscious, then it’s as if this life had never been. It is ‘artificially’ created by an artist in such a way that the perceiver, pausing in his reading, dwells on the text. This is when the literary work attains its greatest and most long-lasting impact. [...] [B]ecause of this device, the object is brought into view. (5)

Art makes us see life anew, as it pulls us out of the mechanical and routine nature of our everyday hypnosis, in which “life fades into nothingness” and “[a]utomatization eats

away at things, at clothes, at furniture, at our wives, and at our fear of war” (5). For Shklovsky, *ostranenie* does not create an emotion-free zone but rather a space in which to revitalize the senses, “to make the stone stony,” a space in which, as Benjamin Sher explains, an object or image is “endow[ed] [...] with ‘strangeness’ by ‘removing’ it from the network of conventional, formulaic, stereotypical perceptions and linguistic expressions (based on such perceptions)” (Shklovsky xix). In this sense, aesthetic estrangement may intensify both the perceptual and affective experience of a literary work. This may occur through a presentation of the everyday from a new reference point, or through a sense of disconnect between the self and the world in which it lives.

I do not intend to imply here that an audience is always or necessarily invested in a creative work on some personal level. Rather, I am arguing that discussions of poetic estrangement have tended to oversimplify its complexity. Shklovsky, Brecht, and Eliot’s differing understandings of aesthetic distancing sometimes may work, and at other times they may not. In other words, estrangement may function in multiple ways.²⁰ While I find Shklovsky’s concept of *ostranenie* extremely useful for thinking

²⁰ The multi-dimensionality of aesthetic distancing, as well as the oversimplification of the concept, is suggested by Benjamin Sher, translator of the 1991 edition of Shklovsky’s *Theory of Prose*, who explains that, though the terms *ostranenie*, defamiliarization, estrangement, and “making strange” are most often used interchangeably, their meanings are not equivalent. Translations of Shklovsky’s *ostranenie* may be misleading. Sher writes, “Shklovsky’s process is in fact the reverse of that implied by this term [defamiliarization]. It is not a transition from the ‘familiar’ to the ‘unknown’ (implicitly). On the contrary, it proceeds from the cognitively known [...], the rules and formulas that arise from a search for an economy of mental effort, to the familiarly known, that is, to real knowledge that expands and “complicates” our perceptual process in the rich use of metaphors, similes and a host of other figures of speech. Defamiliarization is dead wrong!” (xix). That the terms *ostranenie* and defamiliarization have different implications which frequently are overlooked points to an oversimplified understanding of these aesthetic devices. Though Sher seems interested exclusively in the Russian formalist notion of *ostranenie*, his description thereof makes clear that the aesthetic techniques of *ostranenie*, distancing, estrangement, defamiliarization, or whatever else one chooses to call them (Sher invents the word *enstrangement* to

about the potential for poetic estrangement to affect an audience's emotional experience, it, like Eliot's *objective correlative*, presents a reductionist view of art and of aesthetic techniques. For poetic estrangement does not always produce a sense of closeness to everyday perceptions; it can also do the reverse. The many effects which it might have on an audience depend largely on the context in which distanciation operates.

This study approaches metafictional techniques which use techniques that elicit both estrangement and reader empathy in such a way that creates a relational space between reader, text, and narrator that may be perceived not just in terms of nearness, but also in terms of expansive separation. Although the effect of a reader's movement between empathy and estrangement may not fit the mold for what literary theorists have traditionally considered to be emotional engagement in a literary work, I argue that both empathic identification and distanciation largely influence the affective dimension of reading.²¹

refer to Shklovsky's *ostranenie*), are too complex to be summarized by a single term. If *ostranenie* indeed refers to *any* artistic process of presenting the familiar in an unfamiliar way [in order to then re-familiarize the audience with that which is represented (Sher xix, Stacy 48-49)], then Shklovsky's definition does not account for the possibility that other means of defamiliarizing might have different ends.

²¹ While I have contrasted Shklovsky's literary approach to that of New Criticism, the latter *has* at times been discussed in relation to emotion, but such scholarship has usually emphasized an audience's aesthetic response in terms of "objective emotion." Even criticism that questions the notion of affect as non-subjective sometimes returns to this principle. For example, in *Emotion as Meaning: The Literary Case for How We Imagine* (2002), Keith Opdahl initially seems to challenge the idea of objective emotion, but shortly thereafter intimates the concept's legitimacy. He writes that "To say that emotion achieves objectivity within the affective code seems absurd. Emotion is the heart of subjectivity, expressing the individual's desires and needs and reactions" (152). This does not mean that all art submerges itself in the subjective experience of the reader, disallowing the text itself to have any independent meaning. Rather, one must consider her reading experience as a response to that which a text

Sianne Ngai, discussing the New Critical concept of tone in her book *Ugly Feelings*, develops a theory of aesthetic distancing which similarly indicates that aesthetic engagement involves more than empathy (82).²² Using Melville's *The Confidence-Man* as an example, she explores the idea of "nonfeltness," an absence of feeling which actually prompts in its audience an affective response. As *The Confidence-Man*'s audience is made to "care about the very fact of its [the story's] unfeltness" (82), readers become involved in "an affective engagement *that itself prompts distancing*" (85). As this "atonal" text "denies the reader sympathetic identification at all levels," the reader is left unsettled (52). Thus, distancing yields new affect, ensuring that the reader's engagement continues. As Ngai indicates, this view of aesthetic estrangement is not entirely new; we also see it in Kant's notion of *disinterestedness* and in Edward Bullough's "Psychical Distance" as a Factor in Art and an Aesthetic Principle." What *is* new, she explains, is the idea that "the affective distance which the aesthetic relation requires can *only* be produced affectively," that "it is *a feeling itself* that does the work of this distancing" (82). Distancing here is emotive.

does. Oddly, however, Opdahl seems to contradict himself when he states that there is an objectivity in feeling. Agreeing with Eliot, he writes that "the feelings evoked in the reader can do justice to the object" (152-53), for "objective emotion" involves the process of "adopt[ing] an objectifying state of mind or attitude" which "makes us feel the object as it actually exists" (153). Such statements seem to imply that there ought to be an "authentic" experience of reading that can be shared among all readers. To make such a claim, I believe, is to deny the complexity of the reading process and of the relationship between a given reader and an aesthetic work.

²² Tone, in Ngai's "explicitly feeling-related sense," is "a cultural object's affective veering, orientation, or 'set toward' the world" which for her contrasts a New Critical conception of tone that is de-emotionalized and elitist (29). While Ngai's notion that feeling can only occur through reader empathy proves highly useful to my project, I nonetheless take issue with her apparent dismissal of social context's relevance and her implication that affect resides solely in the aesthetic object.

Genette's notion of narrative mood is in keeping with this idea that degrees of distance between text and reader contribute to the affective quality of a text. A story's "mood" is determined by the viewpoint from which it is told, which might convey itself through many or few details, or through direct or indirect means. As Genette explains, narrative mood "can thus seem to adopt a common and convenient spatial metaphor" as it "keep[s] at a greater or lesser *distance* from what it tells" (162). Distance and perspective, "the two chief modalities of that *regulation of narrative information* that is mood" are inseparable from spatial perception (162). What Genette's work suggests here is that, as Lucie Guillemette explains, narrative mood necessarily involves some "degree of distance between the narrative and its reader" (n.p.). Because "a narrative cannot reproduce reality perfectly," there must always be some degree of detachment between a narrator and her story (Guillemette).

Current Common Approaches to Social and Perceptual Space

Genette's concept of narrative mood echoes the idea that human experience is inextricably tied to spatial perception. And as interdisciplinary studies of space have made apparent, our relationships to space and to our social, political, and personal worlds in many ways mirror one another: the physical spaces we inhabit are organized largely according to social structure and cultural and individual attitudes towards others, and, conversely, our physical surroundings give shape to our spatial perceptions.

Cultural geographers, as well as a number of historians, sociologists, psychologists, and linguists, have taken up such issues.²³

Perhaps the most well known and earliest modernist phenomenological study of *literary space* is Gaston Bachelard's *Poetics of Space* (1964). Centering his argument on a metaphysics of the home, which he believes intimately reflects our inner lives, he contends that the affective "houses" in which we dwell are, in fact, the space of poetry. Bachelard describes his notion of poetic space through two complementary metaphors: one, the house as a reflection of the soul, and, two, the language of poetry as the language of the inner self. These metaphors underscore Bachelard's concern with the dissolution between the material and the metaphysical realms.²⁴ As John R. Stilgoe,

²³ As Lisa Gabbert explains, "With the translation and increasing influence of spatial theorists [...], space has come to be seen as intricately interconnected to human activity and therefore as implicated in politics, ideology, and power relations" (183). The work of Henri Lefebvre, often considered the first scholar of cultural geography, offers a prime example of such spatial theory. He argues in *The Production of Space* (1975) that space is a social construct, rather than a predetermined entity. As physical, natural space disappears in a capitalist culture, societies produce their own social spaces, which involve biological reproduction (the family); the division of labor and its organization in the form of social hierarchies, and the reproduction of the social relations of production (Lefebvre 32; Lye). This understanding of space as socially constructed and inseparable from cultural, economic and political context is also carried forward by the historian Edward Soja, who, among other postmodern cultural geographers, places emphasis on geography's social meanings, rather than its material components (Arentsen, Stam, and Thuijs).²³ Soja's work, like Lefebvre's, challenges earlier views of space as transparent. Working within a similar context and focusing on the globalization of the late-twentieth century, Anthony Giddens describes a process of "time-space distancing." Giddens contends that, while in so-called "premodern" societies time and space were "attached to place" or "embedded" (17–20), in modern culture they were separated from one another, primarily through the standardization, or the "emptying," of time. The separation of space from place followed this standardization, "fostering relations between 'absent' others, locationally distant from any given situation of face-to-face interaction" (Giddens 182). As a consequence of time-space distancing, social relations are "re-embedded," or resituated in new contexts.

²⁴ For Bachelard, poetic space is also social. As the house operates as a kind of poetic metaphor within our own minds and poetry as a means of communicating one's personal dreams to others, the poetic connects individual fantasies to a kind of collective imagination (17). Through poetic language, Bachelard contends, one's inner and outer experiences cease to remain severed, and personal and emotional space become something greater than the individual self.

author of the forward to the 1964 publication of *Poetics of Space*, explains, for Bachelard,

Not only our memories, but the things we have forgotten are “housed.” Our soul is an abode. And by remembering “houses” and “rooms,” we learn to “abide” within ourselves. Now everything becomes clear, the house images move in both directions: they are in us as much as we are in them [...]. (xxxvii)

As Stilgoe’s reading makes clear, Bachelard is invested in the extensive nature of space, which is formative of both our inner and our outer perceptions and experiences (all of which prove crucial to the psychological and spiritual significance of symbolism and of literature). At the same time that Bachelard demonstrates a tendency within Western literary tradition (and especially in Romantic and early American writing) to conceive of space as a temporally removed, and therefore mystical, realm, his work draws significant attention to the interconnections among physical, perceptual, and metaphorical space.²⁵

²⁵ Marshall Berman’s thoughts in *All That is Solid Melts into Air: The Experience of Modernity* (1986) in many ways echo those of Bachelard. Also considering the historical and social dimensions of space, Berman addresses the anxieties and ambivalence about modern spaces so often articulated in discussions of modernity. Drawing upon theories of modernity as shock experience and pointing to the sense of individual displacement often used to characterize modernity, he explains that a fundamental aspect of modernism is the attempt by the individual within strange and new surroundings to find a home which

More recently, the cognitive psychologists Joseph Lakoff and Mark Johnson have explored spatial perception in relation to linguistic spatial metaphors (for example, feeling “low” or “high,” or experiencing emotional “closeness” or “distance” between oneself and another). According to Lakoff and Johnson, the ways in which we think about space affect the ways that we construct our physical reality – whether through urban planning and architecture, social structuring, or language and narrative. They find spatial metaphors, in particular, indicative of our physical, perceptual, and emotional experiences. Because, they argue, the body is a source of knowledge that reads conceptual metaphors in literal ways, such colloquialisms as “things are going uphill” or “I’m feeling down in the dumps” function as “embodied” concepts and as maps for more abstract concepts. In other words, when I say I’m feeling “down,” I have a bodily sense of being just that, and when I say that I’m “on the upswing,” I experience a corporeal feeling of elevation.

A number of psychological and linguistic studies support the theory that spatial perception and spatial language are intimately linked (Lakoff & Johnson, Miall & Kuiken, Cataldi). According to the psychologists David S. Miall and Don Kuiken, for

“cut across all boundaries of geography and ethnicity, of class and nationality, of religion and ideology” (15). “[B]ecause [in modern times] subjectivity and inwardness have become at once richer and more intensely developed, and more lonely and entrapped, than they ever were before,” “communication and dialogue have taken on a new specific weight and urgency” (8-9). While Berman’s claim that modernism transcends physical and social space, “unit[ing] people across the bounds of ethnicity and nationality, of sex and class and race” (15), may seem to overlook the many social inequities of modern life, his ideas nonetheless productively ask us to consider modernist space in relation not just to aesthetics, but also to the historical and social circumstances in which they exist. Such hope for a social space in which identity politics do not delineate social space may be a dream, but it does draw attention to a desire to find human connection within an often alienating environment.

example, the term “good” is associated with upward direction and “bad” with downward direction, while “abstract” is viewed as “up” and “concrete” as “down.” “How we use metaphor to talk about things,” they explain, “also has implications for how we act upon, and think about [...] those things” (n.p.). If our physical environments shape our cultural and personal world views, so too might our “inner geographies” influence the manner in which we structure our understandings of our selves and of our physical, perceptual, and social worlds (Lakoff & Turner).

Sue Cataldi develops Lakoff and Johnson’s hypothesis further in her book *Emotion, Depth, and Flesh: A Study of Sensitive Space – Reflections on Merleau-Ponty’s Philosophy of Embodiment* (1993). Drawing upon Merleau-Ponty’s discussion of “lived space” (our perceptual and bodily experience of space), Cataldi considers the spatial qualities of feeling. Using the term “sensitive space” to refer to the corporeal experience of emotion, she explains that both physical and emotional experiences suggest the positionality of the perceiver, as well as varying degrees of a given emotion’s depth. For Cataldi, the “depth” of emotional experience reflects a kind of inverted space within the self, for affective space also is apparent in the external spatial relations between one object and another: we keep things at a distance, or we hold them close to ourselves; we may feel things deeply, we may ignore them entirely, or we may just glance at their surface. These examples suggest that the “depth” of one’s feelings becomes a means of controlling or managing emotional experience. (Consider, for example, the saying that one is “flooded” with emotion, or that someone is “in too

deep.”) As the work of those like Lakoff, Johnson, and Cataldi reflects on the relationships between language and our inner realities and perceptions, it has particular resonance for a consideration of metafiction.

While the work of the above mentioned linguists and psychologists does relatively little to reflect on the sociological dimensions of linguistic spatial metaphors, Sara Ahmed has explored the spatial connections between the public domain of politics and our supposedly private emotional worlds. Reflecting on the construction of social boundaries that also interest Lefebvre and Soja, Ahmed describes the experience of space as at once social, political, perceptual, and affective.²⁶ She thus connects phenomenology and cultural studies. The intersections between sociological, historical, literary, linguistic, and psychological approaches to space are similarly a primary concern for Joyce Davidson, Liz Bondi, and Mick Smith, editors of the book *Emotional Geographies* (2005). As they explain in their introduction, “An emotional geography [...] attempts to understand emotion – experientially and conceptually – in terms of its socio-*spatial* mediation and articulation rather than as entirely interiorized subjective mental states” (3).

I similarly seek, in exploring the text-reader dynamics of self-conscious narratives, to consider the affective experience of reading as more than an interiorized

²⁶ Ahmed discusses the relevance of social and political spaces which construct both physical and conceptual boundaries that separate social, ethnic, and political groups, as well as nation states. Commenting on a 2003 British National Front Poster which reads “Soft Touch Britain,” and which hereby warns British citizens of the danger of illegal immigrants and asylum seekers, Ahmed believes that such representations present a nation’s borders as if they were skin – “soft,” “weak,” and “porous” (2). In this context, space becomes inherent to a given emotional, collective, and embodied experience, in which to be British means to share the anxiety that one’s border might be penetrated.

process and as a dynamic interaction between individual, text, and the sociocultural context in which the reader finds herself. Though, like affective experience, the narrative and reading processes upon which this dissertation centers may be seen largely as interiorized, they are best understood in relation to the external conditions in which they are produced and read.

A reader, influenced by the sociocultural context that surrounds her, develops a complex spatial relationship with the text in which she engages. In constructing a diegetic realm, the reader thus also develops a spatial relationship to the text itself. In this sense, the physical and relational spaces between ourselves and others may be applied not only to our physical and social environments, but also to subjective processes like reading and textual interpretation. Integrating conceptions of literary, social, perceptual, and emotional space, my project considers how metaphors of relational closeness and distance, in particular, may be used to describe the connections between reader and text. As I argue, the relationality of feelings, often expressed in spatial terms, is especially apparent in metaphors of proximity. When I am “close” to someone, I sense an intimacy “between” us; when I am “distant,” I may feel as though I cannot relate to those around me. Such expressions suggest that I perceive my encounters with others in connection to the area – whether concrete or mental – that I perceive between us. These interactions are ephemeral and ever-changing, for as sentient beings we are constantly in motion and in the process of change. To further

explore these dynamics in terms of textuality and the act of reading, I now turn to literary discourse on literary space and form.

Metafiction and Literary Theories of Spatial Form

While space can be defined and understood in endless ways, in literature it traditionally has been considered in relation to literary form and narrative structure.²⁷ Though cultural studies and reception theory have opened new ways for literary critics to consider space²⁸, discussions on the relationships between formal structure, reader response, and the construction of social space could benefit from further development. However, interdisciplinary analyses and cultural studies, gaining influence in the 1980s, have further extended discussions of literary space beyond the realms of physical geography and narrative structure.²⁹ While reader response criticism and psychology

²⁷ This is reflected in the work of literary formalists, structuralists, and narratologists, who until the 1960s predominantly shaped literary theory, emphasizing the “autonomous” text, whose form was to be separated from historical context, authorial intention, and readerly effects.

²⁸ The recent emergence of cultural geography, connected to theories of perception, has been especially useful for considerations of space in relation to our physical, social, conceptual, and perceptual lives. Psychologists of spatial perception, for example, consider the mental processes involved in our meaning-making of spatial qualities, while cultural geographers explore the ways in which our perceptions of space can be understood within the sociopolitical and historical context in which they are produced.

²⁹ As Erika Fischer-Lichte recognizes in “The Shift of the Paradigm: From Time to Space?: Introduction” (1988), in more recent decades an interest in space has carried over into other areas of literary studies. Fischer-Lichte outlines a number of literary approaches to space: theories of intertextuality approach space and time as indivisible categories; reception aesthetics explore the temporal and spatial aspects of an interpretive community; semiotics addresses the temporal and spatial sign systems within a literary system; narrative theories reflect upon the narrative text and the language of narratology; and theories of drama and theater (or what is generally called performance studies) underscore performance as dependent upon both time and space (15-17).

have generally focused on the individual and her cognitive processes, cultural studies look to the social and cultural influences which shape both the reading experience and language's construction. These approaches, I contend, complement one another, rather than acting in mutually exclusive ways. As literary work, reader, and the social intertwine, they demonstrate that the texts with which I engage can be reduced neither to an aesthetics of impersonality, nor to the apolitical. Thus, in exploring the affective spaces of metafiction, I integrate close readings, reflections on the reading process, and cultural studies.

Considering what I see as a need for such integrative scholarship, it's interesting that the earliest well-known literary study on literary space, Joseph Frank's "Spatial Form in Modern Literature" (1945), while understood foremost as a structuralist reading, anticipates reader response theory and cultural criticism decades before these modes of thought would become critical discourses. Frank looks at the reading process and formal structure relationally, contending that form largely shapes one's reading experience, particularly when it comes to modernist texts which (often self-consciously) place importance on the connections between textual scraps which function together as puzzle pieces to create an aesthetic whole. In "Spatial Form," Frank looks at modernist literature, indicating that the spatial qualities of literature are especially relevant to experimental and self-reflexive writing (Smitten 20). According to Frank, who begins by introducing Gotthold Ephraim Lessing's theorization of painting and poetry as spatially and temporally organized, respectively, the idea of poetics as primarily

representing time no longer holds true for modernist writing: here Frank introduces what he sees as the new literary phenomenon of spatial form.

In contrast to traditional literature, Frank explains, modernist texts like T. S. Eliot's *The Waste Land* and James Joyce's *Ulysses* reflect a new interest in literary space over temporality, for these texts aspire, in the words of Ezra Pound, to present an image as "that which presents an intellectual and emotional complex in an instant of time" (9). As the reader experiences the literary work spatially and "in a moment of time, rather than as a sequence" (Frank 9), she must make sense of the textual world reflexively, by looking intratextually at the relationships between literary elements. In so doing, the reader creates a holistic image of a work's spatial form. Jeffrey R. Smitten, writing on Frank's influential essay, explains,

What the concept of spatial form does is to call attention to the departures from pure temporality, from pure causal/temporal sequence. When these departures are great enough, the conventional causal/temporal syntax of the novel is disrupted and the reader must work out a new one by considering the novel as a whole in a moment of time. (20)

In this way, the construction of textual meaning occurs not only within the literary

work, but also in the reader's perception of it. For Frank, Smitten writes, literature which emphasizes spatial form "involves two aspects for the reader": "one, the text is a puzzling text" (17), and, "two, [t]he reader must work out a syntax for the text" as she finds "what connections are to be made among the seemingly disconnected words and word groups" (18). Spatial form thus asks for an audience's active participation in the construction of meaning. In this way, the reader's involvement in the making of the story world occurs when traditional representations of time dissolve and space steps onto center stage. As the text distances itself from a temporal context, it foregrounds a representational space in which the reader must actively engage. These texts, Frank argues, create a system of meaning which, because removed from a temporal context, can *only* be understood within the given textual framework.

Frank's assertion that "aesthetic form and perceiving mind implicate one another" resembles other literary criticism on self-conscious narrative and its foregrounding of creative process, as a number of scholars have since recognized (Foust, Klinkowitz, Mitchell, Smitten). Such statements indicate that Frank's notion of spatial form is best understood beyond formalism and in connection to phenomenological approaches like those of reception theory. Ronald Foust convincingly argues that the significance of Frank's work to reader response has not received the attention it deserves.

What criticism has not stressed [about Frank's essay] is that spatial form is primarily a theory of perception that focuses on the reading process. Its prime rule – similar to both phenomenology's 'empathy' and Structuralism's 'dissection/articulation' – is that the reader must engage the text on its own terms in a strenuously participatory reading that attempts to re-create the experience embodied in it. Meaning, as Frank implies, resides somewhere between the past activity of the author and the present activity of the engaged reader. This point of view is in keeping with recent phenomenological reading theories calling for empathetic participation [...]. (199)

Thus, "Frank, before Frye, created a methodology and rudimentary vocabulary for future criticism [...] an empathetic or interpretive reading based on a nonjudgmental acceptance of the vision embodied in the text" (199). As the critic forms a mental picture of structural interrelations through the "cross-(reflexive) reference of juxtaposed word groups," she should find "a logical and a phenomenological significance" which allows her to comprehend "the unique double relation between the work and its social environment" (185). Frank's theory hereby offers a way to span the gap between

structural and phenomenological approaches to narrative; to call Frank's theory nothing more than a reductionist structuralism is to ignore its phenomenological concerns.

Though the definition of metafiction would not come to be until several decades had passed, Frank's discussion on textual space clearly points to the intrinsically self-reflexive qualities of spatial form. But it would take several decades before scholars made explicit connections between literary space and self-reflexivity, as Jerome Klinkowitz does thirty-six years later. Interpreting Frank's argument, Klinkowitz contends that texts which foreground literary space may be understood as metafictional in the sense that they ask the reader to create textual meaning through reflexive reference, or the relating of one part of the work to another. As the reader develops a holistic picture of a text's spatial form, she creates a new syntax which will enable her to make sense of the diegetic world.

While Frank's structuralist approach does not deliberate on reader response, the text-reader relationship is central to his theory of spatial form, as is apparent in his following description of the reading process:

Aesthetic form in modern poetry, then, is based on a space-logic that demands a complete reorientation in the reader's attitude toward language. Since the primary reference of any word-group is to something inside the poem itself, language in modern poetry is really reflexive.

The meaning-relationship is completed only by the simultaneous perception in space of word-groups that have no comprehensible relation to each other when read consecutively in time. [...] modern poetry asks its readers to suspend the process of individual reference temporarily until the entire pattern of internal references can be apprehended as a unity. (13)

Though Frank's theory was accused by several scholars of denying the temporal nature of the reading process³⁰, Frank's work makes apparent that spatiality is vital to literature in both structural and phenomenological ways.³¹

Although Frank neglects to present a full picture of spatial perception in relation to the reading process, many of his assumptions about reader response parallel the

³⁰ Walter Sutton raises this concern in his response to Frank in "The Literary Image and the Reader: A Consideration of the Theory of Spatial Form" (1957). Here Sutton asks "Are these ideas and emotions [presented in a given text] rigidly defined and fixed by the context of the work, or are they in a state of dynamic flux as a result of the reader's changing experience in time and of the shifting focuses of interest in a work from period to period? Are the ideas and emotions associated with the image not subject to change and revision even during the reading of the poem or novel?" (114). These questions indicate that while Frank was interested in the reader's experience, he overlooked much about the reading experience in this essay, instead emphasizing the literary work as an autonomous entity.

³¹ W. J. T. Mitchell (1980), in his response to both Frank's essay and the criticism it received, commends Frank's work, while also offering a critical revision of it. Emphasizing that to perceive space is also to perceive time, Mitchell writes, "We must begin by removing one of the major obstacles to any comprehension of the problem—the notion that spatial form is properly defined as an antithesis or alternative to temporal form and that literary words achieve 'spatiality' only by denying temporality [...]. The fact is that spatial form is the perceptual basis of our notion of time, that we literally cannot "tell time" without the mediation of space" (541-42). This "common mistake of regarding space and time as antithetical modalities is reflected in the tendency of literary critics to speak of spatial form as 'static,' or 'frozen,' or as involving some simultaneous, instantaneous, and wholistic impression of that which is 'really' temporal" (542).

views of reception theorists like Roman Ingarden, Wolfgang Iser, and Gerard Genette, all of whom foreground the interaction between reader and text in spatial terms.

Genette, probably the most prominent of these critics, echoes Frank, suggesting that texts that emphasize spatial form appear to be temporally suspended. This, Genette contends, is particularly true of the novel, which, by replacing linear discourse with discontinuity and atemporality, foregrounds space; in the novel, “language *spaces itself* so that space, in itself, becomes language, speaks it and writes it” (*Figures I* 101,108). In other words, language reflects upon itself as occupying a particular kind of space; the text *turns inward*. As narrative space becomes central to story, our everyday conceptions of time break down.

But this inward turn does not mean that narrative becomes utterly removed from the world in which it had been created and in which it is read. Just as the reader and his reception remain central to Genette’s theory³², the social and political are also important for Frank, though this interest has often gone unacknowledged (e. g. Curtis, Rahv, Weimann). Philip Rahv, for example, contends in *The Myth and the Powerhouse* (1965) that, as in myth criticism, Frank’s preference for discussing space, as opposed to time, is

³² The reader outside of the text is also central to Genette’s understanding of literary space. In 1997 he coins the term “paratext,” referring to the extradiegetic aspects of the text (*Paratexts*). According to Genette, the literary work is comprised of the paratext (elements placed within the confines of a bound volume, including the title, the book cover, bibliographic information, prefaces, and introductions), as well as the epitext (elements “outside” of the bound text, intertextual references such as book reviews, reader comments, and other sources which may affect the writing or the reading of a particular work). His work may be viewed as a beginning for the reader response theories that develop beginning in the 1970s. Connecting intra- and extratextuality to the concept of narrative space, such literary analyses look beyond formalism to the interactive qualities of narrative.

a result of a “fear of history” (20). In a similar though less reprimanding vein, James Curtis (1981) sees Frank’s structuralism as reflective of a sociohistorical and sociopolitical moment during which modernists, “[b]y associating space with structure, could associate structure with meaning, and meaning with eternal, mythical existence,” which can only exist outside of the social (165). Ironically, this very attempt to remove oneself from the cultural moment, Curtis suggests, is itself indicative of the time in which it is written: “as they [modernists] witnessed the disintegration of the world into which they had been born, they sought permanent meaning all the more vigorously” (165).

While the common critique of modernist literature and literary criticism as apathetic to social concerns may apply to much of this writing, Frank might actually agree with Rahv and Curtis on more points than these critics acknowledge, as is suggested when Frank comments on the influence a cultural moment can have on the literary: “changes in aesthetic form always involve major changes in the sensibility of a particular cultural period” (9). Frank goes on to explain that literature’s new tendency to portray the mythical is indicative of the modern condition, for a sense of universal order calms individuals who are struggling with the uncertainty and anxiety characteristic of modernity. Reiterating Wilhelm Worringer’s argument in *Abstraction and Empathy* (1908), Frank explains that “when the relationship between man and the cosmos is one of disharmony and disequilibrium, we find that nonorganic, linear-geometric styles are always produced,” for “[s]uch forms have the stability, the harmony, and the sense of

order that primitive man cannot find in the flux of phenomena” (53-54). And “[i]f there is one theme that dominates the history of modern culture since the last quarter of the nineteenth century, it is precisely that of insecurity, instability, the feeling of loss of control over the meaning and purpose of life” (55). It is here, in the ambivalence of modern life, that we find the significance of spatial form.

However, Frank does not (as Rahv points out) offer any critique of socially disengaged literature,³³ and moreover he suggests (I would argue mistakenly) that most, if not all, experimental modernist texts are attempts at social escapism. However, a look at works which convey a sense of the mythical and the timeless also suggests that the present day and “the mythic” are not always easily separated. When, for example, in *The Waste Land* Eliot places side by side the figure Tiresias and a woman who faces the question of aborting her child, the past and present seem to collide.

The coming together of the mythical and the contemporary is also evident in postmodern and minority literatures. Consider Leslie Marmon Silko’s *Ceremony* (1977), in which the narrator continually interrupts the flow of the present-day story of Tayo to insert mythical characters and stories which seem to transcend time. Here, to remove Tayo from the past of Native Americans and the conditions under which they currently live would be to create an entirely different text. In a similar vein, Gayl Jones’s *Corregidora* (published in 1975 and the focus of chapter 6), follows the story of

³³ In “Spatial Form: An Answer to Critics” (1977), Frank, responds to the criticism of Rahv and others, clarifying that he understands the mythical imagination to be inseparable from the sociohistorical moment.

the protagonist Ursa, whose everyday life of the 1970s is intruded upon continuously by the oppressive history of the slavery, to which her maternal lineage has been bound. Holocaust novels, such as Günter Grass's *Der Blechtrommel/The Tin Drum* (1959) and W. G. Sebald's *Austerlitz* (2001) (see chapter 5) offer further examples of the ways in which a narrative's emphasis on space and circulatory time does not necessitate a neglect of historical and social reality. These novels illustrate that human experience, while occurring within a particular time, may not necessarily be felt as such. Many texts concerned with intense affective states may emphasize space not to ignore a sociocultural or sociohistorical context, but rather to depict experiences which may be unrepresentable through realism.³⁴ While it may be true that, as Rahv contends, many modernist (and postmodern) texts use mythic and spatial elements which in large part remove narratives from social reality (take for example Ezra Pound's imagist poetry), the same concerns with myth and space often become vital to considering the difficult realities of history and culture. As I hope to demonstrate, the collage-like structure of self-conscious texts, inviting the reader to actively piece together and puzzle over

³⁴ Ronald Foust expresses such a view in his essay "The Aporia of Recent Criticism and the Contemporary Significance of Spatial Form." Remarkably on Rahv's critique of Frank, Foust asserts that Frank's ideas do not necessarily demand that one neglect social concerns, though Frank might better anticipate this critique. "[F]or Frank's essay to be taken seriously as essential to 'newer' criticism," Foust writes, "it must have a theoretical base from which to withstand the accusations hurled at it by a host of often violent antispacialists who proclaim it a 'life-denying' theory that would 'reduce the history of literature to sameness and static juxtaposition' [quoted in Rahv's *Literature and the Sixth Sense* 212 (1969)]." Here Foust reiterates Frank Kermode's reading of (Joseph) Frank's "Spatial Form." Kermode argues in a letter to Frank (dated August 17, 1974) that spatial form's "relevance to contemporary criticism can be established only by clearing it of the charge that it is simply an outdated formalism and thus too easily reducible 'to the status of period aesthetic' [quoted from Kermode's letter]" (Foust 180). Foust and Kermode's thoughts make it clear that discussions on literary space need not (and should not) remain outside of sociopolitical and sociohistorical debates.

fragments which sometimes do and at other times do not cohere, may allow readers to engage with affectively charged subject matter in ways that promote both empathy and critical thought.

The following chapters, considering the intersections between spatial form, the reader process, and the social and political significances of empathic reading, explore how the puzzle-like qualities of contemporary metafiction may contribute to a reading experience of affective and a social engagement. The reader's active reading process, in which she experiences varying degrees of proximity to and removal from a given text, is of course influenced by the situational and cultural contexts in which she approaches a given text: as a great deal of reader response criticism and cultural studies have made apparent, the meaning one finds in literature largely depends upon who is doing the reading. Though this dissertation does not focus on interpretive communities,³⁵ it also acknowledges that the distinct personal and sociocultural backgrounds of the reader greatly influence how she interprets literature. To suggest otherwise is to deny not only the reality of being human, but also to simplify the complex reasons for which we read and study literature and the multitude of meanings that we find within it.

Though I seek to take into account other responses to and interpretations of the texts which I explore, this dissertation is undeniably biased by my own circumstances and my interests in affect, history, culture, and gender. In keeping with my concerns in

³⁵ In his essay "Interpreting the Variorum" (1976), Stanley Fish coins the term "interpretive communities" to explain how an individual's interpretation of a text depends upon her subjective experience in one or more communities, or social groups, which are defined by a distinct epistemology.

the gender politics of emotion, the following two chapters consider two examples of self-reflexive approaches to representing emotion in spatial terms: Carole Maso's *The Art Lover* (1991) and Paul Auster's *City of Glass* (1987). While each of these texts helps to outline the ways in which I will discuss narrative and affective space throughout this project (namely, the puzzle-form of fragmented narrative and the reader response to such structures), I also compare Maso and Auster's work to demonstrate that my conception of spatiality may be applied to both women's and men's writing. Although scholarship has tended to identify Maso's work with a "feminine" way of writing that is intensely interested in feeling and Auster has been generally understood as one of those privileged white American male metafictionists who removes writing from human, social, and emotional experience, my close readings of *The Art Lover* and *City of Glass* suggest these works to be more than those labels. The significance of affective life in the diegetic and relational spaces of these two stories, I seek to demonstrate, becomes apparent in the textual, perceptual, and emotional spaces which they construct.

Chapter 3: "The Poetics of Loss in Carole Maso's *The Art Lover*"

Carole Maso's work offers a compelling case for the argument that metafiction's engagement with emotion is far more dimensional than its critics would purport. As an author who has expressed her distaste for elusive, inaccessible writing, Maso objects to literature which has little connection to life. She expresses this viewpoint in an interview with Nicole Cooley: "[a] lot of writing has become simply elitist and game-playing for its own sake. It's very self-referential and has lost any real passion and love of the world. And love of the world is really my main love, this table, this piece of bread, this hand" (n.p.).

Maso's work, reflecting on the creative process as intimately linked to emotional experience in both personal and political ways, has unfortunately not received the critical attention that it has long deserved, though Maso's concerns in self-reflexivity and literary innovation as a means for expressing human experience clearly indicate its relevance in relation to contemporary writing and literature. *The Art Lover* (1990), written during the decline and eventual death of the author's close friend Gary Falk from AIDS-related causes, is a particularly personal exploration of the possibilities and the limitations of the creative process, in this case in the face of loss.

The Art Lover's three narrative levels explore the experience of loss, as each narrative frame connects with differing degrees of intensity to Maso's grief in losing her friend. This novel looks to both the possibilities and the limitations of art as a way of

understanding human experience in a world made incomprehensible by death and, more specifically, by the AIDS epidemic that surfaces in the 1980s. As *The Art Lover* considers the creative process as a means of both ordering and dis-ordering life, Maso questions a notion of impersonal art which she relates to a masculinist modernist aesthetic that is articulated in the theories of critics like Eliot (as discussed in chapter 2). She does so not by eliminating aesthetic distance from her work, but rather by inviting the reader to engage with her writing through both reader empathy and aesthetic distancing, both of which construct and deconstruct the boundaries between reader and text and life and fiction.

