Knowing and Feeling in Late Modernist Fiction: Nabokov, Beckett, Banville, Coetzee

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Abstract

This thesis explores the relationships between knowing and feeling in the fiction of four late modernist writers: Vladimir Nabokov, Samuel Beckett, John Banville, and J. M. Coetzee. My approach is informed by and builds upon Derek Attridge's claim that literary works are best understood as 'events' performed through acts of reading. The thesis shows how these writers' works explore knowing and feeling both through the description of characters' experiences and through the cognitive and affective experiences these descriptions give rise to in readers. Capturing this demands a slower and more textually immersed mode of close reading than is customary in academic criticism, and my chapters therefore focus on a single text by each author: Nabokov's *Ada or Ardor* (1969), Beckett's *Ill Seen Ill Said* (1982), Banville's *Ancient Light* (2012), and Coetzee's *Waiting for the Barbarians* (1980).

The introduction to this thesis argues that contemporary criticism continues to be shaped by the epistemological bias which has been present in literary studies since the heyday of the New Critics. This bias is conspicuously evident in critical accounts of Nabokov, Beckett, Banville, and Coetzee, and the originality of my readings partly derives from the predisposition of other critics prematurely to resolve the cognitive and affective uncertainties generated by these authors' works. I argue that these writers stage intensely enigmatic feelings which their subjects try to know, and that these experiences of knowing and not knowing are themselves affective. Each chapter examines an epistemological-affective state which is particularly prominent in the author's work, namely: ambivalence, undecidability, disorientation, and uncertainty. In a coda to the thesis, I suggest that, beyond contributing to critical understanding of Nabokov, Beckett, Banville, and Coetzee, the larger ambition of this study is to argue for and exemplify a mode of close reading which is better able to capture the singularity of aesthetically difficult literary fictions.

Contents

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Declaration

I declare that this thesis is a presentation of original work and I am the sole author. This work has not previously been presented for an award at this, or any other, University. All sources are acknowledged as Works Cited.

Part of an early version of the first chapter on Vladimir Nabokov's *Ada or Ardor* has been published by *Textual Practice*. Part of an early version of the second chapter on Samuel Beckett's *Ill Seen Ill Said* has been published in: *New Perspectives on Community and the Modernist Subject: Finite, Singular, Exposed*. Ed. Gerardo Rodríguez Salas and Paula Martín Salván. Routledge, c2018.

Introduction

I begin with the opening half of a short prose piece by Samuel Beckett, entitled 'Still 3' (1973):

> Whence when back no knowing where no telling where been how long how it was. Back in the chair at the window before the window head in hand as shown dead still listening again in vain. No not yet not listening again in vain quite yet while the dim questions fade where been how long how it was. For head in hand eyes closed as shown always the same dark now from now all hours of day and night. No nightbird to mean night at least or day at least so faint perhaps mere fancy with the right valley wind the incarnation bell. Or Mother Calvet with the dawn pushing the old go-cart for whatever she might find and back at dusk. Back then and nothing to tell but some soundless place and in the head in the hand where such questions once like ghosts where what how long weirdest of all. (*Texts for Nothing*, 173)

When first reading this dense, difficult, yet eerily beautiful writing, it seemed to me to be primarily about problems of epistemology and perception. The barrage of interrogatives in the opening sentence ('Whence when […] where been how long how it was') raises a series of questions that readers tend to ask when trying to make sense of a literary narrative - questions which the passage conspicuously refuses to answer. This is not unlike the famous first lines of *The Unnamable*: 'Where now? Who now? When now? Unquestioning. I, say I. Unbelieving' (1). But the unusual prose style of 'Still 3' makes it even more challenging to read, its scant punctuation, intricate syntax, and incessant conjunctions, disjunctions, and qualifications placing our elementary procedures for parsing sentences in disarray. The reader is left struggling to establish what the relationship is between the narrator and the figure in the chair, and whether the narrator perceives, recollects, or invents this scene.

Yet 'Still 3' is more troubling than this problematising of knowledge and perception might suggest. Why does the figure in the chair have their 'head in hand'? Is he or she in pain, or immersed in contemplation, or overwhelmed by sadness, shame, despondency, or none of the feelings the pose might imply? And if the figure is listening, why might this be 'in vain,' with its connotations of melancholic and desperate futility? How might these associations relate to the suggestion of nostalgia, even sentimentality, in the figure of Mother Calvet and the sound of the ringing bell? My inability to comprehend the text began to take on a more unsettling implication;

might I be inadequate as a reader, failing to perceive the distress of this narrator or character? What might my feelings of uncertainty, anxiety, even shame, say about this enigmatic work? Might they be a way of 'knowing' the text, or might they hinder or obstruct it from being known? What relationship might there be between the experience the writing seems to - but might not - represent and the experience it engenders for readers? How can we account for a work that seems to both describe and give rise to such strange and enigmatic affective states?

This thesis argues that literary criticism does not yet offer the interpretative tools to approach questions of this kind, and that the principal reason for this is that contemporary critical writing struggles to accommodate both *knowing* and *feeling* - especially when they are complexly interrelated, as in the text above. I examine works by four late modernist writers - Vladimir Nabokov, Samuel Beckett, John Banville, and J. M. Coetzee - who explore the relationships between knowing and feeling in illuminating, unsettling, and moving ways. Each chapter investigates interpretative issues which arise from the mutual complication of knowing and feeling, many of which are encountered by readers of Beckett's 'Still 3.' In a coda to the thesis, I return to this remarkable work in full and show how the modes of close reading and critical writing developed in this study enable us to do greater justice to such extraordinary literary writing.

1.

The four authors discussed in this thesis might at first sight seem rather disparate. Most striking is the stark contrast between the richness and sensuality of Nabokov's prose and the depleted language and bleak narratives of Beckett's fiction. Nonetheless, part of the overarching argument of this study is that these authors engage with similar questions about knowing and feeling, and in surprisingly similar ways. Each of these writers combines intensely evocative experiential description with what Coetzee calls '[a]nti-illusionism—displaying the tricks you are using instead of hiding them' (*Doubling the Point*, 27). By foregrounding their own fictionality, these authors' works make readers especially self-conscious of their own experiences of reading; of the thoughts and feelings the text provokes. More specifically, these writers exploit anti-illusionist techniques to implicate readers in ethically-freighted feelings,

particularly feelings of loss and violent or exploitative erotic desire. Perhaps the most significant consonance between these authors, however, is the poetic quality which characterises their writing. The works of Nabokov, Beckett, Banville, and Coetzee commonly possess an extraordinary linguistic density or intensity - to borrow an image from Paul Muldoon, they exert 'a pressure per square inch' ('Interview with Paul Muldoon') which is unusual for prose fiction, and more akin to formal poetry.[1]

One could imagine a study which approached these authors via the literary historical connections between them, and particularly their shared interests in a group of high modernist precursors. Nabokov's famous lectures at Cornell (published as *Lectures on Literature*) celebrated Marcel Proust, Franz Kafka, and James Joyce. Beckett similarly wrote about Proust, collaborated with Joyce, and noted a deep affinity between his writing and Kafka's.[2] Given this shared ground of interest, it is perhaps surprising that few have considered the connections between Nabokov's and Beckett's work in any substantive way (as Banville and Coetzee have).[3] Banville has written extensively about Nabokov, Beckett, Joyce, Kafka, and Coetzee, and Coetzee has published essays on Nabokov, Beckett, and Kafka, and engaged closely with

[1] Nabokov, Beckett, and Banville are described as writing 'poetic' prose so often that it is not worth listing examples here. The more complex case of Coetzee, whose style tends to be more syntactically conventional, and which is frequently described as 'spare,' has been discussed by Jarad Zimbler (1-24). Zimbler draws on Coetzee's own claim that prose can be written to resemble 'sentences of English Poetry' ('Surreal Metaphors and Random Process,' 22) to argue - persuasively, I think - that a 'poetic strain' (88) is present in Coetzee's fiction.

[2] In a letter to Hans Naumann (17 February 1954), Beckett describes how he 'felt at home, too much so' when reading Kafka. Beckett outlines the extent of his acquaintance with Joyce and interest in Proust in the same letter (*The Letters of Samuel Beckett, Volume II*, 460-6).

[3] For instance, see: Coetzee, *Doubling the Point* (31, 87); Coetzee, 'Nabokov's Pale Fire and the Primacy of Art,' (5); Banville, 'Nabokov's Dark Treasure.' Coetzee has suggested that: 'Beckett, and later on Nabokov, in a slightly different way, were the two writers who came closest to shaking my confidence that I had nothing to learn about English lexicon and idiom' ('Homage,' 7). Daniel Albright offers perhaps the most sustained comparison between the two writers in *Representation and the Imagination,* followed by Fredric Jameson's rather chaotic series of juxtapositions in *A Singular Modernity* (197-206, 209). Other slight but notable comparisons include Brian Boyd's *Stalking Nabokov* (74, 156), Andrew Gibson's 'Comedy of Narrative,' and the writings of John Barth, most famously in 'The Literature of Exhaustion' (*The Friday Book*, 62-76), but also throughout *The Friday Book*.

Joyce's *Ulysses* (1922) in *Elizabeth Costello* (2003).[4] These literary historical connections are not, however, the focus of this thesis; I am primarily concerned with the singular literary works produced by these authors, and particularly the ways in which they represent and reflect on the relationships between knowing and feeling.

My approach is informed by and builds on Derek's Attridge's claim that literary works should be understood as 'events' performed through acts of reading. As Attridge points out: 'That we experience literary works less as objects than as events—and events that can be repeated over and over again and yet never seem exactly the same—is something many have acknowledged, but the implications of which few have pursued' (*The Singularity of Literature*, 2). Though numerous critics have thought about literary texts in terms of the reader's experience, Attridge offers the most clear, persuasive, and theoretically sound argument for a performative approach to literature.[5] Following Attridge, my readings show how the works of Nabokov, Beckett, Banville, and Coetzee explore knowing and feeling both through the description of characters' experiences *and* through the experiences - at once cognitive and affective - these descriptions solicit from readers. Part of what is both moving and discomforting about these authors' works is the way they place readers in close (and sometimes too close) proximity to the feelings of their protagonists. At times, we are powerfully encouraged to share in the experience of a narrator or a character; at other times, we register the gap between the represented affect and the affects evoked by that representation. Indeed, much of the interest of these works lies in the

[4] See, for instance, Banville's essays 'Survivors of Joyce' (333-342) and 'Beckett's Last words' (374-88) collected in *Possessed of a Past*, his reviews of and essays on Kafka ('A Different Kafka' and 'Franz Kafka's Other Trial'), his reviews of Coetzee's *Youth* ('A Life Elsewhere') and *Disgrace* ('Endgame'), and his reviews of Nabokov's fiction ('Trump Cards') and criticism about Nabokov ('Nabokov's Dark Treasures'). In an interview with *The Paris Review*, Banville preposterously criticised Nabokov's prose for its supposed lack of 'music' ('Interview with John Banville'); only a cursory glance at the opening lines of *Lolita* is necessary to refute this. Banville's is a strong misreading, displaying an almost comic 'anxiety of influence' in Harold Bloom's sense (as elaborated in *The Anxiety of Influence*). It is a happy coincidence that two of the four books Banville recommends to readers of *The Infinities* ('John Banville's Got An Assignment For You') are *Ada or Ardor* and *Ill Seen Ill Said* - the texts by Nabokov and Beckett I have chosen to focus on.

[5] Attridge has recently extended his account of literature-as-event in *The Work of Literature*. Relatively recent critical accounts which take a suggestively consonant approach to Attridge's include Paul B. Armstrong's 'In Defense of Reading,' Elaine Scarry's *Dreaming by the Book*, and Adam Frank's *Transferential Poetics*. In *How Literature Plays with the Brain*, Armstrong has approached what he calls 'aesthetic experience' (1) from the perspective of neuroscience.

movement between these two positions. This thesis illustrates how, in different but related ways, the works of Nabokov, Beckett, Banville, and Coetzee stage intensely enigmatic feelings which their subjects try to know, and how these experiences of knowing and not knowing are themselves affective. Each of my chapter titles refers to a narrative feature which is prominent in the text considered and a cognitive-affective state which that feature gives rise to, namely: description and ambivalence; narration and undecidability; recollection and disorientation; and presence and uncertainty. These states are closely related and are therefore discussed at various points in the thesis.

Any critical approach which explicitly considers the thoughts and feelings produced by literary works has to confront an obvious possible objection. Readers are conditioned by peculiar subjective dispositions, emotions, and desires (what Attridge calls 'idiocultures' [*Singularity*, 21-22]) and so experience texts in diverse and often incongruous ways. To what extent, then, can readerly experiences be definitively attributed to the text itself? This objection is not as problematic for my approach as it might appear, or, more precisely, it raises an issue which in fact attends the praxis of all literary criticism. To closely read any literary work to an adequate degree of textual specificity involves elucidating the particular effects achieved by its particular language; to account for that language as affecting a reader is simply to recognise the grounds of possibility for any interpretation - and to be more explicit about the compromises critics always make when sorting idiosyncratic meanings from those which they have good reason to believe are relevant to a reading of a text. Such distinctions can be neither definitive nor final, and part of what is so troubling about the works of Nabokov, Beckett, Banville, and Coetzee is the way they exploit and amplify anxieties about deciding whether an experience originates in text or reader. Rhetorically posing the question of whether his approach allows for 'a "correct" interpretation of a literary work,' Attridge suggests:

> If 'correct' means 'fixed for all time,' then there isn't [a single correct interpretation], for the obvious reason that the meaning of a work changes as the context within which it is read changes (while, thanks to the logic of iterability, remaining the same work). But if 'correct' means 'appropriate to the time and place in which the reading takes place,' then the term has some purchase. At least it makes sense to have a discussion about the correctness of this or that reading of a text; there may be no final resolution, but we know

> the kinds of evidence that would be considered valid at the time of the discussion, and disagreements, if not abolished, can be refined. (*The Work of Literature*, 37)

To put it more polemically, explicitly recognising that texts are experienced by readers is to relinquish the pretence of objective interpretation, and to rethink critical accounts not as being true or false, but as being more or less convincing and compelling. When I describe the experience of 'the reader' in this thesis, I am in fact describing salient aspects of my own experience of reading a given work, and try to give compelling reasons for why I suggest that it might speak to the experience of a significant number of other readers.

In their famous polemic against the consideration of readers' thoughts and feelings, 'The Affective Fallacy,' W. K. Wimsatt and Monroe C. Beardsley suggest that '[t]he more specific the account of the emotion induced by a poem, the more nearly it will be an account of the reasons for the emotion, the poem itself, and the more reliable it will be as an account of what the poem is likely to induce in other—sufficiently informed—readers' (34). It is for this reason that the readings in this thesis place great emphasis on precision and detail, with the aim of demonstrating exactly why particular qualities of texts give rise to particular qualities of experience.[6] Later in this introduction, I will give a detailed account of the exemplary importance of the New Critics (including Wimsatt) in the pursuit of this end, and outline the relationships between the New Criticism, my own praxis of close reading, and contemporary debates about methods of interpretation. But for the moment, it is worth noting that many widely held assumptions about successful close reading originate in classic works of New Criticism - the assumption that meaning is inextricably bound up with form, for instance, or that what is said cannot ultimately be separated from the way it is said.[7]

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[6] Charles Altieri similarly describes the necessity for literary criticism 'to show why responding to these particular words in this particular order makes present for the imagination certain qualities of experience' ('Taking Lyrics Literally,' 261).

[7] Cleanth Brooks's *The Well Wrought Urn* is perhaps the paradigmatic example. Brooks's particular articulation of these assumptions - that textual engagement involves 'making the closest possible examination of what the poem says as a poem' (vii), that 'form and content, or content and medium, are inseparable' (163), and that this inseparability brings about a 'resistance which any good poem sets up against all attempts to paraphrase it' (160) - is marked by his commitment to conceiving the literary work as an 'organic' form, the consequences of which I discuss later in this introduction.

The readings in this thesis stay intimately close to the text, tracing how passages affectively position readers from moment to moment.[8] Close attention is paid to the specific linguistic formation, or 'style,' of the works, drawing out the singular effects (and affects) engendered by particularities of syntax, register, tone, narratorial form, relations between clauses, orderings of sentences, and much more besides.[9] This mode of analysis demands a great deal of critical effort, and each chapter, though drawing connections across and beyond each author's oeuvre, focuses on a single work - Nabokov's *Ada or Ardor: A Family Chronicle* (1969), Beckett's *Ill Seen Ill Said* (1982), Banville's *Ancient Light* (2012), and Coetzee's *Waiting for the Barbarians* (1980).[10] The readings are consequently more extensive than is customary in current academic literary criticism; they should nevertheless be considered invitations to further critical conversation, rather than comprehensive or definitive accounts.[11]

2.

There is a substantial body of criticism which to some degree touches on questions of knowing and feeling. The most notable example within literary studies is the work of Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, not only in *Epistemology of the Closet*, but also in

[8] Catherine Gallagher claims that 'form may be said to arrest narrative flow' and thus formal analysis can 'appear strangely at odds with the temporal nature of the analyzed work' ('Formalism and Time,' 307). By contrast, my readings, in approaching texts as events, aim to be acutely attentive to the temporality of reading.

[9] My analyses proceed on the fiction of a first-time reading, referring, for instance, to effects of uncertainty, tension, and surprise, as though the plot were unknown. Margot Norris has described this kind of procedure as 'virgin' as opposed to 'veteran' reading (*Virgin and Veteran Readings of Ulysses*), but, in fact, most criticism operates on this assumption, and without acknowledging it. Roland Barthes celebrates 'rereading' because it 'draws the text out of its internal chronology' (*S/Z*, 16); by contrast, this thesis shows that the 'internal chronology' of a text is not an obstruction to be overcome, but something which is inextricable from the singularity of a work.

[10] I quote from and refer to the most authoritative editions of each text: the recent Faber reprints of Beckett's work, the Vintage *Ada* which reprints the 1969 text and so minimises introduced errors, the Vintage *Waiting for the Barbarians* (treated by most Coetzee critics as the authoritative edition), and the first paperback Penguin edition of *Ancient Light*. Where appropriate, alternative editions have been consulted.

[11] My ambition is to approach what Attridge identifies as the achievement of J. Hillis Miller's critical writing: 'it enacts, performatively, the central point - that the literary cannot be exhausted by analysis' ('Miller's Tale,' 78).

Between Men and *Touching Feeling*. In a section of *Epistemology of the Closet* (94-7) which is particularly significant for this study, Sedgwick engages closely with Barbara Johnson's powerful reading of the role of knowing in Herman Melville's *Billy Budd* ('Melville's Fist'),[12] and shows how questions of epistemology in the novella are inextricably intertwined with problems of sexuality and desire. Cognate efforts to complicate epistemological readings which divorce knowing from other, affective, dimensions of experience can be found throughout this thesis. Later in her career, Sedgwick characterised her earlier work as impelled by the question: 'What does knowledge *do*—the pursuit of it, the having and exposing of it, the receiving again of knowledge of what one already knows? *How*, in short, is knowledge performative, and how best does one move among its causes and effects?' (*Touching Feeling*, 124). She goes on to speculatively contextualise this enquiry against certain practices in literary criticism:

> [I]t is possible that the very productive critical habits embodied in what Paul Ricoeur memorably called the 'hermeneutics of suspicion'—widespread critical habits indeed, perhaps by now nearly synonymous with criticism itself—may have had an unintentionally stultifying side effect: they may have made it less rather than more possible to unpack the local, contingent relations between any given piece of knowledge and its narrative/epistemological entailments for the seeker, knower, or teller.[13] (124)

Here and elsewhere, Sedgwick privileges the particular over the universal; her principal concern is with the possibilities of unpacking 'local, contingent relations' rather than elucidating generalities. As Adam Frank puts it:

> Attention to the play between what gets said and how, and between the linguistic and nonlinguistic, is one of the most valuable things that Eve Sedgwick's book [*Touching Feeling*] models and makes available. […] Sedgwick's writing stays close to the ground of perception, aiming to open up possibilities for thinking and feeling that are not so much resistant to totalizing theory and practice but rather, by virtue of the writing's attention, precision, specificity,

[12] 'Melville's Fist' was later re-published in Johnson's *The Critical Difference*.

[13] The phrase 'the hermeneutics of suspicion' is frequently (and not quite accurately) attributed to a section of Ricoeur's *Freud and Philosophy: An Essay on Interpretation*, entitled 'Interpretation as Exercise of Suspicion' (32-6). Alison Scott-Baumann points out (62) that Ricoeur at no point uses the expression 'the hermeneutics of suspicion,' but he uses words to similar effect, and the phrase does accurately capture the thrust of his argument. Rita Felski has reflected at length on 'the role of suspicion in literary criticism' (1) in *The Limits of Critique*.

> and presence, offer a reading experience whose effect is to de-totalize. ('Some Avenues for Feeling,' 520, 521)

Like Sedgwick's, my readings are not against theory but rather concentrate attention on the particular interconnections of knowing and feeling mobilised by a given piece of writing. Though connections are made between and beyond each author's oeuvre, this study tries to resist the temptation to make totalising claims which risk obscuring the singularity of these texts. It is in these larger methodological priorities that Sedgwick's writing has most influenced this thesis, and to a greater extent than the relatively few references might suggest.

Sedgwick's work is currently receiving a renewed attention in light of the current 'affective turn' in the humanities,[14] which has seen the publication of a growing number of accounts which (implicitly or explicitly) theorise what affect is and does.[15] Melissa Gregg and Gregory J. Seigworth, for instance, open their introduction to *The Affect Theory Reader* with an elaborate description of affect, containing numerous sentences beginning 'Affect is,' or words to that effect (1-4). This declarative account is then jarringly punctured with a strangely admonitory caveat: 'There is no single, generalizable theory of affect: not yet, and (thankfully) there never will be' (3). The disjunction between this implicitly prescriptive claim[16] and the impetus of the surrounding pages vividly illustrates the dangers entailed by universal characterisations; despite the self-exculpation, this scholarship manifestly *is* oriented towards a general, or at least very widely applicable, theory of affect - as the volume's

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[14] For example, see Patricia Ticineto Clough's introduction to *The Affective Turn*. The phrase, 'the affective turn,' has been used many times in many different disciplines. Melissa Gregg and Gregory J. Seigworth, in their introduction to *The Affect Theory Reader*, suggest that an essay by Sedgwick and Adam Frank ('Shame in the Cybernetic Fold') and another by Brian Massumi ('The Autonomy of Affect'), both published in 1995, marked 'the watershed moment for the most recent resurgence of interest and intrigue regarding affect and theories of affect' (5). The dedication of *The Affect Theory Reader* to Sedgwick signals her continued influence on this burgeoning field of scholarship. Nancy Armstrong uses the term 'affective turn' in a rather different sense, to describe a tendency in contemporary fiction towards representing protagonists who disable 'the kind of sympathetic identification that novels have traditionally offered readers' ('The Affective Turn in Contemporary Fiction,' 442).

[15] Brian Massumi's *Parables for the Virtual: Movement, Affect, Sensation* and Rei Terada's *Feeling in Theory: Emotion After the 'Death of the Subject'* are two particularly well-known examples.

[16] For comparison, consider Adam Frank's more straightforward observation, free from moralistic overtones: 'There is no current consensus in the sciences or humanities on a theory of affect or emotion' (*Transferential Poetics*, fn4, 153).

title makes plain. By contrast, this thesis does not depend on or try to offer anything like a universal theory of feeling (if indeed such a thing is possible). Rather than applying a single interpretative framework, it draws on a range of theories and critical accounts as and when they illuminate a particular moment or dynamic in the works considered.[17] This critical plurality should be understood as part of a deeper scepticism about the value of general theories of the type affect theorists, despite themselves, seem unable to resist. More illuminating than affect theory is what Sianne Ngai describes as a 'present spotlight on emotion in literary criticism' (*Ugly Feelings*, 24). This 'spotlight' is best represented by the deft accounts of how artworks shape and organise feelings found in Charles Altieri's *The Particulars of Rapture*, the sensitive descriptions of the 'corporeal textures of aesthetic experience' (16) in Jane. F. Thrailkill's *Affecting Fictions*, and Ngai's own discussion of more unusual affective states, not normally understood as emotions, in *Ugly Feelings*.[18] Like Sedgwick, these critics are valuable as provocative and stimulating examples, rather than producers of portable analogies or explanatory theories.

One debate which has greatly exercised affect theorists is, however, worth briefly addressing here - the question of what distinctions, if any, should be drawn between 'affect,' 'feeling,' and 'emotion.' The fifteen page 'Glossary' with which Jonathan Flatley begins *Affective Mapping* (12-27) is indicative (or symptomatic) of the extent to which theoretically minded scholars have worried about this issue, with numerous critics giving a variety of different definitions. Brian Massumi, for instance, declares it 'crucial to theorize the difference between affect and emotion,' and defines the former as pre- or non-subjective 'intensity' and the latter as 'subjective content'

[17] As Sedgwick suggestively puts it: 'What could better represent "weak theory, little better than a description of the phenomena which it purports to explain," than the devalued and near obsolescent New Critical skill of imaginative close reading?' (*Touching Feeling*, 145).

[18] Douglas Mao intriguingly and, I think, correctly suggests that 'Altieri's splendidly nuanced readings generally have the feel, if not the professed cognitive slant, of the New Criticism' (173).

which has become 'qualified intensity' (*Parables for the Virtual*, 27-8).[19] Charles Altieri describes 'feelings' as 'basic building blocks for other affects,' and 'emotions' as 'affects that involve the construction of attitudes' (*The Particulars of Rapture*, 48). Fredric Jameson claims that, where 'emotions' can be named ('love, hatred, anger, fear, disgust, pleasure, and so forth'), 'affect (or its plural) somehow eludes language and its naming of things (and feelings)' (*The Antinomies of Realism*, 29). That, after two decades of sustained critical effort, no consistent set of definitions has met with any significant degree of consensus suggests that drawing strong distinctions is not a promising avenue along which to continue. As Attridge points out, 'since each term functions differently in different grammatical contexts it's probably wise not to be too dogmatic about their meanings' (*The Work of Literature*, 261). Rather than applying categorical distinctions, this thesis adopts a connotative approach, making use of 'affect,' 'feeling,' or 'emotion' as and when they most fully capture a particular aspect of a text.[20] 'Affect,' as the above descriptions indicate, has associations of immediacy and an absence of volition and deliberation (as in the passivity or reduced agency of being affected *by* something). 'Emotion' connotes something more conscious and nameable, and perhaps more knowable. But my preference for 'feeling,' both in the title and the readings of this thesis, is due to its rich indeterminacy between sensation and sentiment, and between body and mind.

The relationships between knowing and feeling cover a vast terrain, but the focus of this study is specific. The fictions discussed are all, in a sense, love stories; more specifically, they are stories about men desiring women who are 'inappropriate'

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[19] I paraphrase from Massumi's abstruse and morally- and politically-coded description: 'An emotion is a subjective content, the sociolinguistic fixing of the quality of an experience which is from that point onward defined as personal. Emotion is qualified intensity, the conventional, consensual point of insertion of intensity into semantically and semiotically formed progressions, into narrativizable action-reaction circuits, into function and meaning. It is intensity owned and recognized. It is crucial to theorize the difference between affect and emotion. If some have the impression that affect has waned, it is because affect is unqualified. As such, it is not ownable or recognizable and is thus resistant to critique' (*Parables for the Virtual*, 28). Marco Abel gives a similar, if rather more succinct, definition: 'Sensation—affect—is presubjective: it is what constitutes the subject rather than being a synonym for an already constituted subject's emotions or feelings' (6).

[20] Rei Terada has similarly claimed to be using these terms according to their 'connotation' (4) - yet she goes on to make categorical, hierarchical distinctions, such as 'emotion encompasses affect, passion, and pathos' (5).

as objects of desire: mothers, children, victims of violence, older women, and the dead. This is partly why these texts are so profoundly discomforting to read, and why they raise problems of knowing and feeling with such urgency. Deviating from culturally acceptable norms of desire, these characters complicate or make strange the familiar trope of the lover desiring - and failing - to know the loved one, present in works as various as Charles Dickens's *Great Expectations* (1861), George Bernard Shaw's *Pygmalion* (1913), and Marcel Proust's *In Search of Lost Time* (1913-27). In choosing to look at narratives dominated by male heterosexual desire (though often entangled with erotic feelings towards men and particularly boys), a wide range of other narratives has necessarily been excluded. This focus does, however, allow the thesis to closely consider a particular modality of knowing and feeling. The frantically epistemological configuration of desire examined herein does seem to be peculiarly masculine, which is not to say that it is necessarily or exclusively identified with male embodiment.[21] One fascinating direction for further research would be to investigate a strain of contemporary fiction which concertedly disrupts the gendered character of this epistemological paradigm - the acutely discomforting narrative of a female paedophile schoolteacher in Alissa Nutting's *Tampa* (2013), for example, or the ambiguously sexed narrator of Jeanette Winterson's *Sexing the Cherry* (1989), or the play with sexual embodiment and performance in Ali Smith's *Girl Meets Boy* (2007) and *How to Be Both* (2014). The cognate problems of knowing, feeling, and desire which these narratives give rise to unfortunately lie beyond the scope of this study.

Perhaps no modern writer has explored the interconnections between knowing and feeling - especially in relation to sexual desire - as fervently or influentially as Sigmund Freud. Adam Phillips, in his unusual biography of Freud, suggests: 'Psychoanalysis became an enquiry into what, if anything, knowing had to do with desiring; and, indeed, about what telling one's life story had to do with desiring' (*Becoming Freud*, 13). The approach to psychoanalysis (and indeed to literature) in this thesis closely follows Phillips's own treatment of psychoanalysis - implied, but never theoretically elaborated - as one among many other possible descriptions of human relations. Though rigorously attentive to theoretical technicalities, Phillips's writing tends towards a non-technical vocabulary. The far-reaching implications of this can

[21] The relationship between heterosexual masculinity and a peculiarly epistemological mode of desire is discussed by Simone de Beauvoir throughout *The Second Sex*.

be seen in his telling use of personal pronouns, as in this passage from his essay, 'On Love':

> Psychoanalysis […] endorses the view that falling in love is not a good way of getting to know someone. […] Freud and Proust are alert in complementary ways to the senses in which knowing people - or certain kinds of knowledge about people - can be counter-erotic; that the unconscious intention of certain forms of familiarity is to kill desire. It is not simply that elusiveness, or jealousy, sustains desire, but that certain ways of knowing people diminish their interest for us; and that this may be their abiding wish. So we have to watch out for the ways people invite us - or allow us - to know them. (*On Flirtation*, 40-41)

This thesis will show that the relationships between knowing, feeling, and desire are more complex than Phillips suggests here. Nevertheless, what is appealing about his writing is the way he expresses psychoanalytic insights in a language that emphasises their relevance and relation to other ways of thinking (and writing) about feeling and desire - especially those found in literary fiction, as illustrated by the 'complementary' comparison between Freud and Proust. Like Phillips, where possible, I eschew abstruse theoretical language, which too often obscures rather than illuminates its subject.[22] My analyses of texts, even when informed by psychoanalytic writing, tend not to rely on the reader being persuaded that the Freudian picture of human feeling is the 'right' one.[23]

Nonetheless, some of Freud's foundational ideas have gained extremely wide acceptance, even or perhaps especially when his articulation of them is unknown or disavowed: 'Alerted by him to puns and ambiguities, hesitations and non-sequiturs, slips and over-emphases; wily about the sex under the sentences, the deflected aggressions, the egotism involved in whatever is shied away from, we are all Freud readers now' (Phillips, *The Penguin Freud Reader*, ix-x). It is debatable whether psychoanalysis was needed to alert us to the potential sexual implications of language (which can be found in abundance in Shakespeare), but Phillips's more general point remains - that some of Freud's fundamental notions are practically truisms today (and

[22] Theodor W. Adorno's critique of the mystifying theoretical language of Heideggerian philosophy*, The Jargon of Authenticity*, has also been instructive - though Adorno's own style is hardly an exemplar of clarity.