In considering *The Art Lover* as a metafictional work whose spatial form shapes the emotional dimension of the narrative and the reading experience, this chapter has two main goals. First, it seeks to demonstrate how a theory of spatial form, as outlined in chapter two (in terms of diegetic structure and the reader's experiences of relational closeness to and distance from a text), may be applied to the affective dimensions of a metafictional work. Secondly, I hope to show that narrative structure and the text-reader relationship can, and often do, have social and political relevance. In the case of *The Art Lover*, the boundaries between life and fiction blur in ways that call to question an Eliotic aesthetic of impersonality that is commonly associated with a masculinist modernism. As *The Art Lover*'s nonlinear, circular form resists closure and the text draws attention to both women and men artists whose work may be experienced on a personal and affective level, Maso challenges the patriarchal institutionalization of art,

drawing attention to and often complicating the stereotypes of the emotional woman and the unfeeling man, while simultaneously calling for an aesthetic which both directly and indirectly addresses emotional life. *The Art Lover* calls into question the virtue of masculine emotional restraint as Maso remembers the AIDS-related death of her close friend Gary Falk, hence bringing to light a story that American culture marginalized, particularly in the 1980s when the epidemic so profoundly affected the United States' gay population.³⁶ Mourning the loss of an individual who did not conform to gender conventions while also celebrating the possibilities of an art unconfined by the patriarchal institutionalization of art, *The Art Lover* indicates that the personal and the aesthetic are also political.

This discussion of gender is then deepened in the proceeding chapter four's reading of Paul Auster's *City of Glass*. By looking at Maso's and Auster's writing relationally as reflections on emotional experience as it intersects with male-female relations, these chapters explore fiction's potential to stage and to seek understanding of social and political forces which profoundly influence our social and affective experiences.

³⁶ Cindy Patton writes in *Globalizing AIDS* that "HIV infection and AIDS are repeatedly displaced from the home-space and the nation-space, dislocated, that is, from civilized space, forgotten, and banished to the floating container of elsewhere" (38). As Patricia Rae points out, this marginalization of AIDS narratives reflects a political agenda. The work of Benedict Anderson, Judith Butler, and Marc Redfield shows that "the kind of public mourning often encouraged by the state and indeed upon which national identities have been built, has typically encouraged the confronting and working through of *some* human losses but not others" (19-20).

To begin a close reading of *The Art Lover*, I will begin with a brief sketch of the narrative's shape, particularly as it relates to Frank's notion of spatial form and to the reading processes of identification and distancing. Frank's idea of spatial form becomes especially apparent in the text's use of collage. The book not only moves continually between narrative levels; Maso also inserts texts and images from other contexts whose themes and images intersect with those of the novel. (She includes, for example, newspaper articles on art history and criticism, a flyer announcing the loss of a pet ferret, paintings by canonical male artists (including Vermeer's *Woman in Blue Reading a Letter* (57) and *Head of a Young Girl* (58), Van Gogh's *Starry Night*, and Henri Matisse's *Young Woman Sleeping in Rumanian Blouse* (90, 175); and the work of more contemporary (and lesser known) artists (Barbara Kruger (162) and Maso's friend Gary). These many linguistic and visual representations have a pastiche-like effect, oftentimes without a direct connection being made between *The Art Lover*'s diegetic worlds and decontextualized collage pieces. Because the reader must piece together the text's dis-ordered fragments to form a coherent story, she becomes actively involved in the construction of textual meaning. As Frank and Smitten would argue (chapter two), the reader develops a "spatial-temporal syntax," or a way of understanding the text in terms of a unique construction of time and space. As with Frank's spatial form, *The Art Lover*'s organization becomes clear only when the reader develops a larger picture of how the text's segments cohere; through the reading process, the text takes shape.

The reader's development of a spatial structure may be viewed in relation to reader empathy and estrangement. While creating a textual "syntax" for the narrative, the audience likely experiences a disorientation which requires that it distance itself from the text in order to make sense of it. As Maso skips from one diegetic (or extra-diegetic) level to another, and as the audience follows her along this path, the reader, filling what Roman Ingarden has called *Leerheitsstellen*, or *places of indeterminacy* (*Vom Erkennen des literarischen Kunstwerks/The Cognition of the Literary Work of Art* 1968), becomes an active participant in the text's meaning making. Like the temporal-spatial syntax which Frank describes as essential to spatial form, the book's fragments form a holistic *Gestalt*, which is only apparent after a reader has viewed the work from multiple angles and from both near and afar. To look at each textual scrap alone is to be blind to the larger narrative structure, while to ignore the fine points of the collage that creates the text is to overlook much of the book's substance.

The Art Lover's collage structure makes it a particularly useful example of how Frank's notion of spatial form can be applied to self-reflexive writing. According to my thesis, Maso's writing, creating situations and characters that blur diegetic frames and the categories of fiction and non-fiction, invites the reader to experience the text on both an emotional and an intellectual level. As the reader re-orders and pastes together the text's many collage pieces, she moves between direct engagement and (dis)engagement with the fragmented narratives. Through this process, she seeks to find meaning and coherence in the relationships that these textual scraps share with one another.

The Art Lover, formed by three parallel diegetic levels whose boundaries are often indistinct, takes the shape of a “Chinese box” of nested narratives (though the three storylines at moments appear more braided than neatly separated, particularly in the novel’s final section). These three stories are organized into the five sections: “Spring 1985,” “Summer,” “Winter,” “More Winter,” and “Spring 1986.” Despite this seemingly linear chronological structure, these stories, like the process of grief, do not unfold in a linear fashion. Instead, they move in circles, jumping between diegetic worlds and temporal moments. The centermost narrative realm, a novel-in-progress, revolves around a nuclear family and its dissolution following the husband’s infidelity. These characters – the wife and mother Maggie, her daughters Candace and Allison, and their emotionally distant father Henry – highlight the themes of intimacy and loss which remain central throughout the text. Framing the developing book is the life of the book’s author, Caroline, whose fictional story parallels her struggle to accept the recent death of her father Max. For Caroline, writing is a way to confront, at whatever degree of removal, the recent loss of her father, the past suicide of her mother, her friend Steven’s suffering from AIDS, and her ongoing struggle with how these relationships continue to affect her life. Finally, the outermost narrative frame involves Maso’s writing of *The Art Lover* and the simultaneous physical decline in the face of AIDS of her close friend Gary Falk.

Caroline’s life, the center of this tripartite novel, comprises the large majority of *The Art Lover*’s five sections. With the exception of the fourth segment, the text

oscillates between Caroline's existence and the world of her novel. "More Winter," however, brings another narrative frame into play. Surrounding Caroline's grieving and writing is the life of the writer Carole (presumably Maso), whose writing, similar to Caroline's, is intimately connected to her recent loss. In this fourth segment, it becomes apparent that, just as Caroline writes her characters into existence, so too does Carole bring life to Caroline. By overtly placing herself within "More Winter," Maso breaks the theatrical fourth wall and questions the notion of art's impersonal nature. *The Art Lover* thus consists of two frame stories (contained by Caroline and Carole) and two embedded ones (Caroline's developing novel and Carole's *The Art Lover*). All three of these story worlds reflect the others. While Caroline's writing process becomes reflective of her struggle to accept the reality of her father's recent death, as well as (albeit more tangentially) that of her HIV-positive best friend Steven, Carole's creation of *The Art Lover* is reflective of her confrontation with the death of her friend Gary.

This narrative structure becomes representative of the relational distance between Maso's life and each of the text's diegetic levels. The outermost narrative frame, portraying Gary's death, comes nearest to Maso's experience, while the centermost story, Caroline's novel-in-progress, stands at the greatest distance from Maso and her reader. Caroline's life, placed between the worlds of the fictional family and Maso, hereby acts as the mediating layer between the outermost and innermost diegetic realms. As the text continually moves from one story frame to another, *The Art Lover* creates varying degrees of proximity between the textual world and the emotional

experience of its characters and reader. But at the same time that *The Art Lover's* numerous fictional levels exist in different degrees of proximity to the nonfictional world of Maso and the reader, the mirror-like qualities of each story offer multiplying ways to reflect on creative process and its relevance to human experience. Caroline's ambivalence about her relationship to her father and her art parallels the emotional struggles of the female members of her fictional family, just as Caroline's grief over the deaths of her father and her best friend reflect Maso's own struggle to mourn the loss of Gary Falk.

Within these textual spaces and through self-reflexive content and form, Maso makes connections between life and literature and hereby critiques the notion that art must remain separate from human subjectivity and affective experience. In so doing, *The Art Lover* challenges the concept of the ideally autonomous text that was privileged by critics including Eliot and Pound.³⁷ Just as the reader experiences different relationships to the narrative's content, so too does she encounter the book's formal techniques in relationally close and distant ways. By challenging the claims of high modernist criticism, which treat the literary work as an object independent from the author, Maso emphasizes art's significance, as well as its limitations, to emotional life and more specifically to the process of grief. Through narrative structure and a dynamic

³⁷ More suitable to Maso's thinking about art might be Clement Greenberg. In "Avant-Garde and Kitsch" (1939), Greenberg argues that modern art (responding critically to capitalist culture) explores the conditions under which we experience and make sense of the world. Johanna Druckner similarly looks at aesthetic objects as cultural artifacts. In *(The Century of Artists' Books* (1994), she considers the intersection between the many elements and activities involved in the production of a single artwork.

text-reader relationship, *The Art Lover* depicts the possibilities, as well as the difficulties, of emotionally engaged art.

The significance of textual, narrative, and affective space becomes apparent in *The Art Lover*'s very first pages. The first of the book's five sections, "Spring 1985," opens with a distinction between the space of the characters of the novel-in-progress and that of its writer Caroline (though the reader does not yet know who Caroline, the narrative I, is). In these first sentences, a separation is made between the spectator, "I," and those whom she observes.

A girl in a striped bathing suit sits at the water's edge...A
man further back on the beach, now getting up, calls to
her. He calls something out as if it were pure song. "The
sun" is what *I* think he says. She turns. *No*. "Alison!" [...]
As she stands up now *I* can see the intricate jigsaw shapes
their bodies make to fit together. (*italics mine*; 5)

Caroline begins *The Art Lover* by immediately establishing herself as a removed spectator of her own fictional construction: "jigsaw shapes" that "their bodies make to fit together. Significantly, these puzzle pieces mirror the shape of *The Art Lover* that the reader will assemble; the boundaries between reality and fiction will be fundamental not

only to Caroline's construction of her book, but also to the reader's building of *The Art Lover's* narrative layers.

Further underscoring the fictional quality of these individuals, Caroline writes that they are "just a lovely picture, a word picture really, picnicking in the meadow near their summer house." The narrator does not attempt to hide the fact that this image of an ideally loving, nuclear family is, in fact, her fantasy. These "figures appear static," she explains, for "it is only my wish for them: that they stay together, that the light remain" (8). The loveliness of this image, Caroline recognizes, results from her own desires for an aesthetically pleasing image on which she can rely to remain constant. As is reflected in the novel's opening scene of the familial "word picture," Caroline simultaneously seeks closeness to and distance from the family she creates, perhaps because she is at once wary of and wishful to confront the challenges of her own familial relationships.

These movements towards and away from this household also appear to reflect Caroline's ambivalence about writing. The anonymous "I" of the book's first few pages initially appears as an anonymous spectator who paints a detailed, albeit awkward, picture of her characters. The speaker, clearly removed from her creation, perhaps maintains some distance between herself and her characters because of fear that this hologram of perfect family will dissolve. As Caroline writes, "I cannot guess yet how remote I, the onlooker, I the one who is telling their story, have become, how cautious. If there is a clue in this scene of something about to go awry, I do not see it. I overlook it. Or perhaps I prefer not to see" (8).

Instead, this spectator notices “one thing [that] stands out now, dwarfing everything.” Here “there is only one thing that cannot be ignored – and that is the enormous starburst in the arch over the farmhouse door” (8). This starburst, which will reappear numerous times, often serving as a reminder of death, returns Caroline to the memory of her father’s passing. This image hereby shifts the text’s focus from the developing novel to Caroline’s life. Though Caroline begins her novel-in-progress by underscoring the separation between herself and her fiction, her book fails to maintain this divide. Rather, Caroline’s writing returns her to memories of her own father’s passing.

These first pages make evident that, just as Caroline cannot separate her existence and her novel entirely, the text’s many sections are best understood in relationship to one another. Thus, *The Art Lover* asks its reader to piece together the plot as the book unfolds. The diegesis will not cohere until much later, when the reader is able to construct it by connecting the text’s many fragments. As the reader makes associations between textual passages and images, the story of *The Art Lover* will begin to cohere, and the reader may come to identify with the characters and their experiences. Repeatedly moving between these processes of meaning making and confusion, the reader develops a dynamic relationship with the text. Empathy and estrangement, thus, exist in constant tension with one another. This movement between spaces of affective distance and proximity results in a multi-dimensional text with multiple perspectives on the relationships between art, life, and feeling.

As form and content begin to mirror one another, relational closeness and distance become central not only to aesthetics, but also to the relationships between Maso's characters. Aesthetic distancing, or the distance the reader experiences between herself and fragmented, disorienting portions of the text, occurs alongside instances during which characters feel an emotional removal from themselves, others, or the artistic process. Similarly, passages which express intense feeling with clarity most likely lead the reader to experience a relational closeness to the text. The reader's oscillation between immersion within the story world and disorientation within it occurs alongside the novel's nonlinear structure, which underscores the complexity of emotional life, especially in relation to loss and mourning.

The intricacy and ambivalence of human thought and feeling is pronounced in the fact that Maso, Caroline, and Carole actively choose, despite their hesitations, to continue their writing in ways which both narrow and widen the distance between themselves and the experiences about which they write. For example, Caroline's move in the book's first pages from her novel to thoughts about her own life makes it evident that her writing, rather than eliminating her grief, actually returns her to it. After only several pages of her novel's opening, the image of a starburst book returns her to the memory of her father's recent death. The starburst, which appear repeatedly in Caroline's everyday and her fictional life and which will become a key image of the text that often symbolizes mortality (8-9, 12-13, 30, 39, 87, 153), is "the one thing that

cannot be ignored” (12). This image leads Caroline away from her novel and to her direct thoughts.

I began foreseeing his death in that recurring New
 England shape, that architectural sunrise, that starburst
 over every door [...]. In this pattern, this cool geometry,
 there was something about to explode. It moved inside my
 father’s head. He had a stroke and died. I did not get there
 in time. (12-13)

Here her memory of her father’s death and her writing process converge. Though the starburst’s “cool geometry” seems in keeping with Max’s notion of cerebral art, it in actuality has a greater depth: like Max’s life, the starburst has arrived at its end, and when it reaches the point of explosion, Caroline can do nothing about it. Because so much of life and emotional experience is beyond one’s control, the texts suggests, an attempt to control life has little use.

As the starburst crosses the boundaries of Caroline’s novel, *The Art Lover* gives way to her thoughts, memories, and imagined conversations between herself and her father. These inner monologues move the book’s focus away from plot to emphasize instead Caroline’s inner life. The story of her fictionalized family, one might argue, is secondary to the portrayal of Caroline’s writing process, which occupies the greatest

portion of the text. She steps outside of her developing novel to speak to her now deceased father. Since the text has not yet revealed who the speaker and her intended audience is, these “few things I know about you,” like the description of the make-believe family, are decontextualized. “You were elegant, graying, distinguished, [...] cerebral, exacting, lively, passionate. [...] You were critical, cold at times, a little monstrous. [...] You were not old” (9). The reader must wait to learn what this “I” and this “you” refer to. This disorientation may alienate her from the narrative realm in which she attempts to engage. But such lack of clarity also challenges the reader to find a way into the text. Here, and as Shklovsky argues in “Art as Device” (see chapter two), the process of “making strange” invites its listeners to pay particularly close attention to the text’s unusual and often confusing features. As an audience practices such heightened awareness of the text, it involves itself more actively and consciously in the story before it. As the reader continues, she receives more material from which to make meaning of an initially confusing narrative scene: the speaker Caroline is mourning the death of her father.

As Caroline begins revealing pieces of her life, it becomes increasingly clear that her thoughts and feelings will shape her progressing book and that her novel, in turn, will parallel her personal experiences. Just as she recognizes that the “lovely word picture” of a family does not reflect a larger picture, so, too, will she acknowledge the rocky spots of her relationship to her father. Because Caroline is concerned not only

with the pain of Max's death, but also with the complexity of their relationship and what it means for her life and her writing, finding peace with his departure involves coming to terms with certain impulses that the two share, especially their love of art. Comparing herself to her father, she confesses "I am a lover of detail, a marker – it's a way of keeping the world in place. One documents, makes lists to avoid becoming simply petals" (12). Caroline's writing functions in this way, creating a safe distance between herself and life. Thinking of the family in her novel, "just a word picture for now," she asserts,

Writing too can keep the world at a distance.

One uses "one" instead of "I." One does not look long enough. [...] One turns flesh too often into words on a page. [...] The temptation is to make it beautiful or perfect or have it make sense. The temptation is to control things, to make something to help ease the difficulty. (16)

Caroline recognizes that she shares the desire for art to organize life. As "a lover of detail" who documents and lists, she confesses, "I am like you, Max: a looker, an accountant, a record keeper, a creator of categories, a documenter" (12). Although she claims, "I am trying to regain my analytical perspective, she remains uncertain that

being like Max is such a good thing. On the one hand, “keeping the world in place” allows her to function in life, to stay composed and “to avoid becoming simply petals.” Like her relationship to Max, her connection to writing is one of ambivalence. On the one hand, art offers a means for characters to process and accept emotional difficulties, such as that of loss. But art nonetheless remains an inadequate substitute for life and direct experience of it.

As the above passages suggest, Caroline has maintained an uncomfortable distance from her father. Coming to terms with the loss of him goes beyond recognizing that he is gone. It is not just his living body that is absent; also lacking is the narrator’s sense of peace with Max’s death.

I did not get to him in time. We had, it seemed, been saying good-bye our whole lives. From the time I was little and he called me his cherub. Even then he was saying good-bye, putting me into a painting, holding me afar and admiring. [] Max, I had wanted a firmer grasp.

(11)

Significantly, the affective distance which separated Caroline from her father is presented, like her “word picture,” in relation to aesthetics. As this passage foreshadows, each of *The Art Lover*’s narrative frames, like the interpersonal

relationships that fill them, will be presented in terms of relational space of nearness and distance.

The attempt to replace actual living with aesthetic experience, which Caroline at moments suggests she learned from her father, is associated with a masculine notion of art that attempts to cover over feeling, which, not coincidentally, is felt usually by female characters. The relevance of gender in *The Art Lover* is perhaps most apparent initially in the recurring theme of women abandoned by men, which, according to Charles B. Harris, reflects the book's questioning of a modernist aesthetic of impersonality and emotional remove. (The female characters of the Caroline's novel-in-progress are betrayed by their husband and father, Caroline confronts the difficulty of losing a father who was emotionally unavailable, and Carole faces the departure of her close friend Gary.) As these occurrences suggest, *The Art Lover's* women figures do most of what Arlie Hochschild has called "emotional labor" (*The Managed Heart*); they are usually the characters to feel and grieve in this text. Through their struggles with loss, they develop new ideas about the role of art as it relates to their emotional lives. While a number of these female characters have idealized what is presented as a masculine aesthetic that privileges objectivity over feeling, they come to reconsider both an aesthetic approach of impersonality and a masculinist culture that has devalued women's art. *The Art Lover*, drawing upon discourse on feminism and art history, underscores how, as Giselda Pollock articulates,

Art history itself is to be understood as a series of representational practices which actively produce definitions of sexual difference and contribute to the present configuration of sexual politics and power relations. Art history is not just indifferent to women; it is a masculinist discourse, party to the social construction of sexual difference. (11)

And so “If modernist art history supplies the paradigm which feminist art history of the modern period must contest, modernist criticism and modernist practice are the targets of contemporary practice” (Pollock 14).

The masculine ideal of emotionally removed art is especially apparent in the relationships between Max and Caroline, for Caroline’s father embodies a New Critical aesthetic ideal (Harris), which becomes an object of reflection for her following Max’s death. Like her father, Caroline looks to writing as a solace from her pain, but ultimately she recognizes that her art will not be enough to ease the difficulty of her loss. Meanwhile, in her unfolding novel, the women characters realize that life goes on without their husband and father Henry. Significantly, as they find meaning outside of the traditionally heterosexual nuclear family (and the narrative around which it is organized), the women come into their own.

The aesthetics of modernist distance which *The Art Lover* calls into question is most apparent in Caroline's relationship to her artist father Max, who, according to his daughter, painted her suicidal mother Veronica into a picture (185). But "The attempts to paint her [Veronica] back into a body, lengthen her thick dark hair and climb it, use it as a rope ladder out of here" benefit neither himself nor his children (185). Perhaps for this reason Max tries to present Veronica's death as a simple fact to his children. He tries to make her absence more manageable by telling his daughter and son that

the fact of the matter [was]: Mother was not here. What one *did* with that information was entirely one's own choice. What you [Max] did was offer some possibilities, some clues toward a way to proceed. You tried to teach us something about art, its consoling nature, in transcendent nature, its ability to help distance. (185)

Max's "objectivity," however, has done little to console his children. And so Caroline, challenging not only to her father's tendency to idealize his wife, but also to a modernist aesthetic which William V. Spanos has called an "aesthetics of stasis" which does not portray life as dynamic (Harris), refuses to become a silent object of beauty like her mother. "I do not hold still hour after hour, day after day and then die. I do not," Caroline declares (164).

Veronica is one of many examples in *The Art Lover* of female characters who at once embody and repress emotion, in contrast to male characters who often deny the significance of affective life.³⁸ At the same time that women convey feeling, however, they, like the male figures, often strive to approach the world “objectively.” This is evident, for example, in Caroline’s similarities to her father. Her critique of the impulse to “keep[] the world at a distance” in order to avoid “struggl[ing] so much” stems largely from her own urge to do so. Caroline is aware that she strives to create writing worthy of her artist father’s praise. She, like Max, is “a lover of detail” (12), though she realizes that writing cannot undo the reality that her mother, “a painting by Matisse,” “took sleeping pills” (16). Although as Caroline develops her novel her ambivalence about “objective” art increasingly will give way to a rejection of what she sees as her father’s notion of static beauty, this protagonist seems also to learn that aesthetic distancing can be a part of an affective involvement with the creative process. For much of the affective content of *The Art Lover* results from an *interaction between reader estrangement and intimacy*, both of which are essential to the emotive qualities of the text. At the same time that Maso critiques a notion of detached spectatorship, her use of both reader empathy and distanciation points to the dynamic nature of feeling.

The connections between Max’s notion of art and his relationships to his wife and children show that Caroline’s writing process is involved not only in coming to

³⁸ This representation of the woman as the embodiment of feeling and man as its antithesis calls to mind essentialist notions of sex which may raise some eyebrows. I explore such concerns in greater detail in the following chapter 4.

terms with her father's death and her mother's suicide, but also in questioning the emotional repression of a patriarchal society. In associating emotional repression with male domination and feeling with women's experience, Maso calls upon the stereotypes of the emotional woman and the stoical man. Thus, one might argue, *The Art Lover* reinforces an essentialist view of man and woman. This thought points to a feminist debate, discussed in greater detail in chapter four, over the possibilities of deconstruction and feminism. The idea that *The Art Lover* essentializes gender, however, is complicated by the fact that women and male characters often face similar and significant emotional challenges. Though men most strongly exhibit such emotional distancing, this behavior is not limited to them. Maggie, a lover of list-making, similarly struggles with the idea that order and art could make life easier. "One loves art more than life," she comments to her daughter Alison. "[I]t's better than life, don't you think, Ali? It doesn't disappoint so. [...] It's not so frightening" (57). But Maggie's doubt in the adequacy of art as a coping mechanism is apparent in "her eyes fill with terror" (57). Such intersections between Caroline's novel and her present life suggest the fuzzy lines between fiction and reality, boundaries with which Maso will continue to play, particularly as she places herself within "More Winter," hereby adding an additional layer to the text.

Though *The Art Lover* concerns itself foremost with the experience of its female characters, and may thus initially appear unconcerned with men's inner lives, the book's male figures also face emotional difficulties. While Max's stoicism might appear on the

surface indicative of a shallow character in love with modernist “objectivity” and unaffected intellect, his frequent inexpression of emotion may be read as a reflection of his unhappiness. In an unusually intimate conversation between Caroline and her father at the end of “Winter,” which may be real or imagined, Max explains his emotional unavailability. Max begins this dialogue,

“Me wanting to love you and your brothers, but never having, never having the nerve. I was so afraid. How terrible to be so afraid.”

You were always so far away, so distant. What were you afraid of? Did you think I’d betray you too, Max?

“I loved you too much, Caroline.”

“I would never have hurt you, Max?”

“I loved you too much, Caroline.”

“I would never have hurt you, Max.”

“Ah, Caroline – you have no idea.” (190)

Regardless of whether Caroline dreams this exchange or whether it actually took place, the Max of this scene is more than a cold man. The dimensionality of Max’s character suggests that the image of the typical male as unfeeling results not from biological differences between the sexes, but rather from a culture which trains men to repress

emotions that convey vulnerability and pain.

The younger male characters, Caroline's brother Steven and Carole's friend Gary, both of whom are dying from AIDS-related causes, do not seem to contain feeling in the extreme way that Max does (though it should be noted that these younger male figures serve more marginal and less developed narrative roles). "More Winter," the section in which Maso inserts herself and her experience of loss, begins with memories of Gary as someone who loved life and who resisted the social pressure to withhold feeling.

Today I'm thinking how we never learned the things they
were best at teaching – to look away, to say no, to want
only a little.

Was it our mistake – that we loved everything so much? I
remember you, even during your last stay at the hospital,
shuddering with pleasure when we talked of a certain
beach. It came back to you nearly complete and you still
wanted it, the sun on your back, the feel of the breeze, the
cool ocean and all the love in the world" (195).

Such memories, amplified by Gary's artwork, which appears out of context throughout the *The Art Lover* (64, 122, 151, 166, 206), make clear that to be male does not

necessitate emptying one's self of feeling and passion.

Caroline's reflection on her father's grief over the death of his wife serves as another example of male emotional experiences that are not alien to women. In another imagined dialogue with Max, Caroline asks, "Can I miss the mother I barely knew? No, I think not, you would say" (14). But Max's ability to brush away his daughter's sadness, one might argue, comes from the way in which he has been taught by dominant culture to suppress his own feeling. Max's denial of his sentiments, Caroline implies, reflects not his liberation, but rather his own metaphorical death, which occurred alongside Veronica's suicide and well before his life's end.

You mourned her and the part of your own life that followed her into the earth. This closet filled with paints, charcoals, paper, linseed oils, half-drawings, paintings of her, untouched all these years. With her death you closed that door for good, never stretching a canvas again, never picking up a brush. [...] You must have loved her very much, Max. Was it hard for you, her terrible sadness? Did you try to put it on canvas, put it at arm's length, where it was manageable? (14-15).

Strangely, Max's lack of interest in life following Veronica's death does not manifest itself in an escape into an objectivist kind of painting, as one might think. Rather, in mourning, he turns away from his art completely. This seems odd if *The Art Lover* is simply a critique of a masculine, modernist aesthetic void of affect. While Max's emotional reticence can easily be explained as a product of social learning, this turn away from art is not a turn away from aesthetic objectivity. If Max's art is his means of escaping the difficulty of feeling, then wouldn't his painting offer a way of avoiding his pain?

Here it becomes difficult to know what *The Art Lover* is saying about art in relation to affect. On the one hand, Caroline suggests that art functions as a (patriarchal) way to distance oneself from life and emotion – and usually she appears critical of such an attitude. On the other hand, both Caroline and Maso are themselves engaged in their own writing, which appears a means of finding peace with death and loss. Is *The Art Lover* suggesting that art is a hindrance or a help to individuals as they confront emotional pain? Perhaps the text is doing both.

If, as I have argued, Maso's use of aesthetic distancing and readerly empathy conveys emotional experience in such a way that challenges common views of affective and objective aesthetics, it is perhaps not surprising that Max's modernist ideology does not match perfectly with his practice. While Caroline's describes Max's aesthetic ideal as one removed from feeling, this does not seem to be the case. As this suggests, while Maso's notion of a female aesthetic raises some question about the degree to which *The*

Art Lover might overgeneralize the nature of women's artistic expression, it is important to note the text's incorporation of artwork by male artists which is described as affectively charged. This is true not only of Stephen's and Gary's art prints, which reflect upon the difficult and yet spiritual quality of his illness (64, 122, 151, 166, 206), or of Max's paintings, but also of canonical artworks, like Vermeer's *Head of a Young Girl*, which appears about one-fifth of the way through the book. This image is accompanied by a half-page of an art book text that discusses the relationship between the girl and her viewer, who is anything but disengaged in the painting's gaze. Above the portrait, an academic voice comments on Vermeer's work as it departs from aesthetic convention, breaking the imaginary fourth wall between audience and art object and demanding the viewer's attention and even feeling:

[T]o look at it [Vermeer's painting] is to be implicated in a relationship so urgent that to take an instinctive step backward into aesthetic appreciation would seem in this case a defensive measure, an act of betrayal and bad faith. It is *me* at whom she gazes, with real, unguarded human emotions, and with an erotic intensity that demands something just as real and human in return. The relationship may be only with an image, yet it involves all that art is supposed to keep at bay. [...] we can scarcely

separate what is visible on the canvas from what happens inside us as we look at it. Indeed, it seems the essence of the image to subvert the distance between seeing and feeling, to deny the whole vocabulary of “objective” and “subjective.” (58)

According to this critic, what makes Vermeer’s work so remarkable is the fact that it asks for its audience’s response as it transgresses “the distance between seeing and feeling” and between the subjective and the objective. In other words, the canonical, male artist Vermeer calls for empathy and questions the notion that aesthetic object and viewer, like art and life, must remain distinct from one another. Such textual moments challenge a simplistic notion of male and female creativity. These passages demonstrate that empathic reading and aesthetic estrangement are not easily separated from one another, nor can these techniques be accurately labeled as, respectively, female and male ways of writing.

Though the commentary on Vermeer’s *Head of a Young Girl* intimates the potential of art to evoke a viewer’s emotive response, representation remains no substitution for direct living. This is apparent in the fact that, at the same time that Caroline’s writing offers her a way to come to terms with death, it is not an adequate means of soothing herself. (Similarly, as Carole creates *The Art Lover*, she is pulled between a need to mourn and a desire to avoid the difficulty of death. Carole recognizes

this impossible wish as she tries to place her grief onto paper. She tells her dying friend that nothing, not even her writing, can stop her pain. “Nothing makes it stop, Gary. Nothing. Not the writing of this. Not the writing of *The Art Lover*” (206). Ultimately, the text suggests, emotional pain simply must be accepted and experienced.) In this sense, *The Art Lover* engages in the very practice of seeking resolution which it criticizes: Maso’s writing, the very thing which asserts art’s inadequacy, is itself involved in the attempt to make artistic process a sufficient means of addressing emotional hardship. How does one explain the fact that the writer Caroline, who questions her father’s attempts through art to hold life and his loved ones at a distance, is herself engaged in the creation of a novel which repeats this aesthetic distancing?

On the other hand, one might also argue that Maso’s writing, which tries and fails to make difficult emotions manageable, is the ideal place to demonstrate art’s failure – and to nonetheless point to its significance. The paradox of art’s simultaneous usefulness and lack gestures once again towards art’s complexity in relation to emotional life. At the same time that Caroline and Carole’s writing in some ways may remove them from direct experience, to say that the primary function of Caroline’s or Carole’s writing is to either numb or resolve their painful feelings would overlook the many levels on which writing operates in the text.

Another way to explain the contradictory nature of creative process would be to say that *The Art Lover* employs a kind of distanciation which somehow differs from that of an objectivist aesthetic. But while one might argue that Maso uses some other –

perhaps “feminine” – version of reader estrangement, a closer look at Max’s painting suggests that his work is not an oppositional binary to the emotionally-engaged aesthetics which *The Art Lover* seems to privilege. Though Caroline maintains that Max used his artwork as a way of holding loved ones at a safe distance and thus of escaping from real life and relationships, this effort to manage emotion through art doesn’t work for Max, given that he is unable to pick up another canvas following his wife’s death.

A conversation between him and his daughter furthermore suggests that Caroline’s assumptions about her father’s creative process and his emotional experience may be inaccurate. Towards the end of “Winter,” Caroline remembers this moment of unusual closeness to her father. After she recalls that Max stopped painting following Veronica’s death, Caroline returns to a conversation with Max that suggests a greater depth to him and to their relationship. When Caroline confronts her father with the belief that he, in being emotionally unavailable, is responsible for her mother’s suicide, it becomes apparent that to view Max as unfeeling is to misunderstand him. Speaking of her mother, Caroline asserts to Max, ““she needed you to treat her other than as an object of beauty, of art. She needed you, Max. [] [D]id you try to keep her at a distance by putting her on canvas, turning her into something else?”” (185). Max’s disagreement is expressed not through a lack of feeling or through angry self-defense. Rather, his thoughtful response offers Caroline a more compassionate understanding of her father – and a more dimensional view of art. ““It’s more complicated, Caroline,” he responds. ““Painting her brought her sadness nearer to me too; I could feel it more keenly, I

understood it better. Until it in some way became unbearable for me too, and I had to stop. [...] I lacked the courage. I couldn't do it" (186). Max's description of his art indicates that it was more than a means of removing himself from his emotional struggles. Rather, his painting was, like Caroline's writing, part of an attempt to acknowledge and understand inner confusion. Max's sentiments suggest that a critique of aesthetic distancing oversimplifies the many ways in which an individual may experience the creative process.

As their conversation continues, Max seems to express an acceptance of life's complexity – and the acknowledgment that, as humans, we will sometimes get things wrong. He turns to his currently developing essay for *Art Forum*, whose subject remains unclear. "It is a different approach," he comments. "It's the process of entering into the understanding that you may be completely off base, and that's all right" (185). With these words, Max seems to accept that people cannot always make sense of life. And so, he explains, "I'm working on a method that lets other variables in, things that independently, given a narrow field, would most likely not occur to the viewer" (185). However methodic his "method" may be, however, it is an approach which acknowledges that the creative process cannot be restricted to a simple and predictable formula. Significantly, it is also an approach which allows one to gain new perspectives which "most likely would not occur to the viewer," vantage points which might become possible through *The Art Lover's* evocation of reader empathy and distancing.

The lack of context which surrounds Max's above statements make it difficult to know what exactly he is saying about his article. But this is perhaps best so, since the ambiguity of his statements make them appear all the more relevant to the conversation between himself and his daughter, as well as to the writing of *The Art Lover*. Max's "method" of accounting for "other variables" might be said to describe Maso's breaking of narrative convention and her invitation to the reader to experience a more personal engagement with literature.

This transgression of narrative convention is most obvious in *The Art Lover's* second to last section "More Winter," where Maso inserts her own story into a third and final diegetic frame. Maso (whose first name Carole cannot help but remind us of Caroline) is a storyteller and a writer whose creative process, like that of Caroline, enables her to face the difficult realities of death, grief, and loss. Hence, Maso's construction of *The Art Lover*, alongside Caroline's act of storytelling, becomes reflective of the power of creativity and, more specifically, of narrative to help individuals in accepting and perhaps even embracing the fragility of life. In this way, art reflects not only a connection to life, but also to death.

Here too, in its thematization of emotional attachment and loss, *The Art Lover's* content and form, like its poetics and its politics, intersect. Grant Stirling, in his essay "Mourning and Metafiction: Carole Maso's *The Art Lover*," points to this convergence of content and form when he argues that Maso's use of narrative structure and plot is indicative of the bereavement process as described by Freud's model of melancholia in

“Mourning and Melancholia.” In this 1917 essay, Freud contrasts what he describes as melancholia, a pathological response to death in which an individual remains obsessed with the lost object, to mourning, a healthy process of working through (and past) grief that frees the ego to attach to a new living object. Stirling argues that the book’s nonlinear and fragmented *sjuzet* (the Russian formalist term for narrative structure) continually interrupts the *fabula*, or plot. While *The Art Lover*’s plot moves “toward the resolution of grief through the work of mourning,” this “is countered by the structure of the *sjuzet*, which creates the stasis of melancholia” (n.p.). Stirling hence suggests that, as in Freud’s initial description of bereavement in “Mourning and Melancholia,” the grieving process in *The Art Lover* has a more or less resolute ending. (Freud’s view of the process, however, would later change, as is expressed in his 1922 work, “The Ego and the Id.”)

While Stirling’s argument rightly emphasizes the intimate connections between *The Art Lover*’s form and its concerns with grief and art, I contend that the book’s circular structure reflects not so much a pathological response to loss as it shows what, for Maso, is a process that may never arrive at tidy closure. This is suggested in Maso’s emphasis in the autobiographical fourth section on her inability to overcome her sense of incredible loss. In including the autobiographical section, Maso hopes that the right words will “make it stop” (206). But even when her writing directly confronts her recent loss, it, like Caroline’s work, is still wrapped up in a desire to make sense and order out of an experience which defies rational understanding. The impulses to order

and to write about life remain insufficient in satisfying a sense of life meaning.

“Nothing makes it stop, Gary. Nothing. Not the writing of this. Not the writing of *The Art Lover*” (206). Recollecting memories of her friendship with Gary and of his steady decline, Carole repeats versions of the statement “I am just trying to get some of this down” in “More Winter” (196, 198, 199). Her struggle to place her unmanageable thoughts and feelings on paper appears as an attempt to order internal confusion in a way that would make it more controllable. But each assertion that she is “trying to get this down” is also a reminder that she fails to do so. Carole’s overwhelm suggests that comprehending the reality of her loss ends without resolution. While writing of Gary’s decline is a way for Carole to reach out to her friend [“Gary, I am trying to talk to you” (200)], she is left with grief, frustration, and aloneness.

Despite her efforts, Maso knows that her writing will fall short of resolving her struggle, yet she knows of no other way to handle loss: “I know, Gary, to write it down is always to get it wrong. But here, wanting you back, it’s the closest I can get to heaven – where I like to picture you” (199). Maso’s words seem to echo those of Sandra Gilbert, who writes in her book *Death’s Door: Modern Dying and the Ways We Grieve* (2006) that despite our “death-denying culture” (219), “no matter how we struggle to achieve ‘closure,’ death’s door [...] can’t and won’t close, [...] death’s door is always open” (462).³⁹ In a similar vein, Maso suggests that art cannot resolve emotional pain, for complete resolution, or as Gilbert puts it ‘closure,’ is impossible.

³⁹ Gubar’s work seems largely in keeping with that of Philippe Aries, who writes in *Western Attitudes toward Death from the Middle Ages to the Present* (1974) that “Death, so omnipresent in the past that it

As Maso's anxiety about writing and the artistic process raises questions about whether her work is a self-defeating attempt for resolution, or if it might indeed offer something more beneficial, the author's self-insertion at once points to the relevance of creative process to human life and indicates that writing can neither replace life nor can it serve as a panacea for all emotional pain. Art and life share an intimate relationship, but the aesthetic is not a substitute for lived experience. "More Winter" ends, like Carole's state of mind, without resolution. The dream about Gary which has haunted her, she writes, simply "means: I miss you. [] It means: I can't believe this happened to you" (206). Following these words is a piece of Gary's artwork, which fills a space where language seems to have little else to convey.

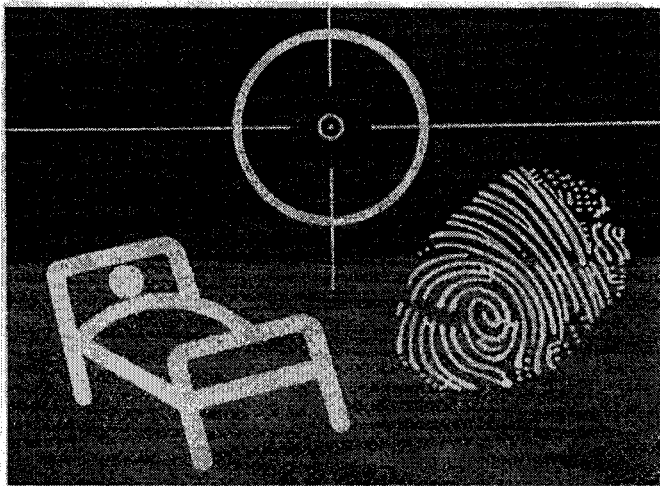


Figure 1.1 Gary Falk, *Untitled* (*The Art Lover* 206)

was familiar, would be effaced, would disappear. It would become shameful and forbidden" (85). Ariès' book, among the first to consider mortality from a sociohistorical perspective, argues that Western culture's attitudes towards death have gradually changed from the early Middle Ages until the mid-nineteenth century: whereas death was once something "both familiar and near, evoking no great fear or awe," today it "is so frightful that we dare not utter its name" (13).

Carole's writing of Gary's death is a process of accepting the reality of her loss and grief, which cannot be made tidy by placing the experience neatly onto paper. "More Winter" thus draws attention to the limitations of writing and of art.

While I agree with Stirling that Maso's direct engagement with her own pain in this section marks a significant shift in her mourning process, I would dispute his suggestion that in the majority of the text art functions as "an aesthetic retreat" which holds on to the past while refusing forward motion and change. Though Maso questions a modernist aesthetic of impersonality that Caroline associates with her father, the book's portrayal of what art and the artistic process actually do usually does not suggest that either male or female artists typically divorce themselves from emotional process through their work. Even the creative work of Max, as discussed earlier, intimates that art most often is closely linked to affective experience. That the aesthetic does not function in *The Art Lover* predominantly as a retreat from actual life is reflected in the fact that the novel's characters confront death and loss directly and indirectly through creative process. Because bereavement, like emotional experience more generally, cannot be confined to an orderly structure, it is best conveyed through the circular structure which Maso utilizes. Not only does this open form call affirm a personal and affectively imbued aesthetic; it also creates a space for mourning which is politically relevant.

As a relatively recent flowering of scholarship on death and loss indicates, while mourning traditionally has been designated to the private sphere, the ways in which we

grieve have social and political significance.⁴⁰ This becomes especially evident in relation to the discourse on AIDS which is undoubtedly pertinent to *The Art Lover*. Maso, in resisting final closure with the death of Gary Falk, not only recognizes the irresolute experience of loss; she also remembers a loved one whose passing is a reminder to us of the reality of AIDS. Douglas Crimp and Michael Moon, writing about the politics of mourning AIDS victims, have called for such an irresolute approach to loss, for, according to them, melancholia “prevents a preventable catastrophe from becoming assimilated into the order of things,” when an ending of bereavement would promote the status quo (Rae 18). In remembering Gary, *The Art Lover* refuses to push his story into cultural amnesia.

On the other hand, *The Art Lover*'s circular structure does not necessitate that one never arrive at the slightest acceptance of loss. Rather, the book's final section, “Spring 1986,” indicates that central to the cycle of life and death are processes of growth and change. Despite Carole's continuing struggle at the end of “More Winter,” “Spring 1986,” which returns to Caroline and her progressing book, conveys a marked shift: following winter and its meditation on death also comes spring and new life. This cyclicity becomes associated with a kind of female creativity. Indicating the changing mood of Caroline and her novel's female characters, the last segment begins with the

⁴⁰ Patricia Rae, in the introduction to *Modernism and Mourning* (2007), emphasizes the political relevance of mourning, as expressed by recent cultural criticism. She begins with Jahan Ramanzani's 1994 book *The Poetry of Mourning: The Modern Elegy from Hardy to Heaney*, in which he argues that the modern elegy repeatedly shows a melancholic resistance to mourning and suggests that this tendency has political meaning, as it questions acquiescing to historical and social circumstances which might otherwise be met with a call for social change. Derrida, Rae explains, similarly identifies a politics of mourning, seeing “such reconciliation to loss as untheical, as failure to respect what death is” (Rae 17).

playful heading “First Signs of Whirligigs and Hiblinkas,” which refers to words Max invented during Caroline’s childhood (209). Caroline begins this segment by returning to her internalized dialogues with Max. While previously such conversations consisted primarily of mournful memories, her reminiscing now also contains an increased interest in the present. Describing her surroundings, Caroline’s voice is distinctly different: “It’s spring, regardless of the date. [...] There’s a lot of dancing and why not? Soon the fire-eaters will be returning. The sword swallows, the jugglers, the three-card montes, people to draw your picture” (209-10).

Caroline now experiences a greater understanding of her father and his response to his wife’s death: “I understand now, Max, that you were heartbroken. I understand there were no suitable words for you to speak, given the enormity of your pain. Given your line of vision. It’s my problem too. How to continue at all, how to speak, given everything” (215). As soon becomes apparent, Caroline is speaking of her father’s emotional detachment after the death of Caroline’s mother: “Her face does not come back, nor her figure. Not a single fragment of her voice or anything she ever said. But I miss my mother” (215).

As Caroline connects the deaths of Max to Veronica, she confronts yet another loss: that of her friend Steven. “Sometimes, Max, it feels too sad to have to go on. [] Steven gasping for breath, some months from now” (215). She imagines what her father’s advice would be in this situation: ““Feel appalled, Caroline. Feel like Picasso”” (215). But instead Caroline turns her thoughts to her dying friend and her visits with

him at St. Vincent's Hospital. Like Maso, Caroline eventually surrenders to the fact that mortality is beyond her control and beyond artistic expression. Commenting on Steven's progressing decline, she asserts,

I am tired of things that divide, that change shape, that become anything other than themselves. I am tired not only of the sinister magic that changes normal cells into death cells, but of any magic, the cells in my brain that turn the homeless on the streets into pink and purple mountains, the cells that turn broken glass into ice. I am tired of any deception. The cells of my brain that bring you back, Max. I am sick of myself trying to give shape to all this sorrow, all this rage, all this loss – and failing.

(148)

Though Caroline is the speaker of this passage, her thoughts could just as easily come from Maso. As both women watch the death of loved ones to AIDS, their stories come continually closer.

This convergence can be seen in Gary and Steven's disco dancing (217, 242), which is related to both the writing process and the perseverance to live in and through emotional challenges. While Caroline and Steven "danc[e] for our lives," they also

“dare to write it down, to make a mark on a page, to utter something” (217). In connecting writing with the choice to “dance for our lives,” Caroline suggests that, just as life is best lived with the risks of passion and intensity, writing is a risk worth taking. Carole similarly remembers Gary with celebration of his love for life: “We are in a disco ... You are moving through a thousand specks of light. You are dancing through smoke and space and light... What the light looks like is the entire galaxy, you unattached, moving through space, your one head larger, more perfect than any planet, than any star” (242).

In addition to being the season in which Caroline decides that love, life, and loss are inseparable, Spring 1986 is also the time when Caroline returns to her novel and its women characters, as well as her concern with the connections between art and gender, which become visible through the female characters’ developing appreciation for women artists and their distinct modes of artistic expression. Though female and male characters face common emotional struggles, such as loss, emotional vulnerability, and interpersonal disconnectedness, *The Art Lover* suggests that women’s experiences remain in many ways distinct from those of men. One year after Henry left his wife and daughters for another woman, the women of the family, like Caroline, are moving forward with their lives. Alison and Maggie, planting seeds in their garden, reflect on the past year: “‘We’ve lived through almost a whole year without him. I think we’re going to be OK,’ Maggie whispers,” as Alison opens the first packet of seeds (219). It is in this moment that Maggie notices the change that has occurred within her daughter

over the past year, and it is now that Maggie, who previously sought escape in her art books,

[f]or the first time [...] realized the beauty of her surroundings – the gorgeous spot this garden was in, high on the hill overlooking the barn and the garden was in, high trees and the field. [...] She allowed herself over and over again the pleasure of simply bending in the dirt. [...] She felt the pleasure of simply sitting in the dirt with a view like this on a lovely spring day with Alison. For a moment she did not try to name or arrange anything.

(222)

The woman who previously needed to make lists, to categorize and to create order, now sees beauty, not in a painting by Poussin, but rather in her momentary experience.

Significantly, Maggie's thoughts are associated with women artists – who, as a Guerrilla Girls poster asserts, have been neglected by art history (161) – not with the men painters who have until now have been scattered throughout the book (and who are replaced on page 162 by an untitled work by Barbara Kruger which presents a woman pinned to the page and the words “We have received order not to move”). As Maggie

recognizes the beauty in her daughter Alison, she thinks of “the painting she could now see in her mind’s eye” (220).

Mary Cassat, she said. Why had she never thought of Mary Cassatt before? Or any of the others? Vanessa Bell, she said to herself. Frida Kahlo. Sonia Delaunay. Georgia O’Keefe.

There was Rosa Bonheur, Paula Modersohn-Becker. Florine Stettheimer and Käthe Kollwitz. She thought she had barely known their names, but now they all came back, in an instant. (220)

While *The Art Lover*’s interest in the inevitability of life and death is exemplary of the text’s relevance beyond the confines of gender politics, such narrative moments as the above passage present individual experiences of beauty, joy, and pain as strongly influenced by one’s sex. This emphasis on women’s experience continues when, following Maggie’s above thoughts, Alison whispers to her mother that Candace is ““much better now [...] since she’s made the decision to paint” (220-21).

Significantly, Candace is the same daughter who earlier tells her mom to place aside art books and to deal with the difficulty of present circumstances, asserts ““Fuck

Poussin, Mother. Your husband left you for a twenty-nine-year-old. Let's show a little emotion. Stop looking for the perfect order, reason, symmetry. There's no such thing" (96). The order which male artists like Poussin embody for Candace is something she comes to associate with male-dominated society and, more specifically, with her father. Earlier in *The Art Lover*, she expresses anger towards not just her father, but also towards a patriarchal culture. Following her thoughts about her father, the "Fucking Liar," Candace subversively writes on the wall with red lipstick about a "we" which opposes male figures of power.

"I do not believe we are powerless.

"I do not believe there are no solutions. [...] I do not believe in Ronald Reagan...I do not believe in Sigmund Freud...I do not believe in any of the fathers. I do not believe in Science or Medicine. I do not believe in NASA. I do not believe in God. I do not accept that it is a man's world."

"I will not keep quiet, [...] I do not believe there are no solutions. I do not believe that we are doing all we can. I do not accept that we are expendable. I do not believe we are powerless."

“I know there are solutions. [...] I still believe that anything is possible,”[...] (160)

In pursuing an art distinct from that of Poussin, Candace joins the Guerrilla Girls, “[a] group of women artists demanding attention and who are known as ‘the conscience of the art world’ (221).⁴¹ Candace’s choice to pursue her art as a feminist seems to give her life and her work a sense of purpose.

The sense of resolution in Candace’s turn to art and in Alison and Maggie’s conversation echoes Caroline’s increased sense of peace. When Maggie recognizes and apologizes that she has been emotionally unavailable to her family (221), the changes of spring seem to exist on a number of levels – in the new life of the garden, in Maggie’s sensual pleasure, in Alison’s emergence into womanhood, in Candace’s developing art, and in Caroline’s growing peace with her father.

The fact that *The Art Lover* ends with a seemingly optimistic attitude towards the women characters’ turn away from masculine notions of art and feeling indicates, as Harris argues, that *The Art Lover* advocates a specifically female aesthetic which embraces lived and subjective experience while rejecting male-dominated modernism. As Stirling explains, this resolution becomes apparent in the form of *The Art Lover*’s final section, where the three diegetic worlds of the progressing novel, Caroline, and Carole merge. As the three diegetic realms overlap, the text’s beginnings and ending

⁴¹ The approach of such groups as the Guerilla Girls was especially prominent during the early 1990s. Since then, with the increasing proliferation of women artists, especially those involved in video installations and performance and sound art, this “numbers” activism have become less common.

similarly come together. The book's final pages thus underscore the unresolved emotional unrest that remains following the text's multiple representations of loss. The blurring of narrative frames and scenes and their connection to the open-ended process of mourning is particularly pronounced in the passages following the heading "The Sky at Night" (231), when Maggie and Alison ride their boat for the first time of the season. Rowing further away from land, they leave behind their familiar world and enter an alternate aesthetic realm, where *The Art Lover's* characters seem to become one another. This process begins when, from Maggie's perspective, the night sky becomes van Gogh's "Starry Night." "She thought she saw what van Gogh had described as a 'note of intense malachite green, something utterly heartbreaking'" (232), and she then "looked up at the spiraling sky, the transfigured, the throbbing sky. [...] The spiral in her hand, now a star, now a galaxy. [...] Maggie latched herself on to one of the spirals and spun with it" (233). Dizzy, she says aloud "Henry, you broke my heart" and "[f]or a moment Alison imagined him with them in the boat, humming. She put Candace next to him, completing the family" (233). Here the text alludes to its opening "lovely word picture" of a family (8), which remains merely a dream. As the next lines and paragraphs skip from one diegetic frame to another, an unnamed voice states, "Max, come back. [paragraph] You were not that old. You were elegant, graying, distinguished, with a slight paunch. [...] You were not old" (233). Caroline, like Alison, returns to *The Art Lover's* opening pages (9).

The disorienting effect of such narrative shifting becomes increasingly greater,

as the next paragraphs offer less and less context through which a reader might make meaning. Sentences become increasingly more fragmented, at the same time that each relates to the common themes of human fragility and the difficulty of loss. The line “Obviously a major malfunction,” a reference to the explosion of the Challenger spacecraft which also connects to the fatal implications of the starburst, is followed by the words “There is so much pain in the world,” “Young people dying around every corner,” “An empty spacesuit flies by,” and “You are in your St. Vincent’s pajamas and slippers” (233). As these images of death absence haunt the page, the distinctions between *The Art Lover*’s narrative frames dissolve.

The stories of Caroline and her characters having merged in the book’s final pages, Maso concludes *The Art Lover* with an “Author’s Note,” which describes her friend’s final days of decline and which indicates the personal significance that the writing of *The Art Lover* has had for her. Above a photograph of herself and Gary, which Carole describes her last memory of him: “‘It’s the most miraculous thing,’ he said. ‘I can see again!’ I put my left hand on his left hand and waved my other hand in front of him and realized that both his eyes were darkened now with his wonderful and perfect sight” (243).



Figure 1.2 “Carole and Gary” (*The Art Lover* 244)

When we see the photograph of Maso and Gary Falk on the book’s final page, much of the emotional impact of this image results from the realization that this photograph comes from the non-fictional world, a place where we, too, must acknowledge the reality of life’s impermanence. The bits and pieces which the reader has attempted throughout the text to place into a coherent order hereby gain new dimension. The larger picture that we have constructed from these fragments becomes relevant to the reader, as she places herself alongside Maso.

This closing indicates that, at the same time that *The Art Lover* cannot be severed from its engagement in gender politics, its concern with human experience – especially in relation to death, loss, and grief – is best understood beyond issues of gender: the human struggle to accept death and loss is a confrontation which cannot be limited to female or male experience. Chapter four continues this argument, as it looks to the connections between reader empathy and poetic estrangement and the relevance of gender in Paul Auster’s *City of Glass* (1984), a novel often categorized as either

phallogentric or socially irrelevant. Through this comparison, I hope to show that, while gender in many respects shapes the writing of both Maso and Auster, both authors address emotionally relevant questions through techniques that similarly encourage reader closeness and distancing.

Chapter 4 – Engendered Emotion and Paul Auster’s *City of Glass*

The previous chapter on Maso’s *The Art Lover* explored how a self-reflexive, puzzle-like narrative, functioning much as described in Joseph Frank’s theory of spatial form, may engage its reader in complementary processes of empathy reading and distanciation in such a way that fosters reflection on emotional experience. While the preceding section touched upon the ways in which this process becomes connected to gender-related issues and politics, the latter portion of this chapter deepens that discussion. The fact that a consideration of reader empathy and distanciation may be applied to the work of these two distinct writers, I argue, suggests this model’s relevance for a variety of self-reflexive works, be they more “canonical” metafictional like *City of Glass* or less well-known texts like *The Art Lover*, and be they the objects of male or female authorship.⁴² Considering the criticism on affect and gender that has emerged since the 1970s (and which has gained ground especially in the 1990s), this chapter seeks to illuminate ways in which affect becomes personally and politically relevant, particularly in relation to gender. After a brief introduction to the connections between the work of Maso and Auster, I survey the history of criticism on feeling, gender, and writing, thereafter turning to a closer reading of Auster’s *City of Glass*, a text which many critics might describe as the masculine and emotionally disengaged

⁴² I do not intend to imply here that Maso and Auster’s work should be seen as monumental stand-ins for women and men’s writing more largely. However, as I discuss in this chapter, it is significant that both writers employ writing techniques commonly associated with female and male authorship, respectively, and that such stylistics are accompanied by their representations of femininity and masculinity.

writing that Maso's work often calls into question. In my textual analysis, I contend that *City of Glass*, much like *The Art Lover*, functions as a kind of puzzle which encourages the reader to engage in an affective reading experience through both reader empathy and estrangement.

Though the literary techniques of reader engagement and poetic estrangement have commonly been described as respectively feminine and masculine ways of writing which are mutually exclusive, Maso and Auster's work shows that such an understanding of these aesthetic approaches is reductionist. These authors demonstrate that reader empathy and distanciation complement one another, creating a more complex picture of emotional life. Moreover, *The Art Lover* and *City of Glass*'s representations of the pain of loss and grief demonstrate the ways in which affective experience is influenced, often in oppressive ways, by the gender norms of a Western, male-dominated society. Revolving around gender issues that affect individual, emotional, and writing experience, these works may be read as gendered performances of emotion: while Maso presents an intensely affective and interpersonal way in which women perceive and create, Auster portrays an alienated male figure whose emotional pain results largely from a sense of disconnectedness.⁴³ As these texts call to mind

⁴³ Auster's presentation of a socially isolated male protagonist is hardly uncommon to metafiction by male writers. As McCaffery explains in *The Metafictional Muse*, self-conscious literature by authors like Barthelme, Coover, and Gass (Auster is often likened to these writers) shares commonalities which include "a central character who is lonely, alienated, disaffected, skeptical" and who "feel[s] victimized by a repressive, cold social order to the point that life seems meaningless" (4). Because of their isolation, McCaffery continues, "characters decide to create a system of meaning to give them hope and order" (4). In so doing, these characters often "ignore their own roles as creators of fictional systems[...] giv[ing] themselves over gladly to their artifices" (4). Such representations of the white, bourgeois male suggest that such writing commonly addresses a crisis of masculinity which I discuss in this chapter.

gender stereotypes of the “sensitive woman” and the “unfeeling man,” they show that emotional intensity and estrangement, like the (gendered) notions of emotionality and dispassion, are not the polar oppositions which they often are perceived to be. This, of course, is not to say that the differences between Maso and Auster are insignificant, as Maso’s own comments on the status of her work a *écriture féminine* make clear, and indeed the distinctions between them make them all the more relevant for comparative analysis.⁴⁴ Both Auster and Maso subvert literary conventions (be they those of high modernism or of detective fiction), creating multi-layered narrative worlds which invite the reader’s empathy and distancing through such literary techniques as fragmentation, pastiche, and readerly disorientation.

City of Glass is the first of Auster’s *New York Trilogy*, a set of “mystery” novels which subvert the literary conventions of detective fiction in order to pose epistemological and phenomenological questions about postmodern urban life. Like each volume of the trilogy, *City of Glass* follows a white, male protagonist, in this case

⁴⁴ For Maso personally, there is an essential connection between writing, affective experience, and female identity. She expresses a desire to create an emotional space through writing which is also a kind of feminine space. “Without apology,” she writes in her essay “Except Joy,” “I have tried to create something of a feminine space. New kinds of intimacies. [...] It is essential, I believe, for women to make their own shapes and sounds, to enact in prose and poetry and all other genres, and in all other mediums, their own desire, and not just mimic the dominant forms. We must refuse to emerge already constructed” (n.p.). While Maso is undoubtedly right when she says in this essay that one’s writing is hugely affected by gender, the notion of women’s and men’s writing as fundamentally distinct is, I believe, problematic. Though one might argue, as does Maso, that the distinctions between women and men’s writing are a product of socialization, not biology, a clear separation between all women’s and men’s writing seems to suggest a kind of monolithic writing which applies solely to either women or men. Then again, as the discourse on feminism and deconstruction asks, if one denies the existence of gender categories, then how can gender be discussed as a category?

Daniel Quinn, who takes on the false identity of the detective Paul Auster, thereby accepting the role of (masculine) private investigator and the challenge to solve the Stillman case. Both “mystery” novel and quest narrative, the text draws attention to literary tropes and genres which might be described as masculine, given their emphasis on objectivity, absolutism, resolution, and definitive knowledge.

Auster is often labeled as an intellectual most concerned with epistemological and phenomenological questions which seem more philosophical than affective. As William Lavendar notes: “It could be argued that Auster’s seemingly obsessive engagement of theory reduces the novel to an academic enterprise, robbing the form of social and political relevance” (n.p.). But Lavendar takes another viewpoint, emphasizing theory’s relevance to everyday existence:

If, however, literature does have value beyond the codification of dominant ideologies, if it is, in other words, relevant, why would it shrink from this very affirmation? In the engagement of theory by representation, both are exposed, and exercised, in all their capabilities and limitations.

As this statement indicates, Auster’s work raises questions about a postmodern world of uncertainty and anxiety, concerns which may resonate in particular ways for Western

men, who generally are socialized to behave as stoical and invulnerable.⁴⁵ The main character Quinn, struggling with social isolation, the death of his wife and son, and a lacking sense of life purpose, faces questions of (gender) identity and life meaning within a Western culture of individualism, privatization, and “family values” in which heterosexuality and marriage appear the sole means through which men may experience human connection and social belonging.

As in Maso’s work, *City of Glass*’s shifts between reader empathy and estrangement – in terms of both content and form – are apparent through a puzzle-like narrative – in this case that of a mystery. Making subversive use of the conventions of the detective novel, *City of Glass* points to and questions the human (and Auster seems to suggest male) impulse to find absolute truth and order. *City of Glass*’s construction of the affective space of alienation comes to be not through pure intellect, but rather through Auster’s continual shifts between philosophical and emotionally-laden ideas. As in *The Art Lover*, boundaries in Auster diffuse, and the distinctions between fiction and autobiography, intellect and feeling, and reader empathy and estrangement become fuzzy. This blurring occurs through both content and form, which seem to vacillate

⁴⁵ *City of Glass*’s portrayal of a male figure who suffers from isolation suggests that, as Gayle Rubin argues in “The Traffic in Women,” “The same social system which oppresses women in its relations of exchange oppresses everyone in its insistence upon a rigid division” between femininity and masculinity (qtd. in Morgan 2). Herb Goldberg (*The Hazards of Being Male: Surviving the Myth of Masculine Privilege* 1976), Andrew Kimbrell (*The Masculine Mystique: The Politics of Masculinity* 1995), and Roy U. Schenk (*The Other Side of the Coin: Causes and Consequences of Men’s Oppression* 1982) similarly argue that men are oppressed by gender conventions. Kenneth Clatterbaugh, on the other hand, dismisses the argument that men are oppressed, contending that the difficulties in Western society of being male (such as need to suppress emotion), are simply results of the privileges and dominance that are the antithesis of oppression.

between emotionality and dispassion. Intellectual thoughts exist alongside moments of emotional intensity, “bare facts” are placed beside descriptions of interior experience, and supposedly affectless characters like Peter Stillman Sr. interact with the isolated Quinn.

In this “city of glass,” a world of mirrors and funhouse effects, the reader, along with Quinn, experiences physical, mental, and emotional disorientation. Much like in Barthelme’s “Views of my Father Weeping” (see chapter two), such confusion contributes on one hand to the text’s playful quality, while on the other conveying a sense of alienation. Through both style and content, *City of Glass* shifts between moments of transparent affectivity and of what might initially be read to be emotional reticence. The inclination to contain feeling that this novel demonstrates is hardly a rational choice: to appear stoic is not to be immune to psychological experience, but rather to have a certain type of affective response, one which is shaped greatly by social pressures and expectations. In this sense, *City of Glass* does not empty itself of affect; rather, the commonly impersonal tone of the book is indicative of its mood. Alongside depictions of “unfeeling” characters is a sense of alienation which both the protagonist and the reader experience.⁴⁶

⁴⁶ Auster’s description of himself during the writing of his first novel is also suggestive of the recurring sense of emotional distance which characterizes the reading experience of this text. As Auster explains, “All through the months I worked on that book, I felt as though I were writing with a mask on my face. It was an odd experience, but I can’t say that it was unenjoyable. Posing as someone else was quite a bit of fun, in fact--but at the same time disturbing and provocative. If I hadn’t gone through that experience of pseudonymity myself, I never would have been able to develop Quinn in the way I did” (McCaffery and Gregory n.p.). As these statements indicate, at the same time that Auster delights in play – wearing masks and in creating multiple “Auster”s and “Peter”s – *City of Glass*’s funhouse effects also enable Auster to explore the emotional and mental state of Quinn.

While Auster's use of poetic estrangement often has a kind of playfulness which may be read as a mocking of any audience member who takes Auster's narrative seriously, the novel is also filled with moments of emotional intensity and disturbance.⁴⁷

⁴⁸ As the main character Quinn attempts and fails to resolve the case of the Stillmans, he becomes enwrapped in existentialist and epistemological questions which call upon postmodern philosophies and theories (i. e. of Freud, Lacan, and Barthes, among others) that some might read as cerebrally removed from feeling. At the same time, *City of Glass* underscores the aloneness, loss, and sense of meaninglessness that result from Quinn's life circumstances and which eventually lead to his insanity and disappearance. Not only does the novel's use of distanciation convey a contemporary culture in which social isolation and existential confusion are prevalent; *City of Glass*'s ongoing oscillation between reader empathy and estrangement results in a reading experience that in many ways parallels the turmoil within the main character Quinn. Making use of

⁴⁷ As *Shiloh* makes apparent, Auster's concern with theoretical questions are often intimately connected to his personal and affective experiences (10). Noting Auster's interest in French existentialism and the Heideggerian, Freudian, and Lacanian ideas in his writing, *Shiloh* identifies the major themes and metaphors of Auster's work as relevant to his own autobiography: "the quest for the father and the mystery of the self, chance as the principle governing human life, the dual nature of solitude, and the image of the locked room as a scene of death and rebirth" (11). All of these can be related to, on the one hand, philosophy and theory and, on the other, with Auster's childhood experiences of alienation and emotional remove from his father.

⁴⁸ Auster's own admission that his writing process is powerfully influenced by his own life experience further underscores the personal nature of his fiction. "Hidden memories, traumas, childhood scars--there's no question that novels emerge from those inaccessible parts of ourselves," he explains in an interview (McCaffery and Gregory n.p.). Despite the degree to which his stories become mental puzzles, this statement suggests that writing for Auster is more intuitive than analytical. "Every once in a while," he explains, "I'll have a glimmer or a sudden intuition about where something came from," but "it always happens after the fact" (McCaffery and Gregory). As this suggests, Auster places intellectual questions alongside impressions and spontaneous thoughts which are not neatly contained by rationality or analysis, and it is largely *City of Glass*'s oscillation between cerebral and affective language which creates the text's emotional landscape.

the conventions of masculinist, hard-boiled detective fiction, this narrative draws attention to the reality that this genre's portrayal of the male hero is complexly linked to male emotional experience. In order to provide a larger context for considering Auster's engagement in questions of gender and feeling, I now turn to an overview of the critical discourse on the intersections between writing, gender, and feeling.

The Gendering of Writing and Affect

Claims that the work of authors like Auster are prime examples of affectively-dry, masculinist writing are best understood in connection to the engendering of emotion, a topic which has received increasing attention both within and beyond academia particularly since the 1990s.⁴⁹ When it comes to discussions on gender and affect in Western society, we all know the gender stereotypes: women are expressive, emotional, irrational, passive, and creative, while men are just the opposite: self-controlled, unemotional, rational, and analytic.⁵⁰ Such gender stereotypes, of course, do

⁴⁹ Catherine Lutz, among the leading scholars on the sociology of feeling, has argued that to talk of emotion is also to address gender politics, for the binary oppositions of woman/feeling and man/thought, along with the social expectations that women and men should express or hide feeling in certain ways, continue to persist within Western culture. (Thus it is not coincidental that the rising interest in affective theory which began in the 1990s has grown out of feminist criticism.) These cultural studies on feeling consider ways in which emotion is felt and communicated by individuals in a variety of cultural, social, and historical contexts. Central to such inquiries is the question of the degrees to which feeling is universal or biological, and the extent to which it is culturally determined.

⁵⁰ As Vanda L. Zammuer explains in "Men's and Women's Lay Theories of Emotions," "women are expected to be nurturant, caring for others, interested in interpersonal relationships, in other words, to fulfill social roles that require a communal, expressive and somewhat passive orientation. This orientation to a great extent presupposes emotionality. Men instead are expected to be active agents who give priority to impersonal goals and are capable of mastering their world, that is, to fulfill instrumental, agentic roles

not exist in a vacuum, and, according to Nancy Chodorow and Carol Gilligan, they result largely from the socialization of women and men.⁵¹ ⁵² While the nature/nurture debate may be never-ending, emotion remains strongly associated with femininity in Western society, while reason more often is ascribed to men. Moreover, feminized feeling continues largely to be viewed as a weakness and is commonly attributed to individuals with less social power (not just women, but also members of ethnic minorities).⁵³ The feminization of feeling reflects a cultural devaluing of sentiment (Lutz) – the predicament then becomes thus: to feminize feeling is to essentialize

that require rationality (e. g. Brody & Hall, 1993; Deaux, 1985; Fabes & Martin, 1991; Wood, Christensen, Hebl & Rothgerber, 1997). In sum, gender role profiles imply different ways of dealing with the world, and the dichotomy emotionality-rationality is at the very core. We may therefore expect lay theories to include emotion beliefs that are gendered according to this dichotomy” (49).

⁵¹ Carol Gilligan writes *In a Different Voice: Psychological Theory and Women’s Development* (1982) that “knowledge about intimacy, relationships, and care has been considered intuitive in women, and so psychologists have neglected to describe its development” (17). Nancy Chodorow similarly indicates that girls’ greater basis for empathy is due to socialization (*The Reproduction of Mothering: Psychoanalysis and the Sociology of Gender* 1978, *Feminism and Psychoanalytic Theory* 1989). At the same time, an essentialist view of women and men as contrastingly empathetic and cerebral has also been questioned by a number of studies (Shields, Zammunder, Greenberger & Blake).

⁵² Michael Mangan, commenting on binary views of gender, explains that there are two common versions of gender studies: essentialist and anti-essentialist (8). According to the anti-essentialist perspective, gender is a social construct: femininity and masculinity are the results of socialization, rather than inherent differences between women and men. An anti-essentialist perspective, which since the 1990s has come to dominate most scholarly discussions on gender, goes hand in hand with most postmodern claims that the world is built by artifice and social construction. In contrast, essentialism asserts that gender differences are solely the result of biological sex and intrinsic characteristics of women and of men. While postmodernism clearly fits with anti-essentialist thinking, some strands of feminism take issue with the notion that gender can and/or should be deconstructed. Mary Gergen explains this viewpoint in her book *Feminist Reconstructions in Psychology: Narrative, Gender, and Performance* (2001): “if the category of gender is erased, challenges to male domination cannot be made. If there are no men, there cannot be a patriarchy” (38). “[J]ust as women gain voice in the political arena, the oppressor as well as the oppressed becomes deconstructed” (38). As these comments point out, extreme versions of both anti-essentialism and essentialism have limitations. Gender is undeniably and hugely shaped by sociocultural context, but if there are no “real” differences between women and me, how can one possibly locate the social inequities between them?

⁵³ Scholarship on emasculation often points for the ways in which emotionality is associated with the effeminate (e. g. Bederman, Efron, Ross, Wilson).

women, but to reject the association between women and emotion may suggest that “masculine” objectivity is superior to “feminine” feeling.

Such characterizations of gender also can be extended to women’s and men’s writing. Men’s writing, which traditionally has dominated the literary canon, is generally described within literary feminist criticism as coherent, straight-forward, and involving chronologically linear narratives that focus on action and exteriority through an unemotional, laconic, and “objective” tone. Women’s literature, in contrast, is marked by its interiority and subjectivity, which is achieved through non-linear, fragmented, descriptive, and affectively charged stories that emphasize character development and interpersonal relationships over plot. These generalizations are articulated especially in notions of *écriture féminine* which call for a specifically female mode of writing that breaks from social convention in order to escape a patriarchal order and language.^{54 55}

⁵⁴ Responding to a need for women to express themselves in ways that challenge social norms, Helene Cixous theorizes the concept of *écriture féminine*. According to this line of thought, because language has been shaped by men, women need to create a feminine mode of writing which subverts male literary conventions, largely through absences, ruptures, and ‘jouissances’ (Humm 16). For female writers to express themselves within a phallogentric discourse, they must find subversive ways of communicating within this linguistic system; *écriture féminine* is said to offer just that. Cixous, like many French feminists, deliberately feminizes writing in an attempt to present women with an alternative means of expression. (It should, however, be noted that, for Cixous, both female and male writers have access to this feminine language. This suggests a kind of gendered writing shaped largely by social circumstances and individual ideology, not one centered on biology.) While French feminist theory points to the significance of gender as it intersects with language, it also relies to some extent on essentialist ideas.

⁵⁵ Feminist literary criticism begins with the idea that language and literature reflect our conceptions of women and men. Thus, language also may be a means for challenging a patriarchal social order. As Maggie Humm explains in *Reader’s Guide to Contemporary Feminist Literary Criticism* (1994), “Women become feminists by becoming conscious of, and criticizing, the power of symbolic misrepresentations of women. To understand the ways in which we acquire a gender *through* language, and to perceive the role played by language in creating our subjectivities and our oppressions give feminist literary criticism an important task” (3).

Maso's approach to gendered creative expression, touched upon in chapter three, is in keeping with much of literary feminist criticism, and with French feminist theory in particular, according to which language has been formed by a patriarchal culture which serves men while disempowering women. Female writers therefore face what might seem impossible task: if language is created by and for male domination, how can women possibly use that very language for self-expression? While one might argue that to write (in a male-defined language) is to give voice to male power, the only alternative to using "phallogentric" language is silence.⁵⁶

At the same time that such feminist literary criticism calls attention to the patriarchal structures upon which much of conventional culture and language are built, it also suggests that women writers necessarily share a common literary style which reflects a universally shared experience of womanhood.⁵⁷ The notion of a distinctly feminine mode of writing (to which Maso ascribes her work) risks reinforcing gender stereotypes, according to which women's writing must concern itself with affective experience, interpersonal relationships, and interiority, while masculine writing focuses on analytic thinking, plot, and externality.

⁵⁶ As Mary Gergen lucidly states, "Although androcentric control over literary forms is a serious matter, how much graver is the accusation that the forms of our personal narratives are also under such control? The relationship between one and the other is strong, but the more pervasive nature and consequence of male-dominated life stories is certainly more threatening, at least to me" (56).