[23] It is for this reason that I have used various translations of Freud; my primary concern is not the theoretical consistency of Freud's thought, but the degree to which it illuminates a given moment in a literary work.

so much so that their troubling character risks being diminished through familiarity). The readings in this thesis would not be possible without some deeply Freudian insights - that a person might not know what they feel or desire, and that unknown feelings and desires can manifest themselves more in *how* we say and do things than in what we say and do.

3.

The importance of manner or style, the sense that manifest surfaces might bear signs of latent feelings and desires, has been one of Freud's most enduring legacies for literary criticism, under the rubric of the so-called 'hermeneutics of suspicion.' In her celebrated essay, 'Paranoid Reading and Reparative Reading, Or, You're So Paranoid, You Probably Think This Essay is about You,'[24] Sedgwick returned to Paul Ricoeur's *Freud and Philosophy: An Essay on Interpretation* and emphasised that Ricoeur in fact contrasts the interpretative suspicion he associates with Freud with a 'hermeneutics as the restoration of meaning' (Ricoeur, 280), a difference Sedgwick re-articulates as 'paranoid' and 'reparative' reading.[25] But rather than preserving a dichotomy and valorising one term over another, Sedgwick takes Ricoeur in a more productive methodological direction, protesting that it is 'a great loss when paranoid inquiry comes to seem entirely coextensive with critical theoretical inquiry rather than being viewed as one kind of cognitive/affective theoretical practise among other, alternative kinds' (*Touching Feeling*, 126). Sedgwick's implication is not that a hermeneutics of suspicion should simply be resisted or rejected, but rather that critics should exercise suspicion alongside other interpretative praxes.[26]

[24] When discussing Sedgwick's 'Paranoid Reading,' I refer to the essay in *Touching Feeling*, rather than the earlier version published as an introduction to *Novel Gazing: Queer Readings in Fiction*, which includes summaries of the essays in the collection.

[25] More recently, Rita Felski has suggested that the significance of Ricoeur's juxtaposition 'lies in the difference between unveiling and unmasking' (*The Limits of Critique*, 32). Felski's choice of metaphor is unfortunate; both 'unveiling' and 'unmasking' are acts of uncovering, unclothing, or stripping - metaphors as Freudian in imagery as they are in implication.

[26] Paul B. Armstrong has similarly suggested, with reference to the two hermeneutics sketched by Ricoeur, that '[t]he hermeneutics of suspicion complicate rather than simplify the question of how to read and compound its inherent variability' ('In Defense of Reading,' 92).

Sedgwick's methodological plurality (often misinterpreted as a straightforward antipathy towards suspicion) has an exemplary value in the midst of current critiques of symptomatic interpretation. The mainspring of this debate is Stephen Best and Sharon Marcus's introduction to 'surface reading,' published as part of a special issue of *Representations* entitled 'The Way We Read Now.' Though softened with caveats about being 'neither a polemic nor a postmortem of symptomatic reading' (3), the thrust of surface reading is to advance non-suspicious modes of interpretation. One of the difficulties of conceptualising this effort is the fact that Best and Marcus claim a vast swathe of historical and contemporary practices as 'surface reading' (9-13) - so much so that it cannot really be understood as a coherent theory or method. The most radical strand they claim for surface reading eschews textual interpretation in favour of book history (9) or the use of computational methods (particularly associated with Franco Moretti) (18).[27] Both book history and 'distant reading' seem to me useful and interesting models for cultural history, but activities which are essentially different from that of literary criticism.[28] But what Best and Marcus mainly seem to have in mind are forms of analysis which employ a 'minimal critical agency' (17), and favour 'description' over 'interpretation.'[29] Ellen Rooney has offered a searing critique of this mode, persuasively demonstrating that Best and Marcus's own value-laden account, though 'they may well intend [it] to be neutral' description, 'is very much an *argument*

[27] See Leah Price's essay, '*The History of a Book*.' Best and Marcus suggest that 'distant reading' employs the same 'minimal critical agency' (18) that they claim for surface reading, though the special issue contains no essays that put computational methods to work.

[28] Franco Moretti states his ambition 'to come up with a new sense of the literary field as a whole,' and proclaims that this endeavour 'cannot mean the very close reading of very few texts—secularized theology, really ("canon"!)—that has radiated from the cheerful town of New Haven over the whole field of literary studies. A larger literary history requires other skills: sampling; statistics; work with series, titles, concordances' (67). Despite the adversarial rhetoric, Moretti's dismissal of close reading is premised on the mistaken assumption that literary criticism is principally concerned with *literary history* ('a sense of the literary field as a whole'), rather than with explicating and illuminating individual works, and so conflates distinct (and by no means opposing) scales of enquiry. Daniel Hack's 'close reading at a distance,' which 'combines detailed, granular textual analysis with consideration of a work's geographical dispersal and uptake' (3), is an interesting permutation, though Hack largely treats 'distant reading' as reception history, and so sets aside Moretti's more characteristic (and more controversial) emphasis on processing large data sets.

[29] See: Best, Marcus, and Heather Love, 'Building a Better Description'; Love, 'Close Reading and Thin Description'; Love, 'Close but not Deep'; Marcus, *Between Women*; and Cannon Schmitt, 'Interpret or Describe?'

for a way of reading' ('Live Free or Describe,' 122).[30] 'The representation of "critical description" in "Surface Reading,"' Rooney concludes, 'is neither a description of the way we read now nor a description of the way anyone might read, ever' (124). Rooney's critique also raises a more obvious worry about how 'surface' might be meaningfully distinguished from 'depth.'[31] Setting aside these reservations for the moment, what is attractive about the discourse around surface reading is the demand for slower, more textually attentive, non-instrumentalising modes of reading not intent upon 'uncovering' repressed histories or ideologies - a much needed emphasis in contemporary criticism.[32] However, despite its claims for supplementarity, 'surface reading' in both name and practise does risk shutting down or restricting more capacious possibilities for interpretation.[33] As Rita Felski puts it, 'styles of academic reading are affective as well as cognitive, inviting us to adopt attitudes of trust, impatience, reverence, or wariness toward the texts we read. […] Suspicious reading […] is not just an intellectual exercise in demystification but also a distinctive style and sensibility with its own specific pleasures' ('Suspicious Minds,' 216). Rather than

[30] Rooney has recently offered a robust defence of formally attentive symptomatic reading ('Symptomatic Reading Is a Problem of Form'). Garrett Stewart has similarly argued against surface reading as an interpretative practice 'because literary surface [already] has its own verbal depth charges' (16). By contrast, Lee Clark Mitchell (46-7) strongly allies himself with Best and Marcus.

[31] Best and Marcus unhelpfully define surface as 'what is evident, perceptible, apprehensible in texts […] what insists on being looked at rather than what we must train ourselves to see through' (9) - a description that might arguably apply to any critical writing which treats texts as language rather than printed marks or pixels on a screen. In the absence of a more coherent account, their polemic simply places more weight on the metaphor of surface and depth than it can be expected to bear. Kristina Straub has also queried the model of surface and depth, though in less critical terms (139).

[32] Derek Attridge and Henry Staten's practice of 'minimal reading' (6) in *The Craft of Poetry* is the most achieved example of this mode. Minimal reading, though pedagogically valuable, should however be considered a starting point rather than an end of textually engaged criticism. Like surface reading, 'minimal interpretation' invites the question: at what point does interpretation becomes more than minimal? I am unsure that that border is worth policing.

[33] The way in which critiques of suspicious interpretation frequently risk restricting readerly possibilities can be seen in Susan Sontag's well-known polemic in *Against Interpretation*: 'The modern style of interpretation excavates, and as it excavates, destroys; it digs "behind" the text, to find a sub-text which is the true one. […] In place of a hermeneutics we need an erotics of art' (6, 14). Sontag represents 'hermeneutics' and 'erotics' as a mutually exclusive binary. It is difficult to see why the excavation of invisible 'truths' (even to the point of destruction) should be perceived as incompatible with the erotic; much of this thesis is in fact concerned with precisely this conjunction.

deciding *a priori* where the interest, truth, or pleasure of a text is to be located, following Sedgwick, this thesis shows that much fuller, richer readings are possible if we consider surface, depth, and everything else a text has to offer.

This methodological debate has shaped the approach each chapter takes to a cognate literary critical issue - the question of how critics should read and respond to narratorial statements on the one hand, and experiential descriptions on the other (a question raised with particular urgency when their implications seem to be in conflict, as is frequently the case in the texts this thesis examines). My chapters on Banville and Coetzee consider numerous critics who too easily identify a first-person narrator's assertions with the meaning of a sentence (or even a novel). By contrast, a smaller number of critics privilege the implications of a text's descriptive mode above statements made by narrators, Martin Hägglund's *Dying for Time: Proust, Woolf, Nabokov* being perhaps the most flamboyant example.[34] In a move again analogous to Sedgwick's, the readings in this thesis try to keep both description and statement in play and to explore how the two operate together - to practise suspicion, reparation, and much else besides.[35]

Sustaining this kind of close reading can be particularly challenging when approaching the works of Nabokov, Beckett, Banville, and Coetzee, which are both richly descriptive and marked by strong narratorial voices. Paul de Man, in a penetrating account of rhetoric and the rhetorical dimension of literary writing, suggests that it is interpretative openness which fundamentally characterises texts as 'literary':

> The grammatical model of the question becomes rhetorical not when we have, on the one hand, a literal meaning and on the other hand a figural meaning, but when it is impossible to decide by grammatical or other linguistic devices which of the two meanings (that can be entirely incompatible) prevails.

[34] As I discuss in my chapter on Banville, Hägglund does not explicitly recognise the explanatory emphasis he places on description over statement (see Adam Kelly's review of *Dying for Time*). Elsewhere, I have more extensively critiqued Hägglund's approach, demonstrating that, though he claims to be attending to affect, his readings actually involve applying his own philosophical beliefs onto literary texts (""The mental rimmed the sensuous"").

[35] In this, the example of deconstruction has been especially illuminating. Richard Rorty describes 'deconstruction' as 'refer[ring] in the first instance to the way in which the "accidental" features of a text can be seen as betraying, subverting, its purportedly "essential" message' ('Deconstruction,' 171).

> Rhetoric radically suspends logic and opens up vertiginous possibilities of referential aberration. And although it would perhaps be somewhat more remote from common usage, I would not hesitate to equate the rhetorical, figural potentiality of language with literature itself. […] A literary text simultaneously asserts and denies the authority of its own rhetorical mode […]. (*Allegories of Reading*, 10, 17)

Such moments of undecidability, when the literal and figurative are vertiginously suspended, are rife throughout these authors' works (which is perhaps why they are so often described as being especially 'literary'). But capturing what de Man calls the 'figural potentiality' of literary writing can be peculiarly difficult when dealing with texts which assert rhetorical authority with such extraordinary force.

The powerful combination of riotous polysemous play and highly interpreting narration that commonly characterises the writings of Nabokov, Beckett, Banville, and Coetzee is the main reason that critics have tended to account for their works in highly epistemological terms; partly because the texts mobilise and intensify interpretative anxieties, and partly because the narrators themselves often privilege epistemological concerns in ways that push readers towards particular kinds of interpretation. Perhaps the most striking example is Nabokov criticism, which to a remarkable degree has accepted and bolstered Brian Boyd's interpretative framework and his overarching claim that both the readers and characters of Nabokov's novels 'experience an ever-deepening knowledge of reality' (*Nabokov's Ada*, 40). Boyd tries to substantiate this claim through an extended description of the experience of reading Nabokov's fiction (and, he implies, the experience of perceiving the world): initially, the text presents a 'resistance' to being known, but through research or further reading, the individual discovers 'solutions' to 'the myriad little problems [the author] sets the reader' (21). It is difficult to reconcile this hyperbolically epistemological account with the intensely sensuous style and subject-matter of Nabokov's fiction (and especially *Ada or Ardor*). When Boyd enthuses about the 'thrill of finding an allusion, of locating the precise source of a teasing echo, of suddenly catching an obscure pun' (21), he unintentionally describes the allure of his own methodology - demonstrating how epistemologically-minded critics can be gratified by feelings of 'knowing' the work. Perhaps the most prominent manifestation of this epistemological impulse is the propensity to treat literary texts as consistent philosophical systems in a way that seems to satisfy a critical desire for conceptual

meaning or knowledge but which simplifies and so diminishes the particularity of the work. As literary critics, it is imperative to resist this powerful pressure to resolve the text in solely cerebral terms, and to respond to the work as an event of reading, which is both cognitive *and* affective.[36] This pressure is particularly pronounced when approaching the writings of Nabokov, Beckett, Banville, and Coetzee, because the density of the prose troubles the reader's ability to grasp and make sense of it - which is precisely why these works are so important and moving as evocations of knowing and feeling.

4.

One important consequence of how these authors' works resist straightforward comprehension is to make readers especially conscious of the textual nature of literary writing - an effect which becomes most interesting and troubling with respect to character. John Frow has recently explored the tension between the textual and figural dimensions of literary fiction in *Character and Person*, which sets out to examine 'the processes of affective engagement by which textual constructs [i.e. characters] acquire their hold on readers, acting on us *as though* they were real' (vi). The book begins with a diagnosis of two opposing critical approaches to character: 'ethical' readings which naively treat characters as persons, and 'structuralist' readings which reductively treat characters 'purely as textual constructs' (vi). Rather than eliminating 'the tension between thinking of characters as pieces of writing or imaging and thinking of them as person-like entities,' Frow argues that 'fictional character must—in ways that […] are logically difficult to hold together—be seen to be both at once' (2). That readers

[36] Michael Wood's otherwise excellent *Literature and the Taste of Knowledge* exemplifies just how difficult it can be to keep both the epistemological and the affective in play. Wood emphasises that 'reading is an immediate event, like tasting salt or coriander' (9), and - as this comparison and the book's title indicate - often describes knowledge in surprisingly sensory terms. Yet his readings seem conspicuously incapable of taking either a literary work's representation of feeling or the felt dimensions of reading seriously. For instance, in his opening discussion of an excerpt from Elizabeth Bishop's 'At the Fishhouses' - 'If you tasted it, it would first taste bitter, / then briny, then surely burn your tongue. / It is like what we imagine knowledge to be' (cited *Literature and the Taste of Knowledge*, 1) - Wood passes over the extraordinarily affective nature of these lines without comment, using the poem only to introduce the book's central question about 'the act of representing knowledge […] and the nature of the knowledge that literary arrangements of words can offer us' (2).

not only should but in fact do experience characters as both persons and pieces of writing is evident from a novel like *Pale Fire* (1962); an acute awareness that characters are fictional constructs in no way lessens the urgency with which readers worry about the ethical implications of the words and actions of Kinbote, and even of King Charles of Zembla.

Like Frow, Alex Woloch has also sought to reconcile 'recurrent disputes between humanist and structural (or mimetic and formal)' (17) approaches to character in his penetrating study, *The One vs. the Many: Minor Characters and the Space of the Protagonist in the Novel*. In an argument which has profound implications for our understanding of literary fiction, Woloch argues that readers not only care about how characters fare *in* a narrative, but also care about how they are treated *by* the narrative:

> We feel interest and outrage, painful concern or amused consent at what happens to minor characters: not simply their fate within the story (whether they marry or die, make their fortune or lose it, find a home or become exiled) but also in the narrative discourse itself (how they are finally overshadowed or absorbed into someone else's story, swallowed within or expelled from another person's plot). (38)

Woloch's insight, at once obvious and surprising, gets to the heart of what is affectively complex about the fictions examined in this thesis - the way they amplify the reader's awareness of their textual character precisely at moments of ethical crisis. Which is to say that this study's interest in ethics is not ancillary but intrinsic to its interest in affect. The dynamic mobilised by Nabokov, Beckett, Banville, and Coetzee with peculiar force is the use of ethically disturbing material to solicit particular emotions, and, conversely, the evocation of particular emotions to raise troubling ethical questions (and often both, reciprocally and simultaneously). Common to the experiences of reading these authors' works are feelings of being unsettled, disturbed, troubled - affects intimately bound up with the cognisance of ethical concerns.[37] Woloch and Frow together enable us to recognise how a reader's awareness that characters exist only as effects of language does not necessarily diminish, but can intensify, such ethical affects.

[37] In the preface to *Gender Trouble* (xxvii), Judith Butler playfully unfolds the various ways in which one can make trouble, be in trouble, and be troubled by trouble.

The relationship between emotional investment and ethical response is at the heart of Bernard Williams's powerful critique of moral philosophy. In 'Morality and the Emotions,' Williams writes: '[W]e could imagine a world in which people had strong moral views, and strong emotions, and their emotions were not in the least engaged in their morality. Some moral theories certainly involve the conclusion that such a world is conceivable; but I do not think that it is' (*Problems of the Self*, 220). This quiet questioning of whether emotion can be abstracted or extracted from morality is articulated in Williams's characteristically peaceable and unassuming prose, which so often masks his radical scepticism about 'how far any philosophy could help us to recreate ethical life' (*Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy*, vii).[38] In the preface to *Moral Luck*, Williams argues that ethics is 'something whose real existence must consist in personal experience and social institutions, not in sets of propositions' (x), and claims that '[t]here cannot be any very interesting, tidy or self-contained theory of what morality is' (ix). With this scepticism about any *a priori* theory of ethics in mind, James Wood suggests that Williams's writing is especially instructive for thinking about the ethical valences of fiction: 'Of course, the novel does not provide philosophical answers (as Chekhov said, it only needs to ask the right questions). Instead, it does what Williams wanted moral philosophy to do—it gives the best account of the complexity of our moral fabric' (134-5). Wood perceptively discerns a correlation between Williams's preoccupation with the particularities of ethical life and the mimetic or illusionist affordances[39] of fiction, though Williams probably would not have accepted the essentialist implication of 'our moral fabric'; rather, literary fictions, as vivid evocations of emotional life, give rise to ethical questions and concerns. The insights of Williams, Frow, and Woloch provide a powerful sets of tools for capturing the specifically literary ways that texts engage with ethical issues (and especially those raised by problems of knowing and feeling), and their influence on this thesis is again more substantial than the relatively slight references to their work might suggest.

[38] Richard Rorty is similarly sceptical of 'philosophers' attempts to squeeze our moral sentiments into rules for deciding moral dilemmas' (*Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*, 148).
[39] Caroline Levine borrows the word 'affordance' from design theory 'to describe the potential uses or actions latent in materials and designs' of various literary forms (*Forms*, 6).

5.

This thesis is about literary fictions which investigate and trouble the relationships between knowing and feeling, but it is also, in a much wider sense, about the role of knowing and feeling in critical writing. The necessity and originality of my readings of Nabokov, Beckett, Banville, and Coetzee arises directly from the predisposition of other critics to resist and/or prematurely foreclose the uncertainties generated by these authors' works.[40] Critical accounts of Nabokov's fiction, for instance, have consistently privileged epistemological enquiries (particularly the identifying of allusions) in place of any sustained engagement with what is singularly disconcerting and moving about a novel like *Ada*. Responses to Beckett's *Ill Seen Ill Said* have too quickly described and dismissed the text's fundamental narrative and affective stakes, shutting down issues which it keeps radically open in unsettling ways. Banville critics have sought to extract consistent theories of perception from the experiential descriptions found in his novels, and so have failed to recognise the centrality of feeling to his fiction. Finally, Coetzee's *Waiting for the Barbarians* has persistently been read as straightforwardly charting the narrator's passage from ignorance to knowledge about his feelings and those of others, resolving a problematic that the text in fact never ceases to worry about. Each chapter's intervention in a discrete field of scholarship responds to a shared critical impulse towards pre-emptively defining texts, a need to too quickly 'know' these elusive works - and especially their representations of knowing - in ways that impede their understanding. This common impulse is not, I suggest, coincidental, but rather exemplifies pervasive assumptions and predispositions in the practice of literary criticism. This thesis both calls for and demonstrates the value of a closer, slower, more textually-immersed criticism of fiction, which more fully reveals the subtlety and complexity of these literary works.

[40] In *The Resistance to Theory*, Paul de Man suggestively describes Reuben Brower's pedagogical practice of 'reading texts closely as texts, […] [which] starts out from the bafflement that […] singular turns of tone, phrase, and figure [are] bound to produce in readers attentive enough to notice them and honest enough not to hide their non-understanding behind the screen of received ideas' (23). Though I do not share Brower's emphasis on the 'design' of literary works, which strays into intentionalist territory, his 'experiments in slow reading' (xii) are in many ways a model for the kind of readings offered in this thesis.

As touched on earlier, the degree of attention and care given to literary works by the New Criticism comes closest to modelling the kind of critical writing this thesis argues for. Yet the New Criticism is also responsible for establishing a set of rhetorical dispositions, values, and emphases which, I suggest, continue to distort the praxis of criticism today.[41] Most pertinent, and most problematic, is the emphasis the New Criticism placed on 'objectivity,' which inevitably encouraged critics to privilege knowing and marginalise feeling.[42] This was exacerbated by the failure of the New Critics to extend the methodological insights they gained through encounters with poetry and develop a critical mode which might respond with adequate attentiveness to prose fiction.[43] The following section will consider the rhetoric of objectivity, before I move on to discuss the divergent fates of poetry and prose under the New Criticism, and particularly the role of 'organic form' in this divergence. Briefly, I suggest that the metaphor originally served a valuable function, enabling critics to articulate what a form-attentive criticism should look like, but it rapidly ballooned into

[41] Joshua Gang has recently published an unusual attack on the New Criticism, firstly, for inculcating a belief that '1930s-style close reading' is 'the only way' of understanding complex literature (682), and, secondly, for barring intention as a legitimate consideration. The first point is based on a crude characterisation of New Criticism, as Cleanth Brooks's retrospective account of some of the major figures ('The New Criticism') should demonstrate. Gang's second claim is based on the observation that 'no one doubts that we perceive intentions when we read,' and therefore to not recognise this is to 'diminish our effectiveness as readers, as critics, and as teachers' (681, 682). Objections to intentionalism tend to arise when a (posited) intention becomes the *basis* for a claim about a text, rather than a contextual factor which enables a reader or critic to perceive something about it; Attridge's concept of 'authoredness' (*The Work of Literature*, 27) allows us to incorporate readers' perceptions of a creative intention behind a work whilst avoiding the familiar shortcomings of the normative intentionalism Gang calls for (most obviously, the problem of verifiability).

[42] Attridge differentiates his approach from that of the New Critics in similar terms (*The Work of Literature*, 104).

[43] I use 'fiction' to refer to short stories and novels, and 'prose' to refer to the language in which short stories and novels are written.

a figure which excessively governed textual analysis, and in ways that placed the prospect of an affective mode of close reading fiction further out of reach.[44]

6.

In the introduction to *Modernism and the New Criticism* (volume seven of *The Cambridge History of Literary Criticism*), Louis Menand and Lawrence Rainey recount how the professionalisation of universities in the early twentieth century made it necessary for scholars 'to conceive of the criticism of literature as an autonomous discipline with some claim to contributing to the accumulation and progress of knowledge' (9-10). It is now a familiar story that the New Critics were 'the first real winners in the battle to achieve institutional standing for literary criticism' (11), and that their success was principally achieved through developing, formalising, and advocating a method of interpretation unique to literature, for which I. A. Richards's *Practical Criticism* (1929) and William Empson's *Seven Types of Ambiguity* (1930) were guiding lights. But their success also involved developing a certain vocabulary or style for literary criticism, as Menand and Rainey implicitly recognise in their explanation of why T. S. Eliot's critical writings held such 'a particular appeal' for Richards, Empson, F. R. Leavis, and the American New Critics:

> Eliot's criticism was ostensibly formalist, insisting on the recognition of literature as an object of study on its own terms; it was anti-impressionistic and almost scientific-sounding; it had the look of being theoretical rather than

[44] Charles Altieri suggests something similar: 'The most obvious reason for the eventual failure of New Critical theory was that it had come to prefer text to act (or Brooks to Burke) so that it could not adequately open itself to the range of human interests that generate efforts at lyric expression. In order to develop a language of values appropriate for this hypostasizing of texts as the locus of value claims, the theorists were forced to a language of "organic form" that simply did not have the power to mediate sufficiently between what writers can produce and what cultures need' ('Taking Lyrics Literally,' 259). In 1979, Cleanth Brooks offered a rather different analogy for literary judgment when defending his claim that critics should not focus attention on a writer's intentions: 'Let me summarize by using the most homely analogy that I can think of. The real proof of the literary pudding is in the eating thereof. It is perfectly proper to look at the recipe the cook says she followed, to take into account the ingredients she used, to examine her intentions to make a certain kind of pudding, and her care in preparing it—or her carelessness. But the prime fact for judging will still be the pudding itself. The tasting, the eating, the experience is what finally counts' ('The New Criticism,' 598).

> journalistic or belletristic. 'Image' connotes impression; 'objective correlative,' though it is, at root, the same concept, sounds theoretical and analytical.[45] (10)

As important as methods or concepts was a criticism that had the right look, sound, and connotation; 'objective correlative' does sound more theoretical and analytical than 'image,' but crucially, it also sounds more, well, *objective*. This rhetorical emphasis on or impression of an 'objective' form of analysis, often neither explicitly registered nor consistently practised, was characteristic of New Critical writing, and at first glance would appear incompatible with any consideration of the feelings produced by literary works.[46]

Beardsley and Wimsatt famously formalised this rhetorical undercurrent and explicitly articulated it as a proscription in 'The Affective Fallacy,' an essay which is significant for literary critical history not chiefly because of its originality, but precisely because it seemingly 'codifies a crucial tenet of New Critical formalist orthodoxy' (Leitch, 1371). The essay's closing recapitulation is particularly suggestive:

> Poetry is characteristically a discourse about both emotions and objects, or about the emotive quality of objects. *The emotions correlative to the objects of poetry become a part of the matter dealt with*—not communicated to the reader like an infection or disease, not inflicted mechanically like a bullet or knife wound, not administered like a poison, not simply expressed as by expletive or grimaces or rhythms, but presented in their objects and contemplated *as a pattern of knowledge*. Poetry is a way of fixing emotions or making them more permanently perceptible […]. (38, emphasis added)

Jane F. Thrailkill points out the 'tantalizing paradox' here: 'why, in an essay urging the irrelevance of feeling to literary studies, is the rhetorical register of such emotional intensity?' (2). To tell us what poetry is not, the passage deploys a series of extraordinarily affective figures of bodily violation - infection, bullet and knife wounds, and poison. Dwelling at such length on the fearful menace of emotion, the sentence seems at once fascinated and repulsed. Or, put more polemically, even in its

[45] Patricia Waugh (382) gives a similar account of Eliot's appeal for the New Critics.
[46] It is worth noting that one of I. A. Richards's stated goals in *Practical Criticism* was 'to provide a new technique for those who wish to discover for themselves what they think and *feel* about poetry' (13, emphasis added); this dimension of the project was generally dropped by Richards's New Critical interpreters.

thesis statement, this essay prohibiting the consideration of feeling seems unable to be uninterested in affect.

The disciplinary stakes of this ambivalence become more apparent if we look at an example of the essay's treatment of other critics. In a reading of Tennyson's 'Tears, Idle Tears' (1847) in *The Well Wrought Urn*, Cleanth Brooks straightforwardly states: 'The last stanza evokes an intense emotional response from the reader' (141-2; cited Wimsatt and Bearsley, 33). Beardsley and Wimsatt, quoting this sentence, feebly protest that 'this statement is not really part of Brooks's criticism of the poem—rather a witness of his fondness for it' (33), as though trying to salvage Brooks from his own words. This division of Brooks's 'criticism' from his 'fondness' is all the more unconvincing (and verges on the disingenuous) given that Brooks directly connects the emotional effect of the stanza to the poem's 'organic structure' (142) in the very same paragraph - the signature Brooksian move. Notice also that Beardsley and Wimsatt re-describe Brooks's 'intense emotional response' as 'fondness,' rhetorically deflating or disarming readerly affect. Far from a straightforward synthesis of methodological orthodoxy, 'The Affective Fallacy' enacts a kind of strong misreading which forcefully misrepresents the New Criticism as less receptive and more hostile to the felt experiences of readers than it in fact was. The sense that Beardsley and Wimsatt are at once inserting themselves in and rewriting literary critical history is only increased by the excessive and unnecessarily deferential invocations of I. A. Richards, the several allusions to T. S. Eliot's 'objective correlatives,' and, more generally, the superfluous and none-too-subtle uses of 'objective' to characterise the critic and his work. 'The Affective Fallacy' is not simply against or in denial about feeling, but commits itself to accounting for literary criticism as a positivistic discipline - a representation which seems to necessitate a disavowal of feeling or its re-articulation as a matter of knowledge.

The professional pressures to account for feeling in literature through an epistemological idiom are, I suggest, still powerfully operative today.[47] The scientific

[47] The PhD - the required qualification for entry into the ranks of the academy - is usually defined as 'a significant and original contribution to knowledge'; it is difficult to imagine that this does not influence junior scholars' perceptions about what constitutes a legitimate subject-matter and style for academic discussions of literature. The present emphasis on 'knowledge transfer' and 'impact' may well exacerbate these perceptions. It is also striking to note that most high-profile work about feeling and literature has been published by senior (usually tenured) scholars.

and theoretical-sounding 'affect,' for instance, seems to have legitimised scholars to talk about feeling in a way that 'emotion' did not.[48] Or consider the abstruseness of the prose in most critical works about affect, Brian Massumi's *Parables for the Virtual* being a representative case. Overburdened with obscure neologisms and technical vocabularies drawn from several theoretical discourses, the very impulse towards unreadability betrays a certain embarrassment about the object of discussion, partially overcome through the use of a language accessible only to others who share with the writer a significant degree of specialised knowledge and interpretative skill. The academic reticence or awkwardness about feeling continues to affect contemporary criticism, as is evident from the conspicuous difficulty which critics have in discussing feeling with the same range and freedom as other subjects. Resisting these powerful pressures has been one of the central challenges of writing this thesis.[49] The chapters which follow this introduction seek to demonstrate how more comprehensive, accurate, and precise readings of literary works become possible when feeling is allowed to play a more prominent - and more explicit - role than is customary in academic literary criticism.[50]

7.