⁵⁷ Feminist critics of ethnic minorities, including Gyatri Spivak and Trinh T. Minh-Ha, find such generalizations of women's experience problematic. They object to the "collective" proclamation – made usually by women of developed, Western, imperialist, and democratic countries – of the needs and wants of *all* women. In addition, the notion of the monolithic female seems to reinforce the idea of the masculine as neutral.

Though there has been a considerable rise in the scholarship on masculinities over the past decade, much of feminist and women's studies continues to reinforce the idea that the feminine is marked and the masculine neutralized. As Milette Shamir and Jennifer Travis argue in the introduction to *Boys Don't Cry?* (2002), feminist and gender studies have continued

to divide cultural products into separate traditions along the line of emotional expressivity: a feminine mode marked by effusion of sentiment and its representational conventions, in contrast to a masculine mode where affect is presented negatively, in terms of disavowal and repression or – in such instances where men 'betray' emotions – in terms of parody or 'feminization.' (2)

While gender studies' focus on women was (and to some extent still is) important for working towards gender equality, numerous scholars have indicated that the discourse on gender now needs to develop a more balanced consideration of both women's and men's experiences (Connel, Jansz, Levant, Nyman, Rosen, Shamir and Travis). The feminine and the masculine can only be understood *relationally*, as a comparative reading of texts like *The Art Lover* and *City of Glass* make evident.

Taking a similar approach to that of Alice Ferrebe, who challenges the tenement that men's writing ignores emotional experience, I consider ways in which these works may and may not be shaped by gender.⁵⁸ While gender powerfully shapes literature, I argue, it does not determine every aspect of any given text. As Rita Felski writes in *Beyond Feminist Aesthetics: Feminist Literature and Social Change* (1989), to define a fundamentally feminine and masculine aesthetics is not only to categorize women and men, but also to overlook the many versions of feminism, some of which seem oppositional to one another.⁵⁹ Like Felski, I find the claim that women's and men's writing are fundamentally distinct problematic, for to assert that literature by women and by men fits neatly into two categories of "feminine" and "masculine" writing is to suggest that all women and all men write according to an inflexible model. Thus, I approach Maso and Auster's work as powerfully influenced, but not defined, by sexual politics and constructions of femininity and masculinity. Maso and Auster focus, respectively, on female and male characters whose writing, perceptions, and emotions are powerfully – and often detrimentally – affected by a patriarchal culture that suppresses emotional expression and promotes stoicism and "rationality."

⁵⁸ In *Masculinity in Male-Authored Fiction, 1950-2000* (2005), Alice Ferrebe points to the problematics in a stereotypical view of men's and women's writing. "Linear narrative quests focused upon a unitary self," she writes, "are used repeatedly to reinforce conceptions of self based upon masculinist principles of isolation and relentless rejection of the Other. In other words, unity of text = unity of self = unity of manhood" (14).

⁵⁹ Rita Felski challenges an essentialist view of feminist aesthetics that "argues [for] a necessary or privileged relationship between female gender and a particular kind of literary structure, style, or form" (19). Instead she contends that feminist art should be characterized by its political aim for gender equality, not for aesthetic qualities which are considered essentially "feminine." This extends, I would argue, to literary techniques that evoke reader identification and estrangement.

While *The Art Lover*'s women characters struggle with and against a supposedly unemotional and impersonal "male" mode of writing, being, and feeling, *City of Glass*'s protagonist Quinn wrestles with the ways in which what R. W. Connell has named "hegemonic masculinity" may be detrimental to the well-being not only of subordinate groups, but also to that of men. For at the same time that hegemonic masculinity "embodies the currently accepted answer to the problem of legitimacy of patriarchy, which guarantees (or is taken to guarantee) the dominant position of men and the subordination of women" (Connell 77), this notion of masculinity also demands that men display stoicism, and rationality, and intrepidity. At the same time that gender norms may be read as serving Auster's male characters in certain ways (they are, after all, the only figures who get much air time and who act), the psychically oppressive nature of male dominance in both *City of Glass* and *The Art Lover* becomes apparent in characters' grieving processes, their interpersonal relationships, and their writing. These authors hereby portray gender identity in close connection to both emotion and the writing process.

While it is clear in Auster and Maso's narratives that gender plays a powerful role, just what these texts might be suggesting about the connections between affectivity and gender is more complex. As I have intimated, *The Art Lover*'s portrayal of aesthetics in relation to gender suggests on the one hand that there are inherent differences between gendered writing, while on the other the other hand underscoring commonalities between women and men's artistic expression and emotional experience.

Though Auster does not address gender in the direct manner that Maso does, *City of Glass* points to a crisis in masculinity that is characteristic of twentieth century men's writing and, more particularly, of the genre of hard-boiled detective fiction. The extent to which such narratives' portrayals of male anxieties challenge hegemonic masculinity and the degree to which they reinforce the notion of a potent and invincible male hero becomes questionable. Do these texts, in connecting gender and feeling, reinforce essentialist notions of femaleness and maleness, or do they point to and critique the social restrictions of gender norms? How much these narratives emphasize emotional experience as gendered, and to what degree they do focus on human experiences beyond the confines of sex?

As *The Art Lover* and *City of Glass* present both essentialist and social constructionist views of gender, they perhaps employ what Gayatri Spivak has termed *strategic essentialism*, a subversive process in which members of a given social group define their "essential" qualities in order to expose those attributes as constructs. By drawing upon essentialist notions of the feminine and the masculine, Maso and Auster place themselves in a position from which they might also question the structures that lie behind such ideologies. While Maso's notion of a female aesthetic and Auster's treatment of the main character Quinn might raise questions about whether these texts reinforce gender conventions, Auster's depiction of the oppressive effects of "privileged" masculinity and Maso's presentation of the thoughts and experiences of both women and men characters suggest that their writing does indeed engage in a

strategic essentialism that works to dismantle essentialist notions of gender. What their stories *do* make clear is that emotion is a gendered performance which is embedded in our daily lives, so much so that neat distinctions between a socially constructed self and an “authentic” identity unaffected by cultural conditions becomes an impossible task.

City of Glass

As in the use of strategic essentialism, notions of specifically male and female modes of writing become complicated in texts like *City of Glass*, for such works call upon genre distinctions and conventions only to bring those categories into question. Auster’s “anti-detective” novel, I argue, engages in questions about the politics of feeling largely through its self-reflexive qualities: while initially appearing to adhere to the rules of the traditional (male-centered) mystery narrative, according to which facts and evidence will be gathered until a case is resolved, *City of Glass* instead invites its reader to reflect upon the social and personal conflicts which its main character faces and which have no conclusive answers. In making use of the detective story as genre (a category which, Glenn W. Most points out, is inherently self-reflexive), Auster draws upon notions of objectivity, certainty, and empiricism (concepts commonly associated with masculinity).⁶⁰ As such, *City of Glass* challenges the assumptions of detective fiction, which, as Brian McHale argues, is the epistemological genre *par excellence* –

⁶⁰ As Most explains, the detective novel is a highly self-reflexive form. This is perhaps most apparent in the fact that the reader, following the detective in an attempt to solve the case, takes on the sleuth’s viewpoint, hereby becoming actively engaged in making sense of the story: “the detective can be understood as “the reader within the text,” as his “activities most closely parallel the reader’s own” (348).

given that the mystery usually assumes that perceived reality is a sure way of understanding the world (*Postmodernist Fiction* 9).

In presenting his story as if it will follow the rules of traditional mysteries, Auster utilizes the genre's self-reflexive qualities to his own ends. The already self-referential nature of the detective novel are pushed to their limits through the characters' direct relationships to textuality and interpretation. As John Zilcosky points out, "Each of Auster's novels features a detective who literally reads the manuscripts of his criminal. Auster's detectives thus are vehemently readers" (n.p.). Not only that: the prominent characters in *City of Glass* are also writers: the anonymous narrator, who introduces himself at the text's end, claims to have composed the text which we are reading; Quinn is author of both mystery novels and the red notebook, which records his daily observations as he follows Stillman Sr.; Peter Stillman Jr. is a poet (albeit of nonsense); Peter Stillman Sr., a published scholar of linguistics who is attend to repair a broken language; and the "real" Auster of the novel, who Quinn contacts at the end of the Stillman case, writes literary essays, including one on Don Quixote and the question of authorship. In this way, *City of Glass* becomes a text of mirrors that refer back to language and writing *ad infinitum* and that repeatedly disorient the reader.

In keeping with the aims of the anti-detective novel, the narrator mis-instructs his reader on how to decipher the text.

The world of the book comes to life, seething with possibilities, with secrets and contradictions. [...] Since everything seen or said, even the slightest, most trivial thing, can bear a connection to the outcome of the story, nothing must be overlooked. Everything becomes essence; the center of the book shifts with each event that propels it forward. The center, then, is everywhere, and no circumference can be drawn until the book has come to its end. (15)

And so it is that “[i]n the good mystery there is nothing wasted, no sentence, no word that is not significant” (15). The relevance of this puzzle’s every detail implies an urgency for scrutiny and analysis, which ultimately should lead to a logical and predictable conclusion. We hereby are asked to take on the viewpoint of a detective. This impulse is further reinforced when the narrator informs us that

The detective is on who looks, who listens, who moves through this mass of objects and events in search of the thought, the idea that will pull all these things together and make sense of them. In effect, the writer and the detective are interchangeable. The reader sees the world

through the detective's eyes, experiencing the proliferation of its details as if for the first time. He has become awake to the things around him, as if they might speak to him, as if, because of the attentiveness he now brings to them, they might begin to carry a meaning other than the simple fact of their existence. (15)

Thus, the misguided reader, unfamiliar with Auster's writing, begins *City of Glass*, much like Quinn: anticipating eventual resolution. She and the protagonist will be frustrated when the antagonist disappears midway through the book and when, at the story's end, Quinn solves nothing, instead having posed an abundance of open-ended and unanswerable epistemological and existential questions.

As *City of Glass* presents the mystery as an analogy for the reading process, it engages the reader in ways which may be understood in terms of distancing. The narrative's suggestion that the reader should find a solution to the story leads audience members either to look studiously for clues, or else to have skepticism of the narrator. Through the exploitation of genre conventions and through an irresolvable puzzle that blurs the boundaries between fiction and reality, Auster engages the reader. This playful storytelling, while making light of the reader's desire to resolve the text's uncertainty (a gesture unlikely to prompt a reader's empathic response), simultaneously confronts the social and cultural isolation which has become characteristic of much of Western

culture.

Again in keeping with the notion of a textual puzzle, Auster, like Maso, gives his audience scraps of information which it must piece together in order to make sense of the story. The book's very first lines make apparent the mental work which the reader will have to engage in as she follows the narrator, who begins with a plethora of ambiguous pronouns and nouns, words which demand that the reader actively participate in the meaning-making of the text:

It was a wrong number that started *it*, the telephone ringing three times in the dead of night, and the voice on the other end asking for *someone he* was not. Much later, when he was able to think about the things that happened to him, he would conclude that *nothing* was real except chance. But *that* was much later. In the beginning, *there* was simply *the event and its consequences*. Whether *it* might have turned out differently, or whether it was all predetermined with the *first word* that came from the *stranger's* mouth, is not the *question*. The question is the story itself, and whether or not it means *something* is not for the story to tell. (my italics; 7)

Given little concrete information, the only way for the reader to find some footing in this text is for her to remember these unknowns and to attempt filling in the blanks with any information that becomes available. This disorientating effect, like the book's title, will be characteristic of a diegetic world of mirrors and illusions.

The mental work a reader must do to follow a text filled with ambiguous passages and misinformation indicates that *City of Glass* will require the reader's analytical participation. The reader's active and intellectual engagement, one might argue, is indicative of a novel whose philosophical questions and cognitive mazes remove it from affective experience. While I will not deny that *City of Glass* often delights in a kind of philosophical play that is more analytical than it is affective, the text's seeming disengagements in emotion – its disorienting effect and its cool intellect – are central to the reader's affective experience.

Moreover, much of the novel directly addresses emotional life: disorienting passages like the one above are oftentimes followed by clear statements which describe the circumstances that affect Quinn's emotional life. Take, for example, the below passage, which begins with a number of unclear pronouns but which then gives specific information about the conditions of Quinn's personal life.

As for Quinn, there is little that need detain us. Who he was, where he came from, and what he did are of no great importance. We know, for example, that he was thirty-

five years old. We know that he had once been married,
 had once been a father, and that both his wife and son
 were now dead. (7)

The ambiguity of the narrator's unaffected assertions, reflected in interrogative phrases like "who he was, where he came from, and what he did," furthermore seem to prompt a Shklovskian defamiliarization. The narrator's tone of detachment, as well as his announcement to pay attention to each piece of information, encourages the audience to slow its reading and to inquire into the significance of these words.

While vague pronouns characterize the first sentence of this passage, the narrator explains that these unclear details are not central to the story and then precedes with the specifics of what is significant: information which presents Quinn as a sympathetic character who has faced the difficulties of loss and social isolation. In the above passage, the narrator, while speaking in an intellectual tone as he offers clues and asks the reader to partake in solving the mystery, simultaneously presents information of emotional import – that the protagonist has lost both his wife and son – in the same cool voice. The oddness of the narrator's flat tone becomes itself reflective of Quinn's numbness of feeling. These passages function much like Sianne Ngai's description of tone (see chapter two), according to which, through a representation of "nonfelnness," aesthetic engagement is fostered by distanciation. As in Ngai's interpretation of Melville's *Bartleby*, the reader may find the narrator's emotional

remove itself disturbing.⁶¹

The fragmented and puzzle-like qualities of *City of Glass* contribute to the playfulness and comedy of the story, while also indicating the intense sense of isolation with which the protagonist lives. For beside *City of Glass*'s analytical language, Auster's writing often takes on a contrastingly sympathetic voice, one with which the reader can more readily empathize. Quinn's memory of his son, like the description of Quinn's aloneness, for example, contrasts the text's many moments of intellectualism. This memory "was not exactly thinking, nor was it even remembering. It was a physical sensation, an imprint of the past that had been left in his body" (10-11). Such painful moments, however,

came less often now. [...] He no longer wished to be
dead. At the same time, it cannot be said that he was glad
to be alive. But at least he did not resent it. He was alive,
and the stubbornness of this fact had little by little begun
to fascinate him – as if he had managed to outlive himself,

⁶¹ Significantly, Quinn thinks of Melville's *Bartleby* at the story's begin, as he waits for his suspect Stillman Sr. to arrive at Grand Central Station. As Müller explains, Quinn subconsciously "turns to a nineteenth-century American writers in order to gain a better understanding of his life as a male writer in an alien society" (Müller 149, *City of Glass* 83-84). William G. Little also makes connections between Quinn and *Bartleby* and their identities as men. Drawing on Mark Anderson's thesis that a crisis of gender marks both modernism and anorexia, Little connects these characters' starvation to a desire to escape the social reality. Like *Bartleby*, Little argues, Quinn "removes himself from circulation. Having abandoned the traditional trappings of male power and prestige, having wasted himself, he emerges as a figure with no profession, no office, no home." Quinn's retreat into nineteenth-century texts, like his lack of emotional expression, one might argue, is connected to a kind of crisis of masculinity.

as if he were somehow living a posthumous life. He did not sleep with the lamp on anymore, and for many months now he had not remembered any of his dreams. (10)

Quinn's lessening emotional pain, these lines suggest, is accompanied by a lack of feeling, an affective deadness that contributes to the sense that he is "living a posthumous life."

Quinn's lack of emotive expression makes it fitting that he work as a novelist of the detective story, which focuses on facts, not experiences, and which assures the reader that a narrative will always end in resolution. The main character's ability to separate psychological experience and his work underscores the distance between his use of language and his state of well-being. As in *The Art Lover*, language reflects characters' perceptual realities. The pen name Max Work and his book's detective William Wilson indicate a separation not only between Quinn and his public persona, but also within himself. The fact that Quinn's character quietly refrains from crying, shouting, or laughing is in itself reflective of his affective state. Conveying Quinn's anxiety about emotion, the narrator explains, "[a] part of him had died, he told his friends, and he did not want it coming back to haunt him" (9). The past is so painful for Quinn that he prefers living a "posthumous life" (11)⁶². Again, his psychic state of

⁶² The phrase "posthumous life" may well be intended as a reference to Joaquim Maria Machado de Assis's *The Posthumous Memoirs of Bras Cubas*, given Auster's common use of literary references.

relational and emotional detachment is significantly connected to his relationship to writing and narrative.

He had continued to write because it was the only thing he felt he could do. [...] Because he did not consider himself to be the author of what he wrote, he did not feel responsible for it and therefore was not compelled to defend it in his heart. (9)

His writing appears as a practice of selflessness and equanimity, though not one of a particularly humble nature, since Quinn feels no conviction for his work and takes no responsibility for it.

The protagonist's dissociation from his life and identity is indicative of the fragmented self common to postmodern theory and to Auster's writing. This split is especially evident in the distinction between Quinn's private and professional lives. While often appearing as a cause of distress, the separation between different parts of himself – his "triadic self" – gives the protagonist solace. By writing under the pseudonym of Max Work and narrating his novels through the detective character William Wilson, Quinn creates a distance between different parts of his life, perhaps because this makes his existence more tolerable. In acquiring his pen name,

[a] part of him had died [...] and he did not want it coming back to haunt him. It was then that he had taken on the name of William Wilson. Quinn was no longer that part of him that could write books, and although in many ways Quinn continued to exist, he no longer existed for anyone but himself. (9)

The pseudonym William Wilson enables the deadened part of Quinn to remain undisturbed. His writing process, seemingly oppositional to that of *The Art Lover*, functions as an escape from himself and from the world. It is oddly when he is *not* himself, when he is his writing persona, that he feels “real.”

Quinn had long ago stopped thinking of himself as real. If he lived now in the world at all, it was only at one remove, through the imaginary person of Max Work. His detective necessarily had to be real. The nature of the books demanded it. If Quinn had allowed himself to vanish, to withdraw into the confines of a strange and hermetic life, Work continued to live in the world of others, and the more Quinn seemed to vanish, the more persistent Work’s presence in that world became. (15)

As Work, Quinn inhabits his alter ego, which succeeds where Quinn would fail and which gives him a sense of freedom and existential purpose.

Whereas Quinn tended to feel out of place in his own skin, Work was aggressive, quick-tongued, at home in whatever spot he happened to find himself. The very things that caused problems for Quinn, Work took for granted, and he walked through the mayhem of his adventures with an ease and indifference that never failed to impress his creator. [...] it reassured him [Quinn] to pretend to be Work as he was writing his books, to know that he had it in him to be Work if he ever chose to be, even if only in his mind. (15)

The more “real” author Work offers Quinn an escape from a self-conscious, anxious part of himself, as well as entry into the self-assurance and ease that he cannot imagine belong to him.

Despite this inner splitting, Quinn clearly is affected by his encounters with Work and Wilson. Work shares his experiences with Quinn. As a writer, Quinn may experience life beyond his familiar experience of deadness, but only through the

identity of another. Both Quinn and Work hide behind a fictional character, and when Work finishes a novel, Quinn finds himself “feeling somewhat exhausted by his [Work’s] efforts.” The narrator goes on to explain that “[o]ver the years, Work had become very close to Quinn. Whereas William Wilson remained an abstract figure for him, Work had increasingly come to life” (11). This growing closeness between Quinn and Work suggests that Quinn, when writing, experiences a deeper connection to the part of him that is still “alive.” Ironically, the writing process which offers Quinn escape from himself and his pain also functions as a way to experience sentience and life meaning. Quinn may experience a life of self-removal as safe, but in doing so, he allows his posthumous life of partial deadness to continue.

In the triad of selves that Quinn had become, Wilson served as a kind of ventriloquist, Quinn himself was the dummy, and Work was the animated voice that gave purpose to the enterprise. If Wilson was an illusion, he nevertheless justified the lives of the other two. If Wilson did not exist, he nevertheless was the bridge that allowed Quinn to pass from himself into Work. (11-12)

This “triadic self” at once contributes to the sadness and the comedy of the text, just as it encourages both reader sympathy and disorientation. Quinn’s split personas are

only the beginning of the disguises and doubled characters that inhabit *City of Glass* and that contribute to its surrealism and indistinctions between the intra-, extra-, and intertextual realms. The reader hereby undergoes disorientation similar to that of the book's detective – with so many mirrors and reflections, it becomes difficult to know the status of any of these images. For example, Work has his own double, William Wilson, the narrator of his novels (who also happens to be the protagonist of Edgar Allen Poe's short story on the *Doppelgänger*). And not only does Quinn have multiple selves; he is also an alter ego for Auster (Barone, McCaffery and Gregory, Shiloh). (Both Quinn and Auster are young fathers and detective novelists, and they share the experience of losing intimate relationships, whether it be through death or divorce, as well as the isolation that comes with that loss.)

In addition to creating parallels between himself and his protagonist, Auster places more mirrors within *City of Glass*, further disorienting the reader by inserting himself into the story and thus creating a second fictional version of himself. When in the book's beginning a wrong number calls Quinn, asking for Paul Auster, the text crosses the boundary separating author and audience. And seven pages later, *City of Glass* makes Quinn's existence as Auster's double all the more explicit: when the wrong number calls again asking for Auster, Quinn this time tells the caller he has reached the right man. In acquiring this new identity, Quinn accepts a case that will suggest additional doubled characters. (The main figures of the mystery are Peter Stillman Jr. and Peter Stillman Sr., and later several characters will share initials –

Henry Dark and Humpty Dumpty, the HDs, and Don Quixote and Daniel Quinn, the DQs.)

According to Madeleine Sorapure, this multiplicity and confusion is closely tied to questions of identity and modern experience. She explains that

The typically modernist quest to solve the mystery of identity to create a meaningful and workable sense of self is paralleled as characters in Auster's works look outward and attempt to understand events and experiences around them. They search for patterns and meanings in the signs they encounter and events they experience, but are frustrated both by the postmodern overload of potentially significant information and by the force of chance, coincidence, the arbitrary, and the implausible. (22)

However, these characters repeatedly "realize that they can no longer impose order and meaning on the contingencies of the world" and must face the actuality of "radical indeterminacy" (23). As the physical world reflects characters' perceptions and experiences, as well as the reader's experience of the text's unstable universe, interiority and narrative setting become mirrors of one another. *City of Glass* hereby serves a demonstration of Henry Lefebvre's notion of produced space: the physical world is

shaped by mental and social spatial conceptions, just as our perceptions of social space are affected by our physical surroundings.

The connections between interior experience and exterior place are particularly apparent in the urban environment and the placelessness of New York City, where the act of walking serves as a metaphor for his interior experience and thought processes (including the *absence* thereof), and later for the writing and reading processes as well.⁶³ That the urban space of New York becomes reflective of Quinn's interior life becomes apparent from the book's very opening: "New York was an inexhaustible space, a labyrinth of endless steps," a location where Quinn becomes "[l]ost, not only in the city, but within himself as well" (8). As the reader similarly has the opportunity to become lost in this textual maze, she follows the main character on wanderings whose centrality becomes evident on the second page.

Nearly every day, rain or shine, hot or cold, he would
 leave his apartment to walk through the city – never really
 going anywhere, but simply going wherever his legs
 happened to take him. New York was an inexhaustible
 space, a labyrinth of endless steps, and no matter how far
 he walked, no matter how well he came to know its

⁶³ As Tim Woods argues, in Auster's work, "Journeys are equivalent to mental movements, and walking becomes an actualization of cognition itself" (111). In *City of Glass*, however, Quinn's walks seem just as significantly connected to a kind of mindlessness which allows him to escape thought.

neighborhoods and streets, it always left him with the feeling of being lost. Lost, not only in the city, but within himself as well. Each time he took a walk, he felt as though he were leaving himself behind [...]. (8)

While one might think of the experience of being lost and of losing one's self as undesirable, Quinn finds it pleasurable, for

by giving himself up to the movement of the streets, by reducing himself to a seeing eye, he was able to escape the obligation to think, and this, more than anything else, brought him a measure of peace, a salutary emptiness within. The world was outside of him, around him, before him, and the speed with which it kept changing made it impossible for him to dwell on any one thing for very long. [...] By wandering aimlessly, all places became equal, and it no longer mattered where he was. On his best walks, he was able to feel that he was to be nowhere. New York was the nowhere he had built around himself, and he realized that he had no intention of ever leaving it again. (8-9)

Quinn enjoys disappearing into urban masses and watching the fast-paced world spin around him (as we perhaps gain pleasure from following him). In so doing, he experiences a removal from himself and from an isolated existence.

But Quinn's affinity for selflessness and placelessness is not purely an experience of postmodern delight in disorder and aporia. Rather, his desire to separate himself from life describes the "part of him [that] had died" which "he did not want [] coming back to haunt him" (8). In the words of Ilana Shiloh, Quinn is a "ghost" that becomes increasingly invisible as he embarks on "an inverse quest, whose objective is self-denudation rather than self-fulfillment" (Shiloh 45). The "concept of motion, of venturing out of the self," becomes impossible – since there is no self, there is also no "out." In this subverted quest narrative, exteriority and interiority collapse into one entity: "all elements of the triad of quest – subject, object, and desire" involve "no distinction between inner and outer" (Shiloh 45). Though the archetypal quest ends with resolution, the mystery of *City of Glass*, remaining unsolved, concludes in the disappearance of the suspect Stillman Sr. and, finally, in the vanishing of Quinn himself. Auster hereby calls into question the empiricist assumptions upon which detective fiction is based.

Nonetheless, as a private detective saving the vulnerable Peter Jr., Quinn finds a new reason for writing and for living. His investigation, based on empiricism and logic, gives him a feeling of security about himself as a "real" man. In stark contrast to his

experience of himself as a weakly (effeminate) writer who spends his time alone and generally finds little meaning in his everyday life, the masculine positions of paternal figure and investigator give the protagonist his new sense of legitimacy. As this suggests and Stephen Fredman indicates, “the postmodern inquiry into the relationship between writing and identity” hereby “metamorphoses into a confrontation with a series of gender issues, oriented around the father” (7-8).⁶⁴

As investigator, Quinn has the opportunity to behave as a protective father who shields an adoptive son from danger. It is not coincidence, as Bernd Herzogenrath indicates, that Peter Jr. reminds Quinn of his dead son, whose name is also Peter (Herzogenrath 30, *City of Glass* 58). In encountering a traumatized young man, Herzogenrath argues, Quinn experiences a “return of the repressed,” that is, the memory of his son’s death. In this “space of trauma,” Quinn’s role as detective “is closely connected to ‘that part of him [that] had died, and [that] he did not want...coming back to haunt him’” (Herzogenrath 30-31, *City of Glass* 9). The protagonist’s underlying motive for his search may be to ease the pain of losing his son, as well as to gain a solid and unified identity as a man.

⁶⁴ This thematization of fathers and sons is common to Auster’s work and depicted in his autobiography. The motif of the absent father is based upon the author’s own emotionally absent male role model, and Peter Jr.’s traumatic experience of social isolation seems to resonate with Auster’s childhood experiences, which he describes in the autobiographical *The Invention of Solitude* as scarred by an emotionally absent father. Though Auster has emphasized in interviews that his fictions are just that, and not autobiography, if one has heard his comments about his childhood and his distant relationship to his father, or the divorce that separated him from his son, it is difficult to be convinced that this scene has no emotional significance for Auster. Especially when the writer has made comments in interviews such as “Writing, in some sense, is an activity that helps me to relieve some of the pressure caused by these buried secrets. Hidden memories, traumas, childhood scars--there’s no question that novels emerge from those inaccessible parts of ourselves” (McCaffery and Gregory n.p.).

In this sense, Quinn's world may be understood in terms of a kind of masculine space which is foregrounded in: 1) the text's use of detective novel conventions like as reliance on empiricism, rationality, definitive knowledge, and narrative resolution (Müller); 2) the centrality of male characters invested in their identities as private investigators, fathers, and sons; and 3) the emotional repression and social isolation that governs Quinn's existence and which often is said to characterize twentieth century Western male experience. As Monika Müller argues in "From Hard-Boiled Detective to Kaspar Hauser?: Masculinity and Writing in Paul Auster's *The New York Trilogy*," Auster "undercuts the usual machoism of detective fiction through his ironic presentation of the conventions of the hard-boiled detective novel" (144). As *City of Glass* draws attention to the conventions of masculinist, hard-boiled detective fiction, it links this genre to a masculinist ethos of objectivity.⁶⁵

In challenging the Enlightenment ideals of modernity, Auster underscores not only the anxiety of a postmodern age, but also the crisis of masculinity that accompanies it. As changing gender roles and social structures threaten to destabilize "hegemonic masculinity," it becomes evident that conceptions of male identity do not always serve men. This certainly seems to be the case for Quinn, who fits Jeroen

⁶⁵ Quoting Cynthia S. Hamilton *Western and Hard-Boiled Detective Fiction in America*, Müller explains that the 'objective technique' of the hard-boiled novel, which focuses on fact rather than emotion, is characterized by "the use of simple, stripped down sentences, the portrayal of actions as series of component movements, [and] the use of understatement [...], devices which] emphasise brutality by objectifying those involved" (Hamilton 140, Müller 151).

Jansz's description of the emotionally restricted male whose life is characterized by social isolation and a difficulty in expressing feelings (175, 170).

Müller's argument and Jansz's discussion of men's restrictive emotionality become particularly compelling when read alongside literary criticism on masculinity of hard-boiled characters and fictions. In *Men Alone: Masculinity, Individualism, and Hard-Boiled Fiction* (1997), Jopi Nyman describes hard-boiled narrative in a way that uncannily seem to dissect *City of Glass*. "[H]ard-boiled fiction," he writes, "explores general cultural conceptions of individualism and gender. It also explores problems of social change and points out the all-evading alienation and fragmentation of American society in this century" (3-4). This quote underscores the major themes and concerns expressed in *City of Glass*: autonomous identity and its dissolution; the social changes that accompany modernization, including alienation within the urban environment; and a crisis in masculinity that is intimately connected to the notion of the [male] self's breakdown. Nyman's further explanations of this genre also speak to many of the social and gender issues at the heart of Auster's text: the male anxieties that emerge in the twentieth century appear in "hard-boiled fiction [as] attempts to defend the ideal of the autonomous male: this character is shown to be a truly masculine character who opposes all forms of Otherness" (3-4). The narrator of such narratives uses a "laconic, detached, and objective mode" which according to Nyman "contributes to the gendered ideology of the hard-boiled fiction," an ideology which presents the narrative voice as "a sign of [male] power" (37).

But these texts are about more than male chauvinism, as Nyman makes clear:

Hard-boiled fiction both believes in such a []
[masculinist] ideology and recognizes its failure to
function properly in a changed world. [...] Since the
traditional ideology of individualism has become
implausible and is now unavailable to the protagonists,
the depth of the loss of traditional solutions is stressed by
their nostalgic laments. (4)

In short, hard-boiled fiction at once idealizes male dominance and points to its impossibility. Though Auster satirizes the genre, he also addresses an issue of gravity: an American masculinist culture which encourages the repression of feeling, or what R. F. Levant has called “restricted emotionality” (a male tendency to withhold feeling which threatens their physical and emotional health).⁶⁶

Interestingly, the protagonist of the hard-boiled novel (as Nyman describes him) displays emotional restraint not only through his lack of feeling. Rather, “[a] hard-boiled character is a curious mixture of surprisingly contradictory strains: detachment

⁶⁶ “Restricted emotionality” is best understood in relation to what is R. W. has called “hegemonic masculinity”: “the configuration of gender practice which embodies the currently accepted answer to the problem of legitimacy of patriarchy, which guarantees (or is taken to guarantee) the dominant position of men and the subordination of women” (77). As Levant makes evident, the restricted emotionality that is part of hegemonic masculinity may reinforce a patriarchal social structure in which men have a huge advantage in terms of social influence. But, I would argue, whether such power leads to well-being remains questionable.

and compassion, humanity and inhumanity, reason and emotion, rationality and idealism” (32). The hero’s emotions are best understood *relationally*, as are the reader’s processes of empathy and estrangement. Quinn’s emotional experience is significant not only during the text’s moments of emotional intimacy; it is essential to understanding his *lack* of affective expression. Again, Nyman’s description of the hard-boiled protagonist can be related to the character Quinn: “Since only a tough shield or shell helps to save his life, the need for protection pervades the minds of hard-boiled characters. By objectifying themselves they distance themselves from other people at the same time” (33).

Quinn’s struggle with such cultural ideals of masculinity becomes evident in the descriptions of his life following his wife and son’s deaths, as well as in his acceptance of the Stillman case. Without the wife and child who made it possible for Quinn to inhabit the male social roles of husband and father, the protagonist is left to his solitary writing and the hope that his phone will ring at any moment. To be a single male in this meta-fictional universe seems to mean that one experiences a human disconnection characteristic of restrictive emotionality and hegemonic masculinity.

Quinn’s triadic identity demonstrates the ways in which masculinity relates to his experience of internal division. The detective character Max Work embodies the stoic, invincible, and ideal male, while Quinn, leading a reclusive, unadventurous life of writing, is ruffled by everyday events.

The very things that caused problems for Quinn, Work took for granted, and he walked through the mayhem of his adventures with an ease and indifference that never failed to impress his creator. ...it reassured him to pretend to be Work as he was writing his books, to know that he had it in him to be Work if he ever chose to be, even if only in his mind. (16)

Work is the prototype of the hard-boiled detective; he offers Quinn a sense, however illusory, of a secure, male identity. In taking on the role of P. I., Quinn begins to conceive of himself as another version of Max Work. In the book's beginning, when Quinn fantasizes about the anonymous call for Paul Auster, "Quinn tried to imagine what Work would have said to the stranger on the phone" (16). Being an intrepid detective, of course, Work most likely would have accepted the case. But the writer Quinn – at least initially – does not do so, and his own hesitation bothers him. Quinn's reaction to the first of the three mystery phone calls, as Müller suggests, makes apparent the connection between the main character's male identity and his decision to work as detective (Müller 148). Following the phone call, Quinn "stood there on the cold floor, looking down at his feet, his knees, his limp penis" (10), and that night, "[i]n his dream, which he later forgot, he found himself alone in a room, firing a pistol into a bare white wall" (10). The main character's observation of "his limp penis" suggests Quinn's

lacking sense of male virility, while the firing of the pistol may be read as a sign of Quinn's anxiety about his identity as a man.

Quinn's unsettledness in this scene is indicative of his ambivalence about his masculinity. As Müller again explains, and as the mystery caller's first two phone calls make clear, Quinn hesitates to take on Auster's identity as detective. It is not until the third call that the protagonist accepts the case. Significantly, this occurs on the night before Quinn's birthday, when, according to Müller, "Quinn is finally able to 'conceive' himself as a real detective" (148), or in other words, as a "real" man. These details underline the degree to which Quinn's mid-life crisis revolves around notions of manhood.

In seeking to save this Peter Jr. (and hereby to act as heroic male), Quinn's venture at first seems to offer him a sense of self (though this does change as he fails to solve his case). When, under Paul Auster's name, he begins work on the Stillman case, he experiences increased energy and, ironically, a greater sense of self (albeit a usurped one). On the morning of his appointment with the Stillmans, he awakens earlier than he has in weeks and, for the first time since his wife and son's funeral, puts on a tie (21). It seems that, as Paul Auster, Quinn is free to begin life anew. As Daniel Quinn, this would not be possible, for the sense of self that the main character experiences is removed from his persona: "it did not occur to him that he was going to show up for his appointment" since "it wasn't his appointment, it was Paul Auster's" (21). Similar to his writing, the Stillman case allows Quinn to escape from himself into another and,

ironically, to develop a seemingly stable identity. Zilcosky explains, “Only when the case begins, when Quinn starts to pursue his real-life criminal, Stillman, does he gain a sense of himself as unified,” as is apparent when Quinn writes his own initials, D. Q., in his red investigation notebook (rather than those of his pseudonym William Wilson) [*City of Glass* 64].

In working on the Stillman case, Quinn develops a sense of self that is connected to the role of father, while he is also given the opportunity to care for someone who, like himself, feels humanly disconnected. As a child, Peter Stillman Jr.’s abusive father confined him in a dark room, removing him any social contact. The young man’s garbled and often senseless speech therefore is somewhat comical, but it also reflects his profound isolation, whose severity becomes apparent when, upon his meeting with Quinn, launches into a twelve-page soliloquy of seeming nonsense (a diatribe which becomes more meaningful when Virginia explains the story of Peter’s solitary confinement). Peter’s monologue, of course, is meant to confuse the reader, just as it does Quinn. This comatose adult begins his speech, ““No questions, please [...] Yes. No. Thank you. [...] I am Peter Stillman. I say this of my own free will. Yes. That is not my real name. No. Of course, my mind is not all it should be. But nothing can be done about that. No. About that. Not anymore”” (26). Peter’s contradictory statements and his inexpressiveness and inactivity give little indication of whether or not he actually understands the phrases he articulates. The disorienting effect of Peter’s words is reflective of his very alienation: he is disconnected from others through his

communicative limitations, and perhaps does not even understand his own mutterings. Quinn, whose loneliness is mirrored in Peter, finds purpose in his endeavors to protect this traumatized and child-like man, who oddly never reappears in the story (once more suggesting Peter Jr. as little more than an projection screen for Quinn's needs and desire).