My claim that the New Criticism was unable to extend its insights about poetry to prose is difficult to demonstrate partly because of the great heterogeneity among the movement's pioneers, followers, and fellow travellers. As Cleanth Brooks points out in a tongue-in-cheek retrospective account published in 1979:

> The New Critic, like the Snark, is a very elusive beast. Everybody talks about him: there is now rather general agreement as to his bestial character; but few could give an accurate anatomical description of him. […]

[48] Katherine Ibbett humorously invokes the sceptical view that 'the only distinction between emotion and affect is a signal we drop to give our emotion a classier feel' (244). I find her subsequent defence of scholars drawing such distinctions unconvincing, for reasons already outlined.

[49] Put bluntly, it is harder to feel like an emerging 'professional' scholar when writing about feeling than when writing about other subjects, such as epistemology.

[50] Deidre Shauna Lynch has cogently argued that 'those of us for whom English is a line of *work* are also called upon to *love* literature' (1); love of literature undoubtedly inspires many and perhaps most critics, but such feelings are rarely deemed appropriate or relevant to critical discussion.

> Who, after all, are the New Critics? John Crowe Ransom, who almost accidentally supplied them with a name? R. P. Blackmur? I. A. Richards? T. S. Eliot? People like these do not fit the stereotype neatly. […] In fact, after some preliminary sorting and sifting, I am usually the person chosen to flesh out the agreed-upon stereotypical diagram. ('The New Criticism,' 592)

Brooks is right to warn that collective characterisations risk obscuring very real points of difference and disagreement. Nevertheless, most of the major figures of the New Criticism (including Brooks) recognise that *close reading* was the principal method and concern. In the 1949 tenth-anniversary issue of the *Kenyon Review*, in a section on 'The Critic's Business,' William Barrett considers past and recent work by prominent New Critics, and notes that, though several were beginning to pursue different paths, the common 'initial point of departure' was a shared commitment to 'the close textual analysis of literary works' (4).

To understand what the New Critics meant by 'the close textual analysis of literary works' (and how the technique was received by a generation of American college students), Cleanth Brooks and Robert Penn Warren's *Understanding Poetry* (1938) and *Understanding Fiction* (1943) are invaluable sources.[51] Mark Jancovich goes so far as to suggest that '[m]ore than any other New Critical activity, these text-books were responsible for redefining the object of literary study […] and defined the terms of reference within which literary studies largely continues to operate' (87). In the 'Letter to the Teacher' which prefaces *Understanding Poetry*, Brooks and Warren outline the book's paradigmatically New Critical 'principles' for reading poetry:

> 1. Emphasis should be kept on the poem as a poem.
> 2. The treatment should be concrete and inductive.
> 3. A poem should always be treated as an organic system of relationships, and the poetic quality should never be understood as inhering in one or more factors taken in isolation. […]
> This book must stand or fall by the *analyses* of individual poems which it contains. (ix)

[51] Both volumes went through a number of editions; I quote from and discuss the first editions so as to focus on the conception of close reading at this moment in the academy's history. Though I discuss Brooks and Warren's influential textbooks, the same attributes I identify are present in Caroline Gordon and Allen Tate's *The House of Fiction: An Anthology of the Short Story with Commentary*.

The 'factors' of poetry referred to here are later identified as rhythm and meter, tone and attitude, imagery, and idea and statement (x), and the book's sections are organised along these lines. Yet *Understanding Poetry* is curiously unwilling to define poetry itself (and particularly in contradistinction to prose). As Brooks and Warren recognise (23), many of their examples, both in the introduction and elsewhere, are in fact drawn from drama (mainly Shakespeare plays). There are even set exercises which compare quotations from poetry and prose, with one particularly rich analysis of how different implications (semantic and affective) are generated by the different rhythms of three prose passages (216-8).[52] Despite this apparent receptiveness to close reading all literary forms, however, two contrary impulses run through the book: on the one hand, a tendency to disparage 'flat prose statement' in contrast with poetry's use of 'imaginative resources that can vivify language' (521), and, on the other, a democratising suggestion that prose differs from poetry only in 'degree' rather than 'kind' (209).[53]

With this in mind, one might expect the approach of *Understanding Fiction* to be similar to the earlier (and more influential) *Understanding Poetry*. The same principles and even turns of phrase are reiterated, with the 'Letter to the Teacher' again arguing for an 'inductive method' (x) which 'aims at the close analytical and interpretative reading of concrete examples' (x), and stressing the importance of recognising the 'organic relationships' (x) that exist among the 'elements' of a text (viii). But a disparity begins to emerge when the 'elements' of fiction are identified as plot, character, and theme (xi) (with the book similarly structured by these divisions). There is no sense here that the singular *language* of a text might be important to its analysis. Brooks and Warren even dismiss 'exposition, complication, climax, proportion, focus of interest, focus of narration, and the like' as 'superficially technical questions' (xii). The demonstrable lack of attention paid to the linguistic qualities of fiction is registered in the sheer scarcity of quotation in the discursive sections of the book. Why do these superlative close readers of poetry describe fiction in such reductive terms?

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[52] The exclusion of these prose writers from the contents page and the author index suggests a certain inconsistency or uncertainty about the book's characterisations of prose and poetry.

[53] The same tension is present in Austin Warren and René Wellek's *Theory of Literature*, which at once warns against 'reducing the contents of a work of art to mere prose statement' (115) and questions the formal distinction between poetry and prose (167, 173), though in a less contradictory manner than Brooks and Robert Penn Warren.

The root of the problem lies in fundamental questions about analytic scale and the ends of literary criticism. One productive pathway into these issues is via Catherine Gallagher's description of how literary form can be conceived in two quite different ways, either as 'structure' or as 'style': 'Form as structure comes into view only from a distance; form as style requires unusually close proximity' ('Formalism and Time,' 307). As Paul H. Fry points out, the lyric poem was the 'privileged site of analysis' (65) for New Criticism because its brevity makes it possible to move between a closely studied line and the poem as a whole. That is, the 'form' of a lyric poem can be conceived and approached both as structure *and* style, in a way that is much harder to achieve with a short story, and even more so with a novel.[54] But between *Understanding Poetry* and *Understanding Fiction*, there is an unacknowledged shift from a predominantly stylistic conception of form (even when discussing longer works of poetry, drama, or prose) to a structural one. This is bound up and finds expression in the different work the figure of the literary work as an *organic* form is made to do in the two anthologies.[55] In *Understanding Poetry*, the metaphor valuably stresses the necessity of accounting for the various formal elements of a poem (rhythm, rhyme, tone, imagery, and so on) together;[56] in *Understanding Fiction*, it justifies viewing the work, at a distance, as a distinct totality. Thus, Brooks and Warren claim that 'the liking for a piece of fiction […] [depends] upon the total structure, upon a set of organic relationships, upon the logic of the whole' (x).

This seems intuitively wrong; many people can attest to the pleasures of reading the first page of, say, *Lolita* (1955) without any knowledge of the 'total structure' of the novel. The implied principle behind this claim - that the purpose of criticism is to account for 'the logic of the whole' - is equally questionable; critics can and do say important things about the writing of Nabokov, Woolf, and Joyce by

[54] Leah Price has shown, in the context of anthologies, how the size of the novel has always presented problems of quotation (*The Anthology and the Rise of the Novel*, 5).
[55] There is a sense in which deconstruction was a sustained critique of the metaphor of organic form, as M. H. Abrams tacitly suggests: 'the American deconstructive critics […] replaced [the New Criticism's] predisposition to discover coherence and a paradoxical unity of opposing meanings with the predisposition to discover incoherencies, "ruptures," and the undecidable gridlock of opposing meanings called "aporias"' (109).
[56] '[I]t is not a mechanical relationship but one which is far more intimate and fundamental. If we should compare a poem to the make-up of some physical object it ought […] to [be] something organic like a plant' (*Understanding Poetry*, 19).

discussing a single page of *Lolita*, *Mrs Dalloway* (1925), or *Ulysses*.[57] Of course, approaching any work too long to be quoted in its entirety raises questions about what constitutes a relevant or sufficient sample.[58] Yet the solutions to such problems cannot be determined *a priori*, but rather depend upon the nature of the text and the critic's enquiry. However, even allowing for a wide range of approaches, Brooks and Warren's choice to forgo close analysis of the language of fiction marks a failure to capture what makes fictions singular - the particularities of register, tone, and other stylistic qualities that make *Mrs Dalloway* every bit as distinct from *Ulysses* as Tennyson's 'Tears, Idle Tears' is from W. B. Yeats's 'The Circus Animals' Desertion.'

The disparity between the New Criticism's treatments of poetry and prose did not go unnoticed, not least by the New Critics themselves. R. P. Blackmur, in the 1949 *Kenyon Review*, declared: 'The novel needs precisely the kind of attention, the same second look from the same untenable position, that in the last twenty years or so we have been giving poetry' (10). Yet Blackmur reproduces the implicit bias of *Understanding Fiction*, claiming that 'the concentrations and invocations of feeling' in poetry 'have to do with language, even ultimately with a single phrase' whereas in the novel they are only 'secondarily those of language and are ultimately those of psychology' (10). John. W. Aldridge took up Blackmur's call in his preface to *Critiques and Essays on Modern Fiction: 1920-1951*, an edited collection which Aldridge hoped scholars 'may […] yet come to call a "new criticism" of fiction' (3). Despite the advertised 'strong formalist bias' (iii) of the collection, however, form is again equated with plot, theme, and character, with key contributors (notably Allen Tate and Joseph Frank) either solely discussing narrative, or describing the style of whole works in very

[57] Erich Auerbach's *Mimesis* is the most celebrated example of a critic using only a page or two of a novel to illuminate the whole. We might also think of the hundreds of articles and book chapters on *Ulysses* which treat a single chapter of the novel as a sufficiently large sample to make a significant claim.

[58] Eric Hayot suggests that '[t]he balance between the specificity of the instance and the applicability of the general is a problem for all thought' (15), and that a valid 'instance' or 'unit' is simply a matter of disciplinary practise and norms (16-17).

general, global terms (as Mark Schorer does).[59] What Aldridge calls 'that method of close textual analysis by which modern critics, particularly critics of poetry, have placed themselves in the most rewarding proximity to the meaning of a work of literature' (101) does occasionally come into view, most notably in the excerpt from F. R. Leavis's *The Great Tradition* (1948).[60] But holistically, the volume exhibits a collective struggle and failure to closely read fiction at the high watermark moment of the New Criticism.

In 1953, Walter E. Bezanson wittily observed: 'It is fifteen years since Brooks and Warren invaded the universities. […] So notable has been their victory that only the Presidential addresses of the Modern Language Association still assume that the debate is open' (132).[61] The institutional dominance of the New Criticism no doubt contributed to the impetus to explore other methodological possibilities; the late 1950s saw the publication of several landmark works which pursued different approaches from that of the New Criticism, most notably Ian Watt's *The Rise of the Novel* (1957), Northrop Frye's *Anatomy of Criticism* (1957), and Raymond Williams's *Culture and Society* (1958).[62] As Michael Levenson points out: 'The reliance on other academic disciplines, the belief that the best understanding of the novelistic text

[59] The chosen examples are the most conspicuous, given that they form the first section of the book which is supposed to be explicitly concerned with 'the principle of technique or form in modern fiction' (Aldridge, 3). Schorer's polemical critique is directed precisely at the kind of readings offered by Tate and Frank. Briefly, Schorer complains that 'form' is too often thought of as extraneous to fiction, or 'thought in blunter terms from those which one associates with poetry. […] As for the resources of language, these, somehow, we almost never think of as a part of the technique of fiction' ('Technique as Discovery,' 67, 68). The intention is laudable, but Schorer's discussion of five novels in twenty-one pages indicates how distant his readings are from the texts. His descriptions of how a work's style changes as its plot unfolds are illuminating, but, for a critic proclaiming the importance of linguistic form, he is remarkably unwilling to closely read individual passages (a predisposition which again seems to arise from a concern with totalities rather than particularities).

[60] It is worth noting that, in *The Great Tradition*, Leavis criticised *Ulysses* on the grounds that 'there is no organic form determining, informing, and controlling into a vital whole' (25).

[61] The essay was written in 1953 but not published until 2015.

[62] We might also think of the publication of the English-language translation of Erich Auerbach's *Mimesis* in 1953, which proved an influential model for critics exploring the relationship between form and socio-historical context - most famously Fredric Jameson and Edward Said. Arguably, major scholars were seeking out alternative methodological directions even earlier; in the preface to his 1949 book, Richard Chase predicts that '[a]n intense verbal analysis might tell us much about *Moby Dick* […] and form the "New Testament" of Melville criticism' (xi-xii), but takes a different path himself.

requires an understanding of its context—these aspects of *The Rise of the Novel* were highly characteristic of criticism of fiction in the fifties' (493). Frank Lentricchia (4) has dated the decline of the New Criticism (and the rise of 'theory') to 1957; one might dispute the date or the precise nature of the change, but it is clear that, around this time, the ambition for a new criticism of fiction was pushed into the background.

David Lodge's *Language of Fiction* (1966) was a rare late revival of this ambition:

> On the whole, the tide seems to be turning against the orthodoxies of New Criticism […]. It is my own opinion that we are in danger of jettisoning the principles of the New Criticism before we have fully exploited their possibilities. […] [I]n the case of the novel […] modern criticism has never approached the general level of achievement in the close and subtle analysis of language which it attained in the case of poetry. (6)

Lodge not only makes an eloquent and full-throated case for the importance of closely reading the language of fiction, but also perceives the problem that the scale of the novel presents for criticism. He outlines two 'alternative procedures' which closely correspond to Gallagher's distinction between form as style and form as structure:

> (1) to isolate, deliberately or at random, one or more passages, and submit them to close and exhaustive analysis, or (2) to trace significant threads through the language of an entire novel. One might label these approaches 'textural' and 'structural' respectively. […] I have relied principally on the 'structural' approach; and where I have submitted a passage from a novel to close analysis I have been concerned chiefly to explicate it by reference to the linguistic character of the whole.[63] (83-4)

There is a significant divergence between the textual (indeed, textural) analyses Lodge offers in the long theoretical essay at the beginning of *Language of Fiction*, when demonstrating the need to closely read the language of fiction, and those in the

[63] In a preface to the 2009 edition of *Charles Dickens: The World of His Novels* (first published in 1958), J. Hillis Miller similarly describes being caught between the dictates of close reading and the assumption of 'organic' form (3-4), though reaches a rather different resolution: 'Though my methods of criticism have changed, I have remained true in all the decades since I wrote this book to my original sense that what really counts in literary works are specific passages that call attention to themselves by being in some way distinctive, peculiar, or anomalous, and therefore as demanding explanation' (4).

subsequent chapters, which aim to exemplify a 'structural' approach.[64] The great sensitivity and comprehensiveness of the former is evident from Lodge's discussion of a passage from Jane Austen's *Persuasion* (13-16), where he persuasively demonstrates the inadequacy of F. W. Bateson's claim that prose is 'ultimately reducible to syllogistic form' (cited *Language of Fiction*, 13). But the consequences of Lodge opting for a 'structural' approach are apparent in his subsequent analysis of the vocabulary of moral and social value in *Mansfield Park*, in which he quotes a series of long passages from the novel without discussing other aspects of the language - tone, syntax, tense, and so on - which are inextricable from the vocabulary he sets out to examine. In other words, the analysis loses sight of the original value of the metaphor of organic form - the recognition that formal elements cannot be treated in isolation. Like the New Criticism before him, in the latter part of *Language of Fiction*, Lodge's overriding concern with 'the linguistic character of the whole' results in a mode of criticism which is distanced from the event of reading. Lodge doubled down on the 'structural' approach in *The Modes of Modern Writing: Metaphor, Metonymy, and the Typology of Modern Literature* (1977), which, like Roland Barthes's influential *S/Z* (1970; first English translation, 1974), exemplifies a method of close reading in which the epistemological emphasis of the New Criticism went crucially unchallenged.

8.

The hegemony of the New Criticism was such that many succeeding theoretical movements rightly responded to its putative blindspots: cultural studies countered its apparent ahistoricism, poststructuralism and deconstruction its naive belief in the signifying capacities of language, and feminist, queer, and postcolonial studies its inattentiveness to particularities of gender, sexuality, race, and culture.[65] As William E. Cain noted in 1982: 'Everyone agrees that the New Criticism is dead or declining, and is obviously no longer an influential force. But at the same time,

[64] Robert Scholes also notes the divergence between part one and part two of *Language of Fiction*, bluntly asserting: 'the theory is feeble and the practice is strong' (574).
[65] 'Common to the rise of these theoretical and political fields,' writes Heather Love, 'is a disavowal of earlier critical movements—particularly the New Criticism' ('Close but not Deep,' 372).

everyone feels obliged to keep dismissing the New Criticism yet once more' (1100-1). Cain suggested that, though the New Criticism was 'dead as a movement,'

> its lessons about literary study lead a vigorous life, setting the norms for effective teaching and marking the boundaries within which nearly all criticism seeks to validate itself. It is the New Criticism that defines and gives support to the central job of work that we perform - 'practical criticism,' the 'close reading' of literary texts. (1101-2)

Gallagher has similarly argued that subsequent movements 'mixed well with what came to be thought of simply as techniques of "close reading" or "practical criticism"' ('The History of Literary Criticism,' 140). Whether close reading played as vital a role in critical writing after the New Criticism's decline is open to debate. But the important point to stress is the degree to which 'practical criticism' and 'close reading' largely continued to be understood in the terms set by the New Critics, with their tendency to downplay the affects of reading.

This epistemological bias was further entrenched by the movement which most directly succeeded the New Criticism - American deconstruction. Jane Gallop, like many others (including Paul de Man),[66] suggests that deconstructive criticism practiced 'a form of close reading of literary texts not in fact so radically different from New Criticism. […] Deconstructionism[67] [*sic*] did not challenge the centrality of close reading to English [studies]; on the contrary, it infused it with new zeal' (182). Some of the most celebrated works of deconstruction do indeed focus very closely on particular passages from literary works. But, though the readings of Paul de Man, Barbara Johnson, and J. Hillis Miller are undeniably brilliant, they are ultimately inspired by and premised upon Jacques Derrida's analyses of the logic[68] of philosophical texts.[69] The epistemological bent of deconstruction is signalled by

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[66] See, for instance, de Man's essay, 'The Return to Philology,' in *The Resistance to Theory* (21-26).

[67] See Jacques Derrida's account of the distinction between 'deconstruction' and 'deconstructionism' in 'Some Statements and Truisms.'

[68] The emphasis on logic is even more pronounced in the work of one of Derrida's more recent influential interpreters, Martin Hägglund, in both *Radical Atheism: Derrida and the Time of Life* and *Dying for Time*.

[69] Attridge notes 'a peculiar feature of the reception of Derrida's work: Derrida the reader of *philosophical* texts was much more important for literary critics than Derrida the reader of *literary* texts' (*Reading and Responsibility*, 17).

Barbara Johnson, who describes the 'overall preoccupation' of *The Critical Difference* as 'the functioning of *what is not known* in literature' (understood as 'the unseen motivating force behind the very deployment of meaning') (xii). As my own readings demonstrate, such a preoccupation does not necessarily preclude the consideration of affect, but it is nevertheless the case that, on the whole, deconstructive criticism tended to displace and/or subordinate the emotional effects of literature.

The most striking example of this proclivity is Miller's reading of Henry James's *What Maisie Knew* (1897) in *Versions of Pygmalion* (1990), published at the high watermark of deconstruction,[70] and where Miller most directly concerns himself with questions of emotion and desire. The essay devotes over fifty pages to a passage close to the end of James's novel, in which Maisie's governess, Mrs Wix, tries to cajole Maisie into affirming her decision to 'give up' Sir Claude as a foster parent, and to say that she was prompted to do so by the 'faint flower' of her 'moral sense':

> She had indeed an instant a whiff of the faint flower that Mrs. Wix pretended to have plucked and now with such a peremptory hand had thrust at her nose. Then it left her, and, as if she were sinking with a slip from a foothold, her arms made a short jerk. What this jerk represented was the spasm within her of something still deeper than a moral sense. She looked at her examiner; she looked at the visitors; she felt the rising of the tears she had kept down at the station. They had nothing—no, distinctly nothing—to do with her moral sense. The only thing was the old flat shameful schoolroom plea. 'I don't know—I don't know.' (258)

Miller's attention is caught by the potential sexual charge of the 'spasm' which seems to precipitate Maisie's decision to abandon Sir Claude. He initially claims that 'the context leaves no doubt that the spasm is […] a paroxysm of sexual desire and loss' (37), but returns to the issue later in the chapter:

> In an earlier essay on *Maisie* I concluded that the ethical import of what Maisie ultimately does is undecidable because it cannot be known whether she acts on the basis of the idealism of an innocent child or with an adult's knowledge and sexual desire […]. I no longer think that the 'undecidability' lies quite in this or that the reader's knowledge is limited in quite that way. […] [T]he novel makes it clear enough that Maisie has, when she makes her decision, reached

[70] On the 'death' of deconstruction, see: Jeffrey T. Nealon, 'The Discipline of Deconstruction' (1992); Barbara Johnson, *The Wake of Deconstruction* (1994); and Jeffrey Williams, 'The Death of Deconstruction' (1996).

> just that point where the child's filial affection for her step-father has definitely turned into sexual desire […]. She refuses to go with Sir Claude and Mrs. Beale as the stepchild that will make their liaison respectable because she wants Sir Claude for herself […]. (59-60)

Miller later clarifies that he now believes the passage is ethically undecidable because:

> Maisie acts with […] peculiar self-righteous cruelty, causing great pain [to Sir Claude] while acting in the most exemplary way […]. Maisie's renunciation is at the same time an act of ferocious aggressiveness against those around her. […] Even if the reader concludes that Maisie by this time knows all about sex and adulterous betrayal, the reader still cannot easily decide how to evaluate what she does on the basis of this knowledge. (65)

Three points are worth emphasising. First, despite the insistence to the contrary, there *is* an uncertainty about whether or not Maisie's 'spasm' is sexual and, if so, in what way, as Miller's qualification ('[e]ven if the reader concludes') makes plain. Secondly, at several points in the essay, Miller implicitly recognises what is troubling about this lurking sexual association: the possibility that the novel might be tacitly invoking the sexual desire of a young girl, raising serious ethical questions about the author's, the narrator's, and indeed the reader's interest in this representation.[71] It is precisely the uncertainty about whether this *is* sexual desire that makes Maisie's 'spasm' unsettling to read, giving rise to the feelings of curiosity, titillation, excitement, and discomfort marked in Miller's essay. Thirdly, and most importantly, the description of Maisie's experience is conspicuously affective: the sensory figure of the 'whiff' of 'a faint flower,' the bodily simile of falling with a jerk of the arms, and, most obviously, the girl's tears and sense of shame. As is stressed by her 'schoolroom plea' of 'I don't know—I don't know,' this passage is much more about Maisie's feelings - and specifically her feelings of *not* knowing - than about her deriving and applying some kind of knowledge. Which is to say that, even when dwelling on knowing and feeling at great length and with great sensitivity, Miller seems unable to bring the two into contact without suppressing or subordinating the one beneath the other, re-

[71] See, for example, Miller's comment about Sir Claude's 'fear that he may succumb to the temptation of child abuse' (41), and Miller's allusion to the potential 'child abuse' Maisie is subjected to by James as her author (74).

articulating the affects the passage both describes and gives rise to as a question about epistemology and ethical decision.[72]

What I am suggesting is not that critics have never attended to the affects of literary works, but rather that the practice of close reading has perpetuated many of the implicit biases of the New Criticism, and especially the tendency to privilege the epistemological over the affective.[73] This has been exacerbated in the case of criticism of fiction, where very close linguistic attention to particular passages has not become the default practice, as it undoubtedly has for poetry.[74] One consequence of the privileging of the epistemological is that many interpretative problems raised by the affects literary fictions evoke remain insufficiently recognised, examined, and explored. When writing this thesis, I have frequently had to qualify or refashion the received critical vocabularies of narrative analysis, which tend to separate thought and feeling too quickly and too neatly. My readings of Nabokov, Beckett, Banville, and

[72] The same can be said of Miller's discussion of the kiss Caspar Goodwood gives Isabel Archer at the end of James's *The Portrait of a Lady* (1881) in *Literature as Conduct* (2005). Though Miller's reading of how this kiss functions as a speech act is highly illuminating, his principal concern is with how it 'gives Isabel knowledge' (79) and with the kinds of knowledge it might give her - a preoccupation which reflects the minimal degree to which the analysis registers the *emotions* that giving, receiving, and reading about kisses can give rise to.

[73] The tendency to privilege the epistemological over the affective was arguably more pronounced in the American academy than in the British context, where F. R. Leavis and his followers exercised considerable influence, especially through their editorship of *Scrutiny*. Though less hostile to feeling than the New Critics and their interpreters, Leavis nevertheless placed great stress on the need for emotion in literature to be qualified by the intellectual faculties. In '"Thought" and Emotional Quality' (an essay published in *Scrutiny* in 1945 and reprinted with only minor amendments in *The Living Principle* [1975]), Leavis offered a polemical comparison between D. H. Lawrence's 'Piano' and Tennyson's 'Tears, Idle Tears,' celebrating the former for possessing a 'complexity […] [which] involves the presence of something other than directly offered emotion,' and stridently critiquing the latter for its 'sweetly plangent flow, without check, cross-tension or any qualifying element' (*The Living Principle*, 78). (We might contrast this with Cleanth Brooks's frank appreciation of the emotional response produced by Tennyson's poem.) Recent scholarship on the role of affect in literary studies has, on the whole, not turned to Leavis as a significant precursor, perhaps because Leavis so frequently paired emotion with his very specific conceptions of morality and tradition - his description of literary evaluation as being concerned with 'questions of emotional hygiene and moral value' (*The Living Principle*, 75), to take one pertinent example.

[74] Henry James, Joseph Conrad, and James Joyce are perhaps the most obvious examples of authors whose works have been subject to very close readings by New Critics, or those employing New Critical methods. Both Lee Clark Mitchell (3) and Garrett Stewart (6) have recently argued for the need to read prose fiction, or at least some prose fiction, as closely as poetry.

Coetzee aim to be as explicit as possible about the problems encountered, and to explicate the wider implications for our critical methods of close reading and, ultimately, our understanding of how fictions work.

9.

The New Criticism's difficulties with close reading fiction are all the more surprising given that the movement partly evolved in response to literary modernism, which promoted a particularly 'poetic' mode of fiction. Mark Schorer, in his foreword to *Critiques and Essays on Modern Fiction* (1952), suggested that, 'in recent times, the novel has struggled more and more toward the condition of poetry' (xix).[75] Similar claims for the poetic achievement of canonical (proto-)modernist novels abound: for Allen Tate, 'it has been through Flaubert that the novel has at last caught up with poetry' (42); for Joseph Frank, 'the reader is forced to read *Ulysses* in exactly the same manner as he reads modern poetry' (46); and for T. S. Eliot, Djuna Barnes's *Nightwood* is 'so good a novel that only sensibilities trained on poetry can wholly appreciate it' (xviii). What is implied by each of these comments (and indeed many of the claims about close reading we have encountered in this introduction) is the idea that poetry possesses a greater linguistic complexity than prose - and it was precisely the linguistic complexity of modernist literature that made it such a productive stimulus for the New Critics.

'The historical circumstances that called into being "the new criticism" were very cogent ones indeed' (3), William Barrett observed in the 1949 *Kenyon Review*. 'Modern literature had become complicated, its elucidation required the discussion of complicated techniques, and this kind of discussion was quickly seen to be applicable also to works of the past' (3-4). Allon White has shown how the novels of George Meredith, Henry James, and Joseph Conrad 'resisted easy interpretation in quite new ways,' marking 'the earliest phase of modernism' prior to 'the peaks of modernist difficulty' (1). Later modernists tended to be more conscious of their difficulty; we might think of Eliot's famous pronouncement that 'poets in our civilization, as it

[75] David Lodge points out that even 'the titles of novels in the modernist tradition tend to be metaphorical or quasi-metaphorical,' as compared with the 'Edwardian realists who […] tended to use names of persons or places for titles' (*The Modes of Modern Writing*, 155).

exists at present, must be difficult' (*The Complete Prose*, 381), or Joyce's equally famous (and possibly apocryphal) declaration that *Ulysses* contained 'so many enigmas and puzzles that it will keep the professors busy for centuries arguing over what I meant' (quoted in Ellmann, 521). Leonard Diepeveen, in *The Difficulties of Modernism*, goes so far as to claim that 'modernism changed what criticism *did*. It may be true that for the first time in history, criticism's routine activity became not to articulate affect, but to elucidate meanings that the art work obscured, and show in what manner these meanings concealed and presented themselves' (224). Whether the change was as stark as Diepeveen suggests is questionable, but there is little doubt that the greater exegetical demands modernism made had an impact on the New Criticism. High modernist difficulty was not only a search for *le mot juste*, the pursuit of an ever more precise language to articulate meaning, but also a mode of writing which was more allusive and indirect; in other words, a writing which more concertedly demanded and rewarded energetic practical criticism. It is not that difficult modernism was more interested in knowing than in feeling, but that its tendencies towards the complex and the enigmatic enabled and encouraged critics to privilege epistemological enquiries, at the cost of close attention to readerly affect.[76]

The relationship between critical movements and particular kinds of writing (for instance, the New Criticism and modernism) raises the issue of the in-built biases of methodologies, and the range of works they are able to productively illuminate. Diepeveen points out that the New Criticism initially entailed 'legimitizing reading processes that privileged difficulty and bringing to the foreground those texts that were most amenable to being read as difficult' (223), but then progressed 'to a larger assertion, that *all* language is difficult' (227).[77] The question of how interesting a New Critical close reading would be for non-difficult texts largely remains beyond the scope of this study, though I do touch on this issue in several metacritical

[76] Some critics have argued that modernist writers were especially concerned with epistemological questions, most obviously Brian McHale (in *Postmodern Fiction*) and, more recently, Sara Crangle (in *Prosaic Desires*). On the relationship between modernism and feeling, see: Jonathan Greenberg's *Modernism, Satire, and the Novel* (1-46), Justus Nieland's *Feeling Modern*, Jean-Michel Rabaté's *The Pathos of Distance*, and *Modernism and Affect* (edited by Julie Taylor).