Though initially Quinn's tracking of Stillman Sr. gives him is a feeling of security which contrasts his previous experience of life's meaninglessness and aloneness, his sense of direction is short-lived. Not only does Peter Jr. disappear from the text; Quinn learns half-way through the novel, much to his dishearten, that the assumptions which lie behind his investigation (and which simultaneously have misguided the reader) are incorrect.

If the object was to understand Stillman, [...] Quinn had failed. He had started with a limited set of facts [...] But the facts of the past seemed to have no bearing on the facts of the present. [...] He had always imagined that the key to good detective work was a close observation of details. The more accurate the scrutiny, the more successful the results. The implication was that human behavior could be understood, that beneath the infinite façade of gestures, tics, and silences, there was finally a

coherence, an order, a source of motivation. But after struggling to take in all these surface effects, Quinn felt no closer to Stillman than when he first started following him. [...] Instead of narrowing the distance that lay between him and Stillman, he had seen the old man slip away from him, even as he remained before his eyes.

(104-05)

This passage indicates that Quinn has attempted to place himself (almost literally) in Stillman's shoes, to empathize with him perhaps much like the reader seeks to do with the book's protagonist. Pursuing this case has meant believing in the notion that life and people can be explained through observation and reason, but Quinn's investigation only widens the distance – literally and metaphorically – between the two. Thus, the reader, along with Quinn, must question the utility of empiricism and rationality, as well as her attempt to comprehend the text's characters.

Struggling to find sense where none seems to exist, Quinn, who has been fruitlessly tracking the father Stillman's every step, turns to his notebook "[f]or no particular reason that he was aware of," sketching as map of Stillman's steps (105). Scrutinizing these diagrams along with the reader in hopes of finding some kind of order to them, Quinn ultimately decides that each of Stillman's daily paths takes the

shape of a letter and that the antagonist has been spelling out “Towel of Babel,” a phrase surely representative of a greater plan (111).

As much as Quinn wants to believe that he has just solved a huge part of the puzzle, he also harbors some doubt in his theory. The narrator describes Quinn’s thoughts: “The letters were not letters at all. He had seen them only because he had wanted to see them. And even if the diagrams did form letters, it was only a fluke. Stillman had nothing to do with it. It was all an accident, a hoax he had perpetrated on himself” (112-13). When he goes to bed, he sleeps “fitfully,” and in his dreams, he “arrive[s] at a neverland of fragments, a place of wordless things and thingless words” (113). Seeking meaning within this jumble, he finds “himself in the town dump of his childhood, sifting through a mountain of rubbish” (113). It is in this highly emotive moment, reminiscent of the abused Peter and of Quinn’s memory of holding his son, that the reader’s empathy is strongly encouraged just before the chapter ends.

While we never get such intimate information about Stillman, Sr., it becomes clear that he shares some of Quinn’s anxieties. As Quinn soon learns in following Stillman, this father has no intention of finding, let alone killing, his son, and when Quinn decides to approach his subject of study, he learns that Stillman’s urban wanderings are part of his magnificent plan to piece together a broken world. ““You see,”” Stillman explains, ““the world is in fragments, sir. Not only have we lost our sense of purpose, we have lost the language whereby we can speak of it. These are no doubt spiritual matters, but they have their analogue in the material world”” (120). The

separation between language and meaning reminds the reader of her process of meaning making, as well as of the many disconnections within Auster's constructed world.

Wishing to mend such severances and to make the world whole again, Stillman, through his daily walks and collecting, is making a new language. As he explains,

“our words no longer correspond to the world. When things were whole, we felt confident that our words could express them. But little by little things have broken apart...And yet our words have remained the same...Hence, every time we try to speak of what we see, we speak falsely. But words, as you yourself understand, are capable of change.” (121)

Stillman's description of the severance between language and its meaning nods to Saussure's signified and the signifier, as well as to Derrida's deferred meaning. *City of Glass* hereby addresses philosophical questions in a way which suggests their relevance to feeling: Stillman's quest for a unified language, like Quinn's search for life purpose, points to a human need for existential meaning which becomes intensified when one is denied human contact and affection.

In conversing with Stillman Sr., Quinn would seem to have come close to solving this case. But this is not the nature of the anti-detective novel – about twenty pages later, Quinn’s suspect disappears.

Stillman was gone now [...] Quinn could walk through the streets every day for the rest of his life, and still he would not find him. Everything had been reduced to chance, a nightmare of numbers and probabilities. There were no clues, no leads, no moves to be made. (141)

Along with losing his suspect, Quinn loses his belief in empiricism and reason, which seem to have kept him together under the identity of Detective Auster. He now wanders the streets aimlessly, pondering existential thoughts. Interpreting Baudelaire, Quinn thinks, “It seems to me that I will always be happy in the place where I am not [...] Wherever I am not is the place where I am myself” (168). Quinn’s formerly gained sense of solid identity and existential purpose have proven illusory, while his aloneness seems quite real.

As in hard-boiled fiction, Quinn’s search for a unified self is centrally connected to a kind of crisis in masculinity. Nyman, describing this genre, contends that while in such fictions male autonomy might at first glance seem to secure male power, it actually leads those male characters to their demise: “While hard-boiled fiction works within the

American tradition of masculine individualism, the basic ideology is also undermined” (19). In the case of Quinn, a masculinist ethos is disrupted by Quinn’s mental breakdown towards the end of his story. Like traditional hard-boiled writing, *City of Glass*, “[b]y foregrounding masculinity [] articulates insecurities about and concerns over definitions of gender” (19-20). As Quinn falls deeper and deeper into despair and mental disturbance he moves increasingly further away from the heroic image of private detective. He is not a rational puzzle solver, but rather, as Müller argues, an effeminate writer who cannot provide for a family. Vulnerable, he lives in street alleys, scrounges trash bins, and loses himself.

Quinn’s breakdown might be described in terms of paranoia, given the protagonist’s view of the outside world as malevolent, dangerous, and completely separate from himself. At the same time that his state of mind seems to rob him of any sense of masculine power and authority (as Müller suggests), the main character’s paranoia also reflects male anxieties in a world where traditional gender roles are now being questioned. Kenneth Paradis makes this connection between a crisis in masculinity and paranoia in *Sex, Paranoia, and Modern Masculinity* (2007), in which he argues that

the feeling associated with the persecutory phase of
paranoia – that perceived reality is an illusion [...] and
that the truth of things is shaped by an invisible and

hostile force – crystallizes a profoundly gendered image
of one's self around the idea that one is an isolated
individual immersed in a fundamentally alien
environment. (1)

This masculinist notion of subjectivity is particularly evident in a paranoid vision of the urban world that becomes prevalent with the beginnings of industrialization.⁶⁷

Such distrust in the urban environment is certainly pronounced in *City of Glass's* closing pages, when Quinn retreats entirely from the city in which he previously immersed himself. Moving into the empty apartment of his clients Peter Jr. and Virginia (since during his wanderings his apartment has been taken for abandoned and taken over – notably – by a young woman), Quinn begins an ascetic practice of fasting and writing which leads him further and further from the physical world, the Stillman case, and his past life and memories of his wife and son. He attempts to remember his life before this story began, but he cannot:

⁶⁷ According to Paradis, this view of urban society and its connection to a crisis of masculinity is especially articulated in American transcendentalism, of which Auster is a fan and which Paradis sees as reflective of patriarchal ideology. Ralph Waldo Emerson, for example, in representing social relations as impediments to self-reliance, suggests that (a feminized) community poses a threat to (male) independence. “[S]ince women were responsible for doing the jobs that absolutely relied upon communal relations [...], communality itself is represented by Emerson as something that obscures the perception of both inner and outer truth and thus makes men more like women” (2). Because, for Emerson, “female bodies are already compromised by their role in the economy of childbearing and rearing, it is in terms of the male body that the problem of individual autonomy becomes articulated fundamentally as a problem of *property*” (2).

He tried to think about the life he had lived before the story began. This caused many difficulties, for it seemed so remote to him now. He remembered the books he had written under the name of William Wilson. It was strange, he thought, that he had done that, and he wondered not why he had. In his heart, he realized that Max Work was dead. He had died somewhere on the way to his next case, and Quinn could not bring himself to feel sorry. It all seemed so unimportant now. (195-96)

The main character's life both before and after the Stillman case has lost any of the meaning it might have had. As he nears his own mysterious disappearance, only one memory seems important to Quinn: the moment of his birth.

This final scene returns the book to its beginning, as it refers to the child-likeness and vulnerability Quinn's son and of the abused Peter. Having lost all sense of self, Quinn is no longer burdened by such memories, and his questions about the Stillman case have become irrelevant. Instead, the protagonist thinks of "how he had been gently pulled from his mother's womb" and "remember[s] the infinite kindnesses of the world and all the people he had ever loved. Nothing mattered now but the beauty of all this. He wanted to go on writing about it, and it pained him to know that this would not be possible" (200). While Quinn has searched throughout the text for life

meaning, it is only when he faces the end of this book that he seems to see pleasure in life. He wonders if he can “write without a pen, if he could speak instead, filling the darkness with his voice” (200) and finally ends his writing with one last question, “What will happen when there are no pages in the red notebook?” (200).

As the protagonist fades into the background, the first-person narrator, previously a muted and seemingly omniscient voice (suggestive of a masculine, “objective” tone) reveals himself. “The account of this period,” the nameless speaker asserts, “is less full than the author would have liked. But information is scarce, and he has preferred to pass over in silence what could not be definitely confirmed” (173). Qualifying the accuracy of his story while also maintaining a scientific tone that refers to himself in the third-person, the narrator may raise questions not only about his story’s reliability, but also about the masculinist ideology upon which the first half of the text is predicated.

The unreliable narrator further makes his point (whether intentionally or not) when he repeatedly contradicts himself, claiming first that “this story is based entirely on facts” and that “the author feels it his duty not to overstep the bounds of the verifiable, to resist at all costs the perils of invention” and then that “Even the red notebook, which until now has provided a detailed account of Quinn’s experiences, is suspect. We cannot say for certain what happened to Quinn during this period, for it is at this point in the story that he began to lose his grip. (173)

Just as Quinn “loses his grip” when he learns that his assumptions and analysis led him to a dead end, the audience must now pose a similar question to itself: can any of this tale be believed, or has the text been fooling the reader all along? The reader, like Quinn, cannot know what she is and is not to believe, as the narrative “I” concludes with a final self-contradiction,

I have followed the red notebook as closely as I could,
and any inaccuracies in the story should be blamed on me.
There were moments when the text was difficult to
decipher, but I have done my best with it and have
refrained from any interpretation. The red notebook, of
course, is only half the story. (202)

This ending underscores Auster’s challenge to notions of determinacy and absolutism that underlie the masculinist ethos of detective fiction.

As in *The Art Lover*, however, determining just what *City of Glass* has to say about feeling and gender is difficult. In calling attention to male tendencies to withhold feeling while subverting the literary conventions of the mystery novel, one might argue that Auster questions a patriarchal culture which imposes upon men expectations of stoicism and invincibility. The novel’s concern with emotion and gender, however, is not a straight forward one, as Müller makes apparent. According to her argument, at the

same time that *The New York Trilogy* calls attention to the construction of gender norms, it reinforces rather than challenges them.

To point out the conflict between ‘manly’ and ‘unmanly’ ways of providing one’s livelihood, he [Auster] juxtaposes the supposedly dangerous masculine profession of the private investigator with the economically rather unproductive – and thus feminized – vocation of the professional writer. [...] Auster presents more or less besotted male protagonists, who only partially realize that they are in the midst of what seems to be an insoluble dilemma to them, namely how to reconcile the demands of domesticity with those of professional authorship. (144-45)

While *The New York Trilogy* draws needed attention to traditional conceptions of masculinity, Müller argues, it also “insist[s] that males fulfill their roles as ‘breadwinner’ – or ‘head of the household,’ – in spite of all the difficulties they might encounter.” In this way, Auster “ultimately furthers hegemonical views of masculinity,

even through he undercuts the usual machoism of detective fiction through his ironic presentation of the conventions of the hard-boiled detective novel” (144).⁶⁸

It is significant, however, that it is difficult in *City of Glass* to arrive at a conclusive interpretation of Quinn. The text in itself reflects an ambiguous, postmodern world in which arrival at definitive conclusions seems impossible. What *is* possible in this narrative is the acknowledgement that our human lives are shaped by social constructions, and gender is no exception. *City of Glass*, like *The Art Lover*, presents gender alongside questions of identity and life meaning and experiences of emotional intimacy and alienation. As the reader attempts (and often succeeds) within this labyrinthine glass city to identify with the solitary Quinn, she experiences moments of, on the one hand, disorientation and, on the other, empathy. Because the reader’s states of confusion resemble the mental condition in which the protagonist finds himself, reader empathy and estrangement function together to create a text whose emotional and intellectual passages contribute to the text’s affective space.

⁶⁸ Müller supports this argument in looking to *The New York Trilogy* as a whole and contrasting the outcomes of the first two books to that of the final volume, *The Locked Room*. All three stories, Müller explains, present the “more or less besotted male protagonists” as writers whose “need for solitude [...] severely limits the emotional rewards to be gained from a harmonious family life” (145). Instead, these stories “inspire[] fantasies of flight from domesticity” (145). This becomes evident, Müller indicates, in the final and third portion of the trilogy, *The Locked Room*, the only narrative in which the protagonist returns to his former life as family “breadwinner” and the one text in which, according to Auster, the main character “manages to resolve the question for himself” and “comes to accept his own life, to understand that no matter how bewitched or haunted he is, he has to accept reality as it is, to tolerate the presence of his ambiguities within himself” (Müller 161, *The Art of Hunger* 272). These comments seem to reinforce acquiescence to a status quo which is best left unquestioned. While, on the one hand, *City of Glass* may be read as a satire on Western ideals of rationality and empiricism (which are associated with masculinity), Auster’s comments make it questionable to what extent the trilogy challenges gender norms and to what degree it reinforces them.

To associate Auster's writing with thought, while divorcing it from feeling, may reinforce the false notion that emotion and cognition, like male and female writing, are incompatible. In actuality, however, Auster, through defamiliarization, seeks move, to disturb, and, as Alike Varvogli explains, "to startle his readers out of the certainties and assumptions which are formed by the closely defined rules of the genre" (26). Similarly, Maso employs "masculine" aesthetic estrangement in order to challenge the concept of patriarchy. The fact that *City of Glass*, like *The Art Lover*, employs both "masculine" and "feminine" literary styles makes clear that this writing, while powerfully influenced by gender, is not reducible to it. Perhaps, as Millette Shamir Milette and Jennifer Travis write, "It is time [...] to remap what Joyce Davidson [see chapter two] calls the 'affective geography of gender'" (3).

Chapter 5: Mnemonic Spaces and Intertextual Travels in W. G. Sebald's *Austerlitz*

W. G. Sebald's *Austerlitz* (2001), like Auster's *City of Glass*, is a kind of quest narrative, in which a male protagonist searches for a sense of life meaning and human connection within an impersonal modern world.⁶⁹ As Sebald and Auster's self-reflexive stories blur the boundaries between reality and fiction, the reader, along with the books' protagonists, finds herself losing her way in a textual world that also dissolves the borders between interiority and exteriority and the physical and spiritual. Just as *City of Glass*'s Quinn finds himself lost within urban streets which become symbolic for semiotic processes, so too does Austerlitz. Speaking to the narrator of the time when he experienced a series of fainting spells and the temporary paralysis of his language abilities, Austerlitz asserts,

Wenn man die Sprache ansehen kann als eine alte Stadt,
mit einem Gewinkel von Gassen und Plätzen, mit
Quartieren, die weit zurückreichen in die Zeit, mit
abgerissenen, assanierten und neubauten Vierteln und
immer weiter ins Vorfeld hinauswachsenden

⁶⁹ Graeme Gilloch and Jane Kilby point to the remarkable similarities between these authors in "Trauma and Memory in the City: From Auster to Austerlitz." They consider of Sebald and Auster's "autobiographical reflections, biographical accounts and historical anecdotes; the endless transgressions of the boundaries between the fiction and the 'real'; [and] the complex fluctuation between narratives and narrators such that one is frequently led to question: who is it that is now speaking? Who is this 'I' [...]" (16).

Außenbezirken, so glich ich selbst einem Menschen, der sich, aufgrund einer langen Abwesenheit, in dieser Agglomeration nicht mehr zurechtfindet, der nicht mehr weiß, wozu eine Haltestelle dient, was ein Hinterhof, eine Straßenkreuzung, ein Boulevard oder eine Brücke ist. (183)

If language may be regarded as an old city full of streets and squares, nooks and crannies, with some quarters dating far back in time while others have been torn down, cleaned up, and rebuilt, and with suburbs reaching further and further into the surrounding country, then I was like a man who has been abroad a long time and cannot find his way through this urban sprawl anymore. (123-24)

Here language and urban wandering become representative of an inner search for belonging in the world. While the reader follows the solitary figure Austerlitz through this textual map, Austerlitz, like Daniel Quinn, hopes that along the way he might gain a greater understanding of his place in the world. As Austerlitz and Quinn strive to find their ways through the labyrinths of their urban and (post)modern lives, movement within city space becomes a metaphor for memory and self-reflection, processes which

become possible largely through narrative, reading, and writing. Particularly in the case of *Austerlitz*, the act of storytelling appears to offer the possibility for human connection and for some extent of self-understanding, though this hardly means that a search for a definitive self or an attempt to find ultimate closure with the past can ever be complete. *Austerlitz* and *City of Glass* hereby call attention to both the possibilities and the limitations of writing and narrative through their depictions of the relationship between the individual and space.

While Quinn has been profoundly affected by the loss of his wife and son, Sebald's central figure Austerlitz is a child of the Holocaust. His parents suffered and died in concentration camps, while he survived by traveling to England on one of the *Kindertransporte*, trains which brought Jewish children to safety during WWII. Austerlitz, having repressed most of his childhood memories, lacks, like Quinn, a sense of self and of human connection and looks through storytelling to restore it: as he tells the narrator, he has come to realize "daß er bald für seine Geschichte, hinter die er erst in den letzten Jahren gekommen sei, einen Zuhörer finden müsse" (68)/"he must find someone to whom he could relate his own story" (43). With a lacking sense of identity and belonging, Austerlitz has maintained a distance between himself and others. "Kaum lernte ich jemanden kennen," he explains, "dachte ich schon, ich sei ihm zu nahe getreten, kaum wandte sich jemand mir zu, begann ich, mich abzusetzen" (185)/ "No sooner did I become acquainted with someone than I feared I had come too close, no

sooner did someone turn towards me than I began to retreat” (126-26). In sharing his story with another, he may begin to cross this divide.

This communicative act is nonetheless complicated by the protagonist’s lacking sense of self and history. “Seit meiner Kindheit und Jugend,” he explains, “habe ich nicht gewusst, wer ich in Wahrheit bin” (68)/“Since my childhood and youth, [...] I have never known who I really was” (44). While this information helps the reader to better understand the main character, Austerlitz’s inability to claim his life as his own makes him an enigma to himself, the narrator, and the reader as they embark on a journey to find answers to this puzzle. In his universe, it becomes apparent that *Vergangenheitsbewältigung*, the attempt to make sense of and learn from the past (and ultimately to move forward into the future), may never be a resolute and finite process.⁷⁰

While Austerlitz’s continual travels and restlessness reflect his ongoing search for his parents and his forgotten past, his monologues to the narrator, accompanied by often haunting photographs (mostly of places which he presumably visited during his travels), structure the novel. Austerlitz’s relayed accounts and the snapshots laid beside them carry the main character’s listeners with him to revisited places where reflections and memories are evoked as space and time seem to collapse. But while the reader/viewer attempts to imagine herself in Austerlitz’s position, this is made difficult by a number of factors, the most important being that 1) Austerlitz’s experience is

⁷⁰ *Vergangenheitsbewältigung* is a term commonly used in discussions of coming to terms with Germany’s Nazi history following WWII and more recently following reunification.

relayed second-hand, through a seemingly objective narrator who in reality is also affected by the unreliability of memory and individual perception, and 2) that the images which regularly interrupt the text's prose, while on the surface seeming mere illustrations of the places Austerlitz has visited and photographed, are often disconnected in subtle ways from the main character's narrative. As we learn of Austerlitz's experiences through the narrator's reporterly telling, the text complicates questions of referentiality and reliability. As Philip Schlesinger points out, this "ethnographic style," drawing on the genres of reportage, ethnography, travel writing, and autobiography, becomes "a kind of referential fiction that disrupts our generic expectations" (49). It is in this way that the novel "intrigues" its readers, asking them to question the status of the narrative (51).

For Schlesinger, this narrative approach points to the condition of exile: the outsider does not merely tell his story to others; rather another explains him to mainstream culture through an authoritative voice. Building on Schlesinger's argument that *Austerlitz's* documentary qualities indicate the main character's outsider status, I furthermore argue that the divide between the central figure and the reader is reflective of his audience's difficulty in understanding the protagonist in his condition of exile. In this way, we too find ourselves becoming outsiders, that is to another's experience and to a text whose referentiality and reliability remain questionable. Aware of the tension between the narrator's and Austerlitz's accounts, as well as between the poetic spaces of the book's prose and photographs, we are left to question how much of this story and its

pictures we can regard as documentation of the protagonist's wanderings. At the same time we may feel moved by the narrative's poetic language and haunting images, which ask us to imagine Austerlitz's (and at times the narrator's) perceptual reality. Thus a reader follows the protagonist's wanderings while we also, as Deane Blackler writes, experiencing a "desire to take her own bearing, extratextually and intratextually, stepping away from the narrator's side for her own imaginative and contemplative purposes" (187).

As the reader's desire "to take her own bearing" exists in tension with her desire to empathize with the main character, she may experience a sense of lostness and displacement similar to that which Austerlitz does: the audience, moving between identificatory and distancing modes of reading, may imagine what it is like to be the isolated figure Austerlitz, while nonetheless failing to identify with a character who constantly disappears from view. This chapter considers the ways in which *Austerlitz's* visual and verbal constructions of space, travel, and memory elicit reader empathy and distancing, hereby offering paths for exploring the complexity of affective experience, particularly as it relates to our individual and collective relationships to the past and present.

To explore how prose and image in *Austerlitz* work together to create a narrative of travel, it is useful to first understand photography's diegetic role. Most obviously, the main character is a photographer: he carries a camera with him on his travels, recording

objects and places which speak to him and which often remind him of the past. Though the book's first several images illustrate not Austerlitz's, but the narrator's thoughts and experiences immediately before meeting Austerlitz, the majority of the text's pictures present places and things to which the protagonist refers. One can account for most of these images' integration into the story when, on page fifteen, the narrator explains that Austerlitz gave his listener the photograph collection in the winter of 1996, after their multiple encounters of the preceding thirty years. Since most of these pictures, though not mentioned directly, seem to illustrate Austerlitz's experiences, it might seem reasonable to assume that the novel's pictures originate from his scrapbook.

These pictures' narrative role, however, is complicated by the fact that some of them, mostly those in the story's beginning, correspond not to Austerlitz's experiences, but rather to those of the narrator. The unclear origins of these pictures add to the spectral qualities that characterize Austerlitz's experiences, perceptions, and memories and which seem to illustrate Roland Barthes' description of the photograph's uncanny doubleness of the photograph. As Barthes writes in "The Photographic Message" and *Camera Lucida*, on the one hand celluloid images provide the viewer with evidence of actual past events; on the other they offer entrance into a realm that now exists only in memory and to which we can never return.⁷¹ Thus, photographs possess a mystical

⁷¹ In "The Photographic Message," Barthes describes this "doubleness" as "the photographic paradox." On the one hand the photograph has a connotative function – it clearly refers to a moment which once was. On the other hand the photograph denotes, functioning mystically and nonverbally (19).

quality which resists easy interpretation and which asks a viewer to engage on an emotional level with them, asking what more lies behind their mere surface.⁷²

The photographic image's surreal quality is heightened in *Austerlitz* by the commentary – and often the lack thereof – that accompanies these images. Without any contextualization through captions or commentary, Sebald's photographs maintain a degree of detachment from the text which surrounds them. At times, the narrator speaks directly about the text's images, but most of the while these pictures, though usually seeming to illustrate the given prose, go unmentioned. Since most images correspond to Austerlitz's travels, one might presume that they represent the places he visits and thus might feel as though she is following the protagonist's movements. But because the pictures are not fully integrated into the text – and sometimes are even placed before or after the passages which correspond to them – these images require that the reader actively participate in constructing the book's narrative. In creating a gap between the text's narrative and its illustrations, Sebald asks the viewer to approach these images with critical inquiry at the same time that she searches for a meaningful a connection between them and the text. The photographs, placed alongside the protagonist's and narrator's reflections on memory, perception, and modern Western culture and history,

⁷² To explore the photograph's ability to elicit a personal and emotional response from the viewer, Barthes coins the term *punctum*, literally "wound." The *punctum* is one or several details in a given picture that "pierce" the viewer, revealing the image's significance – an importance which is evoked usually by memory that is of a personal and emotional nature. The photographic image hereby does far more than offer evidence of that which once existed: it allows the observer access to the past and the ghostly and into a process of attempting, though often futilely, to understand it. The viewer's conflicting impulses to regard photography as evidence and to be mystified by it, I would argue, parallel the tendency in Sebald for the reader to experience identification with and estrangement from the text and its pictures.

suggest that the reader most likely also shares an intimate and complex relationship to the text's pictures. As Maya Barzalai points out, the reader and main character's encounters with the material in *Austerlitz* is underscored in the book's photographs, as is evident in the protagonist's attempts to organize his collection into a logical order, most clearly articulated in the following passage:

Austerlitz sagte mir, dass er manchmal stundenlang sitze und diese Photographien, oder andere, die er aus seinen Beständen hervorhole, mit der rückwärtigen Seite nach oben auslege, ähnlich wie bei einer Partie Patience, und dass er sie dann, jedesmal von neuem erstaunt über das, was er sehe, nach und nach umwende, die Bilder hin und her und übereinanderschiebe, in eine aus Familienähnlichkeiten sich ergebende Ordnung, oder auch aus dem Spiel ziehe, bis nichts mehr übrig sei als die graue Fläche des Tisches, oder bis er sich, erschöpft von der Denk- und Erinnerungsarbeit, niederlegen müsse auf der Ottomane. (175-76)

Austerlitz told me that he sometimes sat here [before his photographs] for hours, laying out these photographs or

others from his collection the wrong way up, as if playing a game of patience, and [] then, one by one, he turned them over, always with a new sense of surprise at what he saw, pushing the pictures back and forth over each other, arranging them in an order depending on their family resemblances, or withdrawing them from the game until either there was nothing left but the gray tabletop, or he felt exhausted by the constant effort of thinking and remembering and had to rest on the ottoman. (119)

Austerlitz's encounter with photography, Barzalai explains, may be read as "a metaphor of the reader's own encounter with the photographs incorporated in the novel as a whole" (215). Both the central character and his audience sit before pictures, searching in their minds for connections between the images their eyes perceive. Because the source of these pictures and their referentiality remains questionable, however, we can never quite share the protagonist's position.

Though physical places are not mentioned in the passage, it is most always these which are depicted in the book's photographs and echoed in Austerlitz's meditations on his otherworldly experiences of space and time. As text and images connect the main character and ourselves to a kind of defamiliarized world where physical laws as we know them no longer reign, atemporality becomes closely connected to both

photographic and mnemonic processes. Similar to Barthes statement that the celluloid image reflects a timelessness (a decontexted space which one might liken to Shlovsky's notion of defamiliarization), Sebald's work creates a world in which alternate perceptions of time and space become possible.⁷³

Austerlitz's picture taking and viewing, like his experience of space, travel, and disbelonging, become intimately connected to his desire to recollect lost memories and thus to find a way out of his isolation. In Austerlitz's descriptions of wandering through a world and a time in which he feels he does not belong, it repeatedly becomes apparent that travel (again like photographs) creates for him a different mode of perceiving time and space, a kind of defamiliarization which the reader is also invited to occupy. Finding refuge in the sense of timelessness which he discovers in meandering through urban spaces, his travels and photographing appear to carry him not just through a physical landscape, but also through history and memory. For example, in secluded urban spaces like "stille[] Höfe [], in denen sich über Jahrzehnte nichts verändert hat," Austerlitz explains,

spüre ich beinahe körperlich, wie sich die Strömung der
Zeit im Gravitationsfeld der vergessenen Dinge
verlangsamt. Alle Momente unseres Lebens scheinen mir
dann in einem einzigen Raum beisammen, ganz als

⁷³ In *Camera Lucida*, Barthes speaks of the photograph's ability to freeze a subject in time, thus also assuring that it exists in the past (77). This freezing of time in the historical photograph is a "defeat of Time" (96).

existierten die zukünftigen Ereignisse bereits und harrten
 nur darauf, daß wir uns endlich in ihnen einfinden [...]
 (367)

[in] quiet courtyards where nothing has changed for
 decades I feel [...] almost physically, the current of time
 slowing down in the gravitational field of oblivion. It
 seems to me then as if all the moments of our life occupy
 the same space, as if future events already existed and
 were only waiting for us to find our way to them at last
 [...] (257-58)

In such moments, memory, like history, breaks down, for without a sense of past or future, one cannot remember that which has passed, nor can one anticipate what will be. While it might seem that within “quiet courtyards” of stasis one must neither struggle towards a destination nor be burdened by the past, the spaces and travels Austerlitz describes in terms of timelessness frequently underscore an interconnectedness of past, present, and future which seems so essential to an awareness of history. The main character’s visit to Liverpool Street Station and its Ladies Waiting Room suggests that it is in such spaces, filled with visions of light and shadow which mirror the text’s photographs, that the main character is able to recollect that which he once forgot. It is

here that Austerlitz (and we subsequently) finds himself during one of his many aimless late night walks. As if he has traveled back in time, the main character sees himself as a young boy waiting for and then being met by his new adoptive parents after his train ride from Prague to London on a *Kindertransport* of early WWII.

The ghostly world of the Liverpool train station which both Austerlitz and his reader attempt to envision is, like the novel's photographs, emptied of people and filled with lights and shadows. In this "Eingang zur Unterwelt" (188)/ "entrance to the underworld" (127-28), located fifteen to twenty feet below street level (188/127-28)), the speaker's metaphysical experience again takes shape through his perception of lights and shadows, which exist within constructed placeless places/spaces of timelessness where physical laws no longer hold. In the London train station of the present day, Austerlitz describes "Andere Strahlen wieder beschrieben merkwürdige, gegen die Gesetze der Physik verstoßende Bahnen, gingen von der geraden Linie ab und drehten sich in Spiralen und Wirbeln um sich selber, ehe sie verschluckt wurden von den schwankenden Schatten" (198)./"Other beams of light following curious trajectories which violated the laws of physics, departing from the rectilinear and twists in spirals and eddies before being swallowed up by the wavering shadows" (135). The collision of past and present is described through visual imagery which resembles the black-and-white photography that carries throughout Sebald's text: this transcendental realm is dominated by lights and shadows which emphasize the collapse of space and time (the "Strahlen" (200)/ "beams of light" which defy physical laws and the "schwankende

Schatten” (198)/“wavering shadows” (135) that accompany them, the “staubgrauen Licht” (200)/“dusty gray light” (136) that suggests the fuzziness of memory, and the darkness of a “sternförmigen Festung [], in einer von aller Welt abgeschnittenen Oubliette” (204)/ “a dungeon entirely cut off from the outside world” (138)).⁷⁴ As we occupy this narrative space, we form a misty image in our minds which corresponds with the photographs that structure the book and which perhaps anticipates the picture soon appearing on the page of an interior space filled with a darkness broken by the blinding light that stretches horizontally across it.



Figure 5.1 Uncaptioned image from *Austerlitz* (Liverpool Street Station)

⁷⁴ In the introduction to *Searching for Sebald: Photography after W. G. Sebald* (2007), Lisa Patt similarly notes the parallels between Austerlitz’s descriptions of spaces and of photographic qualities. Not only do we often “find him in rooms that visually and metaphorically recall the mechanisms of the camera” (73); he “performs photography through dynamic acts of translation, as when the light and shadow chaos of the negative is subjected to the first of its many coding procedures” (as, for example, in ‘gray coated porters,’ a mother in an ‘ashen-gray silk bodice,’ and ‘people ill and gray’ in ‘an overexposed day’) (Patt 73).

We, like Austerlitz, may struggle to imagine (or in Austerlitz's case reimagine) ourselves in this deserted room, which seems to show little sign of remaining life. Can we inhabit this place with the protagonist, or can we only view it from afar as outside observers?

The picture's contrasting darkness and light reappear in the passage below this photograph, though the text's detailed description of that same dreamlike place underscores the way in which language and the visual exist in tension with one another:

Der Schotter zwischen den Geleisen, die rissigen Schwellen, die Ziegelmauern, die Steinsockel [...], die hoch aufragenden gußeisernen Säulen mit den palmblättrig verzierten Kapitellen, dies alles war eingeschärzt von einer schmierigen Schicht, die sich im Verlauf eines Jahrhunderts gebildet hatte [...]" (188-89)

The ballast between the tracks, the cracked sleepers, the brick walls with their stone bases [...], and the towering cast-iron columns with their palmate capitals were all covered in a greasy black layer formed, over the course of a century [...] (128)

As this passage demonstrates and as Blackler notes, Sebald's descriptive prose asks us to create detailed pictures in our minds which often exist in tension with the text's obscure photographs (191). Removed from our everyday understanding of time and space, we may join Austerlitz in an alternate space where light and shadows open a door leading beyond the present and into dream, memory, and the metaphysical. Recollecting his experience in Liverpool Street Station, the protagonist states,

Kaum einen Lidschlag lang sah ich zwischendurch riesige Räume sich auftun [...], die den Blick immer weiter hinaufzogen [...], und je länger ich [...] in die Höhe hinaufstarrte, desto mehr kam es mir vor, als dehnte sich der Innenraum, in welchem ich mich befand als setzte er in der unwahrscheinlichsten perspektivischen Verkürzung unendlich sich fort und beugte sich zugleich, wie das nur in einem derartigen falschen Universum möglich war, in sich selber zurück. [...] mitten in dieser Gefängnis- und Befreiungsvision die Frage mich quälte, ob ich in das Innere einer Ruine oder in das eines erst im Entstehen begriffenen Rohbaus geraten war. (199)

From time to time, and just for a split second, I saw huge halls open up [...], all leading the eye on and on. [...] and the longer I stared upwards [...] the more I felt as if the room where I stood were expanding, going on for ever and ever in an improbably foreshortend perspective, at the same time turning back into itself in a way possible only in such a deranged universe. [...] in the middle of this vision of imprisonment and liberation I could not stop wondering whether it was a ruin or a building in the process of construction that I had entered. (135-36)

In a seemingly uncontained space where light's dynamics transcend physical laws, Austerlitz (and perhaps his audience as well) cannot ground himself: he is unable to determine whether the area that unlocks before him is that of the past or of the future, just as he does not know whether that expanse might lead to freedom or to containment. Within this confusion, however, buried memories which reconnect him to an estranged past return. In this defamiliarized space,

Erinnerungen, hinter denen und in denen sich viel weiter
noch zurückreichende Dinge verbargen, immer das eine
im andern verschachtelt, gerade so wie die

labyrinthischen Gewölbe, die ich in dem staubgrauen Licht zu erkennen glaubte, sich fortsetzten in unendlicher Folge. Tatsächlich hatte ich das Gefühl, sagte Austerlitz, als enthalte der Wartesaal, in dessen Mitte ich wie ein Geblendeter stand, alle Stunden meiner Vergangenheit, all meine von jeher unterdrückten, ausgelöschten Ängste und Wünsche, als sei das schwarzweiße Rautenmuster der Steinplatten zu meinen Füßen das Feld für das Endspiel meines Lebens... (200-201)

the scraps of memory beginning to drift through the outlying regions of my mind [...] memories behind and within which many things much further back in the past seemed to lie, all interlocking like the labyrinthine vaults I saw in the dusty gray light, and which seemed to go on and on for ever. In fact I felt, said Austerlitz, that the waiting room where I stood as if dazzled contained all the hours of my past life, all the suppressed and extinguished fears and wishes I had ever entertained. (136)

In this scene, it is as if the many layers of history are all simultaneously visible and Austerlitz has crossed the boundary separating him from the ghosts of the past. In such moments, one is reminded of Austerlitz's feeling "als gäbe es überhaupt keine Zeit, sondern nur verschiedene, nach einer höheren Sterometrie ineinander verschachtelte Räume, zwischen denen die Lebendigen und die Toten, je nachdem es ihnen zumute ist, hin und her gehen können" (269)/"[of] time [] not exist[ing] at all, only various spaces interlocking according to the rules of a higher form of stereometry, between which the living and the dead can move back and forth as they like" (185). A link to the past, such passages suggest, is only possible outside of everyday life and experience. This may frustrate a reader who will forever remain an outsider to Austerlitz's story, as well as to the intangible past.