[77] Ellen Rooney suggests that 'the march of the New Criticism from the short poems of the metaphysicals and the modernists into the study of the novel' exemplifies how theories become exhausted when 'they are disseminated across literary periods in thematic readings of the most disparate texts' ('Form and Contentment,' 37).

observations. There is a sense in which the profoundly difficult language of Nabokov and Beckett can be *less* disconcerting for the close-reading critic: we might feel uncertain about a particular interpretation, but at least we know that the text requires (and rewards) a close reading. By contrast, the surface conventionality of Banville's and Coetzee's novels gives rise to critical anxieties about whether we might be reading *too* closely, whilst the narrators' propensities to supply their own interpretations can leave us feeling that the most vital interpretative work has been pre-emptively performed. Nevertheless, both chapters on these later authors argue that their works harbour similar epistemological-affective complexities to Beckett's and Nabokov's, which likewise can only be brought into relief through equally close reading.

Close reading (and, as a result, the New Criticism) has recently been the subject of a renewed attention in literary studies. In 2014, Rita Felski described 'a dramatic surge of interest in methodology over the last few years,' and suggested that 'we are now in the midst of the method wars' ('Introduction,' v).[78] In their epilogue to *Rereading the New Criticism* - pointedly titled 'Towards a New Close Reading' - Miranda B. Hickman and John D. McIntyre join the small chorus of critics calling for a return to close reading.[79] Perhaps the loudest among them are the so-called 'new formalists,' pushed into prominence by Marjorie Levinson's widely-read article in *PMLA* ('What

[78] In the introduction to *Critique and Postcritique*, Elizabeth S. Anker and Rita Felski double down on the claim that literary studies is in the midst of 'method wars' (2), and, more generally, that 'debates about the merits of critique are very much in the air' (1). The persuasiveness of this claim is undermined by Anker and Felski's enlisting a familiar cast of advocates for alternative modes of reading (Stephen Best, Sharon Marcus, Heather Love, and so on), but offering no examples to substantiate the assertion that scholars 'who insist on the continuing salience and timeliness of critique are now often expected to defend and justify what was previously taken for granted' (1). They similarly offer no evidence for the claim that '[i]t seems undeniable that the ethos of critique is losing its allure for a significant number of younger scholars' (20).

[79] In her introduction, Hickman describes the volume as participating 'in the recent wave of renewed attention to the New Criticism' (2), citing an anthology of New Critical essays edited by Garrick Davis, *Praising it New: The Best of the New Criticism*, as a key example. Hickman and McIntyre's 'Towards a New Close Reading' largely paraphrases and endorses Jane Gallop's essay, 'The Historicization of Literary Studies and the Fate of Close Reading,' which also calls for a return to close reading without arguing for or instantiating what such a method might look like.

is the New Formalism?').[80] As Levinson points out, 'new formalism is better described as a movement than a theory or method' (558) because its proponents are so disparate. Indeed, in the introduction to *Reading for Form* - the publication most associated with the movement - Marshall Brown and Susan J. Wolfson quote an anonymous reviewer's criticism that '[i]t's hard to see a new program for formalist literary studies emerging from this volume' as a 'positive advertisement,' and proclaim that 'the essays within [the collection] demonstrate, again and again, the vitality of reading for form is freedom from program and manifesto, from any uniform discipline' (5).[81] Levinson puts it more critically: 'despite the advocacy rhetoric, new formalism does not advocate for a particular method' (562).[82] In fact, most new formalist work does not significantly differ from new historicism with a renewed or (depending on one's perspective) restored attention to literary form.[83] Where this thesis diverges from those scholars simply 'calling for' a return to a form-attentive close reading is in its

[80] Heather Dubrow complains that, '[d]espite the acuity of this article, its status as the primary source in its field is regrettable because of its commitment to a simple binary that privileges the New Formalists closest to the author's own position' (xvii, n8) - by which she means that Levinson privileges those scholars who supplement historicism with an attention to form, rather than those who pursue form as the central object of inquiry. See my discussion below.

[81] In the first essay of the volume, 'Form and Contentment,' Ellen Rooney reiterates that the collection does not 'propose a singular theory of form, a definition that reorganizes the field in its own image' (26).

[82] Samuel Otter is more critical still, suggesting that '[t]here is no such thing as "new formalism," if the term is meant to name a system of thought or a sustained method'; rather, the term 'discloses a variety of intellectual and emotional responses' to a 'perceived indifference' to form in literary studies today (116-117).

[83] This is most apparent in the introduction to *New Formalisms and Literary Theory*, in which Verena Theile and Linda Tredennick invent a hypothetical new historicist reading of some recently discovered seventeenth-century bowls and then describe (but do not perform) the different interpretive moves a new formalist would make (10-11). It is difficult to see why they resort to a hypothetical and (as they concede) 'crude' (10) example if new historicism really does need new formalism. Caroline Levine offers one of the most innovative and interesting versions of this historicist strand of new formalism, which she calls 'strategic formalism' and situates as a response to critics who 'have urged a new attention to form as part of a politically aware historicism' ('Strategic Formalism,' 626). An evolved form of 'strategic formalism' is found in *Forms: Whole, Rhythm, Hierarchy, Network*, where Levine cogently makes the 'case for expanding our usual definition of form in literary studies to include patterns of sociopolitical experience' (2). It is notable that, to my knowledge, none of the scholars Marjorie Levinson describes as 'normative' new formalists, that is, not simply form-attentive new historicists - Charles Altieri, Denis Donoghue, Ihab Hassan, Virgil Nemoianu, and James Soderholm (566) - have ever self-identified as such.

combining theoretical elaboration with practical demonstration.[84] Or rather it refuses the division between theory and practice, pursuing interpretations which form and inform the theory, both arguing for and illustrating a particular method of close reading.[85] In this, the New Criticism is again a guiding light; Nicholas Gaskill is right to suggest that the writings of Brooks, Warren, Ransom, and others valuably 'challenge [us] to be as explicit in our discussions about method as they were, naming not only the tools we use but also the enabling conditions of those tools and the sorts of objects they are designed to detect' (521). Some readers will no doubt have specific objections, or prefer different procedures - and that is precisely the point: to provoke and clarify debate, to hone our methods, and so to create new possibilities for the close reading of fiction.

10.

The title of this thesis refers to Nabokov, Beckett, Banville, and Coetzee as writers of 'late modernist fiction.' There are good reasons for this, not least that their works share important qualities with canonical high modernist novels; like *Heart of Darkness*, *Ulysses*, and *To the Lighthouse*, there is an intense focus on phenomenological experience, evoked through strange and stylistically complex prose and unorthodox

[84] Paul B. Armstrong is perhaps the most conspicuous example of this tendency: his extensive, powerful, and compelling account of close reading is followed by a 'brief example' of his own 'critical practice' (subsequently demoted to only a 'hypothetical analysis' [104]) - a reading of *Heart of Darkness* which lacks the specificity and depth called for in the theoretical part of his essay. Other exceptions - that is, those critics who do instantiate their methodologies - notably deal exclusively with poetry: Derek Attridge's chapter 'A Return to Form?' in *Moving Words*, Fredric V. Bogel's *New Formalist Criticism: Theory and Practice*, and Terry Eagleton's *How to Read a Poem*. There are almost no close readings of prose fiction to be found in criticism associated with or sympathetic to the new formalism(s).

[85] D. A. Miller's *Jane Austen, or The Secret of Style* is a superb example of a study which similarly aims to at once practice and theorise a mode of close reading.

forms of narration.[86] Vicki Mahaffey suggests that modernist novels exemplify how 'challenging fiction […] forces readers to face and make interpretive choices that narrators used to make for them […]. Modernist literature erodes the sharp distinction between writer and reader, and in so doing presents readers with interpretive ethical dilemmas' (7).[87] Part of the distinctiveness of how Nabokov, Beckett, Banville, and Coetzee explore the relationship between knowing and feeling is through the intense interpretative demands their fictions place upon readers (demands which, as Mahaffey points out, can be a source of both discomfort and pleasure, and often both simultaneously). This is not to say that earlier novels do not explore knowing and feeling in interesting and compelling ways, but that the particular mode of exploration in these late modernist works is marked by the peculiar emphasis they place on engaging the thoughts and feelings of readers.

Nevertheless, the qualifying 'late' in the 'late modernism' of my title may unhelpfully suggest a mode of writing which is obsolete, derivative, and on the verge of extinction - connotations which risk misrepresenting these vital and innovative fictions. As Attridge puts it, 'modernism after modernism necessarily involves a reworking of modernism's methods, since nothing could be less modernist than a repetition of previous modes, however disruptive they were in their time' (*J. M. Coetzee*, 5). But despite the unsatisfactory connotations of 'late,' there are surprisingly few suitable qualifiers. 'Postmodernism,' inescapably associated with the theoretical writings of Jean Beaudrillard, Jean-François Lyotard, and Fredric Jameson, is not a

[86] My sense that the qualities shared by these canonical works are significant to an understanding of literary modernism is not universally shared. Perhaps the most obvious account which it is at odds with is that of 'The New Modernist Studies' as described by Douglas Mao and Rebecca Walkowitz, where modernism is implicitly defined as a cultural response to modernity. Jessica Berman's *Modernist Commitments* is a paradigmatic 'New Modernist Studies' account, which treats 'modernism' as 'a mode that arises in conjunction with impending modernity in many places, guises, attitudes, and temporalities' (32-3). Yet, as David James notes ('Modernist Affects and Contemporary Writing,' forthcoming), the very 'expansive gesture' of applying 'modernism' to an ever wider literary field is rooted in an affection for precisely these high modernist canonical works, which are inextricably bound up with and signified by the word 'modernist.' For an illuminating critique of the political impulses behind the New Modernist Studies, see: Charles Altieri, 'Afterword: How the "New Modernist Studies" fails the Old Modernism.' Susan Standford Friedman has discussed the problem of defining modernism at length in 'Definitional Excursions.'

[87] Attridge similarly suggests: 'Modernist writing makes more evident what is true of all literature: it requires an active reader, creatively engaging with the inventiveness of the work' ('Tom McCarthy's Modernism').

promising candidate.[88] Furthermore, as Attridge points out when defending his own use of 'late modernism,' 'Coetzee's work follows on from Kafka and Beckett, and not Pynchon and Barth' (2); the works of Nabokov, Beckett, and Banville similarly follow Proust, Joyce, and other high modernists. David James and Urmila Seshagiri have recently introduced the term 'metamodernism' - 'contemporary fictions distinguished by inventive, self-conscious relationships with modernist literature' ('Metamodernism,' 88). Elsewhere, I have argued that 'metamodernism' is more useful as an interpretative lens than as a descriptive category.[89] However, the focus of this thesis is not the way these authors reanimate modernist aesthetics, nor is it primarily concerned with David James's broader question about 'forms that "take from" modernism the potential for extending what fiction can do' (*Modernist Futures*, 1), but rather concentrates on the works themselves - and specifically their engagements with knowing and feeling. Despite its limitations, 'late modernism' is the best characterisation of the texts I explore and my explorations of them. At the very least, the designation emphasises that these authors follow on from and speak to the core concerns of modernist fiction in important ways. Nonetheless, 'late modernism' is not a concept which guides my readings, and the thesis has no special interest in defending it. The fictions of Nabokov, Beckett, Banville, and Coetzee have commonly been subjected to debates about whether they are 'modernist,' 'postmodernist,' or something else; I am not convinced that these debates have illuminated them in any meaningful way.[90]

My focus on these authors necessarily excludes many others who are similarly concerned with knowing, feeling, and male sexual desire; John Fowles's *The Collector* (1963), Julian Barnes's *The Sense of an Ending* (2011), and several Ian McEwan novels come to mind. David James suggests that, in McEwan's fiction, 'lush renditions of perception become the catalyst for an ethically dramatic examination of the calamities of misapprehension' ('Afterword,' *The Contemporaneity of Modernism*, 217). This is best

[88] Brian McHale intriguingly refers to Beckett's *Malone Dies* and Nabokov's *Pale Fire* as instances of 'limit modernism' (*Postmodernist Fiction*, 14, 19).
[89] This article is forthcoming in *Modernism/modernity (Print Plus)*.
[90] The most glaring example is the field of Banville studies, which continues to be shaped by abstract and largely irrelevant debates about whether his fiction is 'modernist' or 'postmodernist.' I have discussed this in a forthcoming article for *Modernism/modernity (Print Plus)*. Mark Pedretti gives a lively account of the history and consequences of the less problematic critical conversation surrounding the question of Beckett's 'modernism.'

exemplified by *On Chesil Beach* (2007), with its extremely meticulous descriptions of Edward's and Florence's feelings as their first (and final) sexual encounter unfolds (and fails). Yet the novel is so gripping primarily because of the absolute clarity with which its protagonists' experiences are perceived: though it builds narrative suspense, there is no sense in which the style of the text involves readers in problems of knowing and feeling.[91] This is not to charge McEwan with a failure of complexity, or to suggest that his fictions are only of narrative interest, but simply to recognise that they do something different from the works considered in this thesis, which solicit the reader's affective involvement in an acutely self-conscious way. Similarly, John Berger's novels, especially *G* (1972) and *To the Wedding* (1995), though profoundly concerned with intensities of desire, are simply less (or perhaps differently) troubled by problems of knowing and feeling. Nabokov, Beckett, Banville, and Coetzee constitute the most cohesive and interesting group of writers for this investigation, which is not say that the analyses and conclusions herein do not have broader implications for our understanding of modern and contemporary fiction.

The primary criterion when selecting a particular text by each author was the degree to which it productively responded to - and interestingly resisted - the enquiry. That is, these works represent each author's most complex, troubling, and moving engagement with knowing and feeling (with the caveat 'to date' for Banville and Coetzee). It is a coincidence, but nevertheless suggestive, that three of the four texts occur very late within their author's oeuvre, and are commonly characterised by qualities Edward Said associates with 'late style' - a propensity towards obscurity and complexity, and an intensification of an earlier aesthetic mode.[92] Nabokov's obsessive attention to material and abstract detail culminates, in *Ada or Ardor*, in sentences spanning hundreds of words, laden with qualifications and clarifications, synaesthetic features, and multilingual wordplays. Beckett's sensitive ear for semantic instability and ambiguity in *Ill Seen Ill Said* becomes an urgent pursuit of textual density, with single-word sentences sustaining a series of syntactical possibilities, in a text of almost unprecedented compaction. Banville's traversal from fine writing to knowing cliché

[91] This focus on narrative uncertainty is emphasised by C. Namwali Serpell in her chapter on *Atonement* in *Seven Modes of Uncertainty* (79-114).

[92] Said never synthesised the ideas about 'late style' he presents through his analyses of various composers and writers in *Late Style*, perhaps because he died before completing the book, or perhaps because he simply had no intention of doing so.

reaches a frenetic rate in *Ancient Light*, as burlesque turns on tragic pathos, and readers' doubts about whether they are being mocked or played with amped up to the highest degree. Coetzee's oeuvre, however, has developed differently, and is characterised by an ever-shifting diversity of styles, rather than an intense elaboration of particular aesthetic concerns.[93] Rather than dogmatically cleaving to late works, the chapter on Coetzee focuses on the early masterpiece, *Waiting for the Barbarians* - the author's most absorbing (and disturbing) narrative of knowing and feeling.

Each of these works has a different place in the author's oeuvre, and the implications of my discussion, for our understanding of both these writers and for late modernist fiction more widely, are correspondingly different. *Ada or Ardor* represents the epitome of a Nabokovian style which has influenced many contemporary novelists - most pertinently, Banville and Coetzee. The style of *Ill Seen Ill Said* similarly exemplifies Beckett's later prose works, which, from *How It is* (1964) onwards, are characterised by a semantic and syntactical density that powerfully resists straightforward comprehension. Banville is a more conventional stylist, and much of what I have to say about *Ancient Light* is therefore directly relevant to his other confessional memoir novels (and indeed those of other authors, Julian Barnes's *The Sense of An Ending* being an obvious example). Coetzee's writing is more heterogeneous and, though I make connections with his other works, the wider significance of my chapter on *Waiting for the Barbarians* lies chiefly in the text's singular importance in the critical understanding of contemporary world literature, as signalled by the great number of articles and book chapters that have been devoted to the novel.

The works this thesis considers are deliberately diverse, and particularly with respect to scale. Where the convoluted narrative of *Ada or Ardor* unfolds over hundreds of pages, the minimal 'events' of *Ill Seen Ill Said*, such as they are, barely exceed thirty. Consequently, each chapter illustrates a distinct way of navigating the problems of quotation and selection discussed earlier. As a non-teleological and non-

[93] Consider how the manic narration of *In the Heart of the Country* is succeeded by the almost eerie composure of the magistrate's narration in *Waiting for the Barbarians*, how the self-conscious meta-fictionality of *Foe* is followed by the concrete setting of *Age of Iron*, and the contrast between the direct political engagement of *Diary of a Bad Year* and the placeless, affectless, and decidedly fictive world of *The Childhood of Jesus* and *The Schooldays of Jesus*. Yoshiki Tajiri ('Beyond the Literary Theme Park') has argued that *The Childhood Jesus* should be considered an example of 'late style' in Said's sense.

historicist thesis, the chapters have not been arranged in a strictly chronological order, but rather organised with aesthetic qualities in mind. The first half of the thesis pairs two texts which pursue two very different but comparably extreme styles, which might be thought of as two diverging aesthetic responses to and extensions of difficult high modernist fiction, in the intense richness of Nabokov's polyphonous prose and in Beckett's extraordinarily bare yet sonorous writing. The authors considered in the latter half of the thesis look decidedly more conventional - neither Banville nor Coetzee push syntax to its limits as Beckett and Nabokov do. Nevertheless, these chapters show that Banville's and Coetzee's novels contain comparably complex involutions of knowing and feeling. The second half is arranged to mirror the first, the carnivalesque burlesquing of eloquence in Banville's fiction being more Nabokovian in style, compared with the Beckettian compactness and spareness of Coetzee's prose.

The chapter on Nabokov begins by challenging the influential account of Brian Boyd and the epistemological predisposition of Nabokov criticism more widely. The prevailing consensus is that Nabokov's novels represent characters who try to 'know' the world through perception; by contrast, my reading of *Ada or Ardor* shows how, in Nabokov's descriptions of experience, perceptions are inextricably bound up with bodily sensations, emotions, desires, and imaginings. The notion of cognition shorn of feeling is also unsettled through the use of a style which gives rise to highly affective epistemological desires in readers. This predominantly takes the form of an eroticised mode of description which involves readers in anticipating and imagining scenes of sex and sexual exploitation. This solicitation of our affective involvement is troubling primarily because of the central subject of the narrative - a sexual affair between a brother and sister which begins when they are fourteen and twelve years old respectively. I consider the most persuasive theories about the ethics of Nabokov's fiction, and demonstrate how each of them fails the novel by treating it as a consistent conceptual theory, rather than an event in which the ethical is inseparable from the affective. In the conclusion to the chapter, I suggest that *Ada or Ardor* not only strives to evoke feeling as vividly as the resources of literary fiction allow, but also reflects on the ways in which even this extraordinarily evocative language fails to capture intensities of feeling.

My reading of Beckett's late masterpiece, *Ill Seen Ill Said*, begins with an in-depth discussion of the text's narration, which has been described by some critics as first-person and by others as third-person, with neither camp justifying their claims. I show how this peculiar narrative eludes categories of narration by eschewing first-person pronouns but manifesting affective dispositions, which have the effect of characterising the narrator. This use of affect rather than pronouns to manifest some form of personhood or subjectivity points to a widespread misunderstanding of Beckett's later fiction, which critics have persistently and erroneously described as enacting an 'elimination of the subject.' The unacknowledged complexity of this narration demonstrates the need to resist the temptation to prematurely resolve the uncertainties generated by such difficult writing by accounting for it in more assured terms than it allows.[94] This critical challenge is exemplified by the central interpretative problem of *Ill Seen Ill Said*, which conspicuously raises and renders undecidable the question of whether the narrator perceives, recollects, or invents the diegetic world. It is important to recognise that the uncertainty this creates is not only cognitive but powerfully affective, producing in readers what Sianne Ngai calls 'affective disorientation,' the 'feeling of confusion *about* what one is feeling' (14). This affective disorientation is predominantly generated by the text's obsessive attentions to an old woman, who the narrator might be inventing, voyeuristically observing, or remembering in an act of mourning. I conclude by showing how the intensely disorientating closing lines of *Ill Seen Ill Said*, like the ending of *Ada or Ardor*, gesture towards the limitations of its own project, bringing into relief the extent to which both one's own feelings and the feelings of others profoundly resist being known.

I begin my discussion of Banville's fiction with his early novel, *Doctor Copernicus* (1976), which has become a *locus classicus* of Banville scholarship. There is a critical consensus that the opening of the text presents the young Copernicus perceiving and knowing the world, prior to his acquisition of language placing this epistemologically pure apprehension in crisis. Like my chapter on Nabokov, through a slower and more attentive mode of reading, I show how the passage, far from presenting a pure perception, in fact depicts an experience in which perceptions, emotions, imaginings, and beliefs are complexly intertwined. The rest of this chapter focuses on Banville's

[94] Jonathan Culler suggests that 'the work of close reading is not primarily to resolve difficulties but above all to describe them, to elucidate their source and implications' (22).

recent novel, *Ancient Light*, which exemplifies the explorations of memory that dominate his recollective memoir fictions. The reading is centrally concerned with the interpretative problems generated by Banville's highly introspective narrators, who not only describe their experiences, but also endlessly philosophise about their significance. When examining the novel's concern with the ways in which what one knows and feels in the present can impinge upon the recollection of the past, the chapter approaches experiential description and narratorial statement in concert. Like *Ada or Ardor*, the central romance of *Ancient Light* - the narrator's teenage affair with his best friend's mother - raises acute ethical concerns. I show how Banville's novel at once conceals and conspicuously exposes the narrator's intimate feelings and desires, and in such a way as to entice readers into making speculations which are themselves powerfully affective, giving rise to excitement, discomfort, pleasure, unease, and myriad other emotions.

The chapter on Coetzee offers a new reading of *Waiting for the Barbarians* which takes issue with an assumption common to the many previous interpretations. The novel centres on the peculiar relationship between the magistrate of an unnamed frontier town and the 'barbarian girl,' a young woman who has been subjected to torture, which the magistrate failed to prevent. Part of what is complex about this narrative is its use of first-person present-tense narration, so that we read the magistrate's thoughts and feelings during the relationship *and* after it has come to an end. The critical consensus is that the magistrate, though initially bewildered by his feelings for the girl, eventually comes to recognise that his desire was essentially no different from that of her torturers. By contrast, I show how the magistrate's retrospective criticisms of his past actions mark not an illumination but a fundamental mischaracterisation of his feelings and desires, which remain profoundly unknown - to himself and to readers. In the latter part of the chapter, I consider the implications of this for the widespread critical belief that Coetzee's fiction stages or enacts an 'ethics of alterity.' I conclude with the suggestion that the fate of 'alterity' in contemporary criticism is symptomatic of the need for more performative approaches to fiction, which aim, not to translate the text into a conceptual theory, but to capture the ways in which literary works present and involve readers in cognitive, affective, and ethical complexities.

In a coda to the thesis, I return to the remarkable prose piece with which I began, Beckett's 'Still 3.' My short reading mobilises many of the critical terms and dynamics encountered over the course of this study. I conclude with the suggestion that the wider ramifications of this thesis lie in these critical strategies, which open up new possibilities for the close reading of aesthetically difficult literary fiction.

Vladimir Nabokov's *Ada or Ardor*: Description and Ambivalence

> 'Lovers, of course, are notoriously frantic epistemologists, second only to paranoiacs (and analysts) as readers of signs and wonders.'
> — Adam Phillips, *On Flirtation*, 41.

Readers of Vladimir Nabokov's *Ada or Ardor: A Family Chronicle* (1969) have described the text in highly affective yet suggestively heterogeneous ways. One of the novel's earliest champions, Alfred Appel Jr., proclaimed it a 'great work of art, a necessary book, radiant and rapturous, affirming the power of love and imagination,' and ecstatically recounted how 'its rich and variegated prose moves from the darkest to the lightest of sonorities as Nabokov sensually evokes the widest range of delights' ('An Erotic Masterpiece'). By contrast, Martin Amis recently characterised *Ada* as an 'interminable book […] written in dense, erudite, alliterative, punsome, pore-clogging prose,' and condemned its excessive 'emphasis on activities we rightly and eternally hold to be unforgivable' and 'its toiling systems and symmetries, its lonely and comfortless labyrinths, and its glutinous *nostalgies*' ('The Problem of Laura,' 2-3). These divergent reports together evoke some of the most fundamental qualities of the novel - its potent combination of intoxicatingly poetic prose and formidable cognitive difficulty; the extremities of sensual pleasure, wracking loneliness, and disturbing brutality it describes; and the intensely ambivalent and complex feelings these descriptions give rise to in readers. This chapter will show that these qualities of *Ada* are intimately interrelated, and argue that only a reading that recognises this can capture what is so distinctive about Nabokov's writing.

1.

The emphasis this chapter places on the experience of reading *Ada* seems to coincide with the most influential account of Nabokov's fiction - Brian Boyd's canonical study, *Nabokov's Ada: The Place of Consciousness*. However, as will shortly become clear, my reading characterises that experience in profoundly different terms. Boyd bases his interpretation on Nabokov's own analogy between reading and solving chess problems, claiming that, though the text initially 'resists' the reader's comprehension, by continuing to read or by conducting some research, we can

discover the 'solutions' to 'the myriad little problems [the author] sets the reader' (21). The novel is thus

> apprehended in the same way as the mind apprehends its world. Reading one of Nabokov's works allows us to become aware of the process of gradually distinguishing and relating things in more and more detail: we experience an ever-deepening knowledge of reality […]. Nabokov makes the relationship between reader and text an image and an enactment of the tussle between the individual mind and the world. (41, 60)

Part of the attraction of Boyd's approach is his willingness to confront the challenge of making sense of Nabokov's fiction. However, the potentially far-reaching consequences of this are limited by his practice of adhering to and applying the philosophical views Nabokov expressed outside of the fictional works, in lectures, interviews, private notes, and his autobiography (*Speak, Memory*).[1] Consequently, Boyd's interpretation is concerned with the relationship between the reader's experience and Nabokov's extra-textual statements, rather than with the most characteristic way that novels engage with phenomenological experience - through the description of characters' thoughts, feelings, and desires. Boyd accepts Nabokov's inordinately cerebral metaphor for reading and enlarges it into a full-blown philosophy of human perception; for Boyd, *Ada* embodies 'Nabokov's belief that the world resists the mind so thoroughly because it is so real, because it exists so resolutely outside the mind' (19). This highly epistemological and dualistic account has led to a serious misunderstanding of Nabokov's writing.

The first passage of *Ada* in which the word 'reality' occurs recounts the beginning of the affair between Demon Veen and Marina Durmanov, whom we later discover to be the parents of the main protagonists, Van Veen and Ada Veen. Demon, captivated by Marina's performance in a travestied *Eugene Onegin*, visits the actress backstage 'and proceeded to posses her between two scenes,' before returning to his seat in the auditorium:

> His heart missed a beat and never regretted the lovely loss, as she ran, flushed and flustered, in a pink dress into the orchard, earning a claque third of the sitting ovation that greeted the instant dispersal of the imbecile but colorful

[1] Boyd characteristically responds to Michael Wood's scepticism about the reading-chess analogy by citing more of Nabokov's philosophical beliefs (*Nabokov's Pale Fire*, 256).

> transfigurants from Lyaska—or Iveria. Her meeting with Baron O., who strolled out of a side alley, all spurs and green tails, somehow eluded Demon's consciousness, so struck was he by the wonder of that brief abyss of absolute reality between two bogus fulgurations of fabricated life. (12)

This evocation of Demon's experience is much more strange and complex than the picture of a mind gradually discovering more about the world can capture. The polyvalent 'heart,' for instance, at once literally describes the organ's action and figuratively describes Demon's sentiment, evoking a feeling in which the mental and physiological are inextricably intertwined, and so unsettling a dualist notion of a mind separate from embodiment. The passage, with its invented place names, obscure referents, and profusion of digressive detail, certainly resists being easily parsed. This resistance is accentuated by the fitful movement of the sentences, which lurch between retarding subordinate clauses before breaking out into breathlessly long final phrases. The beginning of the passage generates an expectation that it will culminate with an affecting sight which gave rise to an unforgettably profound emotion in Demon, but instead we have the surprising metaphysical tenor of his being struck by 'the wonder of that brief abyss of absolute reality between two bogus fulgurations of fabricated life.' This vertiginously figurative description again resists being fully grasped or unpacked in any straightforward way, but the temporal 'brief' - in concert with the rest of the passage - suggests that 'reality' here is not synonymous with 'the world,' or with an acuity of perception, but is bound up with intense sexual experience.

Such strange and challenging uses of 'reality,' far from being exceptional, can be found throughout *Ada*. Take, for instance, Demon's later contemplation of the changes in his feelings for Marina since the end of their affair:

> [H]e considered Marina's pretentious *ciel-étoilé* hair-dress and tried to *realize* (in the rare full sense of the word), tried to *possess* the reality of a fact by forcing it into the sensuous center, that here was a woman whom he had intolerably loved […]. (251)

Through its parenthetical elucidations, the passage gives a kind of gloss or re-description of the word '*realize*.' What the 'rare full sense of the word' might be is not immediately clear, though the *OED* offers 'giving real existence to something' and 'to make real for the mind' (from which the familiar meaning, 'to become aware of,' derives). '[T]o *possess* the reality of a fact' subtly and counterintuitively implies that

'realising' something is different from apprehending it as a fact, whilst the polysemous 'sense' and puzzling 'sensuous center' (the centre of what?) intimate that this is a sensory, rather than solely intellective, act. The sexual connotations of '*possess*' and 'sensuous' suggestively invoke the specific feelings of erotic love that Demon is striving to recapture, as though experiences of realising elude general description isolated from what in particular is being realised, and by whom. The passage powerfully mobilises an epistemological idiom in concert with an affective one, exemplifying the ways in which *Ada* attends to and exploits the interrelationships between knowing and feeling. It might be that the novel plays with and unsettles commonplace conceptions of 'reality,' or even ruins the idea, by rendering it irreconcilable with any consistent philosophical view, and does so without positing an alternative. Whichever of these it might be, it is difficult to reconcile *Ada*'s singular evocations of experience with the picture of a mind grasping the world in the manner of a cognitive problem.

The influence of Boyd's account on Nabokov scholarship can hardly be overstated. Part of the reason it has so dominated critical discussion is that Boyd's central concepts and methodological principles are derived from Nabokov's own 'strong opinions.' As Michal Oklot has observed, the 'implicitly dualist metaphysics on which so much Nabokov scholarship, alas, relies' largely originates in the unwillingness of critics to 'transgress' the author's declared beliefs (165). Even critics who have advanced interpretations which oppose Boyd's tend to proceed from an implicitly intentionalist ground, whether following up Nabokov's passing statements of interest in certain philosophers or giving different readings of the author's philosophical pronouncements.[2] Boyd's epistemological bias has also proved

[2] The first tendency is exemplified by several critics who have cited Nabokov's declared interest in the philosophies of George Berkeley and Henri Bergson (*Strong Opinions*, 290) as the basis for their own derivative readings, for instance, Dana Dragunoiu (*Vladimir Nabokov and the Poetics of Liberalism*, 186-222), Leona Toker ('Nabokov and Bergson'), and Michael Glynn (*Vladimir Nabokov: Bergsonian and Russian Formalist Influences in His Novels*). Similarly, Nabokov's claim that he was 'an indivisible monist' (*Strong Opinions*, 124) provides the impetus for Stephen Blackwell's reading ('Nabokov, Mach and Monism'), which connects the author's fiction with the philosophy of Ernst Mach. A significant example of the second tendency is Leland de la Durantaye (in *Style is Matter: The Moral Art of Vladimir Nabokov*), who criticises Boyd and W. W. Rowe because they 'privilege' one 'statement over the many other—more categorical and clear—definitions [of reality] that Nabokov offered elsewhere' (45).

remarkably resilient, even residing in accounts which directly challenge his own. For instance, Ellen Pifer argues, *pace* Boyd, that 'a commitment to the singularity of human perception governed Nabokov's definition of reality and his methods of rendering such reality in his fiction' (126), yet, just like Boyd, Pifer conceives the novel as an 'epistemological enterprise' concerned with 'grasping the essence of reality' (13). As discussed in my introduction, this resilience is not surprising, partly because Boyd's resistance/solution model thematises its own critical allure, and partly because an approach which proceeds via a preconceived philosophical stance enables a critic to orient themselves on an epistemological terrain and so seem to 'know' a text quickly and stably, and in ways that flatten its interpretative and affective complexities.

Martin Hägglund's putatively affective reading of *Ada*, in *Dying for Time: Proust, Woolf, Nabokov*, is perhaps the strongest example of this critical temptation to neutralise the troubling qualities of a text through the application of a conceptual theory.[3] In the introduction to the book, Hägglund recapitulates his theory of 'chronolibido' (originally expounded at greater length in *Radical Atheism*):

> The key argument here concerns the co-implication of *chronophobia* and *chronophilia*. […] It is because one is attached to a temporal being (chronophilia) that one fears losing it (chronophobia). Care in general, I argue, depends on such a double bind. On the one hand, care is necessarily chronophilic, since only something that is subject to the possibility of loss—and hence temporal—can give one a reason to care. On the other hand, care is necessarily chronophobic, since one cannot care about something without fearing what may happen to it. […]
> I argue that it is […] the logic of chronolibido that is expressive of what is at stake in these literary works, *even and especially in their moments of greatest significance and affective intensity*. […] Proust, Woolf, and Nabokov […] practice a chronolibidinal aesthetics, which depends on the attachment to mortal life and *engages the pathos of survival in the experience of the reader*. (9-10, 18, emphasis added)

Hägglund's appealing attentiveness to the 'affective intensity' of literary works turns out, however, to be more rhetorical than realised in his readings.

Consider this short sentence from *Ada*, in which Van describes Ada's hands, and Hägglund's characteristic response to it:

[3] For a perceptive account of Hägglund's methodology and its implied philosophical implications, see Adam Kelly's review in *Modernism/modernity*.

> The pathos of the carpus, the grace of the phalanges demanding helpless genuflections, a mist of brimming tears, agonies of unresolvable adoration. (*Ada*, 104-5)

> The logic of chronolibido thus emerges in beautiful, entangled phrases—as when Van describes how the sight of Ada's twelve-year-old hands gave rise to 'agonies of unresolvable adoration.' Van's adoration here signifies an irrevocable emotion; it is 'unresolvable' in the sense that it cannot be dissolved. At the same time, even the seemingly perpetual bond of love can always be broken and is thus characterized by an 'unresolvable' contradiction that permeates Van's adoration with symptomatic agonies. (*Dying for Time*, 89-90)

Hägglund's point seems to be that, because of the chronolibidinal nature of temporal life, Van's adoration is necessarily permeated by agony. But the adjective 'unresolvable' in fact qualifies 'adoration,' not the relationship between the two emotions as Häggund implies. His reading effectively dislocates the syntax of the sentence to form a logical proposition (which unsurprisingly conforms to his own theory of chronolibido), rather than registering its own implications and affects.[4] Describing adoration as 'unresolvable' invokes several meanings of 'resolve' listed in the *OED*, including to relieve, dissolve, soften, reduce, slacken, or cause to cease, which each seem to be in play here (and in an irresolvable way). The common implication is that Van's adoration cannot be consummated or alleviated, whilst the rationalistic connotation of the word suggests that this feeling in some sense resists being explicated or accounted for. Such a resistance is vividly evoked by the sentence as a whole through the humorous dissonance between the rhetorically excessive figures of intense emotion and the technical anatomical vocabulary used to describe their cause. This is heightened by the use of the definite article, and the absence of verbs and of an experiencing subject, as though ludicrously suggesting that the sight of Ada's carpus and phalanges might move anyone to tears. Rather than engaging our empathetic pathos, part of the strangeness and playfulness of the passage - and indeed much of the novel - is precisely that it stages a *disparity* between its evocation of a character's feelings and the feelings the descriptive language engenders for readers. Despite Hägglund's insistence that 'chronolibido is not an extrinsic theory applied to the novels, but something intrinsic to the fictional works' (18-19), his theory

[4] This syntactical dislocation is more conspicuous in the earlier article ('Chronophilia: Nabokov and the Time of Desire') on which the chapter in *Dying for Time* is based, where Hägglund suggests that chronolibido is manifested through 'Nabokov's syntax' (454).

programmes the textual analysis in an aesthetically and affectively desensitised way, leaving us with a diminished sense of what it is like to read such remarkable literary writing.[5] As Ellen Rooney puts it: 'When the text-to-be-read […] is engaged only to confirm the prior insights of a theoretical problematic, reading is reduced to reiteration and becomes quite literally beside the point' ('Form and Contentment,' 38).

By contrast, this chapter stays intimately close to *Ada* and the event of reading. As the preliminary analyses might suggest, I show how, in the novel, descriptions of characters' experiences are so dominated by particularities of feeling and desire as to be irreconcilable with the notion of 'knowing' the world through perception. But I also show how the feelings, desires, and imaginings solicited by the text implicate readers in its epistemological and affective dispositions; it is through engendering especially epistemological affects, including curiosity, anticipation, surprise, unease, and discomfort, that the ethical questions of the novel's problematic eroticism are elicited and played out. Towards the close of the chapter, I turn to some of the peculiar effects (and affects) generated by *Ada*'s persistently drawing attention to its own fictionality and textuality in ways that complicate its engagement with knowing and feeling.

2.

The unusual narrative content and structure of *Ada* significantly shapes how we read and respond to its evocative experiential descriptions. The novel tells the story of the love affair between Van and Ada, which begins in 1884 when Van spends a summer staying on the family's aristocratic estate, Ardis; he is fourteen years old and Ada twelve. The pair quickly discover that they are not cousins, as they have been raised to believe, but biological siblings, though this knowledge seems to only intensify the excitement they find in the illicit nature of their relationship. Their affair is broken off and resumed several times over the ensuing decades, before they finally reunite in 1922. Flitting on and off the scene is their younger half-sister, Lucette, who becomes dangerously infatuated with her elder siblings. Though both are titillated by her, Lucette remains an outsider to their romance; in 1901, after trying and failing to

[5] I have discussed Hägglund's methods of close reading at greater length elsewhere ("'The mental rimmed the sensuous'").

seduce Van one final time, she jumps from a cruise ship to her death. Van and Ada's treatment of Lucette - and, crucially, her treatment by their narrative - constitutes the most ethically challenging element of the novel.

Ada initially appears to be a third-person narration but, through notes and editorial comments incorporated into the text, we quickly learn that Van, with occasional contributions from Ada, is the principal author of the memoir, begun in 1957 and unfinished when the siblings (presumably) die a decade later. The text seems to have been posthumously assembled by the Veens' physician, Ronald Oranger. Though his editorial interventions are largely limited to comments about the manuscript, he is the most likely culprit for the omission of a lewd description (576) of his wife, Violet, who is also Van's secretary.[6] The incorporated 'marginalia' consist of Van's and Ada's intimate observations, debates, and reflections about their past and its retelling in the memoir, addressed to one another in the first person.

The shifts between first, second, and third-person pronouns (sometimes in the middle of a sentence) unsettle the unfolding of the narrative. This is chiefly because Van's narration assumes and exploits the rhetorical resources of an authorial fictive discourse - particularly the omniscient depiction of other characters' thoughts and feelings through free indirect narration - when this is, in fact, an autobiographical account, ostensibly told from personal knowledge. David Lodge points out that, when reading third-person fictions, '[w]e do not think of the writer at this desk, penning these words. […] But when the pronoun is changed to the first person, we are immediately conscious of the actual process of recall' (*Consciousness and the Novel*, 35). The sporadic slippages between personal pronouns in *Ada* draw the reader's attention to the disparity between the rhetorical stance of the narration and the actual diegetic scenario; recognising that this is Van's narration, we also recognise the limitations of his knowledge - and how his narration palpably, outrageously exceeds such limits.

An example of how this awareness complicates the text is the opening clause of the theatre scene quoted above: 'His heart missed a beat and never regretted the lovely loss.' Van and Demon's relationship, though highly unusual, makes it extremely improbable that Van would know about this sexual encounter, let alone his father's momentary physical and emotional response to the sight of Marina returning to the

[6] The 'Notes to *Ada*' by 'Vivian Darkbloom' (anagram: Vladimir Nabokov) further complicate the editorial layering of the novel.

stage, giving the clause a fanciful quality which in fact characterises the scene (and indeed the novel) as a whole. It would seem that we can only interpret this as Van's fantasy, its reality (in the conventional sense of corresponding to a true state of affairs) rendered highly questionable. Yet the scene is as vividly evoked as any other in the narrative, and part of its significance (and affect) arises from its status as an origin myth of Van's and Ada's procreations which, like all origin myths, incarnates their cardinal shared value: the pursuit of supreme erotic feeling. The clause suspends the reader's ability to make a distinction (between recollection and imagination) through which we ordinarily make sense of narratives, but it also has a kind of affective reality or force which we might not want to too hastily dismiss. Knowing that Van is epistemologically overreaching does not simply render the story and the detail about Demon's heart irrelevant, but rather brings into relief the possibility that the affective significance of such evocations might eclipse their 'unreality,' conventionally conceived. This is a relatively straightforward instance of the more global way that *Ada* demands that readers attend not only to its diegetic descriptions, but also to how the novel frames (and pre-emptively interprets) those descriptions. The consequences of this diegetic complication of the description of Demon's heart are largely narratological; later in this chapter, we will encounter other examples which are more affectively and ethically fraught.

3.

Some of the troubling implications and affects of *Ada*'s frame narrative can be seen in part one, chapter nine of the novel. The first of the four paragraphs in this short chapter begins:

> Was she really pretty, at twelve? Did he want—would he ever want to caress her, to really caress her? Her black hair cascaded over one clavicle and the gesture she made of shaking it back and the dimple on her pale cheek were revelations with an element of immediate recognition about them. Her pallor shone, her blackness blazed. The pleated skirts she liked were becomingly short. Even her bare limbs were so free from suntan that one's gaze, stroking her white shins and forearms, could follow upon them the regular slants of fine dark hairs, the silks of her girlhood. (58)

There is a marked erotic excitement to the reiterations and repetitions of 'want' and 'caress,' the voyeurism of the catalogue of Ada's body, and the visual tactility of 'one's gaze, stroking her white shins and forearms.' In a novel with a simpler narratorial set-up, we would presumably read this as a piece of free indirect discourse registering the erotic thoughts and feelings of the young Van. But the indefinite 'one' here draws attention to the strange absence of a subject who experiences the feelings imbued in these sentences; for whom is the fall of Ada's hair a revelation, the shortness of her skirts becoming? Whose gaze 'strokes' her limbs? The subtle underdetermination points to two discomfortingly interrelated qualities of this passage. More obviously, the retrospective nature of the narration raises the disturbing prospect of the now elderly Van luxuriating in this eroticising recollection (and representation) of a twelve-year old girl. But more disquieting is the almost imperative quality of these subjectless sentences, which threaten to implicate the reader in this visualisation of Ada's body and make us complicit in Van's questionable pleasures. The unsettling sense that we might be imaginatively participating in the sexualisation of a young girl is only heightened by the peculiar details of the description, which is so unlike conventional romantic images of feminine beauty; the passage is not presenting an erotic subject, but presenting its subject erotically, as though displaying the affectively coercive potential of evocative language.

The anxieties about possible complicity aroused by the opening of the chapter are greatly intensified by its third paragraph:

> What Van experienced in those first strange days when she showed him the house—and those nooks in it where they were to make love so soon—combined elements of ravishment and exasperation. Ravishment—because of her pale, voluptuous, impermissible skin, her hair, her legs, her angular movements, her gazelle-grass odor, the sudden black stare of her wide-set eyes, the rustic nudity under her dress; exasperation—because between him, an awkward schoolboy of genius, and that precocious, affected, impenetrable child there extended a void of light and a veil of shade that no force could overcome and pierce. He swore wretchedly in the hopelessness of his bed as he focused his swollen senses on the glimpse of her he had engulfed when, on their second excursion to the top of the house, she had mounted upon a captain's trunk to unhasp a sort of illuminator through which one acceded to the roof (even the dog had once gone there), and a bracket or something wrenched up her skirt and he saw—as one sees some sickening miracle in a Biblical fable or a moth's shocking metamorphosis—that the child was darkly flossed. He noticed that she seemed to have noticed that he had or might have

> noticed (what he not only noticed but retained with tender terror until he freed himself of that vision—much later—and in strange ways) […]. (59)

A complex voyeurism is the driving force of the passage, which both recounts an act of erotic looking and arouses a cognate desire in readers. The allusive 'rustic nudity under her dress,' for instance, invokes but does not describe Ada's genitals, generating anticipation of a more explicit depiction. This anticipation is both frustrated and intensified by the serpentine sentences - with their elaborate syntax, contextual digressions, parenthetical elaborations, and unusually complex rhetorical figures - which strain comprehension and so demand an intimate attentiveness to the prose, culminating in the revelation that 'the child was darkly flossed.' The first definition of 'floss' in the *OED* is 'the rough silk which envelopes the cocoon of the silk worm.' The strangeness of the metaphor places an unusual demand on the reader's imagination to picture Ada's pubic hair, discomfortingly aligning us with the younger Van masturbating over the memorised image (and, as 'much later' perhaps intimates, the older Van as narrator of this scene). This discomfort is all the more acute here for the use of the epithet, 'child,' which places our own interest further under suspicion. The passage at once stimulates curiosity about '[w]hat Van experienced' and engenders feelings of unease, discomfort, even guilt about our proximity to that experience, illustrating both how tightly interwoven knowing and feeling are in the novel, and the need to capture the vital connections between the representation of characters' experiences and the experiences those representations solicit from readers. Maurice Couturier suggestively describes what he calls Nabokov's 'poerotic mode,' which 'openly seeks to produce for the reader a strong erotic effect, but also a comic and ironic one' (*Roman et Censure*, 180, my translation); *Ada* compels readers to both share in and worry about Van's erotic interest, though the novel's modes of presenting eroticism tend to be much more troubling than comedy or irony. What I particularly want to emphasise here, however, is that this passage at once exposes and for its effect depends upon the potential for imaginings to give rise to strong feelings, regardless of their fictionality.

Part of the affective complexity here arises from the subtle and intricate movements between the scene in the attic and the scene of Van's later masturbatory recollection. To focus for the moment on the former, there is a stress on the affective potential of imaginings in the strange and perplexing description of how Van 'saw—

as one sees some sickening miracle in a Biblical fable or a moth's shocking metamorphosis—that the child was darkly flossed.' The use of 'sickening' and 'shocking' to describe these natural and supernatural transformations suggests that Van's coming to know of Ada's pubic hair is experienced by him not as a discovery about the world (and, more specifically, about Ada's body), but as a transformation of how he has imagined it. However, not much more can be firmly established about the meaning of this vertiginously figurative piece of writing. Why should the metamorphosis of a moth be shocking? Which miracle in the bible is sickening, and why? Calling the biblical story a 'fable,' though it reiterates the potential to be moved by imaginings, only further obscures the meaning of these extraordinary figures. Through its referential recalcitrance, the clause powerfully invites and resists logical explication. George Steiner, in his famous essay, 'On Difficulty,' discusses a similar phenomenon with respect to Wallace Stevens's 'Anecdote of the Jar' and suggests that the poem can be read only 'by a sort of semantic approximation': 'We cannot demonstrate or paraphrase [the poem's meaning] grammatically. […] This rich undecidability […] can serve as a true tactical difficulty, forcing us to reach out towards more delicate orderings of perception' (*On Difficulty*, 40). Nabokov's writing certainly corroborates the underlying contention of Steiner's defence of aesthetic difficulty - that it can amplify rather than dampen the effects of literary language. But where for Steiner undecidability engenders more intricate *perceptions*, in *Ada*, the richly uninterpretable figurative description actually defers the denotation of Van's perception of Ada's pubic hair so as to elaborate on his *feelings*: comparing a young girl's exposure with a biblical event captures the transgressive perversity of Van's interest; likening his act of looking to the sight of a metamorphosing moth heightens the sense of corporeal fascination which suffuses the scene; and the sheer peculiarity of the imagery evokes something of the incomparable significance of this moment for Van. The undecidability of this clause, its epistemological resistance, does not lessen but is vital to its evocation of affect.

The priority given to what Van feels and imagines (rather than what he knows) notably resembles Giorgio Agamben's theory of erotic desire, which can help us further unpack the implications of the passage:

> [L]ove takes as its subject not the immediate sensory thing, but the phantasm […]. But given the mediating nature of imagination, this means that the phantasm is also the subject, not just the object, of Eros. In fact, since love has its only site in imagination, desire never directly encounters the object in its corporeality […] but [as] an image […] a 'nova persona' which is literally the product of desire […] within which the boundaries between subjective and objective, corporeal and incorporeal, desire and its object are abolished.[7] (25-6)

That lovers do not perceive the object of their desire is perhaps not a particularly original thought, though what is distinctive about Agamben's articulation is his emphasis on the way that desire disables the conceptual categories through which we tend to describe and make sense of experience. But where Agamben's philosophical account of desire rather neatly claims that such categories are simply 'abolished,' Nabokov's evocative description of an *experience* of desire does something rather different, not so much refusing as disarranging or deranging these distinctions. We can see this in the suggestive resonance between Agamben's figure of the 'phantasm' and a significant tension in the narration of Van recalling the scene in the attic, between his strenuous exertion when focusing 'his swollen senses on the glimpse of her he had engulfed,' and the strange suggestion that the image of Ada's exposed genitals haunts or possesses him. It is richly ambiguous whether Van is the perpetrator or victim of the 'ravishment' he experiences, simultaneously invoking his being entranced by Ada and his desire to sexually possess her. The gothic idiom and ambiguous agency persist in Van retaining the 'vision' with 'tender terror,' yet needing to be 'freed' from it 'in strange ways.' Later in the novel, we read of how Van hires child prostitutes and tries to relive his past desires for Ada through them, leaving unresolved the question of whether he does in fact ever free himself of this vision.

The global implication of the passage's descriptive mode - that feelings and desires might shape the world a person inhabits as much as perceptions - is also the guiding premise of Ada's 'own little system' of philosophy, which she relates to Van in part one, chapter twelve:

[7] D. W. Winnicott offers a similar insight in *Playing and Reality*, when he describes 'the third part of the life of a human being' as 'an intermediate area of *experiencing*, to which inner reality and external life both contribute' (2).

> An individual's life consisted of certain classified things: 'real things' which were unfrequent and priceless, simply 'things' which formed the routine stuff of life; and 'ghost things,' also called 'fogs,' such as fever, toothache, dreadful disappointments, and death. Three or more things occurring at the same time formed a 'tower,' or, if they came in immediate succession, they made a 'bridge.' 'Real towers' and 'real bridges' were the joys of life, and when the towers came in a series, one experienced supreme rapture; it almost never happened, though. In some circumstances, in a certain light, a neutral 'thing' might look or even actually become 'real' or else, conversely, it might coagulate into a fetid 'fog.' When the joy and the joyless happened to be intermixed, simultaneously or along the ramp of duration, one was confronted with 'ruined towers' and 'broken bridges.' (74-5)

Like the earlier passages about Demon, the nomenclature of Ada's system troubles the semantic cogency of the 'real,' which here denotes 'things' which give rise to pleasurable feelings. Meanwhile the existential ambiguity of 'things' is exploited to elide any distinction between physical objects, abstract concepts, sensory perceptions, and fictive imaginings, unsettling the boundaries of subjective and objective, material and immaterial, lover and beloved. Clearly aspects of this system resemble some of the elements of *Ada* discussed above. Michael Wood, in an uncharacteristically tone-deaf gloss, even claims that Ada's 'philosophy is exactly Nabokov's own' (*The Magician's Doubts*, 213). But to read this passage as outlining the philosophical theory which governs the novel is to fundamentally misread the text, treating it as a conceptual rather than literary work. After all, part of the mischievous humour here is precisely how ostentatiously peculiar this ostensibly universal theory is to Ada's own life. There is a childlike pleasure in flamboyant invention, accompanied by the whimsical absurdity of pairing the fundamental with the banally quotidian (what kind of metaphysical category comprises toothache and death?), and the endearing upper-class vernacular of 'dreadful disappointments.' At once affecting universality and displaying a character's idiosyncratic predilections, the passage seems to both encourage and satirise the temptation to extrapolate philosophical propositions from fiction.

Literature's capacity to evoke the singularity of a character's feelings is spectacularly exhibited in the closing lines of the chapter:

> The classical beauty of clover honey, smooth, pale, translucent, freely flowing from the spoon and soaking my love's bread and butter in liquid brass. The crumb steeped in nectar.

> 'Real thing?' he asked.
> 'Tower,' she answered.
> And the wasp.
> The wasp was investigating her plate. Its body was throbbing. […]
> Her hair was well brushed that day and sheened darkly in contrast with the lusterless pallor of her neck and arms. She wore the striped tee shirt which in his lone fantasies he especially liked to peel off her twisting torso. The oilcloth was divided into blue and white squares. A smear of honey stained what remained of the butter in its cool crock.
> 'All right. And the third Real Thing?'
> She considered him. A fiery droplet in the wick of her mouth considered him. A three-colored velvet violet, of which she had done an aquarelle on the eve, considered him from its fluted crystal. She said nothing. She licked her spread fingers, still looking at him.
> Van, getting no answer, left the balcony. Softly her tower crumbled in the sweet silent sun. (75-6)

Boyd gives the following response to the passage (with reference to Alain Robbe-Grillet's *Pour un nouveau roman*):

> The magic of such description lies not only in the precision but also in the suggestion of irrelevance emphasized by the dislocation in the sudden move from Ada to tablecloth. These things are simply there, independent of any design of the author except his desire to put them there for themselves […] independent of other things and of any special import, any human "'significations" (psychologiques, sociales, fonctionelles) [psychological, social, functional].'[8] (*Nabokov's Ada*, 32)

Boyd's characteristic preoccupation with Nabokov's 'design' leads him to miss the human significance of the description, which is subtly but unmistakably focalised through Van.[9] What is striking is not the 'independence' of the objects, but precisely how Van's apprehension of them is saturated by erotic evocations of soaking, throbbing, stripping, smearing, and licking (a sensual pleasure embodied by the

[8] David Rampton similarly suggests that 'the truth of the scene is a function of the accuracy with which the physical detail has been observed' (123).

[9] Boyd's failure to notice the focalisation of the description is all the more conspicuous for his quoting Robbe-Grillet, who takes the characterising potential of narratorial description to an extreme in his novel, *Jealousy*. Though the narration uses no first-person pronouns, the assiduous attention to a woman's body and the speculations about the possibility of her pursuing an extra-marital affair with a neighbour suggest feelings of sexual fixation and jealousy, from which readers surmise that the unnamed narrator is in fact the woman's husband. Odd details in the diegetic scene, such as the description of three dinners but only two diners, confirm this suspicion.

jouissance of this rampantly alliterative and rhyming prose). The strange way the droplet of honey and violet join Ada in 'considering' Van vividly evokes the inseparability of his feelings about her from his sense (and sensing) of the world. Similarly, the final sentence, shifting the focalisation to Ada, evokes her lingering pleasure in the sun and sweet honey and her tender sorrow as Van silently departs. What is magically moving about the passage - and indeed the novel - is the sheer weight lent to singular feeling, captured even in the description of sunlight or the most commonplace objects.

4.

Ada places stress on the ways that feeling and imagination can shape not only the apprehension of the world in the present, but also the recollection of the past, and indeed what about the past is recollected. Another scene of masturbation illustrates how the novel suggests an affective proximity between perception and recollection, both being mediated by what one feels and imagines.

Part one, chapter sixteen recounts 'a brief period of strange craftiness, of cringing stealth' (97) in Van's actions towards Ada. Van begins a routine of furtively 'caressing' Ada from behind as she sits painting flowers from her botany book; she does not encourage, resist, or verbally acknowledge these attentions. We read about how her paintings would 'enlarge' a flower or else 'combined one species with another (unrecorded but possible), introducing odd little changes and twists that seemed almost morbid in so young a girl so nakedly dressed' (99). This detail about the paintings will be returned to later; for the moment, it is worth registering the extraordinary economy with which the repeated submodifier ('so') registers the erotic allure of Ada's youth for Van, and how 'nakedly dressed' at once describes the simplicity of her dress and his acute consciousness of her naked body beneath it. The following passage similarly accentuates the discomforting subject of the text's eroticism by referring to Ada as 'a little girl':

> The vivid crimsoning of an exposed ear and the gradual torpor invading her paintbrush were the only signs—fearful signs—of her feeling the increased pressure of his caress. Silently he would slink away to his room, lock the door, grasp a towel, uncover himself, and call forth the image he had just left behind, an image still as safe and bright as a hand-cupped flame—carried into the dark, only to be got rid of there with savage zeal; after which, drained for a while,

> with shaky loins and weak calves, Van would return to the purity of the sun-suffused room where a little girl, now glistening with sweat, was still painting her flower: the marvelous flower that simulated a bright moth that in turn simulated a scarab. (100)

The opening sentence draws attention to a significant ambiguity: exploiting the fact that 'fearful' can refer either to a cause of fear or the feeling itself, it is unclear whether Ada's reddening ear and torpor are signs of her fear, or signs which Van fears, or even signs of her fear which Van fears. (The ambiguity of this feeling is only amplified by the indefinite timing of the increased pressure of Van's caress, registering the possibility that these 'fearful signs' heighten Van's arousal.) Though the adjective is potently affective, it lies oddly suspended between Ada and Van, performatively involving readers in an uncertainty that dominates the passage (what does she feel?).

The uncertainty that surrounds Ada's feeling is brought into problematic relief by one particularly suggestive detail: the fact that Van recalls 'the *image* he had just left behind,' rather than the room or the girl herself. The repetition oddly indicates an equivalence between Van's perceptions and recollections of Ada, despite her physical absence from the room in which he masturbates. The simile of 'an image still as bright and safe as a hand-cupped flame' suggests that 'image' means something more than a visual or mental perception here. This tender, romantic, rather beautiful figure for Van's impression of Ada abruptly and discomfortingly resolves into a crude evocation of his hotly masturbating hand. Similarly, Van's carefully sheltering the 'safe and bright' image only for it to be 'carried into the dark' and 'got rid of there with savage zeal' puts in play a dynamic of retention and violent dissolution which is not unlike his ardently recalling yet being haunted by the vision of Ada's 'darkly flossed' vulva. Once again, we have an experiential description saturated by affect, but the primacy of feeling and imagination is more troubling here because Van deliberately seeks out erotic stimulation. The prospect that Van might apprehend Ada as an image to be masturbated over stresses both the degree to which his desire dominates the narration and how this dominance threatens to reduce other people to mere stimuli of feeling, to smother or eclipse their own experiences - even, or perhaps especially, the experience of the girl whom he so intensely desires. The moment exemplifies part of what is so unsettling about this richly descriptive and highly interpreting narration; the difficulty of distancing ourselves from Van's perspective. Later in this chapter, we will

return to the question of the ethical consequences of the novel's paradoxical suggestion that the more intense the desire to apprehend another the more one perceives only one's own desire.

The emphasis *Ada* places on the role of emotion in shaping the recollection of the past is most conspicuously drawn out through the novel's rather self-conscious juxtapositions of personal memory and photography. After Van's first summer in Ardis in 1884, he and Ada see each other only once in the ensuing four years. Towards the end of this period of separation, Ada becomes involved in affairs with her music teacher, Phillip Rack, and a local aristocrat, Percy de Prey. Van returns to Ardis for the summer of 1888 and resumes his romance with Ada, but leaves abruptly when he discovers that Ada has other lovers. It is another four years until the two reconcile. When Ada moves into Van's Manhattan flat in the winter of 1892, she brings with her an album of photographs taken by Kim Beauharnais, 'the kitchen boy' (6) at Ardis. These include formal family pictures, but also surreptitious shots of Ada *in flagrante* with Van and her other lovers, which Kim uses to blackmail her. In part two, chapter seven, she and Van examine the album together in bed, their perusal interrupted when the titillation proves too much. Midway through the chapter, Van alights on a particular photograph, and compares it with his own vivid memory of the moment it was taken:

> Another photograph was taken in the same circumstances but for some reason had been rejected by capricious Marina: at a tripod table, Ada sat reading, her half-clenched hand covering the lower part of the page. A very rare, radiant, seemingly uncalled-for smile shone on her practically Moorish lips. Her hair flowed partly across her collarbone and partly down her back. Van stood inclining his head above her and looked, unseeing, at the opened book. In full, deliberate consciousness, at the moment of the hooded click, he bunched the recent past with the imminent future and thought to himself that this would remain an objective perception of the real present and that he must remember the flavor, the flash, the flesh of the present (as he, indeed, remembered it half a dozen years later—and now, in the second half of the next century). (402)

The first sentence deceptively intimates that the subject of the passage is a missing photograph. Whilst this pretence is maintained, we have a very detailed description of Ada's smile, replete with personal knowledge and sentiment; 'very rare,' for instance, suggests that it was unusual for Ada to smile so, and that this smile was therefore unusually precious. The passage seems to be describing the emotional response Van

has to a photograph when he remembers it in 1892; but then the final sentence reveals that this image is in fact Van's own memory of the moment, collapsing the temporal gap between the perception and the feeling. This rhetorical sleight-of-hand is highlighted by the memory being referred to as an 'objective perception of the real present,' an assertion that can only make sense if we adopt the passage's own implied and decidedly unconventional understanding of these terms. Because of the repetition, 'the flavor, the flash, the flesh of the present' reads as a gloss of 'the real present.' Each adjective draws out an aspect of lived experience which photography cannot capture - non-visual sensations, the passing of time, and the feeling of corporeal embodiment - with the closely alliterating adjectives implying an accumulation of qualities which nevertheless stop short of encompassing 'the real present.' The passage not only refuses the ocularcentrism of assuming that photographs capture experience, but suggests that the felt particularity of memories make them *more* real than photographs.