The photographic qualities of such passages, with their descriptions of light, dark, shadows, and gray tones, reflect the connections between photography and memory which Sebald, like numerous critics of visual culture, establishes.⁷⁵ In *Camera Lucida*, Barthes focuses on photography in relation to time and memory. For him, the photograph functions indexically, pointing to something which once was (that "this has been"), but also that no longer is and that now exists only in memory. As "a reminder of something which once was but no longer is" (80), the photographic image is "literally

⁷⁵ In an interview with Kenneth Baker, Sebald acknowledges a familiarity with and interest in theories on the photograph: "I've always liked image-text relationships. In the '70s there were very interesting things written about photography by Susan Sontag, Roland Barthes, John Berger. I felt a direct rapport with things said in these essays."

an emanation of the referent” (80), a ghost of the past, a mystical object with an uncanny tie to the dead. Barthes’ statements point to a distance between then, the moment of a photo’s making, and now. The viewer, he suggests, experiences a separation between the present moment in which she experiences everyday life and the image towards which she gazes. At the same time she strongly is drawn to the image, suggesting that it has some resonance for her.

Barthes remarks on the sense of connection between image and onlooker which the photograph may elicit: despite the photograph’s seeming deadness, the viewer experiences a kind of corporeal connection to it. He describes the viewing experience as follows:

From a real body, which was there, proceed radiations
which ultimately touch me, who am here; . . . A sort of
umbilical cord links the body of the photographed thing to
my gaze: light, though impalpable, is here a carnal
medium, a skin I share with anyone who has been
photographed. (quoted in Hirsh 14)

The above description suggests that images, at the same time that they are connected to the world of the dead, possess a kind of life that touches the beholder and speaks to her own self and body. This state of mind also seems applicable to Austerlitz and his listeners: they attempt to arrange images into a comprehensible order, despite

the frustration and even impossibility of this activity, for the photograph nonetheless speaks to them in some way.

The notion of a corporeal and affectively charged sense of connection to the photograph is further developed by the art historian Jill Bennett.⁷⁶ In *Empathic Vision: Affect, Trauma, and Contemporary Art* (2005), Bennett argues that photographs do not only represent moments in the past; they also may convey emotional or bodily experience by evoking in the viewer her own memories and inviting her to experience an image not just mentally but also physically. Drawing upon Deleuze's early work in *Proust and Signs*, according to which an "encountered sign" is felt rather than perceived cognitively, Bennett explains that feeling is "actually a more effective trigger for thought because of how it grasps us" (7) through "an embodiment of sensation" (8). Since most contemporary art does not lend itself to realist interpretation or characters with which we can identify, our affective responses to such works "emerge from a direct engagement with sensation as it is registered in the work" rather than from emotional identification or sympathy (7). As the boundaries between inside and outside dissolve, "affect is revealed to flow through bodies and spaces, rather than residing within a single subject" (13).⁷⁷ Such an emotive experience, Bennett argues, can also be

⁷⁶ In "Family Pictures: Maus, Mourning, and Post-Memory," Marianne Hirsh notes this connection between Barthes' *Camera Lucida* and Bennett's idea of experiencing the image on a corporeal level.

⁷⁷ With this statement, Bennett seems to align herself with scholars like Brian Massumi (also cited in chapter one), who makes an important distinction between the terms affect and emotion. Drawing on the work of Spinoza, Massumi defines affect as the body's "capacity for affecting or being affected." While emotion describes the way in which an individual, shaped by her own memories and experiences, registers a given moment corporeally, affect extends beyond the self and involves "a stronger sense of

thought provoking as artworks “can produce a form of empathy that is more complex and considered than a purely emotional or sentimental reaction” (24). Such an encounter with the image moves beyond the personal and into the realm of the political: the viewer experiences an image as reflective of affect, which extends beyond herself rather than centering on her personal emotion and perception.

Such an engagement in images becomes possible in *Austerlitz* as the categories of self and other dissolve. This dissolution is made possible largely because the book’s images are not easily ascribed to Austerlitz and his narrator alone. (As mentioned, a number of the text’s photographs present places which only the narrator visits, and it remains unclear whether the protagonist necessarily produced many of the images the reader/viewer encounters. The disconnects between narrative and image underscore to the audience’s outsider status: it must rely upon its own associations, interpretations, and subjective processes, bringing its own history to the table.

The viewer’s bodily experience of the photographs in *Austerlitz* is greatly shaped by the book’s construction of spaces that the reader/viewer imagines and into which she intrajects herself. This physical experience is, again, complicated by the novel’s disorienting qualities. Blackler speaks to this experience when she writes of the sense of trappedness which the text’s pictures evoke:

embeddedness in a larger field of life — a heightened sense of belonging, with other people and to other places” (Zournazi).

As we try to read the resolutely silent photographs in isolation, we are partially trapped in a labyrinth of mystery that Sebald has constructed. We can never enter into the experience that the photographs represent, nor share the impulse of the recorder. For that matter we are outside the experience of the one who has selected and inserted the photographs into a verbal text which reconstructs someone else's story. We are momentarily imprisoned, in each encounter with an image, because the photographs reflect our otherness as readers in a darkly unrevealing way [...] (176)

As Sebald's audience, we continually attempt to locate ourselves both within and outside of the text but are, like Austerlitz, denied full access to an understanding of the labyrinth in which we find ourselves.

That the novel's images involve the reader's affective and bodily engagement is apparent in the photographs of doorways and gates which, about two-thirds of the way into the book, nearly fill the entirety of four pages (276-79)/(190-93). They, too, are reminders of obstructed understanding and vision and might remind one of Austerlitz's earlier statement, "Genau kann niemand erklären, was in uns geschieht, wenn die Türe aufgerissen wird, hinter der die Schrecken der Kindheit verborgen sind" (41)/"No one

can explain exactly what happens within us when the doors behind which our childhood terrors lurk are flung open” (25). Presumably taken during Austerlitz’s visit to the ghost town Terezin, which neighbors the concentration camp Theresienstadt where his mother died, these pictures stand as passageways to the past, closed and locked, aligning deserted streets where human absence suggests the deaths of millions.

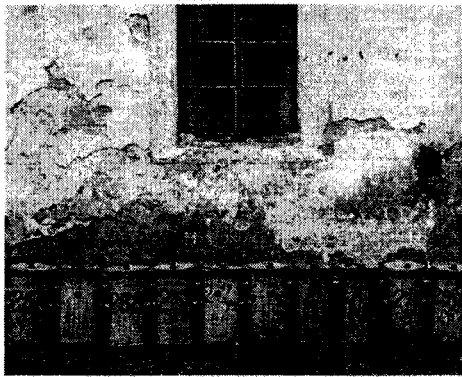


Figure 5.2 Uncaptioned image from *Austerlitz* (building facades)



Figure 5.3 Uncaptioned image from *Austerlitz* (doorways)

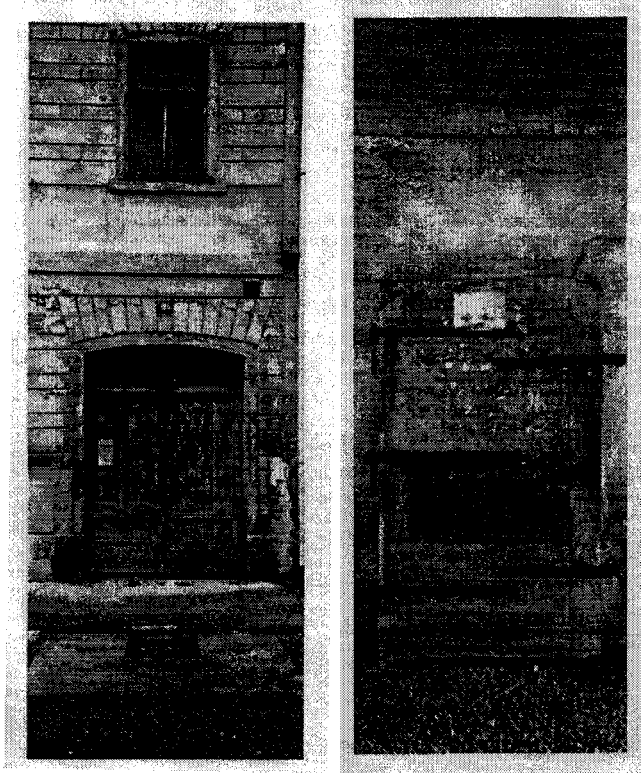


Figure 5.4 Uncaptioned image from *Austerlitz* (doorways)

These straight-on, symmetrical shots of decrepit and yet unyieldingly strong structures confront the viewer with a directness that simultaneously captures her gaze and withholds from her what lies behind them. The darkened, barred windows which appear on the first two presented facades; a shut door with no visible handle; and another door barred by four black metal bolts not only reinforce the protagonist's thoughts in the book's beginning on the power of institutional buildings/structures to control the masses. They also suggest the inaccessibility of history, the unconscious, and memory, as the spaces and objects behind these barricades remain out of our view. Moreover, these doorways are reminders of the impossible separation between the worlds of the living and the dead and of Austerlitz's past and present, as they harken back to the doors of Theresienstadt behind which the main character's mother presumably perished. These enclosed spaces and darkness, as in his dream of Liverpool Street Station, characterize the unremembered or the obstructed, but in this case, it remains unclear whether these portals will ever be exposed to any light. As Austerlitz explains following the photographs' insertion, these structures are most uncanny ("unheimlich") because they appear to "[versperren] den Zugang [] zu einem nie noch durchdrungenen Dunkel, in welchem [...] nichts mehr sich regte als der von den Wänden abblätternde Kalk und die Spinnen, die ihre Fäden ziehen" (281)/"obstruct[] access to a darkness never yet penetrated, a darkness in which I thought, said Austerlitz, there was no more movement at all apart from the whitish peeling off the walls and the spiders spinning their threads" (189). As in the waiting room of Liverpool Street Station, the fuzzy pictures of the

Terezin doors and the unknowns of the past may unground the reader, while the sharp image of spiderwebs invites her to imagine that same setting.

As the doors of Terezin seem to lock history behind them, they become what Alexandra Tischel calls “Speicher von Gedächtnis,” or “containers of memory” (43). Rather than being a “Versuch, das Undarstellbare sichtbar oder anschaulich zu machen,” an “attempt to make the unrepresentable visible,” they function as ways of searching for traces of the past (“die Spuren der Geschichte”) found in remnants (43). In this sense,

Erinnerung und Raum werden demnach in doppelter
Weise miteinander verkoppelt: Ebenso wie das
Gedächtnis topisch gedacht wird, so werden Orte und
Dinge als Speicher von Gedächtnis im Sinne historischer
und individueller Vergangenheit konzipiert. (43)

Memory and space are thus inextricably connected: just as
memory is thought of as topical, places and things are
conceived of as storing memory as it pertains to the
historical and the individual past. (my translation)

Tischel's thoughts point to the way in which photographs in Sebald appear to possess a life of their own, an idea in keeping with W. J. T. Mitchell's argument in *What Do Pictures Want?* that, despite a modernist resistance to viewing images as magical, we continue to approach pictures affectively, as if they desire something from us. One can imagine Mitchell thinking of *Austerlitz*'s haunting images when he writes of the "peculiar tendency of images to absorb and be absorbed by human subjects in processes that look suspiciously like those of living things" (2). It is perhaps in part this same experience of the image as sentient which leads Bennett to speak of photography's potential for communicating corporeal and affective experience.

Rather than denying this so-called "primitive" inclination towards animating the visual, Mitchell (like Bennett) believes that we should pay attention to our impulsive and affective responses to the visual, considering their potential value. In describing the visual in terms of sentience and consciousness, Mitchell presents the image as socially, historically, and culturally significant. Rather than adopting an individualistic psychoanalytic model, he considers pictures as reflections of the collective.⁷⁸ Mitchell's work begins to articulate the uncanny draw one feels to the photographs in *Austerlitz*, which lead the viewer not so much to identify with the main character as to search for a

⁷⁸ Mitchell writes, "Images are active players in the game of establishing and changing values. They are capable of introducing new values into the world and thus of threatening old ones. For better and for worse, human beings establish their collective, historical identity by creating around them a second nature composed of images which do not merely reflect the values consciously intended by their makers, but radiate new forms of value formed in the collective, political unconscious of their beholders. [...] These stand at the interface of the most fundamental social conflicts [... and] seem to possess agency, aura, a 'mind of their own,' which is a projection of a collective desire that is necessarily obscure to those who find themselves [...] celebrating around or inside an image" (105-06).

meaning beyond his individual story, a significance which, like his meditations on history and society, might resonate with a cultural collective.⁷⁹

Seeming to demonstrate Mitchell's thesis, Austerlitz is fascinated by images to which he ascribes human qualities and mnemonic powers. Reflecting upon his first encounters with the medium as an adolescent, Austerlitz comments that

Besonders in den Bann gezogen hat mich bei der
 photographischen Arbeit stets der Augenblick, in dem
 man auf dem belichteten Papier die Schatten der
 Wirklichkeit sozusagen aus dem Nichts hervorkommen
 sieht, genau wie Erinnerungen, sagte Austerlitz, die ja
 auch inmitten der Nacht in uns auftauchen und die sich
 dem, der sie festhalten will, so schnell wieder verdunkeln,
 nicht anders als ein photographischer Abzug, den man zu
 lange im Entwicklungsbad liegenlässt. (117)

⁷⁹ The idea that photographs possess a sentience related to a kind of collective consciousness is central to Walter Benjamin, who describes the camera as an expression of the unconscious in *A Short History of Photography* (1931): "A different nature speaks to the camera than speaks to the eye; most different in that in the place of a space penetrated by a person with consciousness is formed a space penetrated by the unconscious. [...] Photographic aids: time-lapse, enlargements, unlock this for him. He discovers the optical-unconscious first of all through it, just as the drive-unconscious is discovered through psychoanalysis" (quoted in Leslie). Photography, with its ability to alter our perceptions of time and space, Benjamin contends, takes on the life of the unconscious mind, offering us access to new ways of seeing which may reveal that about which we otherwise remain unaware. The camera produces the dialectical image, which is a potential site for historical illumination and the awakening of repressed consciousness to consciousness (Gilloch 115). That the photograph speaks to the collective, not just the individual, is reiterated in his 1936 essay "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," where he states that "mass movements are usually discerned more clearly by a camera than by the naked eye" (quoted in Smith).

In my photographic work I was always especially entranced, said Austerlitz, by the moment when the shadows of reality, so to speak, emerge out of nothing on the exposed paper, as memories do in the middle of the night, darkening again if you try to cling to them, just like a photographic print left in the developing bath too long.

(77)

Here, interestingly, the act of developing pictures – as well as of taking and viewing them – functions as a metaphor not only for recording and preserving memory, but also for forgetting them. Celluloid, like memory, has the potential to become overexposed and thus to resubmerge into the forgotten. As Austerlitz struggles so intensely with acts of recollection and forgetting, the book's entire structure becomes an analogy for both his and culture's relationship to history and to memory.

This analogy between the mind and photographic development, which applies most directly to the central character but is hardly confined to him, is first suggested in the novel's opening pages when the narrator (not Austerlitz) visits the Nocturama, an artificial environment which allows visitors to observe nocturnal animals in their waking hours during the daytime. The Nocturama serves as one example of how photography and memory in *Austerlitz* are inextricably linked to place. As Duttlinger

points out, “the connections here between darkness and vision” underscore the intersection between photography, recollection, and forgetting, all of which occur in the dark “and therefore in the liminal sphere between dreaming and waking, consciousness and the unconscious” (158). In this simulated world, where the darkness of night and the light of day are reversed, the narrator is fascinated by a raccoon which washes an apple “als hoffe er, durch dieses, weit über jede vernünftige Gründlichkeit hinausgehende Waschen entkommen zu können aus der falschen Welt, in die er gewissermassen ohne sein eigenes Zutun geraten war” (10-11)/ “as if it hoped that all this washing, which went far beyond any reasonable thoroughness, would help it to escape the unreal world in which it had arrived, so to speak, through no fault of its own” (4). This “falsche Welt” is associated with darkness, as is suggested in the notably large eyes of the Nocturama animals, which demand engagement as they possess an “unverwandt forschenden Blick, wie man ihn findet bei bestimmten Malern und Philosophen, die vermittels der reinen Anschauung und des reinen Denkens versuchen, das Dunkel zu durchdringen, das uns umgibt” (11)/ “fixed, inquiring gaze found in certain painters and philosophers who seek to penetrate the darkness which surrounds us” (5). Between these lines appear four narrow rectangular-shaped pictures, each with a pair of eyes staring directly at their viewer (first those of what appears a small monkey, then those of an owl, and finally those of two men (the first of whom, according to Ross Posnock, belong to Ludwig Wittgenstein)).⁸⁰

⁸⁰ This textual moment brings to mind John Berger’s “Why Look at Animals?,” in which the critic argues that when we look at animals, we are in a sense staring at ourselves and the mortality which we share



Figure 5.5 Uncaptioned image from *Austerlitz* (eyes of animals and men)

Like an actor directly addressing her audience, these eyes disrupt theatrical illusion, asking the beholder to return their gaze and to consider her connection to the life and consciousness (frozen in an inanimate image) that asks for her response. Thus the reader is invited to become involved, along with Austerlitz and his teller, with the attempt to find a way out of darkness and a way into light.

This process of “bringing to light” will repeatedly surface as, similar to the inhabitants of the Nocturama, Austerlitz attempts through his travels, storytelling, and

with them. Since the nineteenth century, however, culture has become increasingly disconnected from animals, preferring to ignore their physicality and thus own impending death as well. As the creaturely and human eyes in *Austerlitz* directly confront their viewer, they, like the novel more generally, may be understood as a meditation on the human condition which invites the reader reflection.

photographing to find a truth about European history and about his family's history. As in the Nocturama, this effort will be made difficult by the darkness that surrounds so many of his memories. Moreover, whether the main character can arrive at a "truth" remains questionable, for the Nocturama is a space of appearances where light and darkness may simply yield illusion. The narrator, Austerlitz, and we may never arrive at a "reliable" and stable view of the world in which we find ourselves.

But it is precisely an alternate point of view which Austerlitz seeks through his travels and picture taking. In the suspended realms of travel and of photography, he explains, the conditions of light change, seeming to make contact between the dead and the living possible. In places removed from the everyday world and its regulation of time, "kommt [es] mir vor, daß wir, die wir uns noch am Leben befinden, in den Augen der Toten irreale und nur manchmal, *unter bestimmten Lichtverhältnissen und atmosphärischen Bedingungen sichtbar werdende Wesen sind*" (italics mine, 269)./"it seems to me that we who are still alive are unreal in the eyes of the dead, that only occasionally, *in certain lights and atmospheric conditions, do we appear in their field of vision*" (italics mine, 185). This space of suspended temporality, given the right luminosities and environmental conditions, offers the possibility of bridging the realms of the living and the deceased, much as does the camera.

The central character's (and perhaps our own) compulsion through photography to discover the past and to make sense of the spaces which he momentarily inhabits is suggested upon the first (coincidental) meeting between the novel's two primary figures

in Antwerp Central Station. When the story's teller enters this mystical environment, a liminal site of waiting which appears in its interior darkness as "ein zweites Nocturama" (13)/"another Nocturama" (6), he notices the solitary Austerlitz taking pictures of a transitory space which, like the many train stations in the text, connects locations and yet seems to remain remote from the everyday world of time. In such places of pause, which at once suggest the ephemeral and the timeless, it becomes clear that the main character's individual experiences, thoughts, and perceptions, however remote they might seem from the world around him, are inextricable from the time and culture in which he lives. Such textual moments indicate that the many passages focusing on the main character's personal history and his sense of isolation from others are to be understood within a larger context: the ways in which modernity's regulation and institutionalization of time and space affect our everyday perceptions and experiences.

Austerlitz's concern with modernity's influence on our sensory and perceptual experience becomes evident upon his first meeting with the narrator when the story's teller walks into Antwerp Central Station. The two quickly come into extensive conversation, Austerlitz reflecting on the beginnings of the train system which, he explains, necessitated the regulating of time and hence gave birth to a new experience of space and time that became characteristic of modernity:

erst seit der um die Mitte des 19. Jahrhunderts erfolgten
Gleichschaltung beherrsche die Zeit unbestrittenermaßen

die Welt. Nur indem wir uns an den von ihr vorgeschriebenen Ablauf hielten, vermochten wir die riesigen Räume zu durchheilen, die uns voneinander trennten. Freilich, sagte Austerlitz nach einer Weile, das Verhältnis von Raum und Zeit, so wie man es beim Reisen erfährt, bis auf den heutigen Tag etwas Illusionistisches und Illusionäres, weshalb wir auch, jedesmal wenn wir von auswärts zurückkehren, nie mit Sicherheit wissen, ob wir wirklich fortgewesen sind. (22)

and not until they were all standardized around the middle of the nineteenth century did time truly reign supreme. It was only by following the course time prescribed that we could hasten through the gigantic spaces separating us from each other. And indeed, said Austerlitz after a while, to this day there is something illusionistic and illusory about the relationship of time and space as we experience it in traveling, which is why whenever we come home from elsewhere we never feel quite sure if we have really been abroad (12).

Like the photograph, train travel possesses an illusory quality which appears removed from ordinary physical laws. In the modern world, in particular, our perceptual experience has been transformed by technologies like the train, which require that our every hour be regulated. Here the main character immediately calls to mind Wolfgang Schivelbusch's *The Railway Journey: The Industrialization of Time and Space in the 19th Century*, in which he argues that the railroad profoundly changed our perception of space and time, desensualizing and denaturalizing its passengers and alienating them from the world which they inhabit (20).⁸¹ Austerlitz practically recites Schivelbusch's theory when he states that while such standardization was intended "die riesigen Räume zu durcheilen, die uns voneinander trennten"/to "hasten the gigantic spaces separating us from each other," the train stands as a precursor to the human desensitization which has come to characterize modern society. This consequent disconnection from our senses, the protagonist will suggest, has reinforced a long history of violence and force, of building defensive fortresses which actually separate human beings from one another, keeping them living in vigilance and fear.

⁸¹ Particularly since the 1980s, academic interest in the connections between modernity and perception has grown tremendously. Among the leading scholars of new media theory was German theorist Friedrich Kittler, who argues in *Grammophon, Film, Typewriter* (1986) that toward the end of the nineteenth century, new media technologies like phonography, photography, and film led individuals to develop a new relationship to the senses. Jonathan Crary similarly contends in *Techniques of the Observer: On Vision and Modernity in the 19th Century* (1990) that in the 1820s optical inventions like the stereoscope, demonstrating the physiology of the eye, offered viewers on the one hand a new autonomy while at the same time creating new modes for controlling and standardizing vision. While these scholars' historicizations of perception proves fascinating and clearly relevant to a reading of *Austerlitz*, my focus here is the form of Sebald's narrative and how it shapes the reader's experience.

It is perhaps in part because modern human experience has become so regulated (and thus also disconnected from history) that the central figure seeks out those places which, like the photographic image, seem safeguarded from the forces of time. For, as Austerlitz's study of architecture has taught him, the history that is told through man-made structures is one of incredible violence and injustice. Travel, like photography, makes possible a different experience of time and space, hence seeming to providing a refuge from the harsh reality of historical violence. But at the same time, Austerlitz is fascinated by buildings which seem to exercise force over their inhabitants. His contradictory urges, on the one hand to escape history and on the other to immerse himself in it, parallel his (and perhaps our own) conflicting impulses to recall and to forget his origins and personal history.

Sebald's photographs of architectural structures function as one way to confront (perhaps less directly) past atrocities, as they carry the reader to moments of confrontation with and removal from historical violence. These buildings and spaces, which the main character sees as as threatening signs of domination and hegemony, appear as catalysts for mnemonic processes and as objects which reflect (and which likely shape) our individual and collective *Weltanschauung*. That exteriority regulates interior experience is intimated when Austerlitz, speaking of architecture, focuses on "den Ordnungszwang und den Zug ins Monumentale, der sich manifestierte in Gerichtshöfen und Strafanstalten, in Bahnhofs- und Börsengebäuden, Opern- und Irrenhäusern und den nach rechtwinkligen Rastern angelegten Siedlungen für die

Arbeiterschaft" (52)/"the compulsive sense of order and the tendency toward monumentalism evident in law courts and penal institutions, railway stations and stock exchanges, opera houses and lunatic asylums, and the dwelling built to rectangular grid patterns for the labor force" (33). These humanly constructed spaces, like the railway stations that during the Holocaust made possible the transporting of millions of people to concentration camps (but also Austerlitz's own escape to London), were built to regulate the everyday.

That architectural and institutional structures shapes our perceptions is reflected in the fortresses at Breendonk and in the photographs of them. Austerlitz perceives these constructions as reminders of human anxieties and fears about the unknown and the foreign which are reinforced by institutional orders. As the narrator explains,

Bei seinen Studien über die Architektur der Bahnhöfe,
 [...] bringe er nie den Gedanken an die Qual des
 Abschiednehmens und die Angst vor der Fremde aus dem
 Kopf, obwohl dergleichen ja nicht zur Baugeschichte
 gehöre. Freilich verrieten gerade unsere gewältigsten
 Pläne nicht selten am deutlichsten den Grad unserer
 Verunsicherung. So liesse sich etwa am Festungsbau [...]
 gut zeigen, wie wir, um gegen jeden Einbruch der
 Feindesmächte Vorkehrungen zu treffen, gezwungen

seien, in sukzessiven Phasen uns stets weiter mit Schutzwerken zu umgeben, so lange, bis die Idee der nach aussen sich verschiebenden konzentrischen Ringe an ihren natürlichen Grenzen stoße." (24-25)

In his study of railway architecture [...] he could never quite shake off thoughts of the agony of leave-taking and the fear of foreign places, although such ideas were not part of architectural history proper. Yet, he said, it is often our mightiest projects that most obviously betray the degree of our insecurity. The construction of fortifications, for instance [...] clearly showed how we feel obliged to keep surrounding ourselves with defenses, built in successive phases as precaution against any incursion by enemy powers, until the idea of concentric rings making their way steadily outwards comes up against its natural limits. (14)

Significantly, the analogy made here between defensive fortress and psychic processes applies to not just specific individuals (like he himself, who will repeatedly refer to repressed memories which surface during his journeys), but also to culture more

generally. Just as societies have built walls to protect themselves from enemies, so too does the individual (including Sebald's reader, who is protected from the horrors of the Holocaust through the text's distancing devices). But, according to this metaphor, the attempt to block out one's opponents does little good. For

denn fixiert, wie man auf dieses Schema war, habe man
 außer acht gelassen, daß die größten Festungen
 naturgemäß auch die größte Feindesmacht anziehen, daß
 man sich, in eben dem Maß, in dem man sich verschanzt,
 tiefer und tiefer in die Defensive begibt und daher
 letztendlich gezwungen sein könnte, hilflos von einem mit
 allen Mitteln befestigten Platz aus mit ansehen zu müssen
 (27)

intent as everyone was on that pattern [of the star-shaped
 fortress], it had been forgotten that the largest
 fortifications will naturally attract the largest enemy
 forces, and that the more you entrench yourself the more
 you must remain on the defensive, so that in the end you
 might find yourself in a place fortified in every possible
 way (16)

These lines suggest that the desire to keep out the unwanted “enemy” (one might read the enemy in multiple ways, including as an undesired past to forget the past or a repressed part of memory) does little to alleviate one’s suffering. If such defensive strategies are entirely futile, however, one might ask why Austerlitz and so many others have made use of them, and moreover why Sebald makes use of multiple literary devices that encourage distancing.

The affectively-charged content of *Austerlitz* indicates that the novel’s estranging effects function as more than barricades to difficult subject matter. As the reader is asked to relate to Breendonk’s monstrous construction plan as a model for her own cultural history, the book’s employment of literary estrangement exists in ongoing tension with its call for reader empathy. As Austerlitz explains that the star-shape of this fortress became a model for defensive architectural structures, he suggests that Breendonk is just one of many representations of the “Ausgeburt der Häßlichkeit und der blinden Gewalt” that has dominated history – and that is most likely part of the reader/viewer’s past and culture as well.

Austerlitz’s pictures of architectural structures remind the reader of a living past that continues to haunt the present. Such buildings have fascinated and horrified the protagonist over the years, seeming to have a life of their own.

Auch als ich später den symmetrischen Grundriss des Forts studierte, mit den Auswüchsen seiner Glieder und Scheren, mit den an der Stirnseite des Haupttrakts gleich Augen hervortretenden halbrunden Bollwerken und dem Stummelfortsatz am Hinterleib, da konnte ich in ihm, trotz seiner nun offenbaren rationalen Struktur, allenfalls das Schema irgendeines krebsartigen Wesens, nicht aber desjenige eines vom menschlichen Verstand entworfenen Bauwerks erkennen. (35-36)

Even later, when I studied the symmetrical ground plan with its outgrowths of limbs and claws, with the semicircular bastions standing out from the front of the main building like eyes, and the stumpy projection at the back of its body, I could not, despite its now evident rational structures, recognize anything designed by the human mind but saw it, rather, as the anatomical blueprint of some alien and crab-like creature. (21-22)

As the text suggests that these images have grabbed hold of both Austerlitz and the narrator, the photograph becomes a living being (again evoking Mitchell's notion of the

sentient image). These photographs capture static objects, while unable literally to speak or act, resonate with past memories and events makes them all the more mystifying. While these structures appear to be dead, the thoughts which they trigger in Austerlitz, the narrator, and the reader suggest otherwise. As Austerlitz's childhood nanny comments while looking at family photographs with the main character, pictures may leave one with "den Eindruck [...] es rühre sich etwas in ihnen, als vernehme man kleine Verzweiflungseufzer, [...] als hätten die Bilder selbst ein Gedächtnis und erinnerten sich an uns, daran, wie wir, die Überlebenden, und diejenigen, die nicht mehr unter uns weilen, vordem gewesen sind" (266)/ "the impression [] of something stirring in them, as if one caught small sighs of despair [...] as if the pictures had a memory of their own and remembered us, remembered the roles that we, the survivors, and those no longer among us had played in our former lives" (182-83). These thoughts prove especially unsettling when considering the histories of brutality to which the novel's words and pictures repeatedly draw attention.

The narrative and images related to Breendonk also serve as a prime example of the disconnect between *Austerlitz's* prose and images. Though supposedly the book's images are taken from Austerlitz's own photo collection, the pictures of Breendonk do not appear in the text until the narrator visits the site, after Austerlitz has discussed the defense structures. Thus it becomes difficult to distinguish where the main character's experience ends and where that of the narrator begins. As this dissolution of

subjectivities suggests the connections between individual and cultural experience, we too may relate the fortresses to our world.

Among the first architectural structures the book shows, Breendonk serves as a prime example of how places and objects in *Austerlitz* represent psychic processes and, moreover, how the novel's photographs, seeming to take on their own life, prompt mnemonic processes. Significantly, it is not Austerlitz's remembering which is thematized here, but rather that of the narrator. Such moments indicate that the text's images bear relevance beyond a single individual's experience. Immediately before the exterior image of one fortress appears, the narrator emphasizes his incomprehension in looking at a structure which seems absent of any trace of human civilization:

sie ließ keinen Bauplan erkennen, verschob andauernd ihre Ausbuchtungen und Kehlen und wuchs so weit über meine Begriff hinaus, daß ich sie zuletzt mit keiner mir bekannten Ausformung der menschlichen Zivilisation, nicht einmal mit den stummen Relikten unserer Vor- und Frühgeschichte in irgendeinen Zusammenhang bringen konnte. (34)

I could make out no architectural plan, for its projections and indentations kept shifting, so far exceeding my

comprehension that in the end I found myself unable to connect it with anything shaped by human civilization, or even with the silent relics of our prehistory and early history. (20)

Below this we see a view of one fortress's exterior, a dark gray made all the more massive by the light sky behind it.



Figure 5.6 Uncaptioned image from *Austerlitz* (exterior of fortress)

We hereby may share the narrator's experience of these remains as disconnected from their disturbing history. Like him, we are distanced from a construction which has no visible entrance and which does not welcome its visitor (as is suggested when the narrator comments, "Und je länger ich meinen Blick auf sie gerichtet hielt und je öfter sie mich, wie ich spürte, zwang, in vor ihr zu senken, desto unbegreiflicher wurde sie

mir” (34)/ “and the longer I looked at it, the more often it forced me, as I felt, to lower my eyes, the less comprehensible it seemed to become” (20-21).

Several pages later, the narrator (and his audience) does gain access to the site’s interiors, though this does not mean that the ramparts become any more comprehensible. As throughout the text, the reader and narrator move from being outside of a place or story to gaining more insight into it (though this by no means is to say that they gain complete understanding or that all distance between themselves and the narrative collapses). As the narrator comments that his memories of Breendonk have darkened over time, we encounter a straight-on view of a hallway with a round arched ceiling that becomes more and more narrow until disappearing into blackness. The tiny barred windows, black bolted metal doors, and a string of small hanging lamps which line the hall become smaller and fainter until they reach this abyss.



Figure 5.7 Uncaptioned image from *Austerlitz* (interior hallway)

The nothingness to which the hallway leads, like the doors and gateways in Terezin, remind us of the past's inaccessibility, as well as of Austerlitz's, the narrator's, and our own ongoing, frustrated, and endless journeys in search of a comprehensible past.

Despite such efforts, Austerlitz and the narrator find so many of their recollections fading into darkness. The storyteller's memories, like the protagonist's, are dimming like an overexposed photograph.

Die Erinnerung an die vierzehn Stationen, die der Besucher in Breendonk zwischen Portal und Ausgang passiert, hat sich in mir verdunkelt im Laufe der Zeit, oder vielmehr verdunkelte sie sich [...] schon an dem Tag, an welchem ich in der Festung war, sei es, weil ich nicht wirklich sehen wollte, was man dort sah, sei es, weil in dieser nur vom schwächen Schein weniger Lampen erhellten und für immer vom Licht der Natur getrennten Welt die Konturen der Dinge zu zerfliessen schienen. Selbst jetzt, wo ich mich mühe, mich zu erinnern [...] löst sich das Dunkel nicht auf, sondern verdichtet sich bei dem Gedanken, wie wenig wir festhalten können, was alles und wieviel ständig in Vergessenheit gerät, mit jedem ausgelöschten Leben, wie die Welt sich sozusagen von

selber ausleert, indem die Geschichten, die an den ungezählten Orten und Gegenständen haften, welche selbst keine Fähigkeit zur Erinnerung haben, von niemandem je gehört, aufgezeichnet oder weitererzählt werden [...] (38-39).

My memory of the fourteen stations which the visitor to Breendonk passes between the entrance and the exit has clouded over in the course of time, or perhaps I could say it was clouding over even on the day when I was in the fort, whether because I did not really want to see what it had to show or because all the outlines seemed to merge in a world illuminated only by a few dim electric bulbs, and cut off for ever from the light of nature. Even now, when I try to remember them, when I look back at the crab-like plan of Breendonk and read the words of the captions [...] the darkness does not lift but becomes yet heavier as I think how little we can hold in mind, how everything is constantly lapsing into oblivion with every extinguished life, how the world is, as it were, draining itself, in that the history of countless places and objects

which themselves have no power of memory is never
heard, never described or passed on. (23-24)

As the narrator reports on his personal experience of Breendonk rather than on that of the main character, Austerlitz's individual memories move to the background, while those of the narrator come to center stage. While the speaker addresses a "we" to which the reader presumably belongs, we may experience the story with a new immediacy and directness which encourages us to reflect upon our own engagement with the book's prose and images. In this way, the storyteller suggests that his listener is also incapable of holding in her mind such places and memories as Breendonk (whose cultural and historical significance is made most clear when Austerlitz explains that the site was acquired by Germany following a military victory and that these stations were used between 1940 and 1944 for torturing German war prisoners). Though following WWII, Breendonk stands as a national memorial, the Museum of the Belgian Resistance (32), the language and images depicting it offer little sense of reconciliation. The silent fortress calls to the viewer's mind to horrors of the past and which represents "eine einzige monolithische Ausgeburt der Häßlichkeit und der blinden Gewalt" (35)/"a monolithic, monstrous incarnation of ugliness and blind violence" (21). The stillness and emptiness of the fortress haunt as the reader considers of the people and the events connected to this site.

Though the reader lying in her armchair is safely distanced from such spaces as Breendonk, she too may experience an almost physically threaten from a creature which seems to reach from the past into the current day reality. Such images, as Mitchell argues, seem to expect something of their viewer, demanding that she search for the horrific history which she knows to be connected to those images. The distanced and uncomfortable onlooker might then share Austerlitz's sentiments when he describes his relationship to memory in terms of defense against and management and avoidance of his past:

[ich] verfeinerte mehr und mehr meine Abwehrreaktionen und bildete ein Art von Quarantäne- und Immunsystem aus, durch das ich gefeit war gegen alles, was in irgendeinem, sei es noch so entfernten Zusammenhang stand mit der Vorgeschichte meiner auf immer engerem Raum sich erhaltenden Person. [...] Diese Selbstzensur meines Denkens, das ständige Zurückweisen einer jeden in mir sich anbahnenden Erinnerung, erforderte indessen, so Austerlitz weiter, von Mal zu Mal größere Anstrengungen und führte zwangsläufig zuletzt zu der fast vollfommenen Lähmung meines Sprachvermögens,

zur Vernichtung meiner sämtlichen Aufzeichnungen und
Notizen [...] (205-06)

I was always refining my defensive reactions, creating a
kind of quarantine or immune system which, as I
maintained my existence in a smaller and smaller space,
protected me from anything that could be connected in
any way, however distant, with my own early history.
[...] Yet this self-censorship of my mind, the constant
suppression of the memories surfacing in me, Austerlitz
continued, demanded ever greater efforts and finally, and
unavoidably, led to the almost total paralysis of my
linguistic faculties, the destruction of all my notes and
sketches [...]” (140).