Most of the deranging uses of 'reality' in *Ada* discussed so far home in on a moment of intense pleasure (though tinged with other affects). However, alongside the tendernesses and erotic exhilarations which Van so ardently recollects are memories of loss, distress, and despair which he is unable to forget. The most poignant of these is the scene when Van abandons Ardis in the summer of 1888 after confronting Ada about her infidelities:

> He could swear he did not look back, could not—by any optical chance, or in any prism—have seen her physically as he walked away; and yet, with dreadful distinction, he retained forever a composite picture of her standing where he left her. The picture—which penetrated him, through an eye in the back of his head, through his vitreous spinal canal, and could never be lived down, never—consisted of a selection and blend of such random images and expressions of hers that had affected him with a pang of intolerable remorse at various moments in the past. Tiffs between them had been very rare, very brief, but there had been enough of them to make up the enduring mosaic. (296-7)

There follows a page-long series of memories Van had of Ada being angry or upset, before the narration returns to the unforgettable image he associates with his flight from Ardis:

> Those were the fragments of tessellation, and there were others, even more trivial; but in coming together the harmless parts made a lethal entity, and the girl in yellow slacks and black jacket, standing with her hands behind her back, slightly rocking her shoulders, leaning her back now closer now less closely against the tree trunk, and tossing her hair—a definite picture that he knew he had never seen in reality—remained within him more real than any actual memory. (298)

The passages at once stress the immutableness of the picture and deploy a series of verbs and prepositions which describe the picture as in some sense inside Van - 'retained forever,' 'penetrated,' 'never be lived down,' 'enduring,' 'remained within' - again mobilising the imagery and depleted agency of being possessed, infected, or haunted by memories. There is a condensed instance of this mode two chapters later: 'Destroy and forget! But a butterfly in the Park, an orchid in a shop window, would revive everything with a dazzling inward shock of despair' (324). The grammatical agency given to the 'butterfly' and 'orchid,' the implied involuntariness of 'dazzling,' the 'inward' motion of the shock of despair, and the spectral metaphor of 'revive' all reiterate how irrepressible these memories are for Van. The extent to which *Ada* describes memories as determined more by intensities of feeling than perceptual verisimilitude is encapsulated by the final phrase of the above passage, 'more real than any actual memory'; 'real,' semantically prised apart from the 'actual,' is used to evoke the vividness or affective significance of this moment of the past.

5.

Ada's provocative and persistent uses of 'real' to describe intensities of feeling rather than something known about the world raises a seemingly daunting question about the divergences and conflicts between individuals' differing senses of reality. Leland de la Durantaye, drawing on Nabokov's use of the term outside of the novels, claims that, '[f]or Nabokov, instead of engendering an uneasy epistemological vertigo, the proud and independent making of one's own world is a thrilling and joyous act' (42). The positive tenor here is dramatically at odds with the way that Van is haunted, even terrorised, by distressing memories, and the 'independent making of one's world' similarly implies a creative volition which corresponds more to Ada's 'little system'

than any description of experience found in the novel.[10] De la Durantaye is nevertheless correct that 'one finds very little anxiety in Nabokov's writing as concerns shared conceptions, full communication or meaning in history' (42). *Ada* comes closest to engaging with questions about shared conceptions of the world in two modes operating on very different scales: through the setting of the novel in an alternative reality or world (referred to as 'Antiterra' or 'Demonia'), and through minor conflicts between Van and Ada about their differing recollections of the past.

Demonia resembles a version of our own world, but introduces odd changes and additions to our geopolitical, literary, and technological histories: America has been colonised by Russians as well as the English and French, Van and Ada refer to Proust and Joyce in 1884, and electricity has been banned following an unspeakable disaster (though phones, televisions, and vehicles run fine on water). Such details accrue over hundreds of pages of narration, which proceeds as though the reader were entirely familiar with the world of Demonia. The diegetic setting of the novel is complicated even further by an entity called 'Terra,' which corresponds almost exactly to our world. But whether Terra is a fiction, a delusion of the insane, a distorted reflection of Antiterra, or a separately existing realm is hotly debated by the inhabitants of Demonia:

> As Van Veen himself was to find out, at the time of his passionate research in terrology (then a branch of psychiatry) even the deepest thinkers, the purest philosophers, Paar of Chose and Zapater of Aardvark, were emotionally divided in their attitude toward the possibility that there existed 'a distortive glass of our distorted glebe' as a scholar who desires to remain unnamed has put it with such euphonic wit. […] There were those who maintained that the discrepancies and 'false overlappings' between the two worlds were too numerous, and too deeply woven into the skein of successive events, not to taint with trite fancy the theory of essential sameness; and there were those who retorted that the dissimilarities only confirmed the live organic reality pertaining to the other world; that a perfect likeness would rather suggest a specular, and hence speculatory, phenomenon; and that two chess games with identical openings and identical end moves might ramify in an infinite number of variations, on *one* board and in *two* brains, at any middle stage of their irrevocably converging development. (18-19)

[10] Michael Wood similarly places an excessive emphasis on volition: 'The imagination […] is defined elsewhere in *Ada* as "third sight": not an evasion of reality, and not, quite, a reconstruction of it. More like divination, the scrupulous invention of what's already there' (*The Magician's Doubts*, 208).

With its rapid accumulation of negations and counter-qualifications, elaborate metaphorical figures, and impenetrable vocabulary, this vertiginously convoluted account ostentatiously resists comprehension. We could try to unpick the implication of individual phrases. Take, for instance, 'a distortive glass of our distorted glebe'; *OED* informs us that 'glebe' can refer to land which is regarded as a source of sustenance or which is assigned to a clergymen as part of his benefice, perhaps obscurely suggesting that a belief in the reality of Antiterra, even a delusory one, in some sense sustains the believer, and that Terra is only a more distorted reflection of that belief reflected back.[11] Or consider 'specular, and hence speculatory,' which seems to intimate that believing in the phenomenal existence of mirror images (which are, after all, only effects of light) is no different from believing in the occult. Yet the excessive ornament of these anaphoric phrases raises the suspicion that they might have been chosen more for their *sound* than for any real, philosophically important, reason.[12] A similar suspicion is raised by the ridiculously named Zapater of Aardvark, seemingly invoked entirely for the alphabetic play. Even the most obvious implication of the prefix of Antiterra - that it presupposes our own world which we know, or at least believe, exists - does not help matters much. There is not simply a lack of anxiety about 'shared conceptions' at a global level, but a powerful resistance to them (as is perhaps gestured to by the philosophers being '*emotionally* divided' in their contemplations about the nature of their reality). The incomprehensible Terra/Antiterra relationship not only withholds a stable, knowable diegetic world against which individuals' realities could be tested, but also, through a combination of cognitive exhaustion and affective deflation, pushes readers away from questions of this kind.

A brief dialogue between Van and Ada offers a relatively simple but representative example of the way the novel forcefully refocuses attention from the diegetic world and onto the individual:

[11] The unnamed scholar is presumably Van: the quotation, with its anaphoras and alliterations, is characteristic of Van's scholarly style, as exemplified by his notes on dreams later in the novel (362-4).

[12] Later in the thesis, we will see how Banville takes to an extreme this mode of using mildly ridiculous turns of phrase to generate doubts about how seriously we should take the proposition of a given sentence.

> [Ada: ']You believe, you believe in the existence of Terra? Oh, you do! You accept it. I know you!'
> 'I accept it as a state of mind. That's not quite the same thing.'
> 'Yes, but you want to prove it *is* the same thing.'
> He brushed her lips with another religious kiss. Its edge, however, was beginning to catch fire.
> 'One of these days,' he said, 'I will ask you for a repeat performance. You will sit as you did four years ago, at the same table, in the same light, drawing the same flower, and I shall go through the same scene with such joy, such pride, such—I don't know—gratitude!'] (264)

The implication of the dialogue is that Van wants to prove that states of mind have as much existence as the physical world. The intervening description seems almost to enact this idea: 'He brushed her lips with another religious kiss. Its edge, however, was beginning to catch fire.' The sentence is more grammatically complex than its affective directness might suggest. The referent of the singular possessive pronoun ('Its') must be 'kiss,' yet 'edge' (a boundary or border) describes an object rather than an act (as does something catching fire). In isolation, this seems to be about a material thing, but in its narrative context, we immediately apprehend the sentence as a figurative evocation of how Van's 'religious kiss' begins to inflame his desire, smoothly illustrating the ease with which one can think of affects and objects in cognate ways. Furthermore, the vividness of this description transports the reader from conceptual ideas about the diegetic world to a dense evocation of individual feeling - where the novel's real interest and concern is located. In this respect, the passage offers up one further intricacy: the 'joy,' 'pride,' and 'gratitude' Van anticipates feeling were he and Ada to recreate his furtive caresses. These affects are, of course, very different from those which characterise the original evocation of the scene, gesturing towards the ways in which what one imagines one felt in a moment of the past can change with shifts in what one thinks, feels, knows, and desires in the present. (As will be discussed later in the thesis, this dynamic is a mainstay of John Banville's fiction.)

Indeed, it is through the conflicts between how Van and Ada think and feel about the past that *Ada* most directly engages with potential divergences between individuals' distinct realities:

> If their recollections now and then did not tally, this was often owing to sexual differences rather than to individual temperament. Both were diverted by life's

> young fumblings, both saddened by the wisdom of time. Ada tended to see those initial stages as an extremely gradual and diffuse growth, possibly unnatural, probably unique, but wholly delightful in its smooth unfolding which precluded any brutish impulses or shocks of shame. Van's memory could not help picking out specific episodes branded forever with abrupt and poignant, and sometimes regrettable, physical thrills. (109-110)

The dense metaphoricity here intimates that what is being discussed is not a dispute about specific incidents, but essential differences in how Van and Ada experience the past. This divergence is attributed to 'sexual differences' as opposed to 'individual temperament,' a separation of bodily desire from innate character that is conspicuously at odds with the rest of the novel, and that the rest of the passage puts under acute pressure. In the description of Ada's feelings, there is a pronounced echo of the detail about her paintings from a dozen pages earlier, in both the botanical register of 'gradual and diffuse growth' and her peculiar fascination with 'unnatural, probably unique' forms. Her sense of the past as 'wholly delightful in its smooth unfolding' is similarly echoed later in the novel ('She (Ada) had, hadn't she, a way of always smoothing out the folds of the past—making the flutist practically impotent (except with his wife) and allowing the gentleman farmer only one embrace, with a premature *eyakulyatsiya* [ejaculation]' [394]). By contrast, Van's remembrance is marked by his sadomasochistic predilections for brutality and shame, his fixation with extremities of emotion and sensation, and his failure to suppress his most distressing memories - all compressed into 'branded forever.' The divergence in how Van and Ada think and feel about the past does not seem to arise from 'sexual differences' (or at least not in the sense of differences in genitalia), but from their very distinct affective interests and predispositions - idiosyncrasies which, the novel suggests, beget distinct senses of reality. As Van puts it later in the novel: '[I]f people remembered the same they would not be different people. That's-how-it-went' (120).

An apparently minor disagreement between Van and Ada about the memoir's representation of a specific aspect of their shared past can help us place the novel's emphasis on the affective idiosyncrasy of individual memory in a wider ethical context:

> Although Van had never had the occasion to witness anything close to virginal revolt on the part of Ada—not an easily frightened or overfastidious little girl (*Je raffole de tout ce qui rampe*), he could rely on two or three dreadful dreams to

> imagine her, in real, or at least responsible, life, recoiling with a wild look as she left his lust in the lurch to summon her governess or mother, or a gigantic footman (not existing in the house but killable in the dream—punchable with sharp-ringed knuckles, puncturable like a bladder of blood), after which he knew he would be expelled from Ardis—
> (In Ada's hand: I vehemently object to that 'not overfastidious.' It is unfair in fact, and fuzzy in fancy. Van's marginal note: Sorry, puss; that must stay.) (97-8)

Why does Van insist that 'not overfastidious' must stay? Someone who is 'fastidious' is 'easily disgusted' or 'difficult to please with regard to matters of taste or propriety' (*OED*); the litotes of 'not overfastidious' tacitly characterises the young Ada as morbidly fascinated by disgust, lacking moral propriety, and perhaps lacking in personal hygiene - all qualities which sexually excite Van. Maurice Couturier claims that, 'in *Ada*, thanks to the active contribution of the delphinet [Ada] to the narration, one has a complete and two-sided vision of this beautiful idyll' (*Nabokov's Eros*, 202). The parenthetical dispute above draws attention to the way that Van's representation of the 'little girl' as an object and stimulus of erotic interest overrules the elder Ada's conception of her past self, subtly illustrating how being too credulous of the memoir's rhetoric of presenting a shared past risks countenancing and even collaborating with Van's occlusion of others. This exercise of narratorial control seems relatively innocuous partly because it follows the much more disconcerting image of the 'gigantic footman (not existing in the house but killable in the dream—punchable with sharp-ringed knuckles, puncturable like a bladder of blood).' The semantic and figural contamination of urine and blood in the final simile gives the violence a visceral revulsion, despite its explicitly imagined nature. The affective purchase of the sentence is emblematic of how the novel is simply less ethically concerned with separating the imaginary from the objective and arriving at a shared sense of reality than with dispositions of kindness and cruelty, irrespective of their epistemic status. Put differently, *Ada*'s blurring of the real and the imaginary does not entail a universally permissive ethics, but rather all the more urgently concentrates attention on the effects (and affects) of the way characters treat one another (in dreams and in waking life).[13] Richard Rorty suggests that '[t]hose who see fantasy as

[13] In *Pale Fire*, Kinbote writes: 'We all know those dreams in which something Stygian soaks through and Lethe leaks in the dreary terms of defective plumbing' (Vintage edition, 231).

irrelevant to the moral sense will have trouble with Nabokov's definition of art' ('Introduction,' xvii). I would go further; one *cannot* read Nabokov's fiction without feeling that imaginings are of ethical consequence.

6.

The affective ways that *Ada* raises ethical problems for readers can best be seen by first looking at the treatment of a minor character, Kim Beauharnais. In part two, chapter seven, as Van and Ada peruse the album of photographs, Van attempts to wheedle Kim's present whereabouts from Ada with a barely concealed malevolent intent that Ada stridently rebuffs:

> 'You shall not slaughter him,' said Ada. 'He is subnormal, he is, perhaps, blackmailerish, but in his sordidity there is an *istoshnïy ston* ("visceral moan") of crippled art.[?] […]
> 'Art my *joute*. This is the hearse of *ars*, a toilet roll of the Carte du Tendre! I'm sorry you showed it to me. That ape has vulgarized our own mind-pictures. I will either horsewhip his eyes out or redeem our childhood by making a book of it: *Ardis*, a family chronicle.'
> 'Oh do!' said Ada. (406)

The surprising echo of '*ars*' in 'hearse' and the absurd incongruity of 'a toilet roll of the Carte du Tendre' gives to the dialogue a mischievous, ludic quality that downplays the menace of Van's threat to 'horsewhip [Kim's] eyes out.' Only later, in part two, chapter eleven, does the dark irony of Ada's ambiguous 'Oh do!' become clear. In the intervening chapters, Demon visits Van's flat and inadvertently discovers that Van and Ada are lovers. He and Van have a tense conversation, in which Demon admonishes his son for seducing Ada, and confesses that he and Marina are the biological parents of both Van and Ada. This confession is interrupted by a page-long parenthetical digression about an affair between a countess and a poet, which concludes with the following revelation:

> We may add, to complete this useful parenthesis, that in early February, 1893, not long after the poet's death, two other less successful blackmailers were waiting in the wings: Kim who would have bothered Ada again had he not been carried out of his cottage with one eye hanging on a red thread and the other drowned in its blood; and the son of one of the former employees of the famous clandestine-message agency after it had been closed by the U.S.

> Government in 1928, when the past had ceased to matter, and nothing but the straw of a prison cell could reward the optimism of second-generation rogues.) (441)

Van's attack on Kim, tucked away in this syntactically convoluted sentence overburdened with irrelevant information, is afforded little narrative attention, the sense of irrelevance only heightened by the parenthesis interrupting one of the most narratively dramatic moments in the story of Van and Ada's romance. Yet the writing also luxuriates in the details of corporeal destruction, homing in on the mutilation of one eye and the irreparable damage done to the other. This tension exemplifies Alex Woloch's observation that readers are affected by a character's 'fate within the story […] but also in the narrative discourse itself' (38); it is the combination of palpable relish in the horrific damage done to Kim and this damage apparently meriting no more than a side note in a digressive aside which makes Van's attitude as narrator of this incident so repellent.

A simultaneity of stinted narrative attention and graphic corporeal description similarly characterises Van's visits to the Villa Venus brothels, recounted in part two, chapter three of the novel. This chapter is one of the most pronominally unstable in the novel, the movements between third-person and first-person pronouns in turn engendering and collapsing a sense of distance - and especially comic distance - from the scenes described. Van's aborted intercourse with a young boy discomfortingly combines some of the most repulsive imagery in the novel with a more than usual rhetorical exuberance:

> Cherry, the only lad in our next (American) floramor, a little Salopian of eleven or twelve, looked so amusing with his copper curls, dreamy eyes and elfin cheekbones that two exceptionally sportive courtesans, entertaining Van, prevailed upon him one night to try the boy. Their joint efforts failed, however, to arouse the pretty catamite, who had been exhausted by too many recent engagements. His girlish crupper proved sadly defaced by the varicolored imprints of bestial clawings and flesh-twistings; but worst of all, the little fellow could not disguise a state of acute indigestion, marked by unappetizing dysenteric symptoms that coated his lover's shaft with mustard and blood, the result, no doubt, of eating too many green apples. Eventually, he had to be destroyed or given away. (355)

The reader is confronted with a mass of horrific detail: the series of epithets ('lad,' 'girlish,' 'little fellow') which emphasise the boy's childishness; the objectification of

'defaced' and animalisation of 'crupper'; the use of 'sadly' and 'worse' to describe what is erotically rather than ethically desirable; the intermingled registers of feeding and faeces; the understatement of 'dysenteric symptoms' being 'unappetizing'; and the sheer grotesqueness of the boy 'coat[ing] his lover's shaft with mustard and blood.' And yet there is an air of frivolity to the passage, with its lighthearted idiom ('amusing,' 'sportive,' 'entertaining,' 'engagements'), and unmistakeable comic brio in the cavalier way it describes this disgusting scene. At once repelling us with its grim corporeal detail and inviting us to be carried away by its linguistic virtuosity and play, the passage gives rise to an ethically-freighted ambivalence, only intensified by the possibility of our momentarily having endorsed or condoned Van's offhand treatment of the boy, as both protagonist and narrator. Which is to say that what is repugnant about the passage is not only Van's mistreatment of the boy, but also the continued indifference implied by the ludic mode of narrating his past actions. The ethical import of the narratorial mode is perhaps most starkly in evidence in the passage's peculiar distribution of narrative attention, which encourages us to feel that Van should be less interested in the colour of apples the boy had eaten than with whether the child was 'destroyed or given away.'

The episodes in the Villa Venus brothels, in focusing on Van's sexual desire rather than (only) his taste for brutality, touch more directly on the central romance of the novel. A consonance between these abusive acts of desire and Van's feelings about Ada is forcefully suggested through two encounters with young girls, apparently named 'Adada' and 'Adora.' Van recounts how, on his first visit to the brothels, three prostitutes sexually stimulated him in 'preparation' for his having sex with Adada:

> I lay supine and felt twice the size I had ever been (senescent nonsense, says science!) when finally six gentle hands attempted to ease *la gosse* [*the girl*], trembling Adada, upon the terrible tool. Silly pity—a sentiment I rarely experience—caused my desire to droop, and I had her carried away to a feast of peach tarts and cream. (353-4)

The slip into first-person narration collapses any sense of distance between the character and the narrator, whilst the smug alliterative punning ('senescent nonsense, says science!') exacerbates and draws attention to the greater expenditure of words on Van's feeling about the size of himself and/or his penis than the girl herself. The only detail we are given, the adjective 'trembling,' emphasises the physical manifestation of

her terror, recalling Ada's 'fearful signs' and the acutely discomforting prospect of Van being further aroused by this response. Any relief we might feel that Van's 'silly pity' and drooping desire stopped him from raping this girl is dispelled by the closing scene of the chapter, as Van lies in bed with another child: 'He had fondled and fouled her many times, but was not sure if her name really was Adora, as everybody maintained. […] It was not Ardis, it was not the library, it was not even a human room […] but the soft little creature in Van's desperate grasp was Ada' (357-8). Van's sentiment here is reaffirmed at the end of the novel, when he calls this moment 'the purest *sanglot* [sob] in the book' (584). The equation of Adora and Ada brings the most troubling implication of the text's descriptive mode - that desire does not directly apprehend its object - to its most extreme conclusion in this scene from which Ada herself is entirely absent.

The way the narration compounds the abhorrence of these acts can help us approach the more complex case of Lucette's suicide, which constitutes the most ethically testing aspect of the novel. When Van and Ada begin their affair in 1884, Lucette is just eight years old. The two lovers devise various ruses to rid themselves of Lucette's presence so they can again consummate their desires for one another, though more than once she spies them having sex. Lucette quickly develops a strong erotic attachment to her siblings, exacerbated by a number of dubious 'games' Van and Ada play with her. The persistence of Lucette's intense infatuation with Van becomes apparent when she sends him 'a rambling, indecent, crazy, almost savage declaration of love in a ten-page letter' (366) in 1891, and later begs him to take her virginity. In 1901, she secretly books a cabin on a cruise ship on which Van is due 'to deliver an address on the Psychology of Suicide' (452), and resolves to end her life if she cannot seduce him. After two days, her relentless efforts to arouse Van to a pitch that will overcome his reservations nearly succeeds. But as the two sit together watching a film in the ship's cinema, Ada, now pursuing a career as an actress, appears on the screen playing an Andalusian peasant. Van pretends to be seasick, returns to his room, and masturbates twice. Lucette tries to follow him from the cinema, but allows herself to be waylaid by a pair of dull family friends, Mr and Mrs Robinson, for whom she summons 'her last, last, last free gift of staunch courtesy that was stronger than failure or death' (490). After extricating herself from the Robinsons, she phones Van's cabin, but he pretends to be with another woman; Lucette overdoses on

'Quietus' seasickness sedatives, downs three glasses of vodka, and dives off the ship into the sea.

Lucette's death is one of the most emotionally charged moments of the novel, made all the more fraught by the textual errors which mar the depiction of the scene:

> Although Lucette had never died before—no, *dived* before, Violet—from such a height, in such a disorder of shadows and snaking reflections, she went with hardly a splash through the wave that humped to welcome her. That perfect end was spoiled by her instinctively surfacing in an immediate sweep—instead of surrendering under water to her drugged lassitude as she had planned to do on her last night ashore if it ever did come to this. The silly girl had not rehearsed the technique of suicide as, say, free-fall parachutists do every day in the element of another chapter. Owing to the tumultuous swell and her not being sure which way to peer through the spray and the darkness and her own tentaclinging hair—t,a,c,l—she could not make out the lights of the liner, an easily imagined many-eyed bulk mightily receding in heartless triumph. Now I've lost my next note.
> Got it.
> The sky was also heartless and dark, and her body, her head, and particularly those damned thirsty trousers, felt clogged with Oceanus Nox, n,o,x. At every slap and splash of cold wild salt, she heaved with anise-flavored nausea and there was an increasing number, okay, or numbness, in her neck and arms. As she began losing track of herself, she thought it proper to inform a series of receding Lucettes—telling them to pass it on and on in a trick-crystal regression—that what death amounted to was only a more complete assortment of the infinite fractions of solitude. (493-4)

There is a weak and incongruous comedy to the textual errors, which seem to be the result of Violet automatically transcribing every word Van says, including his corrections, comments, and clarifications, and even his use of her name. Michael Wood suggests that the writing goes 'berserk' here (*The Magician's Doubts*, 223) because Van is too distraught to narrate properly, but, given this use of her name, it is difficult to see why we should read these errors as being made by Van rather than Violet. Indeed, the absence of transcription errors elsewhere in the novel raises a much more troubling possibility: that *Violet* - who has never met Lucette - is too upset to transcribe properly, whereas Van remains relatively undisturbed, and is able to narrate the scene with perfect composure. The spelling out of 'tentaclinging hair—t,a,c,l' accentuates the stylistic fussiness of the nonce word, just as 'Oceanus Nox, n,o,x' draws attention to the pretentiously poetic personification of the sea. This preoccupation with style is reflected in the air of aesthetic detachment, even irritation,

in bemoaning that '[t]he perfect end was spoiled' by Lucette surfacing and that '[t]he silly girl had not rehearsed the technique of suicide,' as though her death were a performance.[14] But despite this strong sense of indifference, the passage also makes a sustained and seemingly sincere effort to imaginatively inhabit Lucette's thoughts and feelings - nowhere else in the novel does Van so intensely focalise another character's experience. The 'wave that humped to welcome her,' for instance, simultaneously conveys the motion of the sea and the allure it holds for Lucette; the boat 'receding in heartless triumph' captures her painful preoccupation with abandonment; and the 'anise-flavored nausea' registers the physiological and sensory specificity of her intoxicant-induced sickness. In the magnificent final sentence, we find Lucette's cast-iron propriety ('thought it proper'), her unending feelings of loneliness ('the infinite fractions of solitude'), and her finally succumbing to the drugs and alcohol in the confusion and multiplication of selves.[15] The ardent pursuit of experiential particularity and the textual corruptions eerily combine in the 'increasing number, okay, or numbness, in her neck and arms,' 'number' (possibly meaning even more numb rather than numerical value) seeming to introduce an error yet vividly evoking Lucette's increasingly dim and disoriented consciousness. And it is precisely because these two qualities are present together that this passage cannot be read as an unfeeling aestheticisation or as a heartfelt act of empathy, but must be seen, in ways that are difficult to hold together, as both at once. What is so powerful and so moving is the way the passage simultaneously stages an intense effort to imagine oneself into the feelings of another person and starkly exposes the limits of such empathy, in the impossibility of entirely escaping the particularities of one's own perspective.

[14] The sense of Van exploiting Lucette's death for aesthetic effect is vividly revived in the final chapter of the novel: 'Rather humiliating that physical pain makes one supremely indifferent to such moral issues as Lucette's fate, and rather amusing, if that is the right word, to constate that one bothers about problems of style even at those atrocious moments. […] Her tragic destiny constitutes one of the highlights of this delightful book' (587, 588).

[15] Wood perceptively proclaims: '"Thought it proper" is perfect—Lucette is decorous even when she is drunk and dying—and the fractions of solitude are exquisite' (*The Magician's Doubts*, 223).

7.

The inadequacy of the most significant ethical accounts of *Ada*, represented by Brian Boyd, Dana Dragunoiu, and Michael Wood, becomes apparent if we examine both their specific claims about Van and Ada's culpability (or otherwise) for Lucette's death and the philosophical theories upon which these judgments are based.

Boyd's influential interpretation is premised on extending his resistance/solution model to map out 'Nabokov's moral strategy':

> [H]e encourages us to fail to make a necessary judgement, then by the controlled irony of his recurrent patterns makes us suddenly aware how readily we could make a moral blunder. […] He compels us to discover these limitations of moral imagination in ourselves. […] [O]nly upon rereading, perhaps only after numerous rereadings, do we find the acute moral judgments that Nabokov has woven into the fabric of the novel and that we ourselves have not been able to see. (*Nabokov's Ada*, 57, 62)

Boyd's willingness to consider the potential ethical involvement of readers is appealing, but again, his account is undermined by its epistemological bias and dogged intentionalism. The Villa Venus scenes vividly show that Van's capacity to perceive the pain of others does not lead him to act ethically, whilst the reader's involvement in these scenes arises not from epistemological resistance but from viscerally affective prose.[16] The identification of moral and epistemological failure similarly seems to be the reason for Boyd's claiming *both* that 'Lucette commits suicide […] because her whole emotional development has been twisted by her being sexually "initiated" far too young' (54), and that Van is culpable because of 'the fatal lack of concern he shows towards Lucette […] in not seeing how all-consuming is her desire to lose her virginity to him' (59). It is difficult to see how merely perceiving the intensity of Lucette's desire could have attenuated her suffering or averted her death. Meanwhile Boyd's first claim, given that the entirety of the novel is devoted to the sexual relationship between Van and Ada, comes dangerously close to countenancing twelve years old - Ada's age at the beginning of the affair - as *not* too young.

[16] Leland de la Durantaye similarly suggests, following Kant, that Humbert Humbert is ethically abhorrent because of his 'inability to think from the standpoint of someone else' (92). In fact, throughout *Lolita*, Humbert very often *does* perceive the suffering he causes; these perceptions do not lead to his acting more ethically.

Dana Dragunoiu, adopting a Kantian ethics,[17] criticises Boyd's position on different grounds:

> Boyd's argument that Van and Ada's premature initiation of Lucette into their erotic games sets off a chain of events that culminates in Lucette's suicide is both persuasive and morally attractive. But […] [t]o read Lucette's suicide as a consequence of Van and Ada's actions is to deny Lucette the autonomy and integrity due to her as a rational being. A guilty verdict for Van and Ada secured on the basis of a consequentialistic ethics replicates their crime against Lucette. A more reliable ethical standard must refuse to sacrifice Lucette's dignity to the ethics that would defend her. A standard of this kind must focus, as Kant's does, on what is right rather than what is good. (148, 171)

In the domain of sexual ethics, Dragunoiu argues, again following Kant, that 'only equality between partners can prevent the degradation of the weaker parter's dignity' (173). Where 'Lucette's sexual desire [cannot] provide a moral justification for sexual relations' because Van 'cannot offer [her] a relationship of perfect mutuality' (173), Van and Ada's 'relationship is almost preternaturally egalitarian' (174). Like Boyd, Draguniou is too quick to normalise the ethical difficulties of the text's central romance, whilst the Villa Venus scenes insist on the consonance between Van's use of child prostitutes and his feelings for Ada. Dragunoiu's claims for 'egalitarianism' and 'perfect mutuality' are not reconcilable with the novel's descriptions of Van's experience, which emphasise how his desire threatens to occlude the thoughts and feelings of others.

The more philosophically significant (and problematic) dimension of Dragunoiu's account, however, is the conception of personhood which underlies it. This can be seen in her claim (which Boyd agrees with)[18] that Lucette's 'last, last, last free gift of staunch courtesy' to the Robinsons 'emblematizes the potential to rise above the self-interest that determinist models see at the heart of human conduct' (149), and that, in this, Lucette follows 'the Kantian injunction that one ought to and therefore can be courteous even to those one does not love' (150). The essentially Kantian presupposition here - that ethical action consists of the abandonment of self-

[17] A reference to Kant in *Ada* provides the impetus for Dragunoiu's tenuous claim that 'Kant's moral philosophy suffuses Nabokov's fiction' (143).

[18] 'Her simple politeness toward the Robinsons, her refusal to show anything less than kindness even to people she does not care for and in the face of her own overwhelming need, represents for Nabokov human conduct at its most heroic' (*Nabokov's Ada*, 272-3).

interest - has been subjected to an incisive critique by Bernard Williams in his powerful essay, 'Persons, Character, and Morality' (collected in *Moral Luck*). Williams points out that Kantian theories of morality, conceived as the 'rational application of impartial principle,' are premised on a distinction between a 'non-moral, […] self-interested, point of view' and a 'moral point of view […] characterized by its impartiality and its indifference to any particular relations to particular persons' (2). Put simply, Williams questions 'the extent to which we can hope to attain any conception of the world […] independent of our peculiarities and the peculiarities of our perspective' (x). Williams suggests that what is missing from the Kantian picture is the recognition that 'each person has a character, […] [a] pattern of interests, desires and projects [which] not only provide the reason for an interest in what happens within the horizon of one's future, but also […] a reason for living' (5, 11, 13). In a pertinent aside, Williams speculates that recognising this can help us understand why the devastation of an individual's 'categorical desires' might remove meaning from their life (11-13). 'Once one thinks about what is involved in having a character,' Williams writes, 'one can see that the Kantians' omission of character is a condition of their ultimate insistence on the demands of impartial morality, just as it is a reason for finding inadequate their account of the individual' (14).

Lucette exemplifies the extent to which *Ada* is incompatible with a conception of personhood which abstracts character; it is precisely because Lucette is *unable* to escape or transcend her peculiar interests, desires, and projects that she is so profoundly unhappy. Shortly before her suicide, Lucette intimates something like this to Van:

> 'I enjoy—oh, loads of things,' she continued in a melancholy, musing tone of voice, as she poked with a fork at her blue trout which, to judge by its contorted shape and bulging eyes, had boiled alive, convulsed by awful agonies. 'I love Flemish and Dutch oils, flowers, food, Flaubert, Shakespeare, shopping, sheeing, swimming, the kisses of beauties and beasts—but somehow all of it, this sauce and all the riches of Holland, form only a kind of *tonerikiy-tonerikiy* (thin little) layer, under which there is absolutely nothing, except, of course, your image, and that only adds depth and a trout's agonies to the emptiness.['] (464)

Lucette suggests that the pleasure she finds in life is overwhelmed by her feelings of loneliness and need, whilst the bizarre confusion of her own agonies and those of the

trout obscurely intimates that these feelings are part of the world she apprehends and inhabits (a poignant counterpart to the honey and violet 'considering' Van). This representation of Lucette's emotional life is entirely in keeping with the emphasis *Ada* places on the singular realities which arise from individuals' idiosyncratic feelings and desires. The Kantian ethics Dragunoiu advocates is premised on a conception of personhood which is simply inadequate to capturing the complexity of the novel's descriptions of experience.

Dragunoiu is nevertheless correct when she points out that 'to read Lucette's tragedy as a direct consequence of Van and Ada's sexual manipulations casts Lucette's fate in a deterministic scheme that can just as easily exonerate Van and Ada from charges of moral misconduct' (149). Michael Wood comes close to exonerating Van and Ada in precisely this way:

> [H]appiness is […] among other things, a form of brutality. It knows no charity, cannot resort to mere kindness. Van and Ada have many faults, but in regard to Lucette and her death their only fault is to love each other, to remember their happiness, obsessively, when they have lost it; to fail to imagine, even from the shores of lost happiness, what the actual world of the unhappy looks like, or that there is such a world. (*The Magician's Doubts*, 224)

Wood rather evasively seems to claim both that Van and Ada *did not* and *could not* imagine Lucette's unhappiness. But there are countless moments in the novel when Van *does* clearly perceive other people's suffering - including Lucette's - and acts no more ethically as a consequence (the Villa Venus scenes being one obvious example). Moreover, the simplistic binary of 'happiness' and 'unhappiness,' though rhetorically effective, is too descriptively thin, and cannot capture nor respond to the text's rich evocation of experiences in which joy, fear, pleasure, and other emotions are complexly interwoven.

Wood is, in a sense, too credulous of the self-exculpation Van offers in a letter to Ada and her husband Andrey after Lucette's suicide, in which Van refers to himself by his pen-name Voltemand (inaugurating the chain of allusions to Shakespeare's *Hamlet* which run through the passage):

> *As a psychologist, I know the unsoundness of speculations as to whether Ophelia would not have drowned herself after all, without the help of a treacherous sliver, even if she had married her Voltemand. Impersonally I believe she would have died in her bed, gray and serene, had*

> *V. loved her; but since he did not really love the wretched little virgin, and since no amount of carnal tenderness could or can pass for true love, and since, above all, the fatal Andalusian wench who had come, I repeat, into the picture, was unforgettable, I am bound to arrive, dear Ada and dear Andrej, at the conclusion that whatever the miserable man could have thought up, she would have* pokonchila s soboy *(put an end to herself) all the same. In other more deeply moral worlds than this pellet of muck, there might exist restraints, principles, transcendental consolations, and even a certain pride in making happy someone one does not really love; but on this planet Lucettes are doomed.* (497-8)

The logic of this explanation is premised on a radical restriction of the range of possible feelings one might have to a mutually exclusive binary (to love/to not love), coupled with a deterministic vision of human behaviour: because Van could not love Lucette, her death was inevitable (and therefore not his fault). Such an impoverished account of emotion and desire is patently at odds with the novel's experiential descriptions, which powerfully exhibit the great diversity of feelings a person can have for others. Indeed, part of what is so arresting about Van's explanation here is precisely the tension between his claims for impartiality and the affective particularity of the writing ('carnal tenderness,' 'wretched little virgin,' etc.). 'As a psychologist,' for instance, suggests the adoption of a scientific attitude that jars with the highly rhetorical language, replete with metaphors, emotional adjectives, and literary allusion. This tension is compactly played out in '[i]mpersonally I believe,' the paradox of an impersonal belief ruining the sense of the phrase. Holistically, the passage dramatises a failure to inhabit an impartial perspective, indifferent to particular relations to particular persons. In doing so, it exemplifies the way the novel presents an individual's singular feelings as neither entirely escapable nor as absolutely determining their actions, demonstrating the extent to which moral accounts premised on either polarity will necessarily fail to capture the ethical complexity of the writing.

It is because of the evocative density of *Ada* that critical attempts to extract a moral theory, in the sense of a decision-making procedure, tend to result in rather banal conclusions: that people should try to perceive the suffering of others, that everyone deserves respect, that the weak should not be exploited, and so on. What is appealing about Wood's reading, despite the shortcomings of his specific response to Lucette's death, is his persistent refusal to extrapolate a didactic morality from the novel: 'The temptation of all moralizers, even the most delicate, is to draft an alternative motion, to convert what they think should have happened into a moral

imperative' (*The Magician's Doubts*, 221). *Ada* does not lay down or conform to an *a priori* moral code against which its protagonists are tested, and perhaps no successful literary work does. This is not to say that literary fictions do not engage with ethical issues, but rather that their mode of engagement is evocative as well as propositional, affective as well as conceptual.

8.

The specific affordances of literature to engage with particular kinds of experience brings us, finally, to the fact that *Ada* strives - perhaps more strenuously than any other novel - to evoke individual feeling as fully and richly as possible, but also slyly gestures towards the limitations of this endeavour. In its all-consuming preoccupation with sexual desire, the novel concentrates on feelings which, in their intensity and corporeality, present a particular challenge for literary representation. Something of this challenge is subtly registered when Van rhetorically questions why sex has such a dominant role in his memoir (and in his life):

> What, then, was it that raised the animal act to a level higher than even that of the most exact arts or the wildest flights of pure science? It would not be sufficient to say that in his love-making with Ada he discovered the pang, the *ogon*', the agony of supreme 'reality.' Reality, better say, lost the quotes it wore like claws—in a world where independent and original minds must cling to things or pull things apart in order to ward off madness or death (which is the master madness). (219-220)

We have the now familiar use of 'reality' to signify an intensity of feeling rather than the physical world. But what I particularly want to highlight is the stress the passage places on how this use of the most metaphysical register is *'not* […] *sufficient*' to capture

such intense, erotic feelings.[19] The insufficiency of language is performed through 'the pang, the *ogon*' [fire], the agony,' the assonance and change in language suggesting an accumulation of description which nevertheless falls short. This is even more dramatically brought into relief by the final sentence, the punctuation metaphor and dropped quotation marks around 'reality' accentuating the sentence's manifest failure to convey the intensity of feeling it strains to evoke.

There is a similar use of a punctuation metaphor to draw attention to the evocative paucity of the writing in a far more narratively significant scene, which depicts the first intimate (and inadvertent) contact between Ada and Van, when she slips as they climb a tree together:

> Her bare foot slipped, and the two panting youngsters tangled ignominiously among the branches, in a shower of drupes and leaves, clutching at each other, and the next moment, as they regained a semblance of balance, his expressionless face and cropped head were between her legs and a last fruit fell with a thud—the dropped dot of an inverted exclamation point. She was wearing his wristwatch and a cotton frock. (94)

What is immediately notable about this passage is the absence of focalisation; the physical movements of the characters are recorded with little or no indication as to their thoughts and feelings (as is foregrounded by the detail of Van's 'expressionless face'). Even Ada's lack of underwear - which Van is presumably acutely conscious of - is registered only by omission. Though the Edenic allusion suggests that Van comes to some kind of sexual knowledge (perhaps a knowledge of what Ada's vulva feels like), the writing remains distant from his experience, whilst the 'inverted exclamation point' figure implies a sense of shock or surprise which is as conspicuously absent as the invoked punctuation mark. By declining to describe the riot of emotion (elation? embarrassment? exhilaration?) we presume that Van is feeling, the passage points up

[19] In *Speak, Memory*, Nabokov similarly describes his 'habit' of reaching for fundamental (meta)physical limits when contemplating the intensity of his strongest emotions: 'Whenever I start thinking of my love for a person, I am in the habit of immediately drawing radii from my love—from my heart, from the tender nucleus of a personal matter—to monstrously remote points of the universe. Something impels me to measure the consciousness of my love against such unimaginable and incalculable things as the behavior of nebulae (whose very remoteness seems a form of insanity), the dreadful pitfalls of eternity, the unknowledgeable beyond the unknown, the helplessness, the cold, the sickening involutions and interpenetrations of space and time. It is a pernicious habit, but I can do nothing about it' (296).

the extent to which the rest of the novel strives to involve readers in the protagonist's affective experience (and especially his erotic experience).

The profound stakes of this evasion, omission, or lapse are brought into relief in the exceedingly complex re-description of Van and Ada's intimate contact in the following chapter: 'Such contacts evolve their own texture; a tactile sensation is a blind spot; we touch in silhouette' (98). The sentence rapidly moves from the particular to the universal, the specifying 'such' giving way to the indefinite article, and the indefinite article to the all-encompassing personal pronoun. The tactility of 'texture' intimates that such moments come to have not a singular meaning but a singular *feeling*. The primacy of feeling is similarly stressed by the visual-epistemological metaphor of a 'blind spot,' with its suggestion that a 'tactile sensation' can be neither seen nor known. This sentiment is intensified by the striking implication of the final clause - that the ways that people touch one another can be perceived only in silhouette, a shadowy outline of a bodily form. In a novel which so madly desires to capture and relive affective experience in every last detail, there is a deep pathos to this suggestion that something of the poignancy, the particularity, of feeling is necessarily lost in introspection.

It is for this reason that the experience of reading this extraordinarily affective yet numbingly over-elaborated novel is so difficult to describe and account for. *Ada* characteristically seems to hint at this difficulty in the parodic pseudo-blurb in the final chapter:

> In spite of the many intricacies of plot and psychology, the story proceeds at a spanking pace. Before we can pause to take breath and quietly survey the new surroundings into which the writer's magic carpet has, as it were, spilled us, another attractive girl, Lucette Veen, Marina's younger daughter, has also been swept off her feet by Van, the irresistible rake. (588)

The mischievous humour of this *précis* is its manifest failure to do justice to the sheer evocative density of the preceding hundreds of pages, and in a way that diminishes their affective and ethical complexity. Like the blurb, the reading in this chapter is necessarily partial, in both senses of that word; to echo *Ada*'s closing refrain, the novel will aways offer readers 'much, much more' (589).

Samuel Beckett's *Ill Seen Ill Said*: Narration and Undecidability

Ill Seen Ill Said (1982) is perhaps Samuel Beckett's most moving work of fiction. In *Damned to Fame*, James Knowlson suggests that it 'may come to be judged as one of his greatest works. […] [A]s you read late Beckett, you may find yourself suddenly and unaccountably moved to tears' (677, 671). John Banville, in a memorial essay discussing Beckett's late prose, claims that *Ill Seen Ill Said* is 'one of the glories of late twentieth-century literature, or, indeed, of world literature of any period. […] It is profound and moving, an extended poetic meditation on eschatology; these last things shake the heart' (*Possessed of a Past*, 375, 385). Knowlson and Banville are right to celebrate *Ill Seen Ill Said* as a remarkable literary achievement. But what is missing from their assessments is any allusion to the fact that this is also some of Beckett's most difficult and enigmatic writing. This chapter will show that the epistemological challenges of reading and making sense of *Ill Seen Ill Said* are inextricable from its emotional power, and argue that only by recognising this can we account for just how moving and unsettling this work is. My discussion has wider implications for our understanding of Beckett's late prose works which, from *How It Is* (1964) onwards, are characterised by a semantic and syntactical density which reaches an apotheosis in *Ill Seen Ill Said*.

Knowlson offers the following explanation of how emotion is handled in Beckett's writing:

> [T]he deep feelings that lie at the roots of his work are either depersonalised or displaced onto more neutral ground. […] The widely acknowledged power of much of his writing, particularly in the late work, comes from the fact that emotions are strictly contained but never totally abandoned. A phrase from […] *Ill Seen Ill Said*, 'Silence at the eye of the scream,' illustrate[s] his startling ability to encapsulate emotion and express it memorably. (671)

Knowlson rightly emphasises the oblique way in which feelings are represented in Beckett's later writings. Yet the role of emotion in these works is more complex than he suggests, as we can see by looking more closely at the passage of *Ill Seen Ill Said* from which Knowlson quotes:

> The long white hair stares in a fan. Above and about the impassive face. Stares as if shocked still by some ancient horror. Or by its continuance. Or by another. That leaves the face stone-cold. Silence at the eye of the scream. Which say? Ill say. Both. All three. Question answered. (58)

There certainly is a sense of deep feelings being displaced. But Knowlson does not (and likely could not) tell us what emotion 'Silence at the eye of the scream' expresses or encapsulates. Because the syntactical relationships between these peculiar sentences are so underdetermined, it is unclear whether 'Stares as if shocked still' describes the 'long white hair' or 'the impassive face.' When reading a more conventional work, we might assume the latter, but the use of 'stares' in its etymological sense of being rigid (*OED*) in the preceding sentence leaves both possibilities open. The polysemous 'still' similarly generates an ambiguity about whether the hair or the face remains shocked, or whether it was shocked into stillness, or, indeed, both. The cause or imagined cause of this shock is even more obscure, the possessive pronoun of 'its continuance' perhaps referring to the 'ancient horror' (an allusion to Medusa?) or to the face, an obscurity compounded by the even vaguer 'Or another.' Set amidst these escalating indeterminacies is the highly figurative 'Silence at the eye of the scream,' with its strange use of 'eye' seemingly as a synonym for 'centre' or 'heart' (as in 'the eye of the storm'). This might be a metaphorical description of the appearance of the impassive face, or it might be an evocation of an emotion which lies behind it, not only raising the question of what emotion is being expressed, but also whether an emotion is being expressed at all. The ungraspable nature of the passage is brought into greater relief by the rhetorical question, 'Which say?', and the conflicting implications of 'both' and 'All three.' As a conclusion to such a bewildering piece of writing, 'Question answered' has an overt and palpable irony. And, as my discussion of *Ill Seen Ill Said* will demonstrate, the interpretative problems generated by this passage are in no way attenuated by greater knowledge of the surrounding narrative. The thoughts and feelings this passage evokes are extremely complex, but the peculiar character of this language primarily derives from its combination of powerful epistemological resistance and its invocation of intense emotions - of shocks, horrors, and screams. That one of the most sensitive readers of *Ill Seen Ill Said* simplifies and diminishes its affective power in his effort to celebrate it indicates just how difficult it is to do justice to this remarkable work.

It is suggestive that the two critics who most fully register the emotional intensity of this text, Knowlson and Banville, are writing in the genres of biography and the memorial essay respectively. For reasons discussed in the introduction to this thesis, more formal literary criticism has struggled to come to terms with the affects represented and produced by Beckett's late prose.[1] One prevalent critical trend is worth briefly addressing here: the tendency to diminish and domesticate these troubling texts by describing them as outright rejections or abandonments of prior literary and/or philosophical norms. An example of this is the widespread claim that Beckett's texts enact an eradication of subjectivity. In 2006, Andrew Gibson proclaimed that: 'if recent Beckett criticism has reached a consensus on any point, it is surely that Beckett's work pervasively dramatizes or effects a dissolution of the subject' (*Beckett and Badiou*, 128). Pascale Casanova has similarly argued, through a reading of *Worstward Ho* (1986), that 'Beckett works to invent literary images freed from figurative norms and prescriptions' (89), and that the later fictions 'succeed in completely erasing the subjective convention by deleting pronouns […] in the name of a refusal to reproduce the obviousness of psychological interiority' (90). Paraphrasing and endorsing Casanova's view, Terry Eagleton states: 'Even if anything as inconceivable as expression is going on, what is being expressed is certainly nothing as drearily passé as a self' (2).[2] In the past decade or so, Beckett scholarship has largely turned attention away from this topic, and instead vigorously pursued the 'historicist trend' (Van Hulle, xvii) and 'archival turn' (Feldman, 27) which has characterised modernist studies - and literary studies - more widely,[3] allowing this consensus to go

[1] One notable exception is Laura Salisbury's excellent study, *Samuel Beckett: Laughing Matters, Comic Timing*. Salisbury offers some insightful observations about *Ill Seen Ill Said*, though I am unsure that humour is the best lens through which to view a text so dominated by feelings of desire and loss.

[2] Jonathan Boulter articulates more or less the same idea. Séan Kennedy's critique of Boulter is premised on a problematic identification of the narrative voice of the *Texts for Nothing* with the biographical person of Beckett. Christopher Langlois has offered a similar but more nuanced reading of *Texts for Nothing*, which is nevertheless susceptible to the same objections I make to Marjorie Perloff's reading later in this chapter.

[3] Paul Sheehan rightly suggests that '[i]t is an observable fact that successive waves of Beckett criticism have tended to mirror changes taking place in the wider field of literary studies. The archival turn is no exception' (1).

critically unchallenged.[4] *Ill Seen Ill Said* would seem to exemplify the view that Beckett eliminates subjectivity from his fiction. In the course of this chapter, I will demonstrate that this is a misreading which has limited our understanding of Beckett's writing, and especially our understanding of the magisterial late prose works.

I will begin my reading by considering the perplexing narrative form of *Ill Seen Ill Said*. My central claim is that the narration invites and sustains several conflicting interpretations, and that only an approach that recognises the fundamental *undecidability* of the narrative can begin to account for the intense epistemological and affective uncertainties it both represents and engenders. These uncertainties are intricately bound up with a tension that dominates the narration, between an obsessive desire to know another person's feelings and an opposing desire to *not* know (and to not want to know). In my conclusion to the chapter, I show how *Ill Seen Ill Said* archly draws attention to the apparent proximity between the experiences it seems to describe and the thoughts and feelings it gives rise to in readers.

1.

The formidable difficulty of summarising *Ill Seen Ill Said* indicates something of the interpretative challenge it poses for readers and critics. The text's sixty-one paragraphs extend to more than thirty pages, yet not much in the way of 'events' could be said to definitively take place. At the heart of the text is an unnamed old woman in an isolated cabin, who is sometimes present on the scene, yet at other times seems to be absent. She appears to be the only person in this world, though obscure figures referred to as 'the guardians,' 'the mysteries,' and 'the twelve' are occasionally alluded to. The woman is described sitting motionless in her chair, standing beside a stone, and walking in her cabin or through the surrounding snow-covered fields. Nothing about the organisation of these incidents suggests the kind of development we might call a 'plot,' or at least not the kinds of plots we might recognise from reading other

[4] In the introduction to *The New Cambridge Companion to Samuel Beckett*, Dirk Van Hulle observes that theoretical and historicist approaches (or some blend thereof) have been the dominant paradigm for most recent work on Beckett. The 'Poetics' section of the volume notably contains insightful essays on periodisation (Shane Weller), intertextuality (Anthony Uhlmann), self-translation (Sam Slote), and contemporary philosophy (S. E. Gontarski), which nevertheless have little to say about the poetics of Beckett's writing.

works of fiction. The near-repetition of various actions, and numerous assertions which contradict those found elsewhere in the text, make it nearly impossible to establish any chronology or temporal sequence. Nevertheless, though far from a conventional narrative, there is a sense of significance or progression in the way this work unfolds: the tone oscillates between panic and serenity at an increasingly frenetic rate, the scene of the old woman grows more vague and unstable, and the imagery becomes ever more abstract.

Marjorie Perloff has shed some light on the 'poetic' style of *Ill Seen Ill Said*. She arranges the opening lines of the text into metrical form in order to illustrate the strong presence of rhythm, rhyme, and alliteration:

> From where she lies
> She sees Venus rise.
> On.
> From where she lies
> When the skies are clear
> She sees Venus rise
> Followed by the sun.
> Then she rails at the source of all life.
> On.
> At evening when the skies are clear
> She savours its star's revenge. ('Between Verse and Prose,' 416; *Ill Seen Ill Said*, 45)

Though poetic techniques are more pronounced in the opening of the text than elsewhere, Perloff perceptively highlights how the style of *Ill Seen Ill Said* places stress on the aural qualities of its language. The sentences feel densely compacted, almost as though constrained by line length. Perloff's metrical arrangement also implicitly shows how the absence of punctuation and the frequency of pronouns demands that readers parse the ambiguous relationships between words, phrases, clauses, sentences, and even paragraphs. As the text progresses, these relationships become increasingly difficult to determine. Because of the compaction of these sentences and the sparseness of the punctuation, the full stops and capital letters are unusually significant, and this chapter therefore eschews the academic convention of altering the case of a quotation to make it consistent with the surrounding prose. Likewise, the syntactically dense and tightly interwoven nature of these sentences often makes it necessary to quote at length to provide the reader with adequate semantic context.

The vocabulary of *Ill Seen Ill Said* is richly diverse, drawing on a range of tones and registers, and carrying traces and echoes of works from across the English literary canon (many of which have been catalogued by Perloff in *Poetic License* [166-173]). Allusions to Greek, Roman, and Christian traditions are curiously intermingled. Particularly prominent in the text's diction are words and phrases which resemble 1890s Decadent and Aesthetic works, most obviously in the pervasive use of synaesthesia and of sensuous and enigmatic imagery. The style of *Ill Seen Ill Said*, with its semantic density, allusive resonance, and sensory richness feels laden with significance; to again invoke Paul Muldoon's image, it has 'a pressure per square inch' which is unusual for prose ('An Interview with Paul Muldoon'). However, Perloff is too quick to proclaim that *Ill Seen Ill Said* 'has little in common with the short story or novella' ('Between Verse and Prose,' 417); the arrangement of the text as paragraphs does present it as a prose narrative, which is partly why the resonant language is so surprising, and so moving.

Where *Ill Seen Ill Said* most assiduously resists straightforward description, however, is with respect to its narrative form. Perloff's observations about the poetic qualities of the text are accompanied by a conspicuous lack of clarity about the narration, which in a single paragraph she refers to as 'Beckett's own […] eye,' 'the voice of us all,' 'a debased or parody bard,' and 'the impersonal voice' ('Between Verse and Prose,' 420). This inconsistency is emblematic of the wider critical response to this text, with critics quickly moving beyond or passing over fundamental questions about the narration so as to make seemingly grander claims about the work. In an otherwise insightful reading, Adam Piette summarises *Ill Seen Ill Said* as follows: 'Beckett stages a confrontation between the remembering, self-analytical "drivelling scribe" and the mental traces of the maternal imago in the shape of an "old so dying woman." […] [The narrator] is mourning someone whom he remembers in mourning' ('Beckett, Affect and the Face,' 283, 287). Compare this with John Banville's précis: '*Ill Seen Ill Said* […] is narrated in the third person and has as its central figure a dying old woman, alone amid the snows at lambing time and watched over by a mysterious Twelve who ring the clearing where her cabin stands' (385). Why do these descriptions differ so dramatically? The following discussion will show how both writers accurately capture some part of this text, but stop short of considering how it relates to other, conflicting parts. As a consequence, these critics are unable to recognise how *Ill Seen*

Ill Said profoundly troubles the conventional categories through which readers often make sense of literary fictions.

2.

To elucidate what is at stake in the elusive narrative form of *Ill Seen Ill Said*, it is worth beginning with a simple view of literary narration before turning to a more nuanced one. Because the narrator uses no singular first-person pronouns, the text initially appears to be written in the third-person; that is, it appears to be a story told by a narrator who is not him- or herself a character in that story. But where the absence of first-person pronouns usually means that a narrator is not a character, this appears not to be the case in Beckett's text. Consider this seemingly simple description of the cabin's setting: 'The feeling at times of being below sea level. Especially at night when the skies are clear. Invisible nearby sea. Inaudible' (47). Here we see a manipulation of syntax found throughout Beckett's late prose, where the omission of a pronoun and a verb obscures both the subject and the temporality of the sentence. (A more ordinary sentence might read: 'I have the feeling at times of being below sea level,' or 'she has the feeling…,' and so on.) Without a character to attribute this feeling to, the definite article seems to have a general or universal reference, as though anyone present might feel this. Yet the implied universality is not easily reconciled with the particularity of this experience; cognisance of the sea being nearby but invisible and inaudible invokes a complex apprehension which involves specific states of knowledge, emotion, and sensory perception. This feeling presumably has something to do with qualities of light and sound, and perhaps a sense of vulnerability in the face of a constant threat of catastrophe, but, ultimately, why 'one' might feel as though below sea level remains unclear. Strange feelings of this kind pervade Beckett's text: 'And man? Shut of at last? Alas no' (47). The peculiar conjunction of misanthropy, pity, and regret compacted in 'Alas' intimates that it is desirable to be 'shut' of 'man.' 'Man' might refer to humankind, or to the male sex, or to the concept of humanity; whichever it might be, these are very particular sentiments. Innumerable narrative statements in this work disclose desires which are no less particular: 'Already all confusion. Things and imaginings. As of always. Confusion amounting to nothing. Despite precautions. If only she could be pure figment' (53). 'If only' deictically

functions to express longing, yet at this point in the narrative, the woman has disappeared from the scene, and even the mysteries are gone, again leaving the reader with no character to whom this desire might be attributed. Whose 'imaginings' are these, and who feels such 'Confusion'? Dislocated fantasies are found throughout this narrative: 'Times when she is gone. Long lapses of time. At crocus time it would be making for the distant tomb. To have that on the imagination!' (51). Again, the deictic effect of the final sentence is to express consternation or surprise in response to something one has imagined. These are just a few of the innumerable ways that the narration of *Ill Seen Ill Said* manifests singular emotions, beliefs, judgments, desires, and imaginings - experiences which readers can only ascribe to some kind of being or consciousness.

The narratological implication of these effects can be more easily perceived by addressing how they complicate or elude Gerard Genette's well-known taxonomy of narration. Briefly, Genette describes narrators who are involved in the story as 'homodiegetic' and those who are not as 'heterodiegetic,' and uses the terms 'extradiegetic' and 'intradiegetic' to distinguish between narrators embedded within other narratives and those whose narration constitutes the primary narrative level (*Narrative Discourse*, 248). In the later *Narrative Discourse Revisited*, Genette acknowledges that 'all that is needed to convert an extradiegetic narration into an embedded narration is a sentence of presentation' (95) - that is, a sentence presenting a scene or act of narration. As Richard Walsh points out, such a sentence would make little difference in the case of a homodiegetic narrator, but in a heterodiegetic narration, it would result in 'the *creation* of a character' (71, emphasis added). Walsh goes on to suggest that 'many [extradiegetic homodiegetic] narrators—Huck Finn, Tristram Shandy, Humbert Humbert, Molloy—are at least as strongly characterized in the telling of their tales as they are in the role of protagonist' (71). This raises a large narratological question: can a narrator who is not explicitly embedded in a primary narrative, and who eschews first-person pronouns, be characterised *solely* through telling a tale? Alain Robbe-Grillet's *Jealousy* (1957) gives us an interesting precedent: though the narrator uses no first-person pronouns, erotic attention to a female character's body and speculative fantasies about the possibility of her pursuing an extra-marital affair manifest feelings of sexual fixation and jealousy which pointedly suggest that the narrator is her husband - a suspicion confirmed by various clues in

the diegetic scene, such as the description of three dinners but only two diners. The case of *Ill Seen Ill Said* is more complex - the text gives no definitive evidence that the narrator exists in the same world as the protagonist(s), instead leaving the relationship between the narrator and the narrated world profoundly undetermined. But the effect of the narration exhibiting recurrent affective dispositions is to *characterise* the narrator as the subject of specific thoughts, feelings, and desires.