The reader may find herself in a similar defensive mode, in moments wishing to look
away from the Holocaust while nonetheless continuing her attempt to come to grips
with it. The text’s indirect address of the Nazi past – through, for example, the second-
hand “ethnographic” narration and the protagonist’s own remove from his family’s
history – allows the reader to ward off the paralysis which Austerlitz once experienced.

It is perhaps through the novel's evocation of empathy and distanciation that she is able to remain engaged in the language which became impossible for the protagonist.

That such defense mechanisms appear to be at work not only in the mind of the main character but also in the reader/viewer and in Western/European culture more largely is furthermore evident in the fact in the structure of Paris's new Bibliotheque Nationale. Reflecting on the building's overall plan, Austerlitz explains that

[ich] bin zu dem Schluß gekommen, daß in jedem von uns entworfenen und entwickelten Projekt die Größendimensionierung und der Grad der Komplexität der ihm einbeschriebenen Informations- und Steuersysteme die ausschlaggebenden Faktoren sind und daß demzufolge die allumfassende, absolute Perfektion des Konzepts in der Praxis durchaus zusammenfallen kann, ja letztlich zusammenfall muß mite inter chronischen Dysfunktion und mit konstitutioneller Labilität. (398-99)

I came to the conclusion that in any project we design and develop, the size and degree of complexity of the information and control systems inscribed in it are the

crucial factors, so that the all-embracing and absolute perfection of the concept can in practice coincide, indeed ultimately must coincide, with its chronic dysfunction and constitutional instability. (281)

Again, the regulation of spaces appears representative of a history of institutional power and domination which proves destructive to culture and, moreover, to knowledge and memory. The librarian Henri Lemoine, meditating on the Bibliotheque Nationale, speaks about

die im Gleichmaß mit der Proliferation des Informationswesens fortschreitende Auflösung unserer Erinnerungsfähigkeit und über den bereits sich vollziehenden Zusammenbruch [...] de la Bibliotheque Nationale. Das neue Bibliotheksgebäude, das durch seine ganze Anlage ebenso wie durch seine ans Absurde grenzende innere Regulierung den Leser als einen potentiellen Feind auszuschließen suche, sei, so, sagte Austerlitz, sagte Lemoine, quasi die offizielle Manifestation des immer dringender sich anmeldenden

Bedürfnisses, mit all dem ein Ende zu machen, was noch ein Leben habe an der Vergangenheit. (404)

the dissolution, in line with the inexorable spread of processed data, of our capacity to remember, and about the collapse [...] of the Bibliotheque Nationale which is already underway. The new library building, which in both its entire layout and its near-ludicrous internal regulation seeks to exclude the reader as a potential enemy might be described, so Lemoine thought, said Austerlitz, as the official manifestation of the increasingly importunate urge to break with everything which still has some living connection to the past. (286)

Lemoine, like Austerlitz, understands this impulse to regulate and control as intimately linked to a modern tendency towards cultural and historical forgetting. While the Paris library attempts to exclude a reader whose cognitive abilities prove threatening, we remain engaged in a text that resists such institutional control. We join Austerlitz as readers seeking some degree of understanding through language.

Austerlitz's position as a reader is emphasized shortly before Lemoine's paraphrased monologue, when on the preceding page he comes across a photograph of

the room in Terezin where records of concentration camp prisoners are kept. Two full pages are dedicated to this image, with its high-reaching bookcases which cover nearly the entirety of the two walls we see. In contrast to the inaccessibility of the Paris library, documents here lay on open shelves, seemingly waiting for their visitors to pick them up and take them to one of the nearby wooden desks.

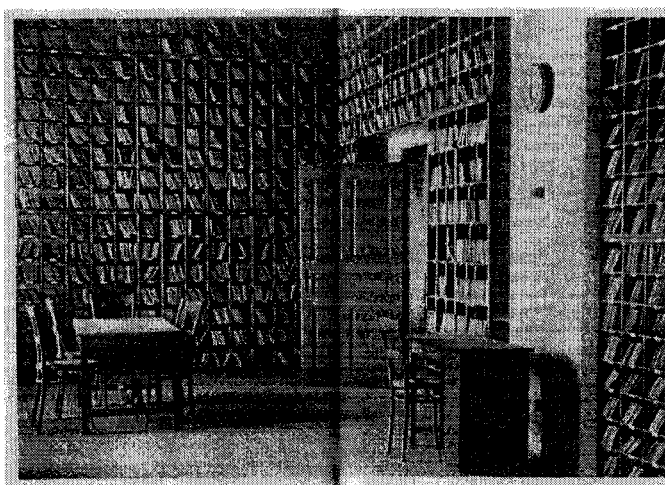


Figure 5.8 Uncaptioned image from *Austerlitz* (archive)

This pause in the narrative underscores the act and reading, suggesting that Austerlitz and his audience, at least momentarily, occupy parallel spaces and experiences. While both readers experience an obstruction from knowledge and language when reflecting on the Nationale Bibliotheque, in this archive the tall, open stacks implicate admittance. The contrast between this room's seeming accessibility and the Nationale Bibliotheque's closedness proves illustrative of the reader's contrasting experiences of

involvement in and removal from the text. As Austerlitz shares these reading spaces with the reader, his experience seems to take a similar form.

But while the reader has limited control over a text that discloses and withholds information as it sees fit, Austerlitz is himself responsible for not having viewed the documents at Terezin archive earlier. Ironically, it is his own fear of confronting history which kept him from going to the archives there in the first place (401). Immediately before the double-paged picture of the archives at Terezin appears, Austerlitz, frustrated with the Nationale Bibliotheque's alienating design, realizes that while he has spent futile and countless hours there, it is in the small library in Terezin where he might find what he is looking for. As the main character dreams of this other space, a photograph of the Terezin book shelves appears. Again we may experience a disconnect between image and language, as at this point in the main character's narrative he has yet to visit this place (though the clock to the upper right of the picture indicates the time to be precisely 6 o'clock, the same moment that Austerlitz says he later came to the reading room). Perhaps the main character has already traveled to this place in his mind, or maybe the narrator has simply inserted this picture prematurely, reminding us that someone is intervening in the transmittal of Austerlitz's story. Or, alternatively, this might function as yet another example of the timelessness realm of the photograph and of memory.

While the tall shelves near Theresienstadt provide Austerlitz with renewed hope for uncovering his family's past, to say that these open stacks indicate that he can now

unproblematically go forward to learn of that history would be too easy. If the open stacks of the Terezin archive hold keys to the main character's questions, they only offer institutionalized information recorded by someone other than his loved ones. Despite the hope that these bookshelves may seem to offer, they cannot capture an account of what "really happened." In this sense, they, like the vast rooms of the Bibliotheque Nationale, refuse to provide that which Austerlitz or his audience with definitive answers.

And so at the book's end, Austerlitz, the narrator, and their reader appear to have returned to their starting points, this time with perhaps more questions than before. Austerlitz, filled with new (and probably false) hope that he will discover his family's history, ventures off to find his father, whom he has just learned from an archivist was interned at the Gurs concentration camp. There is, however, little to make one believe that his efforts will be rewarded, since the central character's intuition that his father must have survived the camp and left from the Paris train station is darkened by his discomfort while in the station that remains "für mich von jeher der rätselhafteste aller Pariser Bahnhöfe" (412)/"to me the most mysterious of all the railway terminals of Paris" (292) and which leaves him with the sense that "ich befinde mich am Ort eines ungesühnten Verbrechens" (413)/, the "impression of being on the scene of some unexpiated crime" (292). These comments suggest that the protagonist's search, presented parallel to the story of Dan Jacobson (about whom the narrator reads in a book Austerlitz passed on to him), is likely to have a similar ending. In the case of

Jacobson, “Kaum irgendwo findet [er] auf seiner litauischen Reise eine Spur seiner Vorfahren, überall nur die Zeichen der Vernichtung [...]” (420)/“On his travels in Lithuania, Jacobson finds scarcely any trace of his forebears, only signs everywhere of the annihilation [...]” (297). Thus it seems Austerlitz will continue to wander train station and cities in search of something unreachable, much as we have done through the pages that have followed him.

Though Austerlitz ends his story by taking leave, it becomes clear that the narrator’s (and our own) engagement in his story is not over. Before the main figure departs, he hands the narrator the key to his home in Alderney Street, telling this distant friend that he is welcome anytime to visit there and to study the black-and-white pictures, the only thing that remains of Austerlitz’s life. As Austerlitz continues his wandering, we, having lost sight of him, are, like the narrator, left with these images, which remain available for our revisitation and which ask us to consider our own affective responses to them.

The narrator, too, returns where he began in the text: to the Nocturama and the Breendonk fortresses where his own travels began. And so the reader also finds herself again at a beginning. Revisiting the fortresses at Breendonk, the narrator finishes the final pages of the book Austerlitz gave him upon their first meeting in Paris: the literary scholar Dan Jacobson’s autobiographical account of his search for his grandfather, the Rabbi Yisrael Yehoshua Melamed (called Heschel). While Jacobson’s search for his ancestor seems to mirror Austerlitz’s fruitless pursuit, the writer’s reflections on the

graves in Kimberley, South Africa, near where he grew up as a child, echo both Austerlitz's experiences and the narrator's thoughts during his time at the former military outpost. These graves, yet another version of the Breendonk structures, reiterate a history of subordination, domination, and inhumanity of which Nazi Germany is a part,⁸² at the same time drawing attention to the loss of life and of family roots which is a result of such atrocities. As the narrator explains, Jacobsen, looking into the graves in Kimberley, reflects

Wahrhaft schreckenerregend sei es gewesen, [] einen Schritt von dem festen Erdboden eine solche Leere sich auftun zu sehen, zu begreifen, daß es da keinen Übergang gab, sondern nur diesen Rand, auf der einen Seite das selbstverständliche Leben, auf der anderen sein unausdenkbares Gegenteil. Der Abgrund, in den kein Lichtstrahl hinabreicht, ist Jacobsons Bild für die untergegangene Vorzeit seiner Familie und seines Volks, die sich, wie er weiß, von dort drunten nicht mehr heraufholen läßt. (420)

⁸² The narrator explains that, according to Jacobson's book, the Russians placed a belt of twelve forts in Kimberley at the end of the nineteenth century, which in 1914 proved utterly useless. Later some of these forts fell to ruins, while other served as Litauern and later Russian prisons. In 1941, the defenses came into German hands; in one of these forts, under the control of the German Wehrmacht, 30,000 people were killed (421).

[I]t was truly terrifying to see such emptiness open up a foot away from firm ground, to realize that there was no transition, only this dividing line, with ordinary life on the one side and its unimaginable opposite on the other. The Jacobson's image of the vanished past of his family and his people which, as he knows, can never be brought up from those depths again. (297)

In these final lines, we are reminded of the lightness and darkness that have illuminated and dimmed Sebald's work. "Der Abgrund, in den kein Lichtstrahl hinabreicht"/"The chasm into which no ray of light could penetrate" seems to offer little hope, and yet this writer has left us with a beautiful and moving story which prompts us to remember and to acknowledge not only the limits of understanding, but also to engage through empathy and distance on an intellectual, an emotional, and even a corporeal level with the sentient spaces and images which fill these pages and which resonate with our everyday lives. As *Austerlitz* refuses to arrive at conclusive answers, it encourages us to imagine the experiences of others who have been affected by historical atrocity while also respecting the impossibility of fully comprehending another's story. In revisiting a past which inevitably continues into our presents and futures, Sebald acknowledges the continuities and the disruptions between yesterday and now and how our individual and cultural perceptions have been shaped by history. Such awareness offers a beginning for

redressing the past and developing a new relationship to the future, while nonetheless recognizing the complex and irresolute nature of this process.

Chapter 6: Sounding Emotion: Music, Rhythm, and Silences in Gayl Jones'

Corregidora

Gayl Jones's *Corregidora* (1975), like the other novels explored in this dissertation, is a fragmented narrative which invites its reader's active engagement in a textual puzzle that prompts on the one hand confusion and critical inquiry and on the other empathy. This text, perhaps more so than the others I have discussed, foregrounds performance in an effort to demonstrate the ways in which our everyday thoughts, behaviors, and perceptions are powerfully shaped by our socially defined roles and identities. This process occurs as the main character Ursa conveys her story to her listeners through not only language, but also sounds, musicality, and silences, in order to come to terms with the history of slavery and how it has shaped her maternal family's lives. Voicing an otherwise silenced narrative of oppression that begins with her great-grandmother's enslavement and continues up into the 1940s through the 1960s of Lexington, Kentucky, and giving testimony to both her own and her foremothers' experiences through oral blues songs and verbal exchanges which employ African American oral traditions, Ursa acknowledges and engages her audience. While the main character continues a maternal oral tradition that has defined the lives of her maternal family, she simultaneously diverges from that tradition, creating "a new song" empowered by both vocalizations and silences which break from the past and allow her to develop a new relationship to both her listener and the world which she inhabits. As

Corregidora draws attention to an African American oral tradition in which audience plays a vitally interactive role in storytelling, and as the text hereby takes on the blues form of AAB in which a stanza is repeated once and then restated differently, or *with a difference*,⁸³ Jones indicates the ways in which stories, passed on from generation to generation (particularly through matrilineages), not only tell of the past, but also shape the present and future.

While Sebald's *Austerlitz* (dis)engages the reader largely through photographs of empty spaces which appear to externalize his interior experience, *Corregidora* thematizes how our interior and our exterior worlds mirror one another through its representation of a performative space of sounds and silences. Ursa's utterances begin in an internalized space (the protagonist's body and mind) but soon become part of a performative public space in which the intersections between self/other and speaker/listener become indistinguishable. This blurring of interiors and exteriors reflects the storytelling process, during which thoughts and ideas, at first only existent within an individual's mind, materialize onto the page. Particularly in the case of

⁸³ In *The Signifying Monkey*, Henry Louis Gates, Jr. argues that African American writers' interest in the vernacular functions as a way of placing African American literary practice outside of the Western tradition. According to Gates, "Free of the white person's gaze, black people created their own unique vernacular structures and relished in the double play that these forms bore to white forms" (Introduction to *The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of Afro-American Literary Criticism*). Central to these nontraditional forms has been referencing other African writings and "signifyin(g)" upon them, often through repetition "with a difference" (reprinted in Napier 344). This method functions as a way not only of carrying on an alternative literary tradition, but also as a means for commenting upon and oftentimes revising other aesthetic patterns. One way in which Jones calls upon this tradition is through her rewriting of Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937), a novel which similarly indicates the connections between past and present through a grandmother's framing slavery narrative and a granddaughter's relationship to that story (Rushdy "Relate," Pettis).

Corregidora, where the vocalized publicizes private thought to a larger audience, performative space becomes imbued with political power. As the main character's narrative is told and heard in the public sphere, she intervenes in a history that has defined her life, hereby creating the possibility for an alternate future. Though the reader leaves this text with much unsettlement and disturbance, *Corregidora* creates a new space of musical performance where Jones suggests that social change, while slow and often interrupted, is possible.

As Ursa attempts to come to terms with an oppressive history through an oral/aural performance of sounds, rhythms, and silences that both communicate to and withhold information from her listeners, Jones powerfully relates to her audience through the sounds and silences of language and music which on the one hand invite the reader's participation and empathy but on the other indicate not only that much of Ursa's experiences are verbally inexpressible, but also that the main character reserves the right to determine what she will and will not share with her audience.

The inaccessibility of much of the protagonist's experience, reflected in the text's disorienting passages and in the gaps and silences found throughout them, reflect the horror that lies behind the text's ambiguities. The book's difficult subject matter is made more manageable for the reader by *Corregidora*'s indirect narrative strategies: because that world is presented to us often indirectly, through the unspoken and the implied, we maintain a kind of distance from the narrative which allows us to continue reading often troubling passages as we oscillate between the pleasure and the pain of

our textual engagement.⁸⁴ Such indirect language allows the reader a distance from troubling passages, while also indicating that we may never (and perhaps should never) arrive at full reconciliation with the realities of violence and brutality. In this way, the neo-slave narrative, dismantling the dichotomies of past/present, self/other, sound/silence, and home/the foreign (while nonetheless recognizing the need for such distinctions), complicates our conceptions of subjectivity and agency, often in troubling ways.⁸⁵ Jones hereby encourages her audience to interrogate the ways in which our everyday thoughts and actions may perpetuate (often unconsciously) oppressive power structures, and how we might intervene in such cycles. As the disorienting and reorienting qualities of a story told through both continuities and ruptures; shifts in time, place, and narrative perspective; lyrical, semantic breakdown; and ruptures and silences work to narrow and widen the space between the audience and a narrative world profoundly affected by the history of slavery, Jones indicates that if there is any way out of repeating the legacy of slavery, it is a recursive journey that occurs through

⁸⁴ In "The Art of Distancing: How Formal Devices Manage our Emotional Responses to Literature," Jenefer Robinson similarly argues that literary estrangement may enable its reader to approach reading material which otherwise might prove emotionally unmanageable. According to Robinson, literary form "enables us—in our different ways—to *cope* with troubling content" (158), and distanciation proves especially useful in such cases. In this way, Robinson writes, "in a successful literary work, even one with painful subject matter, the form will organize the experience into a harmonious whole that brings pleasure" (156). While I hesitate to say that it is first and foremost the *pleasure* of reading a novel like *Corregidora* keeps a reader engaged, I do believe that the tension between a reader's experience of closeness to and distance from a text has a similar function.

⁸⁵ Jones' deconstruction of binary oppositions raises contentious issues about identity politics, particularly as they relate to race and gender. She has been both lauded and criticized for blurring the lines between past/present, self/other, black/white, and victim/victimizer. While many of the sources cited in my work praise *Corregidora*'s deconstructionist tendencies, Jones has been accused of presenting negative racial models of African Americans (see footnote 10) and, more specifically, of black men (Barksdale) and black women (Jordan).

contemplating the connection between now and then and, ultimately, in voicing and listening to the stories of both older and younger generations.⁸⁶

This chapter explores the ways in which *Corregidora* (dis)engages its audience in order to encourage its reflection on the relationships between the public and the private and between affective and political life. Paying particular attention to the connections between the experiences of the novel's protagonist and its reader, I consider the intersections between the text's content and form, as seen in the narrative's movements between past and present and italicized and nonitalicized passages, in its employment of defamiliarized language in the form of "ritualized dialogues" (Jones's term) and blues singing, and in the book's use of gaps and silences which call for the reader's interpretation. As Ursa listens to the stories of her maternal lineage and then reenacts those narratives in a new way, I argue, she may seek along with her reader to develop a new relationship to a troubling past.

Corregidora is primarily the story of its first-person narrator, Ursa Corregidora, an African American woman living in Kentucky who, after being pushed down the stairs by her abusive husband Mutt, must have a hysterectomy that makes it impossible

⁸⁶ In *Remembering Generations: Race and Family in Contemporary African American Fiction*, Rushdy notes that African American novels about slavery and historical revision, including Jones' *Corregidora*, burgeoned during the 1970s. These "palimpsest narratives," Rushdy argues, "constitute a response to those discourses exhibiting a historical amnesia about the enduring effects of past social systems. By representing a contemporary subject whose psychic health, romantic success, and even physical survival depend on an ability to comprehend the role of the past in the production of the present, the palimpsest writers emphatically assert the fundamental part played by American slavery in the making of the modern world" (33).

for her to carry forward her matrilineage's tradition of "making generations" that will keep alive the history of slavery and oppression that their former slave owners have attempted to bury. While Ursa has undoubtedly been affected by the Corregidora legacy, she is, like the reader, a kind of outsider to this lineage, for she has only heard stories of the slave master second-hand and never had direct contact with him. Though the majority of Jones' book focuses on Ursa's life following her hysterectomy (the twenty-two years between 1947 and 1969), as Bruce Simon explains, the novel "actually spans nine decades and two continents" (94), for Ursa's life is profoundly shaped by the experiences of preceding female generations. Great Gram iterates how the past lives on when explaining to Ursa, the slaveowners " *'burned all the documents, Ursa, but they didn't burn what they put in their minds. We got to burn out what they put in our minds, like you burn out a wound. Except we got to keep what we need to bear witness. That scar that's left to bear witness. We got to keep it as visible as our blood'*" (72; italics in original). In fulfilling Great Gram's demand that they bear witness by having children, the Corregidora women remember a history of oppression that otherwise would be silenced. But while giving voice to this story proves in some ways empowering to this family, remembering and repeating this narrative also becomes its own form of oppression, as through this process the past maintains a life-defining power over future generations.⁸⁷

⁸⁷ As Deborah Horwitz writes of *Corregidora*, "The legacy of slavery, in a sense, is perpetuated by those who were first subjected to it. The family's women continue to find themselves confined to male dominance and compulsory heterosexuality and motherhood. Certainly all the Corregidora women are victims of men, but they also act unwittingly as oppressors" (n.p.) Ursa's partner Tadpole, with whom she

The tradition of “making generations,” also a passing on of the story of slavery, becomes a stand-in for the oral tradition that has shaped so much of African American culture and identity.⁸⁸ But while African oral traditions tend to emphasize the audience’s role in helping to shape performance, Ursa and her mother seem to listen passively to their foremothers’ recollections. It is perhaps in part because they have not found another way of relating to these stories that Ursa and her mother find themselves trapped within this narrative: though slavery has ended according to the history books, these women find themselves with unsupportive male partners who continue to exert power and claim possession much like Corregidora once did.

Because after her fall, Ursa no longer possesses the ability to “bear witness” in the way she has been instructed to do, she is led to questions about where she belongs in relation to her maternal forbearers and their memories. At the same time that she comes to acknowledge the significance that the past has on her present life, she also realizes that she must also distinguish between her own and her ancestors’ experiences if she does not want that history to consume her. As Ursa, like her reader, moves between relating to and removing herself from the stories to which she listens, she looks to

becomes involved following her “accident,” articulates this viewpoint when, upon learning about the legacy of “making generations,” he declares, “Procreation. That could also be a slave-breeder’s way of thinking” (22).

⁸⁸ Madhu Dubey argues that “black feminist critics often use the metaphor of matrilineage to authorize their construction of black feminine literary tradition [. . .] and posit the mother as the origin of black women’s literary tradition, as well as the guarantor of its temporal continuity” (Hochberg 1-2). Along similar lines, Hortense J. Spillers writes that the conditions of family life for slaves led African American women to have a (relatively) potentially powerful social position, given that slavery often removed African American men from paternal roles (Hochberg 2).

understand the intersections between her life and those of past generations, as well as the places where those lives might diverge.

Intervening in the legacy of “making generations,” Ursa creates through song rather than childbirth. Through the culturally significant forms of call and response and of the blues, Ursa finds “a song that would touch me, touch my life *and* theirs. A Portuguese song, but not a Portuguese song. A new world song. A song branded with the new world” (59). Through an oral/aural communication that has characterized African American expression since slavery,⁸⁹ this new form holds promise for a new space and for the revisionist impulse suggested in the book’s title, derived from the Spanish word “corregir,” “to correct.”⁹⁰ When Ursa addresses her imagined community,⁹¹ *Corregidora* becomes an interactive performance that seeks not only to expose the ways in which the past bears upon the present, but also to redefine and perhaps even to transform the relationship between past and present, individual and collective, and self and other. The reader’s vital role in this process of change becomes evident as she finds herself not only functioning as witness to the protagonist’s story, but also as she is herself disturbed, inclined on one hand to empathize and on the other to remove herself from the difficult material placed before her.

⁸⁹ see Leroi Jones’s *Blues People*

⁹⁰ While Jones’ novel may itself be read as a kind of “correction” or rewriting, of history which seeks to bring justice to oppressed slaves, the slaveowner *Corregidora*’s name suggests him as a disciplinarian who puts his subjects in their proper place, a “corrector” (“*Corregidora*”).

⁹¹ Bennett Anderson coins the term “imagined communities” to describe a social group which one imagines herself belonging to. A nation, for example, “is imagined because the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion” (6).

As in the other works explored in this project, the reader's shifts between empathy and defamiliarization becomes possible largely through *Corregidora's* puzzle-like form. At the same time that the text resists a linear chronology and final closure, it is carefully organized by the experiences and memories of four generations of mothers and daughters, as well as by six sections (marked by the Roman numerals I through VI) which continually present events from the past alongside those of the present.⁹² As the four generations' stories overlap and bleed into one another, they make distinctions between one another at once impossible and necessary. This arrangement emphasizes the significant relationship between collective and individual memory and identity: for Ursa to come to terms with her own history, she must first grapple with the pasts that have indirectly shaped her life. Thus, Great Gram and Gram's haunting past are most powerful in the novel's first half, while the latter portion of the book shifts its emphasis to Mama and Ursa's "private memories" and the ways in which their personal memories have been affected by the histories that they have inherited. In this way, the numbered segments provide a concrete structure that informs the reader about where Ursa's

⁹² *Corregidora's* emphasis on a maternal lineage which passes memories from one generation to the next has prompted a number of critics (Hochberg, Sharpe, Yukins) to explore the novel as a narrative of what Marianne Hirsh has termed "postmemory," "the response of the second generation to the trauma of the first" in which traumatic memories continue to live on in the lives of future generations (8). According to Hirsh, "Postmemory most specifically describes the relationship of children of survivors of cultural or collective trauma to the experiences of their parents, experiences that they "remember" only as the narratives and images with which they grew up, but that are so powerful, so monumental, as to constitute memories in their own right" (9). Though Hirsh describes this "identification with the victim or witness of trauma" as "modulated by the unbridgeable distance that separates the participant from the one born after" (10), she is criticized by Dominick LaCapra, among others for claiming ownership of the experiences of others. Instead, LaCapra calls for what he calls empathic unsettlement, an empathy which "resists full identification with, and appropriation of, the experience of the other" (79).

experiences originate and how her world view evolves over the course of her narrative. If one reads the italicized sections as expressive of Ursa and her maternal family's entrapment in the past – or of her process of distancing her story from that of her foremothers, the book's later transition away from this font suggests a progressive movement beyond that history and into the present and possibly the future. The reader follows the central figure on this path towards greater clarity, though the ambivalent closing scene indicates that the narrative is hardly a straightforward progression from conflict to resolution or that the psychic processes it presents are clearly defined by distinct beginnings and endings.

To the contrary, time and history are complicated by the fact that the female characters share a collective memory that regards neither chronological nor geographical boundaries. Mirroring Frank's description of narrative spatial form, the novel's continual movement between a progressive and a nonlinear storyline and between temporal and spatial continuity and disruption demands that the reader continually ask how a given scene fits into the text as a whole.

One way in which this oscillation between alternate realities occurs is through Jones' use of italics, which act as signposts to the reader that the narrative is shifting to an alternate perspective. As history repeatedly intrudes upon the present, the books' first two sections regularly move between a given point in Ursa's life (presented in regular font) and a timeless dimension where the protagonist's conscious and unconscious thoughts and feelings are presented in relation to her family's history (placed in italics).

The stressed font suggests that the time of slavery has not ended; it continues to exist in the thoughts, dreams, and interpersonal relationships of Jones's characters.⁹³

The first italicized portion early on frames Ursa's life within a larger familial and historical narrative that is undeniably linked to the sexualization of black women. After Ursa tells her new partner Tadpole (whose name might remind one either of sperm or of an immature person) about Corregidora and the legacy of "making generations," the text abruptly switches to the stressed font. Such passages seem to slip into an alternate space: here decontextualized phrases make it difficult to decipher where a scene occurs and who speaks and who listens. The new paragraph begins, "*A Portuguese seaman [note Jones' word play – the "seaman" may be read as little more than a sexual fluid, "semen"] turned plantation owner, he took her out of the field when she was still a child and put her to work in his whorehouse while she was a child [...]. Great Gram sat in the rocker. I was on her lap. She told the same story over and over again*" (10). The novel hereby immediately establishes Ursa as, like her reader, a listener who knows of Corregidora only second-hand (though the story of course has been far more influential for the main character). The reader, aligned in this way with the protagonist, is thus better positioned to imagine Ursa's experience of a narrative that has so profoundly shaped her maternal lineage's identity and which seems to allow so

⁹³ The critics Simon, Dubey, and Morgenstern read these italicized passages as indicative of a traumatic repetition of the past. While such arguments may imply that change is not possible for Ursa, I argue that the shifts which occur in these dream-like sequences suggest otherwise.

little space for individual selfhood. These women seem to find little distinction between their individual histories, as Ursa suggest when she states,

“My great-grandmama told my grandmamma the part she lived through that my grandmamma didn’t live through and my grandmamma told my mama what they both lived through and my mama told me what they all lived through and we were suppose to pass it down like that from generation to generation so we’d never forget.” (8-9)

Though each generation adds to this collective narrative, when the women speak of this history, collective memory leaves little room for that of the individual. When Great Gram tells about the slavery past, for example, *“It was as if the words were helping her, as if the words repeated again and again could be a substitute for memory, were somehow more than memory. As if it were only the words that kept her anger”* (14). That language functions as a “substitute for memory” suggests that Great Gram’s story leaves little room for other narratives or recollections. Such indistinctions between self and other add to the disorienting qualities of *Corregidora* and reflect not only Ursa’s continual struggle to understand herself in relation to this history, but also the confusion that she shares with the reader, who, like Ursa, is repeatedly faced with questions about where one selfhood ends and another begins.

Ursa, in contrast to Great Gram, does not wish to simply repeat the words she has heard before. In creating a new song, she instead places her personal memories beside those of older generations, considering not only how her life is a repetition of the past, but also how she may signify upon narrative tradition by telling it anew and by reenacting it *with a difference*. It is thus significant that *Corregidora*'s italicized passages consist not only of events that occurred during slavery, but also of Ursa's cognitive and emotional experiences, which reflect her own intervention in that legacy. Such passages frequently take the form of what Jones, in an interview with Michael Harper, calls "ritualized dialogue." In these verbal exchanges (usually appearing in italics), where the speakers are unidentified and the place of their interaction unnamed, Jones explains that

You create a rhythm that people wouldn't ordinarily use, that they probably wouldn't use in real talk, although they are saying the words they might ordinarily use [...] you do something to the rhythm or you do something to the words [...] both things take the dialogue out of the naturalistic realm--change its quality. (359)

It is through this alternate realm and its rhythm, removed from the confines of everyday life and speech (defamiliarized in the Shklovskian sense), that Ursa and her former

husband Mutt begin to redefine their relationship, replacing a model for sexual relationships that is based upon subordination, domination, and violence with one founded upon mutuality and tenderness.⁹⁴ Through defamiliarized language and intonations, the couple is able to find a new way of interacting which gives shape to something new. Calling upon the African American tradition of call and response, in which a song evolves through the interaction between performer and audience, these rhythmic exchanges appear on the one hand to reenact the past and to symbolize Ursa's "stuckness" in the past, but they also offer Ursa the potential to move beyond the scripts upon which her maternal forbearers have insisted and instead to create with her listeners a new kind of dialogue.

These exchanges frequently begin with discord and, as they unfold, vacillate between reconciliation and irresolution, indicating that this couple's connection has a complex history that will not change easily. As these ritualized dialogues evolve into a more harmonious blues form, the lines separating dialogue and song become hazy. As Amy Gottfried writes, the book hereby "weaves a pattern out of the blues and colloquial speech" (n.p.). *Corregidora's* conversational narrative, in the words of Jones, evokes an "up-close;" perspective, a direct relationship "between the storyteller and the hearer" (Harper 692, 698).

⁹⁴ In an interview with Claudia Tate, Jones emphasizes that, though literary critics often overlook this, her work does more than focus on brutality: "Something else is also suggested in them [...] namely the alternative to brutality, which is tenderness" (Tate 98).

Despite this fluidity of language and music, a distinction between these categories proves useful. For Ashraf Rushdy, the blues in *Corregidora* are “instrumental rhythms [...] indicative of change” which “follow ritualized dialogues that appear to be locked within the past” (“Relate” n.p.). The blues “are but one communicative form serving to facilitate Ursa's development.” This is apparent in the fact that “she translates the oral/familial tales into blues songs only after she engages in other mediating oral forms, especially the imagined future conversations with Mutt,” which appear in the form of ritualized dialogue. According to Rushdy, “what Ursa produces in terms of a cultural form (the blues) depends intimately on her diagnosing [through forms other than the blues] the root cause of Mama's and her own inability to talk about Great Gram's history without succumbing to possession or falling into rote repetition” (“Relate”). The blues then present to Ursa the possibility to break away from a tradition of unconscious repetition, to understand herself as more than the stories of her grandmothers.

While the blues and ritualized dialogue repeatedly overlap, I find Rushdy's theoretical distinction between the two useful, though it should not be viewed as a hard and fast difference. As Rushdy notes, Jones' own comments on this musical genre indicate its significance in her work: “For Jones, the blues--with their ‘strategies of remembrance,’ their connection of ‘individual and group experience,’ and their capacity for ‘carrying us beyond the apparent stereotypic’--constitute the cultural form best suited to that performance (Liberating 74, 39, 107)”; (Rushdy “Relate”). This seems in

keeping with Jacquelyn A. Fox-Good's comment that "African American music, through imagined immersion in and expression of suffering, both enables and signifies transcendence of and liberation from that suffering and from its material causes, including slavery, degradation, humiliation, and other forms of loss and dispossession"

(2). As Fox-Good's statement indicates, it is the expressive function of African American music which gives it its liberating qualities. It is also this communicative and interactive quality of Ursa's singing, encouraging the reader's participation, I argue, which lends it its emancipating power.

As mentioned, the text's dream-like conversations, usually lacking both quotation marks and explicitly identified speakers, are decontextualized in such a way that blurs the lines between past and present. While the past's intrusion into the present day seems to constrict the book's characters, the encounter between yesterday and today also offers the potential for change. These passages draw parallels between Mutt and Corregidora, hereby reminding the reader of the gray lines between the life of the main character and those of her family members. In one such conversation, for example, Mutt may be confused with the slaveowner when he states,

"Did you forget so soon? I know you from way back,

Ursa. That's what I said, didn't I? But you've forgotten."

'Naw I haven't forgotten. I'm still thick with you. I can't get you out.' (76)

Mutt's statement that he knows Ursa "from way back" implicitly connects their partnership to historical events that over centuries have sculpted power dynamics and racial and sexual relations. In this way, Mutt may be read as a *Doppelgänger* for the slave owner Corregidora, as is evident in his threat to sell Ursa's "piece of ass" (156) and in the fact that he, like Corregidora, calls his sexual partner "my little gold piece" (60, 124). As the reader, who by now has become familiar with the text's shifts between italicized and unstressed passages, understands the connection being made between Mutt and Corregidora, she is, like Ursa, "thick with" Mutt and the thoughts of violence and injustice with which he is associated. But while neither Ursa nor the reader may be able to "get out" the uncomfortable thoughts and feelings which such passages evoke, such ritualized dialogues also present the potential for negotiation and change through verbal exchange. As the reader follows Ursa's dynamic encounters with Mutt, which oscillate between harmony and dissonance, she too may alternate between experiences of enjoyment and displeasure which seem to characterize the couple's relationship, as well as Ursa's experience of sexual desire more generally.

Similar to the reader's shifting experiences of reading pleasure and disturbance, Ursa's sexual desire involves conflicting (and intense) feelings of pleasure and pain which, expressed in her italicized exchanges with Mutt, are inextricably connected to her relationship to her matrilineage. While Mutt and Ursa's relationship is far from one of purely reciprocal pleasure, neither is it its polar opposite, as is evident, for example,

in the fact that Mutt asks his partner, “*Does it feel good?*” (76). Though her reply, “*No,*” suggests that this is less than a fair exchange, the very fact that he is concerned about her desires – and that she can articulate what she feels – implies that Ursa is more than a sexualized object.

As the reader finds herself both intrigued and disturbed by Ursa and Mutt’s continually changing conversations, she may find herself in a kind of paralysis, unsure how to relate to subject matter that allows for no easy resolution. While ambiguities about Ursa’s desire (or lack thereof) remain, it is also through such uncertainties on the reader’s part that Ursa covertly resists, in however limited a way, male domination, as well as the reader’s full access to her interior experience.

Nonetheless, Ursa appears in these lines primarily to be a passive object, a reality which the main character connects to her great grandmother and Corregidora. How one is to read such passages becomes difficult, for it is unclear whether or not Ursa finds pleasure in intercourse, or in a “dirty talk” which suggests that the language of domination and submission is embedded within fantasy life. Where, such passages lead us to ask, does eros end and illegitimate political force begin? What is clear is that Ursa and Mutt have been reiterating a language which Great Gram learned from Corregidora, and that Ursa, who “never would tell” Mutt something (perhaps “what he is doing”) is exercising resistance to her former partner’s demands. Just as she performs this act of resistance in their conversations and in their relationship to one another, she withholds from the reader, leaving the audience to read between the lines without

arriving at clear answers. As this section ends with irresolution, it suggests that Ursa will continue for some time to grapple with the connections between desire and resistance and between her matrilineage and her relationship to Mutt.

At the same time, however, the couple's exchanges also seem to move increasingly towards greater understanding, implicating that Ursa's life has reached a state of utter paralysis. Twenty pages later, Ursa points to the ways in which her relationship with Mutt once was one of love, one may well ask if Ursa and Mutt's relationship simply repeats the past, or if it departs from her family's narrative tradition in a productive way. Responding to Mutt's question, "*What you looking for, woman?*" she asserts, "*What we stopped being to each other. / Something you gave me once, but stopped giving me*" (98). And when she implies that she needs a relationship that is about more than fucking, Mutt seems to understand her unspoken thoughts. Presumably referring to Tadpole, who recently cheated on Ursa, Mutt asks,

"What he stopped giving you too?"

"Yes."

"What you need?"

"Yes."

"What you wanted from me?"

"Yes." (98-99)

As the protagonist articulates her needs and wants, the exchange between the two partners is perhaps gradually moving from dissonance to understanding and from distance to intimacy. Ursa's and Mutt's evolving relationship parallels the reader's own shift towards making better sense of the decontextualized passages.

As I have stated, it is particularly significant that these conversations eventually emerge into the blues form of AAB, in which a stanza ends with a variation of the preceding lines (and as evident, for example, in the final scene which I later discuss). For at the same time that the blues are rooted in African American oral tradition, they also emerge as a distinctly modern form, thus offering a new means of expression relevant to the circumstances of post-slavery times. As Leroi Jones explains in *Blues People*, the blues, with roots in the spirituals of slavery but reborn out of modern, urban rhythms, brings together African American tradition and cultural change, as well as individual and ethnic expression (50). "Blues was a music that arose from the needs of a group, although it was assumed that each man had his *own* blues and that he would sing them" (Jones *Blues* 62). This music hereby became characteristically American, presenting African Americans as individuals rather than property, for "[t]he limited social and emotional alternatives of the work song could no longer contain the growing experience of this country that Negroes began to respond to. [...] The music of the Negro began to reflect these social and cultural complexities and change" (Jones *Blues* 62).

The blues have an even more particular relevance for Ursa as a black woman. Though even in 1998 Angela Davis writes that most music scholars view women as marginal to the genre (9), in reality the classic blues (of the 1920s) were primarily performed by female singers,⁹⁵ making African American women visible for the first time in the public realm (and oftentimes economically independent of men as well). This musical form gave black women venues through which to question a dominant, bourgeois culture in which patriarchy and marriage were presented as givens, despite that “[n]ormative representations of marriage as the defining goal of women’s lives blatantly contradicted black social realities during the half-century following emancipation” (Davis 18).⁹⁶ As this suggests, and as Davis argues in *Blues Legacies and Black Feminism: Gertrude ‘Ma’ Rainey, Bessie Smith, and Billie Holiday* (1998), the blues were in many ways reflective of an African American feminist consciousness. The blues form’s ability to “construct seemingly antagonistic relationships as noncontradictory oppositions” and multi-layered, complex meanings made it conducive to such modes of thought (xv). Not only did blues performances provide women with one of the few public spaces for contesting patriarchal culture, marriage, and male

⁹⁵ Leroi Jones states that ninety-one of the great classic blues singers were women and that over 75% of classic blues songs written from female perspective (91). His work, however, in contrast to that of Davis, overlooks the importance of gender and sexual issues intrinsic to the form.

⁹⁶ As Davis explains, “women’s blues bore witness to the contradictory historical demands made of black American women. On the one hand, by virtue of their femaleness, they faced ideological expectations of domesticity and subordination emanation from the dominant culture. On the other hand, given the political, economic, and emotional transformations occasioned by the disestablishment of slavery, their lived experiences rendered such ideological assumptions flagrantly incongruous” (22).

violence against women (25); blues women did not hesitate to express their sexual (including homosexual) desire (Davis 3, 24), and, according to Davis, “While sexual metaphors abound in these songs, the female characters are clearly in control of their sexuality in ways that exploit neither their partners nor themselves” (14-15).

Davis’s statement that “the blues confront raw emotional and sexual matters associated with a very specific historical reality” (24) further indicates that the blues appear an ideal means for Ursa to express her feelings about her individuality, race, and gender relations; the complex history that she has inherited; and the sexual desire which she reclaims as her own. That Ursa uses this musical form for such ends is apparent when she sings of “[a]ll those blues feelings” and of “my feeling ways” (50). This mode’s multi-vocality proves especially relevant for an individual whose sentiments about her selfhood and her inheritance fraught with ambivalence.

While the blues make use of a language that does not seem capable of conveying fully the central character’s thoughts and feelings, they, like the novel as a whole, also transcend the verbal by drawing upon sounds and silences that come closer to communicating the ineffable. The modern aesthetics of the blues allow Ursa, “*without words, the explanation somewhere behind the words*” (66), to transcend a language that has been largely defined by dominant white, patriarchal culture, while also communicating to her listeners (and her maternal lineage in particular), hereby creating a new kind of space in a new world where boundaries dissolve. Through song, Ursa hopes to find “a song that would touch me, touch my life *and* theirs. A Portuguese song,

but not a Portuguese song. A new world song. A song branded with the new world” (59).⁹⁷ This song of the “new world” resides not only in the Americas which Europeans “discovered”: it exists in a reclaimed space in which Ursa’s voice will not only be heard, but will also touch her listeners (the reader included).

Following the main character’s fall, the power of her voice to communicate to others beyond language seems to have grown, as if the pain she has lived through means she has a strong message to relay. As her neighbor Cat states, responding to Ursa’s comment that her own voice ““didn’t sound like it used to,””

“Your voice sounds a little strained, that’s all. But if I hadn’t heard you before, I wouldn’t notice anything. I’d still be moved. Maybe even moved more, because it sounds like you been through something. Before it was beautiful too, but you sound like you been through more now.” (44)

As Cat indicates, the power of Ursa’s voice resonates in more than language.

While the reader may also be “moved” by the knowledge that Ursa’s voice has powerful resonance for her music audience, she can only learn of the main character’s

⁹⁷ As Jones comments in her interview with Michael Harper, Jones believes that English is inadequate because it uses “one dimensional words to try to express multi-dimensional things....There are a lot of things that this language won’t account for, that are outside its perspective, you could say, that it doesn’t have either the words or the forms for” (Sharpe 312-13).

experiences through language, its rhythms, and its unstated implications. Thus, the voice which moves Cat and which hopefully touches Ursa's ancestors remains at a continual remove from a reader who is denied full access to the protagonist's world. At the same time that this obstruction between us and Ursa's song may prove frustrating, it also grants Ursa a kind of agency: she, as teller, determines to a great extent what she will and will not reveal about her story; she is more than a mere passive spectacle. Thus, we are encouraged to respect the incomprehensibility and the unknowability of another's experience.

Though the reader cannot hear the actual tones and pitches of Ursa's voice, she can experience the rhythms and silences which *Corregidora's* frequently defamiliarized language produces. Though the reader in a sense can only engage in the text through words, it is paradoxically outside of the verbal that Ursa becomes most expressive. Not only have *Corregidora* and her matrilineage marked certain subject matter as unspeakable; in line with Elaine Scarry's argument in *The Body in Pain: The Making and the Unmaking of the World* (1985), the violence which the main character has encountered has to a large extent destroyed language and its communicative potential. Ursa is left to express herself largely through what she does *not* say, and the reader to read between the lines and interpret, while at the same time recognizing that she cannot comprehend much of that which is either incommunicable or which the protagonist refuses to share.

The way in which language, music, and silence work together to this ends, particularly through blues performance, is apparent from the book's very beginning. In the opening lines, the singer suggests that the blues are vital to her process of moving out of the past and into a new future when she declares her need to sing and refuses to give in to her husband's demands that she not do so. Mutt objects to her singing "because he said that's why he married me so he could support me" and cannot understand when she explains that "I sang because it was something I had to do" (3). (These first lines also place on center stage the power struggles which govern so much of Ursa and her partner's relationship, conflicts deeply rooted in a history that continues to define social and interpersonal connections.)

This declaration of self-empowerment contrasts the (silenced) abuse which, it is implied several lines later, Mutt exercises by pushing his wife down the stairs. While Ursa says little about her fall when first speaking about it, what she does *not* say has as much significance as what she asserts. Speaking of Mutt's violence through gaps and silences, she explains, "I didn't see him till he'd grabbed me around my waist and I was struggling to get loose" (3). The passage presents only the cross words between the main character and her partner that precede her fall, not the following act of violence:

"I don't like those mens messing with you," he
said.

"Don't nobody mess with me."

“Mess with they eyes.”

That was when I fell.

The doctors in the hospital said my womb would
have to come out. (3-4)

Here Ursa tells her story not only by disclosing information, but also by affirming her right to *withhold* pieces of it. At the same time that this likely frustrates the reader, she is also drawn in by such selective silences with a desire to fill in the passage’s missing pieces.

Just as *Corregidora*’s indirect narrative strategies may also help the reader to manage the text’s difficult subject matter, the storyteller’s choice to remain silent about certain parts of her narrative may help her to confront past horrors at some degree of remove. That Ursa also finds a defensive function in distanciation is evident in her repeated comments on her inability to feel. Similar to how the reader is protected from *Corregidora*’s difficult subject matter through gaps, silences, and defamiliarization, the main character seems to avoid being swallowed by affective intensity through physical and psychological numbness. This is implicated, for example, in her repeated dreams of “*being screwed and not feeling anything. Numb between my legs*” (89). Like the impossibility of her having children, the protagonist’s numbness is at once empowering and limiting. While it is true that if Ursa does not have sensation others cannot cause her obvious pain, to not feel creates another kind of pain. Ursa frequently *wants* to feel

(particularly during sexual relations), but repeatedly is unable to do so. When making love to Tadpole, she “felt nothing” though “I wanted to feel” (83), and she “struggl[ed] against him, trying to feel what I wasn’t feeling” (75). And when Mutt asks her, “*What bothers you?*” she responds, “*because I can’t feel anything*” (90). The reader may similarly experience the text’s defensive strategies as both enabling and restrictive: Ursa’s coded language allows her audience to broach material which might otherwise seem unapproachable at the same time that the central figure’s incomplete accounts aggravate a reader who desires to know more. While this very frustration may result from a *lack* of information, it is that same dissatisfaction which enables the reader to better imagine herself in the place of a protagonist who similarly struggles with how to respond to a narrative of violence.

The enabling and limiting effects of estrangement make clear that the book’s use of such strategies is highly ambivalent. This tentativeness is especially pronounced in the text’s treatment of silence. While an oppressive, dominant white culture has forced speechlessness upon the novel’s female characters, Ursa often uses reticence as an act of resistance. The oppressive power of silencing is articulated in Ursa’s maternal family’s stories of sexual assault.

There was a woman over on the next plantation. The master shipped her husband out of bed and got in the bed with her and [...] she cut off his thing with a razor she had

hid under the pillow and he bled to death, and then the next day they came and got her and her husband. They cut off her husband's penis and stuffed it in her mouth, and then they hanged her. (*Corregidora* 67)

To comply with “white” authority, this quote makes evident, is to be silenced, but to challenge it has the same result. As Jennifer Cognard-Black writes in “‘I Said Nothing’: The Rhetoric of Silence and Gayl Jones’s *Corregidora*,” from this scene “it is clear that the price of fighting against sexual commodification--or ‘telling’ one's brutal story--is forced silence: having one’s mouth ‘stuffed’ and one’s head (intellect) ‘hanged’ or having your husband push you down the stairs” (n.p.).

But silence also functions in *Corregidora* as a site of protest. As Cognard-Black observes, Ursa, whose most frequent phrase is “said nothing,” uses silence as “a remarkably allusive narrative strategy” that “resist[s] conscription and [] forge[s] an intricate and versatile counternarrative or ‘antidiscourse.’” As this suggests, the loss of Ursa’s womb is “structured not only as symbolic silence (i. e., the silence of lost generations and, as a result, lost history), but also as an impetus for reinventing Ursa’s identity.” In this way, *Corregidora* employs a kind of *écriture féminine* which conveys meaning through the unstated and the implied.⁹⁸ This expressive mode invites its

⁹⁸ Willingham details the significant intersections among the tradition of “making generations,” Ursa’s song, and Cixous’s notion of writing the body. As Willingham points out, Cixous contends that there is a direct relationship between the feminine and song, for both “precede the Symbolic or phallogocentric

audience to seek a way of relating to Ursa's outside of a language associated with dominant culture and the history of slavery.

The separation between words and expression is at once liberating and restricting, just as is its potential to connect Ursa to and to remove her from her audience. On the one hand, to express oneself through the non-verbal may mean remaining misunderstood by mainstream culture and the reader, and perhaps by others in one's community. Because Ursa's music underscores the inarticulable nature of her experience, it also points to the (conceivably painful) disconnect between that experience and the culture in which she lives. On the other hand, to escape language is to move outside of a largely dominant white and patriarchal discourse that has sought to define, to control, and even to own "the Other." Cognard-Black, noting that most criticism on *Corregidora* has overlooked the significance of her silences as a form of agency, rightly points to the ways in which silence both imprisons and frees those who do not engage in a language defined mostly by white, patriarchal culture. I would however argue that in *Corregidora* silence is best understood not as an independent entity, but rather as *a part of* the protagonist's music and performances. Like her absent womb, the unspoken is vital to Ursa's choices to express (or not express) herself. Together, words, sounds, and silences give Ursa the agency to revise the story that has long dictated the lives of her family's women and to form a new relationship with her audience. Rather than protesting her family's erasure by making generations, she resists

law" and thus "retain traces of the maternal." (For a more in-depth description of *écriture féminine*, please see chapter two on Maso's *The Art Lover*.)

the language and the narratives which have been forced upon herself and previous generations of her family.⁹⁹ In this way, Ursa simultaneously validates and questions a matrilineal tradition.

The liberating quality of Ursa's speechlessness are especially apparent in the non-verbal qualities of her singing, which, through sounds, transcend the limits of language. During one performance she explains, "my voice was dancing, but I was saying nothing" (61). Only beyond language (a domain to which the reader has limited access) does it seem she can communicate much of her personal story. This is suggested when the protagonist, wondering if her mother knows her daughter's personal story, recognizes that it may have been conveyed to Mama through her singing. In a dialogue with Mutt, the main character asks, "*But you think she knew? [...] Oh, I don't mean the words, I wouldn't have done that. I mean in the tune, in the whole way I drew out a song. In the way my breath moved, in my whole voice*" (103). Ursa seeks to tell her story through a voice that is most expressive when freed from language. Through the nonverbal, however abstract it may be, Ursa's audience, like the mother to whom she wishes to communicate, might be able to better imagine the protagonist's emotional experience.

⁹⁹ Ursa's speechlessness is repeatedly associated with her absent womb ("*Silence in my womb*" (99)), indicating, as Cognard-Black notes, the text's resonance with Helene Cixous's notion of writing the body. At the same time that the loss of Ursa's uterus results from violence inflicted upon her, it also becomes a site of protest: not only does she refuse to employ a male-defined system of expression; she is also freed from the demand to bear children. As Boutry explains, "The literal replacement of Ursa's reproductive organs with her voice is liberating, as she is no longer confined to a sexual role." Though "when she discovers she is sterile, Ursa worries that her musicality is inextricably linked to her reproductive abilities, [...] her music does not suffer" (108). Thus, Ursa is able to explore her creativity and her life outside of what her family has understood as compulsory motherhood.

Despite the difficulty of individual expression (or perhaps in part because of it), it seems especially important to Ursa that she communicate through music not only to a wider audience, but more particularly to her mother, who most directly connects her to the Corregidora legacy. In the passages in which the main character addresses her mother, we may experience ourselves as more distanced observers, while also in moments seeming to occupy the positions of listener which both Mama and Ursa interchangeably inhabit. When, for example, Ursa asserts, "*[I]f you understood me, Mama, you'd see I was trying to explain it, in blues, without words, the explanation somewhere behind the words. To explain what will always be there*" (66), we also become the "you" to whom Ursa speaks. But Mama, and perhaps we as well, does not understand how the blues allow her daughter "to explain what I can't explain" (56). Instead Mama asserts that "*Songs are devils. It's your own destruction you're singing. The voice is a devil.*" [...] "*Unless your voice is raised up to the glory of God*" (53). While song may be the one medium through which Ursa can best express herself, this does not mean that her message will be received. The reader, however, unlikely sympathizes with Mama's opinion, though her words may prompt the reader to better understand Ursa's inclinations at times towards silence and implication.

Mama's objections indicate that the protagonist's choice to sing is a protest not only against white hegemony, but also against her own family's demands that only certain memories be passed on (and only in certain ways). But Ursa does not see her

song as incompatible with passing on the story of her family's history. This is her way of bearing witness to her family's past:

*still I'll sing as you talked it, your voice humming, sing
about the Portuguese who fingered your genitals [...] let
me give witness the only way I can. I'll make a fetus out of
grounds of coffee to rub inside my eyes. When it's time to
give witness, I'll make a fetus out of grounds of coffee
[reminders of her ancestors' work on the Brazilian coffee
plantation]. I'll stain their hands. (54)*

In telling the family's story through music, the demand that "*Everything in the beginning must be said better than in the beginning*" will perhaps be fulfilled (54).

For Ursa, saying "everything" "better than in the beginning" involves giving voice to the untold narratives of her mother and herself – and those voices and stories, which ironically have been overpowered by their foremothers, being heard. Like Ursa, Mama holds something unspoken behind her eyes, something which she refuses to share with others: "[...] *I knew she [Mama] had more than their memories. Something behind her eyes. A knowing, a feeling of her own. But she'd speak only their life now*" (103). Ursa, like her reader, desires to gain access to another's story, despite that individual's resistance to do so. Perhaps because "*Corregidora was easier than what*

she wouldn't tell me," or maybe because Great Gram and Gram have taught Mama that the only story worth telling is theirs, "*She could only tell what they'd told her*" (102).

Similar to Mama, Ursa has pushed memories into forgetfulness in ways that do not always serve her. This is evident when, after telling Mutt that Mama refused to speak of her own past experiences, Ursa asks, "*What about my own?*"(103). But before she is able to answer this question and to assert herself as an autonomous being, she, along with the reader, must learn about Mama's "private memory," which parallels her own in multiple ways. Both women possess what Patricia Williams has called "bastard consciousness," according to which an "illegitimate" child does not have the right to inherit her biological family's memories or histories. In *Corregidora*, Williams writes, "bastard daughters highlight the problems inherent [within trauma discourse] in traditional schematizations of property claims and genealogical descent" (n.p.). Hence, the relationship between Ursa and her mother proves crucial for the protagonist; to establish a solid connection with her mother is also to consider her position in her family and in the world and to find a new approach to questions of racial purity and self-worth. Similarly, the reader will best understand the main character once having learned more about her history.

While most of Mama's story is told in a straightforward and direct manner, when Ursa first begins to reflect upon her mother's past, she emphasizes her own frustration in being oblivious to that narrative. Like the reader, Ursa has had to piece

together bits of her mother's past, never successfully arriving at a complete or coherent narrative. She knows from her grandmother that a man left Mama.

*A man that left her. Still she carried their evidence,
screaming, fury in her eyes, but she wouldn't give me
that, not that one. Not her private memory. [...] And I
kept waiting for her to tell me, but she wouldn't tell me.
Sometimes I'd try to feel it out of her with my eyes, but I
couldn't get it. No. She was closed up like a fist. It was
her very own memory, not theirs, her very own real and
terrible and lonely and dark memory. And I never saw
her with a man because she wouldn't give them anything
else. Nothing. And still she told me what I should do, that
I should make generations. (101)*

Like her own audience, Ursa has waited for this story and been frustrated by the protagonist's refusal to speak. Because Ursa "couldn't be satisfied until I had seen Mama, talked to her, until I had discovered her private memory," she takes a bus to her home town, telling Mutt, "*If I do [return], I'll come with all my memories. I won't forget anything*" (104). These words, immediately preceding Book II of the novel, seem to indicate a shift not only for Ursa, but also for the reader: though the text's gaps and

silences will continue to shape the text, from here onwards *Corregidora* becomes a more linear and coherent narrative.

Though Mama initially is reluctant to share her memories stating, ““Corregidora is responsible for that part of my life. If Corregidora hadn’t happened that part of my life never would have happened”” (111), Ursa continues to watch Mama, hoping that her own eyes, communicating beyond language, will “say it” (111). Though language is limited, as is evident in the unnamable “it” that Ursa silently conveys to Mama, it seems important for Mama (as for Ursa) that she place her story into words. And eventually Mama does speak, explaining that despite her disinterest in men and her inability to feeling anything during sexual intercourse, she felt pulled by some invisible force to bear a child (111, 118). And so she half-heartedly entered a relationship with Ursa’s father Martin, feeling pulled by some unknown and unarticulable force.

[I]t was like something had got into me. Like my body or something knew what it wanted even if I didn’t want no man. Cause I knew I wasn’t lookin for none. But it was like it knew it wanted you. It was like my whole body knew it wanted you, and knew it would have you, and knew you’d be a girl. (114)

Though Martin is far from the perfect partner (when Mama later returns to him, he hits or beats her on at least two occasions), she finds fault in herself for his departure: “I carried him to the point where he ended up hating me, Ursa. And that’s what I knew I’d keep doing. That’s what I knew I’d do with any man” (121). While Mama’s claim to self-responsibility may be disturbingly understood as an act of “blaming the victim,” the idea that Mama has some agency in her own life challenges the notion that all *Corregidora* women are helpless sufferers.

Mama’s narrative is crucial to Ursa’s telling of her own: in the final line of section II, Ursa declares, “I was thinking that now that Mama had gotten it all out, her own memory – at least to me anyway [...] But then, I was thinking, what had I done about my *own* life?” (132). This statement marks yet another shift in *Corregidora*: Ursa, who beside the reader has played the role of witness, now becomes speaker.

Mama’s story seems to parallel Ursa’s own, especially when it comes to sexual partnership. Both women were involved with men who were at times abusive, while at others loving. Moreover, both characters seem to believe that in holding back their sexual desires they pushed away their partners. Though Ursa and her mother certainly have reasons to resist Mutt and Martin (notice the similarity in the two men’s names), the notion that these women played roles in the evolution of their relationships suggests that they are not mere passive observers.

Nor are Great Gram and Gram, as Ursa learns when her mother tells her the part of the family narrative which has she had not heard before. Ursa is all too familiar with

the dynamics of possessive, male-dominated relationships and the stories that accompany them. What she has *not* heard, and what she finds as she seeks to comprehend the experiences of her foremothers and her connection to those events, are counternarratives of female desire. In learning that her female family members are agents of desire, the main character may envision an alternative way of being in the world. The importance of this process is made clear when Mutt asks his partner why she continues to recollect the past (“*why do you go on making dreams?*” (103)). Ursa responds that “[*till I feel satisfied that I could have loved, that I could have loved you, till I feel satisfied, alone, and satisfied that I could have loved,*” she will continue to revisit these “dreams” (103). In owning her want, Ursa challenges the idea that “*A man always says I want to fuck, a woman always has to say I want to get fucked*” (89). She hereby objects to the patriarchal enslavement of both yesterday and her present day.

This vision of female desire becomes a reality when Ursa learns from Mama that there is another side to Great Gram and Gram’s story of victimhood. After the abolition of slavery, Great Gram made a choice: to remain with Corregidora. It is only when Great Gram “*did something that made him [Corregidora] want to kill her*” that she ran away. While, in contrast to Mama’s story, ambiguities abound in this statement, hereby indicating the continuing impossibility for Ursa or the reader to come to terms with the slavery past, this information also begins to answer Ursa’s earlier interrogative statement “*Sometimes I wonder about their desire [...]. Grandmama’s and Great Gram’s. Corregidora was theirs more than hers [Mama’s]*” (102). Ursa reflects in her

continued monologue to Mutt, “*You know how they talk about hate and desire. Two humps on the same camel? Yes. Hate and desire both riding them*” (102). Mama similarly suggests that Great Gram and Gram may have felt some attraction to Corregidora when she says she thinks the two women hated Martin “because he had the nerve to ask them what I never had the nerve to ask. [...] How much was hate for Corregidora and how much was love” (131). While these unsettling questions might appear to place blame upon Great Gram and Gram by suggesting that they that they enjoyed their positions of subordination, Ursa, in repeating the past *with a difference*, suggests that there is something liberating in the thought that a woman has and expresses desire.

Of course, there is something extremely unsettling in the idea that Great Gram and Gram wanted the violence that was exercised upon them. Stephanie Li makes sense of this presentation of female desire when she writes that *Corregidora*

does not suggest that Great Gram passively acquiesced to Corregidora’s abuse; instead Jones’s description urges us to consider the complexities and contradictions of delineating agency and personal identity in circumstances charged with complex issues of intimacy, violence, and need. What does resistance mean when bondage becomes a site of desire or when enslavement is perceived as a

defining characteristic of the self? How are we to understand Corregidora's simultaneous role as slave master and lover? And Great Gram as both victim and agent of abuse? *Corregidora* problematizes notions of freedom by presenting characters that foster their own psychological bondage to trauma. (n.p.)

This reading suggests *not* that the abuse directed at Great Gram and Gram is excusable, but rather that the conditions of slavery complicate notions of desire and pleasure. Elizabeth Swanson Goldberg similarly talks about “the collapse of the language of desire under the historical weight of systematic torture of black women under slavery” (453) and quotes Hortense Spillers: “Whether or not the captive female and/or her sexual oppressor derived ‘pleasure’ from their seductions and couplings is not a question we can politely ask” (Goldberg 453). Nor is it perhaps polite to ask whether the reader, engaging in a text filled with a great deal of brutality, derives enjoyment from reading. Though we may actively choose whether we will engage in this text, we also find ourselves confronting a similar difficulty. We might ask, as does Spillers, “[w]hether or not ‘pleasure’ is possible at all under conditions that I would aver as non-freedom” (quoted in Goldberg 453).

While I would agree with Li, Spillers, and Goldberg that desire may become an impossibility within the world of master/slave and that *Corregidora* problematizes the

notion of desire in such a way that it can only be understood within a specific sociohistorical context, I disagree that Jones makes female desire utterly impossible (Goldberg 445). Though desire could not free Ursa's ancestors from an oppressive and unjust system, and though that desire must be considered within the complexity of bondage, the idea that these grandmothers could own their own feelings and longings is an acknowledgement of their subjectivity and individuality, however much it might be shaped by social circumstances. The unsettling relationship between love and hate and desire and repulsion (for which a number of critics have criticized Jones¹⁰⁰) also haunts Ursa, who reflects on her feelings for Mutt: "What do they say about pleasure mixed in the pain?" she asks. "That's the way it always was with him. The pleasure somehow greater than the pain. My voice screaming for him to take me" (50-51).

Because female desire placed within a history of enslavement is so troubling, Great Gram ignores the question "how much was hate for Corregidora and how much was love" (131). Nor does she speak of the "something" that she did to Corregidora that led her to run from him. The reason for her flee, however, is key to Ursa's reconsideration of her relationship to the past, as becomes clear in the book's final scene. When part IV opens in the year 1969, twenty-two years after Ursa's fall, she is still living alone, supporting herself by singing at Happy's Diner. After Mutt's extended absence, he visits Happy's Café while Ursa is performing, and immediately she knows, "I was singing to him. I think he knew it too" (182). As in the early stage of their

¹⁰⁰ Loyle Hairston, June Jordan, and John Updike argue that Jones's representation of female sexual desire paints women as masochistic.

relationship, Ursa expresses her desire for Mutt, who she once felt was the only person who truly heard her song while “the others only listened” (52). Though Ursa knows she hasn’t forgiven Mutt (182), the text creates an opening for the couple’s reconciliation, a process during which they both remember the past and see the possibility for an alternate future.

Thus, Ursa, Mutt, and the reader soon find themselves in the place where the book began, the Drake Hotel where they once lived (and fought) and where they now reconsummate their love. As the couple closes the novel through a final performance, the realms of the private and the public again become inextricable. Within this intimate and yet performative space, we become the audience of a blues performance which is at once intensely personal and political.

Given the couple’s troubled history, the reader is likely taken aback by this moment: after Ursa’s efforts to develop a fuller picture about her mother’s and grandmothers’ experiences, does it remain impossible for her own life to change, or will the past merely repeat itself, as it seems to have done throughout the book? As Ursa and Mutt seek reconciliation, they return to the ritualized dialogues which they have carried on throughout the text and which seem to indicate that their relationship is not in a state of paralysis, but rather in one of flux and change. While this ambiguous final scene could suggest that the novel departs exactly where it began (that is, with Ursa’s

entrapment in an abusive relationship),¹⁰¹ the novel's closing repeats the past *with a difference*: "It wasn't the same room, but the same place. The same feel of the place" (184). As the couple returns not only to their previous Kentucky home, but also to memories of Brazil, this time Ursa articulates her desire, and Mutt clearly shows affection and tenderness for her: "I knew what he wanted. I wanted it too. We didn't speak. We got out of our clothes. I got between his knees" (184).¹⁰² In this place of unspokens, the reader is again left to puzzle over the particularities of this exchange. With Ursa's audience placed in this sense outside of the scene, the main figure again exercises her power to both speak and to withhold: we read of Ursa's desires, but exactly what she and her partner want and just what transpires between them remains uncertain. And while we may wish to celebrate Ursa's articulation of her wants and her partner's seeming respect for her, the connections made here between slavery and this sexual encounter cannot help but unsettle us.

¹⁰¹ The closing scene in which Ursa returns to Mutt is probably the most complex and confusing moment in *Corregidora*. It is thus not surprising that the final pages of the text have repeatedly been interpreted in contradicting ways. According to Simon, the book's end symbolizes "a return to the history of slavery" (102). Dubey similarly argues that the couple's last conversation indicates "the impossible conditions of heterosexual desire" (259), and Goldberg believes that Ursa's voice is never validated (464). Li and Rushdy, on the other hand, contend that Ursa's and Mutt's final "blues duet" is indicative of healing.

¹⁰² As Rushdy explains, "By reenacting an event from each of their great-grandparents' lives, Ursa and Mutt come to a knowledge about the confused desires produced out of enslavement, as Mutt imitates an enslaved ancestor who wants people simultaneously to love and abhor him, and Ursa an ancestor who feels both 'hate and love'" (*Remembering* 184).

Performing fellatio on Mutt for the first time, Ursa consciously reenacts the stories of her foremothers, recognizing the connection between her own life and those of her maternal lineage.

It was like I didn't know how much was me and Mutt and how much was Great Gram and Corregidora – like Mama when she had started talking like Great Gram. But was what Corregidora had done to *her*, to *them*, any worse than what Mutt had done to me, than what we had done to each other, than what Mama had done to Daddy, or what he had done to her in return...? (184)

While Ursa and Mutt's interactions might initially seem a mere repetition of the traumatic past, Ursa demonstrates through her oral performance not only the connection between herself and her inheritance, but also her capacity to act upon the present. An attempt to escape from the past may prove itself futile, but Ursa does have the power to revise how that past is replayed.

It had to be sexual, I was thinking, it has to be something sexual that Great Gram did to Corregidora. I knew it had to be sexual: "What is it a woman can do to a man that

make him hate her so bad he won't to kill her one minute
and keep thinking about her and can't get her out of his
mind the next?" (184)

It is in this instant, Ursa thinks, that Gram discovered an inner power, and it is this same moment that the protagonist finds her own authority.

In a split second I knew I was what it was, and I think he
might have known too. A moment of pleasure and
excruciating pain at the same time, a moment of broken
skin but not sexlessness, a moment just before
sexlessness, a moment that stops just before sexlessness, a
moment that stops before it breaks the skin: "I could kill
you." (184)

As the reader attempts to determine what this "moment of [simultaneous] pleasure and excruciating pain" is and whose voice states, "I could kill you," it becomes clear that Ursa stands in the position that formerly belonged to Great Gram. But as Rushdy notes, "Ursa does not follow the example of the woman on the plantation and emasculate Mutt, nor does she emulate her Great Gram and bite Mutt's penis enough to break the

skin. She stops before breaking the skin”, reenacting the past with an essential variation (“Relate” n.p.).

While the unsettling of the text’s ending, its return to the same places and the relationships, cannot be denied, the blues duet between Ursa and Mutt with which *Corregidora* closes further suggests the healing power of their coming together.¹⁰³ At the same time that Ursa remains within a system of heterosexual power relations according to which men are dominant,¹⁰⁴ the power dynamic between her and her sexual partner has changed. This is expressed in their closing song, which, like Ursa’s earlier performances, externalizes previously contained thoughts and feelings and suggests an alternate space where personal, social, and historical change may be possible. Mutt answers Ursa’s declaration “I could kill you” not with anger, but rather with the assertion “I don’t want a kind of woman that hurt you.” “Then you don’t want me,” Ursa answers, seeming to hold onto a history of pain and victimhood. But as the couple begins a call and response pattern, Ursa’s language changes. Mutt continues the exchange,

“I don’t want a kind of woman that hurt you.”

¹⁰³ Li supports this view, disagreeing with Goldberg’s claim that “there is no one who *hears*” (464) Ursa. Li instead argues that Mutt “a careful listener to Ursa’s stories and is sensitive to her cautious nature,” “is not a simplistic substitute for the tyrannical Brazilian slave owner.” While it cannot be denied that Mutt has in many respects dominated and mistreated Ursa, it is also true that the couple shares moments of closeness. Such intimacy occurs when the two share with one another their family histories of enslavement.

¹⁰⁴ A number of critics have read Ursa’s return to Mutt as affirming what Adrienne Rich has called “compulsory heterosexuality” (Marr, Streeter, Fahy).

“Then you don’t want me.”

“I don’t want a kind of woman that hurt you.”

“Then you don’t want me.”

“I don’t want a kind of woman that hurt you.”

“Then you don’t want me.”

“I don’t want a kind of woman that hurt you.”

“I don’t want a kind of man that’ll hurt me neither.” (185)

When Ursa moves from the statement “Then you don’t want me” to “I don’t want a kind of man that’ll hurt me neither,” their song finds resolution, however temporary it may be. In so doing, the closing scene underscores the many tensions that fill Jones’ text: sound and silence, conflict and resolution, stasis and change, violence and tenderness, past and present. As these dichotomies pull against one another, like the reader’s impulses to immerse herself in and separate herself from the narrative world, *Corregidora*’s power resonates in the silences that follow its performance. The novel’s listeners, like its protagonist, may hereby attempt to negotiate the tension between past and present and the individual and the collective, as we are left with an unsettlement which encourages us to reflect upon the personal and the political dimensions of affective life, as well as the extent to which we might intervene in history to create new narratives that honor human rights and social justice.

Conclusion

Through this dissertation's theoretical framework and its close readings of four postmodern metafiction, I have sought to explore self-reflexive narrative's potential for engaging its reader in both the personal and the political dimensions of emotional experience. While postmodern self-consciousness has frequently been criticized as self-indulgent play which removes itself from the social, historical, and political present, writing like that of Maso, Auster, Sebald, and Jones makes clear that such a view overlooks the many levels on which such texts operate. Though these authors' experimental styles may seem less accessible to a general reading public than more straight-forward narratives, their work is hardly impenetrable, and the challenge these writers present to their audience to piece together narrative puzzles prove more than a game. Because readers actively engage in and interpret texts which thematize the emotional and affective dimensions of issues relating to gender, race, and class (as well as how those concerns connect to history, society, and politics), metafiction offers a particularly productive form for exploring the intersections between the personal and the political.

As readers of the works explored in this project likely experience an alternation between disorientation and estrangement and understanding and empathy, they are encouraged to relate to self-conscious writing on a number of both intellectual and emotional levels. In this way, the authors considered here refrain from either presenting their public with one confined point of view or from distancing readers to the point that

they can no longer find relevance in the narrative world before them. The dynamic mode of reading which these works encourage allows for not only a more interesting textual engagement, but also one in which the reader becomes self-conscious of her own connection to the situations she encounters. Such a critical reading experience prevents an audience from a kind of simplistic identification with characters which collapses differences and which, as many cultural and postcolonial studies have argued, actually hinders social and cultural understanding and exchange. Instead, as readers maintain some remove from a given narrative, they are encouraged to respect the limits of their understanding while nonetheless looking to relate to the characters, social groups, and situations placed before them.

This study has only touched the surface in its discussion of socially relevant self-reflexive writing. While I have focused on a few Western (and mostly American) works, all taking the form of the novel, the realm of metafiction is vast, as is the number of self-conscious writings that, as my introductory chapter indicates, prove personally and politically relevant. Further studies on the intersection between self-reflexivity and feeling might explore any number of other national literatures, including those of non-Western countries. Moreover, other literary and aesthetic forms, particularly those which place great importance on audience (e.g. poetry, video installations, theater, dance) and which prove relevant to performance and media studies, offer rich material for further consideration of affect. Avant-garde and experimental theater, with their focus on the body and affect, seem particularly promising areas for such work. Such

materials' aesthetic, social, and political functions, I believe, make further explorations of self-reflexivity and audience response productive and worthwhile.

This is not to say that in reading metafictional texts like those examined in this dissertation we can or will change the world. But while Amy Copland expresses reservation about the actual political power of empathic reading (as addressed in chapter two), I nonetheless believe that such texts have the potential to evoke a kind of reflection that offers the beginnings for greater social and political engagement and activism. This potential, of course, depends on what we do with these books – and, more importantly, what we do after we close them. The teaching of literature offers one small way for moving beyond reflection into the realm of interpersonal communication; public forums and discussions offer another. And though self-conscious writing like that explored here may only have a small impact on our social and political consciousness, it is also in small steps, I believe, that greater change becomes possible. And in a historical moment in which globalization and intercultural exchange exist alongside intolerance, xenophobia, and racial profiling, such efforts seem especially needed.

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VITA

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