Ill Seen Ill Said demonstrates that neither first-person pronouns nor overt diegetic involvement are necessary for characterisation. But, as Seymour Chatman indicates, the question of how such a narrator should be understood remains complex:

> We need a definition of 'narrator' which can allow for non-human as well as human, nongendered as well as gendered agents. We do have many gaps to fill in reading narratives, but it has not been demonstrated that the need to make the presenting agent a person is one of them, especially in cases where the text seems to go out of its way to avoid such identifications. (122-3)

Some texts, such as Nabokov's *Transparent Things* (1972) and Banville's *The Infinities* (2009), clearly do require that readers imagine a non-human narrator. But in the case of most literary fictions, it is difficult to see why readers should not associate a narration imbued with specific thoughts, feelings, and desires with personhood. This commonplace assumption is the principal reason that first-person pronouns are normally identified with subjectivity - in our day-to-day lives, the two almost always coincide. Nonetheless, as Chatman points out, such assumptions should not lead us to prematurely resolve narrative ambiguities which texts *do* generate: such an ambiguity is at the heart of *Ill Seen Ill Said*, as we will shortly see.

Even critics who have explicitly described Beckett's narrator in non-personal terms have implicitly recognised the characterising effect of the narration. Marjorie Perloff is again the most striking example: though she claims that 'the words and phrases in Beckett's [text] emanate from no identifiable source' ('Between Verse and Prose,' 421), her use of the gendered pronoun 'he' a page earlier tacitly invokes a specifically sexed subject - a slip which is consonant with but does not register the implications of the pronounced masculine, heterosexual eroticism of the narration. (It is for this reason that I occasionally refer to the narrator as 'he.') Simon Critchley similarly uses a gendered pronoun without considering the implication of his doing so: 'Whoever speaks in Beckett's work, it is not "I," it is rather "he" […] the third

person or the impersonal neutrality of language' (174); much of Beckett's writing is pronominally third-person, but it is rarely neutral or impersonal. Perloff claims that the absence of a narrating subject in *Ill Seen Ill Said* is demonstrated by the 'curious mixture of voices and discourse patterns' (420), including Elizabethan pentameter, archaisms, fairy tales, and nursery rhymes. But, though Perloff is correct that 'no tone lasts long' (420), these registers (along with others) in fact *recur* throughout. The narratorial language is certainly strange, but the consistency of the lexis and syntax suggest not a mixture of voices but an *idiolect*, the language characteristic of an individual's speech or writing - something which Perloff again implicitly recognises in her use of the definite article ('the voice') and her neologism, 'associative monologue' (419), a monologue being precisely the speech of an individual. The implied idiolect of the narration is accompanied by similarly recurrent affective dispositions, manifest in the obsessive and frequently erotic attention to the old woman's body, the persistent anxieties about what she feels and whether she feels anything at all, and the strange combination of pleasure and despair provoked by her presence. As Walsh points out, such dispositions are rife in many narrations which are pronominally first-person, but become more troubling for readers when a characterised narrator is not explicitly identified.

The complexity of Beckett's use of personal pronouns has been discussed at length by Daniel Katz in his book, *Saying I No More: Subjectivity and Consciousness in the Prose of Samuel Beckett*, which Andrew Gibson accurately calls 'the most elaborate and detailed account' (*Beckett and Badiou*, 128) of Beckett's supposed 'dissolution of the subject.' Drawing on Émile Benveniste's celebrated essays on the deictic functioning of pronouns, Katz persuasively suggests that Beckett's 'handling of the textual construction of subjectivity' effects a 'disorientating and violent undermining of the pronominal system' (19). But Katz's conclusion that 'no subjective presence, either to be revealed or hidden by language, can be found' (16) only follows if we accept that the first-person pronoun is '*the* mark that expresses subjectivity in language' (19, emphasis added), rather than only the most explicit means of signalling the expression of individual thought and feeling.

Ill Seen Ill Said exploits and problematises readers' basic procedures for making sense of literary fictions through a combination of highly affective narration and an eschewal of first-person pronouns. One consequence of this is that the text involves

sufficiently attentive readers in considering and questioning the relationships between language, affect, and the textual representation of persons. Part of what can be so alluring and unsettling about Beckett's writing is the way it eludes or complicates familiar conceptual frameworks - taxonomies of narration, for instance, or assumptions about linguistic subjectivity. The critical challenge is to not only register these complications, but also to capture how they shape the experience of reading passages of Beckett's writing from moment to moment. The radical rhetoric that proclaims that Beckett 'eliminates the subject from literature' seductively offers up a theoretically sophisticated interpretative schema that seems to valorise the writing, but which actually forecloses an issue that is powerfully mobilised by the text. That Beckett places the ordinary implication of personhood through pronouns under acute pressure signals not the abandonment of concern about personhood and literary representation, but precisely its centrality to his fiction.

Before turning to the central interpretative problem raised by *Ill Seen Ill Said*, I want to briefly demonstrate how Beckett's fiction involves readers in fundamental questions about the representation of subjectivity in literature by considering a small but significant issue: the question of whether the narration should be considered as voice or writing. Gibson argues that the metaphor of narration-as-voice is for orthodox literary criticism 'so deeply entrenched as apparently to have forgotten the very difference between the literal and the metaphorical' ('Voice, Narrative, Film,' 640). Literally speaking, Gibson says, all literary texts are writing: 'To Roland Barthes's question as to who speaks in the text, the answer, it would seem, is no one ever' (640). But for Gibson, the continued efficacy of the metaphor means that 'the concept of narrative voice can neither be taken on trust nor simply dispensed with. […] The question may be, not how we get beyond the double-bind at issue here, but what kinds of significant thought are possible within it' (647).

To reformulate this question in a less theoretical and more literary critical idiom: what characteristics of a text produce *effects* of voicing and writing, and how literally or metaphorically should we interpret these effects? Like many of Beckett's narrations, *Ill Seen Ill Said* is riddled with revisions, corrections, disjunctions, and elucidations, qualities which generate the impression of spontaneous speech. But this impression is brought into doubt later in the text when we read what seems to be a description of paper being torn to shreds and thrown away: 'The sheet. Between tips

of trembling fingers. In two, Four. Eight. Old frantic fingers. Not paper any more. […] Hack into shreds. Down the plughole. On to the next. White. Quick blacken' (74-5). It is fundamentally unclear whether it is the narrator or the old woman who tears up sheets of paper and 'blackens' new pages: on the one hand, she is described as 'old' and 'trembling' several times; on the other, only the narrator shows any signs of being 'frantic.' By preventing attentive readers from determining whether the scene belongs to the diegetic world or depicts its composition, the passage asks whether the narration is a fictive representation of voice or writing, and so involves us in recognising and considering how particular patterns of language connote different modes of articulation, within and beyond this text. When Katz claims that 'Beckett's postwar prose takes the task of dismantling […] this coherent "voice-effect" and all the metaphysical suppositions that it entails' (16), the radical rhetoric of 'dismantling' again obscures something central to this writing and event of reading.

3.

The ways that literary works trouble received categories of experience brings us to the central interpretative difficulty of reading *Ill Seen Ill Said* - the struggle to decide whether the narrator perceives, recollects, or imaginatively invents the world of the old woman. As we will see, these narrative alternatives have dramatically conflicting affective consequences. Discussing the relationship between literary narratives and these modalities of experience, in a not dissimilar fashion to Gibson, Chatman claims that:

> The narrator […] is a reporter, not an 'observer' of the story world in the sense of literally witnessing it. It makes no sense to say that a story is told 'through' the narrator's perception since he/she/it is precisely *narrating*, which is not an act of perception but of presentation or representation, of transmitting story events and existents through words or images. […] Even for so-called 'camera-eye' narration it is always and only *as if* the narrator were seeing the events transpire before his very eyes at the moment of narration. If we do not understand this, we cannot clarify but must fall victim to the very illusion that it is our task to analyze. (142, 145).

Chatman rightly draws attention to the danger of naturalising visual metaphors when describing literary narratives. But there is an odd tautology to his insistence that it is

only ever '*as if*' a fictional narrator perceives a narrated world - fiction being precisely the representation of something 'as if' it were real. Chatman also warns us against 'fall[ing] victim' to the 'illusion' that a narrator perceives yet firmly accepts the equally illusory notion that narration entails the 'existence' of a narrator; ultimately, both narrator and perception are fictional, and pointing this out doesn't tell us very much about a given work. As with the issue of voicing and writing, the more pressing and interesting question is how particular patterns of language connote different modalities of experience. What is so complex about *Ill Seen Ill Said* - as its title indicates - is the fact that, at various moments, the narration reads *as if* the narrator is perceiving, or recollecting, or creating the diegetic world, interpretations of the narrative which appear to be mutually exclusive. It does this by deranging the means through which we ordinarily determine the kind of fiction we are reading - through the temporality implied by grammatical tense, by establishing whether (within the fiction) the narrated world exists independently from the act of narration, and by considering the degree of the narrator's knowledge about this world and its inhabitants.

When reading more conventional works, we can infer from the tense of the narrator's language the temporal relationship between the events of the story and the present time of the narration. The opening line of *Ill Seen Ill Said*, 'From where she lies she sees Venus rise' (45), describes the woman's actions in the present tense, implying that the narrator is presently observing her. But this inference is swiftly unsettled by the close of the paragraph: 'All this in the present as had she the misfortune to be still of this world' (45). 'All this' might refer to the incidents that have just been described or to the narration itself, just as 'the present' might refer to the current time or the grammatical tense, opening up two possible readings. This might still be a record of the narrator's perceptions, but it might equally be an account of past events only *told* in the present tense - a technique of affected immediacy which Dorrit Cohn calls the 'evocative present' (*Transparent Minds*, 198) and Beckett's Molloy the 'mythological present' (*Molloy*, 23). The sentiment implied by the suggestion that the woman has 'misfortune to be still of this world' radically changes depending on one's reading, being either an expression of compassion for the unfortunate living or of relief for the safely dead. Matters are complicated even further when, a few pages later, we read: 'Time truth to tell still current' (49). Contrary to the previous quotation, the suggestion is that the events narrated in the past tense are only being told as such

and in fact occur in the present, a kind of 'evocative past' of affected nostalgia or longed-for absence. Whether these disjunctions of tense and temporality are rhetorical effects or represent projections of desire, they raise the possibility that at any moment the tense of the language might disturb our sense of the temporal 'reality.' The cumulative effect of these instabilities is to strip tense of its capacity to help the reader to determine whether the narrator perceives or recollects the diegetic world.

What is common to both these interpretations of the narrative, however, is the premise that, within the fiction, the narrated world exists or existed apart from the act of narration. This is made doubtful by numerous descriptions weighted with hesitancy, indecision, and regret: 'A moor would have better met the case. Were there a case better to meet. There had to be lambs. Rightly or wrongly. A moor would have allowed of them. Lambs for their whiteness. And for other reasons as yet obscure. […] In any case too late' (47-8). The obscure reasons for lambs being necessary and the regret that they were not set upon a moor strongly suggest that the narrator is inventing this world. This is very difficult to reconcile with the reiterated expressions of desire for the woman to exist only in the imagination: 'If only she could be pure figment. Neither be nor been nor by any shift to be' (53).

Volatile fluctuations in the degree of implied knowledge similarly frustrate efforts to determine a single, stable relationship between the narrator and the narrative world. Such instabilities are present from the earliest description of the cabin's setting:

> Stones increasingly abound. Ever scanter even the rankest weed. Meagre pastures hem it round on which it slowly gains. With none to gainsay. To have gainsaid. As if doomed to spread. How come a cabin in such a place? How came? Careful. Before replying that in the far past at the time of its building there was clover growing to its very walls. Implying furthermore that it the culprit. And from it as from an evil core that the what is the wrong word the evil spread. And none to urge - none to have urged its demolition. As if doomed to endure. Question answered. (46)

The movements from present to past tense, for instance from 'to gainsay' to 'To have gainsaid,' might represent self-corrections or changes of mind, whilst the oddly linguistic verb (can one 'gainsay' the movement of inanimate objects?) sustains the uncertainty about whether the narrator is describing this world or making it up. There is a similar ambiguity to 'As if doomed to spread,' which might suggest that the narrator knows that, despite appearances, the stones will continue to spread, or

indicate that his knowledge is limited to present appearances. Questions such as 'How come a cabin in such a place?' might be the narrator interrogating his own memory, or prompting himself to invent further, or be solely for rhetorical effect. These fluctuations in implied knowledge become most visible, and most troubling, with respect to the narrator's irregular access to the woman's subjective experience. In the opening paragraph, her sensory perceptions ('she sees Venus rise'), emotional responses ('she rails at the source of all life'), and states of knowledge ('not knowing whither or for what purpose') are related in full. But these confident assertions quickly give way to wavering indecision: 'She never once saw one come toward her. Or she forgets. She forgets. Are they always the same?' (47).

The problem of determining the mode of the narration is complicated further by an intrinsically related and equally intractable issue: the question of whether or not the narrator should be considered an *embodied* person. This issue is conspicuously raised by the strange figure of 'the eye,' introduced in the opening paragraph as 'an eye having no need of light to see' (45). This seems to be a metaphorical 'mind's eye,' but the metaphoricity of the figure is disconcertingly disrupted by later images of an eye - perhaps belonging to the woman, but likely not - drying up (51) and filling with tears (52). More peculiar still are the later descriptions (again, presumably metaphorical) of the eye performing the functions of other organs: 'The eye breathes again' (54) and even 'digests its pittance' (54). The ocularcentric notion of 'point of view' is certainly being put under great pressure. But as a synecdoche for the narrator, the bizarre figuration of the eye prevents us from deciding whether a body is being invoked, further troubling our ability to determine what kind of narrative this is.

These examples represent some of the numerous ways that every paragraph of *Ill Seen Ill Said* introduces fundamental doubts about whether the old woman is observed, recollected, or invented by the narrator. This problematic reaches an insurmountable extremity in those passages which simultaneously mobilise more than one diegetic interpretation: 'What empty space henceforward. For long pacing to and fro in the gloom. Suddenly in a single gesture she snatches aside the coat and to again on a sky as black as it. And then? Careful. Have her sit? Lie? Kneel? Go? She too vacillates' (70). The suddenness with which the woman snatches aside the coat suggests that the narrator observes her movements and is surprised by them, intimating that she exists independently from his narration. This is notably at odds

with the implication of the questions beginning 'Have her sit?', which seem to present the narrator deliberating over how she should move, as though directing her actions. These two mutually exclusive interpretations of the narrative paradoxically combine in 'She *too* vacillates,' which characterises the woman as *both* an autonomous person and a figment of fantasy, at once perceived and imagined by the narrator.

A number of critics, including Adam Piette, Lawrence Graver, and Rina Kim, have accounted for these narrative contradictions by claiming that *Ill Seen Ill Said* recounts an experience of mourning. Feelings associated with grief and loss are certainly present in the text. But even the most direct indications that the narrator might be mourning the woman are pervaded with contradiction, ambiguity, and doubt in excess of this explanation: 'If only she could be pure figment. Unalloyed. This old so dying woman. So dead. In the madhouse of the skull and nowhere else' (53). Piette, the most persuasive of these readers, suggests that, in this passage, the 'narrative voice yearns for the end of human presence in his subject, the old so dying woman' ('Reading the Subject,' 320). 'If only' expresses some kind of yearning, but part of the strangeness of this writing is the ambiguity about *what* is being yearned for. Because of the underdetermined relationships between the sentences, 'so dead' might be a continuation of the narrator's expressed wish, but it might also be a description of the woman's present state. 'If only she could be pure figment' consequently might be a wish to loosen libidinal attachment to a lost object (Piette's reading), or it might be a desire for the woman to be 'So dead' (perhaps glossed as 'In the madhouse of the skull and nowhere else'). The movement from 'old so dying' to 'So dead' might be the narrator coming to terms with the fact of her death, or it might be a proleptic recognition that she is dying and therefore one day will be dead. 'So' might even be an intensifier, suggesting - in concert with other moments in the narrative - that the woman has lived an inhumanly prolonged life, and is dying in an equally prolonged way. Mourning, even when most visibly present, is only one of several possible narrative interpretations being simultaneously mobilised by this text. The passage is emblematic of the degree to which *Ill Seen Ill Said* eludes narrative reading, and illustrates how such accounts risk diminishing just how strange and troubling this work is.

4.

As readers and critics encountering this elusive fiction, we might feel obliged to resolve the diegetic contradictions and commit to a single narrative interpretation. But such a commitment requires ignoring or passing over significant dimensions of the text. Instead, we should recognise that *Ill Seen Ill Said* admits of no single definitive diegetic description. We might think of Henry James's *The Turn of the Screw* (1898) as a precedent: readers can (and have) argued that Peter Quint 'really' haunts the governess or that she only imagines he does, but registering the narrative undecidability allows for a more accurate account of the text - and the affects of uncertainty it produces.[5] Rather than describing the narrator of *Ill Seen Ill Said* as perceiving, recalling, or making up the narrative world, we should respond to how the text troubles these categories of experience and their function in enabling us to make sense of narratives. Such an account gets us closer to an important aspect of the experience of reading this work - the effort of constantly reassessing what kind of fiction this is, and the frustration of that epistemological desire. Derek Attridge, referring to Jacques Derrida's and J. Hillis Miller's ideas about the 'secrecy' of literature, suggests that '*no* work of art reveals everything we might want to know, precisely because its secrets have no depth to which we could penetrate in pursuit of that knowledge […]. Every work is a knowing work, every work smiles enigmatically, because there is no way we, or it, can satisfy the thirst for knowledge that it generates' (*The Work of Literature*, 257). Though this seems intuitively right, the epistemological (but also semantic and affective) desire that *Ill Seen Ill Said* gives rise to is more acute - and more conspicuous - than almost any other literary work.

H. Porter Abbott has discussed the peculiar epistemological resistance of Beckett's fiction in a penetrating recent study, *Real Mysteries: Narrative and the Unknowable*, which explores what Abbott calls 'textually induced experiences of noncomprehension' (65). Abbott suggests that 'syntactical and narrative impossibility […] lets us know through experience, rather than through abstract discourse or representation, one way in which our minds need "to make sense" of a represented world' (65). The structuring opposition here is part of Abbott's ambition 'to develop

[5] See H. Porter Abbott's brief discussion of the controversy surrounding Edmund Wilson's reading of *The Turn of the Screw* in *Real Mysteries* (98-102).

the distinction between a literature of representation and a literature of experience' (45). This distinction needs to be nuanced: reading any literary text is an experience, and even the barest works minimally represent, however provisional and unstable that representation might be; it would be more accurate to say that certain texts (like Nabokov's and Beckett's) challenge, and so make readers especially self-conscious of, their experiences of sense-making. Nonetheless, the value of Abbott's central insight is illustrated by his short but insightful reading (89-90) of a sentence from *Ill Seen Ill Said* - 'Weeping over as weeping will see now the buttonhook larger than life' (52) - which centres on the ambiguous address of the imperative 'see now.' Given the brevity of his discussion, it is perhaps understandable that Abbott does not discuss the consequences of the undecidable narrative here, but it is telling that he makes no comment about the uncertainty as to who is weeping and why. Though he is acutely attentive to the multiple modalities through which 'noncomprehension' can be generated, Abbott's sense of noncomprehension as specifically '*cognitive* failure' (12, emphasis added) stops short of capturing what is so troubling about the palpable epistemological resistance of Beckett's writing. As Sianne Ngai indicates in her description of what she calls 'affective disorientation,' noncomprehension can also be intensely affective:

> affective disorientation […]—what we might think of as a state of feeling vaguely 'unsettled' or 'confused,' or, more precisely, a meta-feeling in which one feels confused about *what* one is feeling. This is 'confusion' in the affective sense of bewilderment, rather than the epistemological sense of indeterminacy. Despite its marginality to the philosophical canon of emotions, isn't this feeling of confusion *about* what one is feeling an affective state in its own right? (14)

Ngai perceptively draws out the ways in which not knowing (and specifically not knowing how one feels) can be felt as much as thought, though we might want to question her strong differentiation between 'the affective sense of bewilderment' and 'the epistemological sense of indeterminacy'; it is precisely the indeterminacy of *Ill Seen Ill Said*'s narrative which makes it so affectively disorientating to read.

Consider the complex and unsettling movements between the seventh, eighth, and ninth paragraphs of the text, which it is necessary to quote at length:

> she could be seen crossing the threshold both ways and closing the door behind her. Then a time when within her walls she did not appear. A long time. But little by little she began to appear. Within her walls. Darkly. Time truth to tell still current. Though she within them no more. This long time.
> ||
> Yes within her walls so far at the window only. At one or the other window. Rapt before the sky. And only half seen so far a pallet and a ghostly chair. Ill half seen. And how in her faint comings and goings she suddenly stops dead. And how hard set to rise up from off her knees. But there too little by little she begins to appear more plain. Within her walls. As well as other objects. Such as under her pillow – such as deep in some recess this still shadowy album. Perhaps in time be by her when she takes it on her knees. See the old fingers fumble through the pages. And what scenes they can possibly be that draw the head down lower still and hold it in thrall. In the meantime who knows no more than withered flowers. No more!
> ||
> But quick seize her where she is best to be seized. In the pastures far from shelter. (49-50)

The first quoted paragraph intimates more strongly than usual that the woman has long been dead, though it leaves room for the possibility that she has only vacated her cabin. With the movement to the present tense in the second paragraph, the uncertainty about whether the woman has reappeared on the scene or if the narrator has returned to a past time when she was alive is conspicuously raised and sustained. Much of the passage's tone, vocabulary, and implication are consonant with a narrative of mourning: note the woman's indeterminate presence and 'faint comings and goings'; the way 'she suddenly stops dead,' as though we might be witnessing her passing; the spectral 'ghostly chair' and funereal 'withered flowers'; and, above all, the ambiguous exclamation of 'No more!' Yet there is also a pronounced eroticism to the broken articulation ('Such as under her pillow - such as'), the speculation about her 'thrall,' and the sexually suggestive 'deep in some recess' and 'she takes it on her knees.' This eroticism is made all the more troubling by 'in time be by her,' with its menacing suggestion that the narrator might be capable of physically inhabiting the cabin. The heightened sense of uncertainty about whether the narrator is watching the cabin or remembering a deceased woman reaches something of a climax or crisis in the opening of the third paragraph: 'But quick seize her where she is best to be seized.' Without knowing what kind of narrative this is, we cannot know whether this 'seizing' is rapacious voyeurism or a heartfelt compulsion to remember the dead. And, where one might provoke revulsion and the other compassion, mobilising both together

denies the reader any consistent or easily defined feeling. The possibility that we might unwittingly recoil from an act of mourning or sympathise with rapacious desire only intensifies the ethical anxieties bound up with this uncertainty. The close connections between the ethical, the epistemological, and the affective are dramatically brought into relief by the imperative form of 'Quick seize her,' which seems to urgently demand our participation in something we neither know nor know our own feelings about. *Contra* Ngai, the epistemological indeterminacy of this passage is inextricable from its disorientating effect.

The feelings of discomfort generated by the sustained uncertainty about whether the woman is living or dead reach an acute pitch in perhaps the most erotically charged description of Beckett's text:

> Panic past pass on. The hands. Seen from above. They rest on the pubis intertwined. Strident white. Their faintly leaden tinge killed by the black ground. Suspicion of lace at the wrists. To go with the frill. They tighten then loosen their clasp. Slow systole diastole. And the body that scandal. While its sole hands in view. On its sole pubis. Dead still to be sure. On the chair. After the spectacle. Slowly its spell unbinding. On and on they keep. Tightening and loosening their clasp. Rhythm of a labouring heart. Till when almost despaired of gently part. Suddenly gently. Spreading rise and in midair palms uppermost come to rest. Behold our hollows. Then after a moment as if to hide the lines fall back pronating as they go and light flat on head of thighs. Within an ace of the crotch. It is now the left hand lacks its third finger. A swelling no doubt – a swelling no doubt of the knuckle between first and second phalanges preventing one panic day withdrawal of the ring. The kind called keeper. Still as stones they defy as stones do the eye. Do they as much as feel the clad flesh? Does the clad flesh feel them? Will they then never quiver? (60)

The diegetic ambiguity is made particularly troubling by the pronounced eroticism of the passage, with its emphasis on the woman's crotch and its proximity to her hands, the description of her body as a 'scandal' and her movements as a 'spectacle,' the sexually suggestive verbs of 'tightening,' 'loosening,' 'spreading,' and 'swelling,' and the note of agitation in the self-interruptions ('A swelling no doubt - a swelling no doubt'). Again, without knowing what kind of narrative this is, we cannot know whether this is a scene of voyeurism, erotic reminiscence, or sexual fantasy. The discomfort caused by this indeterminacy is intensified by 'Dead still,' which, exploiting the polysemy of 'still,' might describe the woman as motionless but living or confirm that she remains dead, an indeterminacy brought into sharp relief by the affirmation

'to be sure.' The making strange of this familiar idiom illustrates just how far we are from the idea espoused by Eagleton that 'Beckett wanted to purge words of their meanings' (8); rather, we might think of Michael Wood's description of Nabokov as 'a writer who cannot hear a word as saying only one thing if there is a chance that it can be got to say more, by whatever contortions of tongue or syntax,' giving us 'a language haunted by meanings far in excess of the one in front of us' (*The Magician's Doubts*, 211).[6] The equivocal 'Dead still' colours the several narrative possibilities which are simultaneously kept in play: if the woman is being watched, the narrator's exacting scrutiny of each movement takes on a sinister and menacing implication; if she is being remembered, the attention to her body, though disconcerting, gains a certain pathos from the urgency and ardency with which every detail is recollected; and if she is a figment of the narrator's imagination, the ambiguity about whether she is living or dead adds a perverse edge to the erotic fantasy. The disparate ethical associations of voyeurism, grief, and necrophilia only deepen the conflicting responses these readings mobilise. By sustaining each of these possibilities, the passage gives rise to intense uncertainties, not only about the narrator's feelings about the woman, but also about the *reader's* feelings about the narrator. Which is to say that the profoundly disorientating character of this writing emanates from complex relationships between knowing and feeling.

As these examples illustrate, the acute epistemological difficulties and desires that *Ill Seen Ill Said* generates are complexly bound up with the central impetus of the narration, which is intensely preoccupied by the figure of the old woman. Two seemingly antithetical impulses dominate the text: on the one hand, the narration manifests a fervent desire to know the woman's thoughts and feelings; on the other, there is a sense in which the narrator seems to be haunted, even tormented, by his inability not to want to know or imagine her experience (not unlike the way that Van is terrorised by his memories of Ada). Though apparently at odds, these dispositions are intricately interwoven, the frustrations of the desire to know giving way to repudiations of the old woman, and the repudiations in turn giving rise to renewed epistemic desires. For the sake of clarity, however, the following section will examine

[6] The polysemy of 'still' is exploited in many of Beckett's late prose works, including *How It Is*, *Company*, *Worstward Ho*, and *Stirrings Still*.

the drive to know the woman's feelings, before turning to the frustration and repudiation of that impulse that dominates the latter parts of the text.

5.

The degree to which *Ill Seen Ill Said* involves and implicates readers in the narrator's efforts to know what the woman thinks and feels can be seen in the fifth paragraph, which redirects attention to the woman after three paragraphs describing the cabin's setting:

> She is drawn to a certain spot. At times. There stands a stone. It it is draws her. […] With herself she has no more converse. Never had much. Now none. As had she the misfortune to be still of this world. But when the stone draws then to her feet the prayer, Take her. Especially at night when the skies are clear. With moon or without. They take her and halt her before it. There she too as if of stone. But black. Sometimes in the light of the moon. Mostly of the stars alone. Does she envy it? (48)

The slow accumulation of simple statements in the opening sentences give the impression that the narrator is trying to work out what motivates the woman: she is drawn to a spot, on the spot stands a stone, therefore it is the stone which draws her there. The narrator seems to guess, rather than know, what she is thinking; an omniscient narrator might more simply say, 'She is drawn to a spot on which a stone stands.' The assertions of the subsequent sentences seem more confident, but then we arrive at the obscure question at the close of the paragraph: 'Does she envy it?' What does the narrator suppose the woman envies? The reader must consider the nouns of the preceding sentences ('the stars' and 'the light of the moon') before presumably concluding that the pronoun 'it' likely refers to the stone - in turn raising the question of why the narrator would make such a peculiar conjecture. Returning to the passage again, that the woman has 'misfortune to be still of this world' intimates that what is enviable about the stone is its lifelessness, a strange sentiment that seems to tell us more about the narrator's feelings than the old woman's. The suspicion that the narrator might be projecting his own feelings onto the woman brings into relief how the interpretative resistance of the sentence involves readers in pursuing a similar process of speculating about the narrator's experience in order to make sense of the

pronoun, raising the possibility that our readings might be similarly compromised by our own affective dispositions. This is a particularly direct example of the more general way that the indeterminate narrative of *Ill Seen Ill Said*, by not allowing us to settle on a single interpretation, troubles the reader's ability to apprehend the emotions implied by a given passage, and so gives rise to a hermeneutic (and affective) anxiety about whether these emotions have their basis in the text or our own feelings and desires. We might have similar doubts about our perceptions of Molly Bloom's feelings or Clarissa Dalloway's, but Beckett's text escalates and foregrounds such anxieties to an unusual degree. The above quotation illustrates the extent to which to try to make sense of *Ill Seen Ill Said* is to try to comprehend the narrator's thoughts and feelings, an activity which obviously parallels the narrator's speculations about the woman's experience.

In *Human, All Too Human*, Friedrich Nietzsche articulates a deep scepticism about the degree to which people can understand the feelings of others through a suggestive comparison between the fictional characters of art and the apprehension of living people:

> When we say the dramatist (and the artist in general) actually *creates* characters, this is a nice piece of deception and exaggeration in the existence and dissemination of which art celebrates one of its unintentional and as it were superfluous triumphs. In reality we understand very little of an actual living person and generalize very superficially when we attribute to him this or that character: well, the poet adopts the same *very imperfect* posture towards man as we do, in that his sketches of men are just as *superficial* as is our knowledge of men. […] The invented human being, the phantasm, desires to signify something necessary, but only in the eyes of those who comprehend even an actual human being only in a crude, unnatural simplification […]. [People] are thus quite ready to treat phantasms as actual, necessary human beings because they are accustomed when dealing with actual human beings to take a phantasm, a silhouette, an arbitrary abridgement for the whole. […] Art begins from the natural *ignorance* of mankind as to his interior (both bodily and as regards character) […]. (84-5)

Nietzsche upends the notion of psychological realism, claiming that people find the characters of art lifelike not because they are so richly depicted, but because our knowledge of living persons is so impoverished. In a different idiom but complementary vein, John Frow has also questioned the categorical priority we tend to give to persons over characters, arguing that critics should 'understand persons not

as ontological givens but as constructs, which are in part made out of the same materials as fictional characters' (vii). Frow goes on to suggest that, when reading fiction, 'the question of the ontological status of fictive entities is largely irrelevant to our ability and willingness to interact with them *as though* they were persons like ourselves' (44). These accounts have a close bearing on our discussion of *Ill Seen Ill Said* in two respects. Firstly, the existential uncertainty surrounding the old woman *should* discourage us from treating her as though she were a person; the fact that we continue to do so (as numerous critical responses testify to) illustrates just how willing readers are to overlook the fictive status of characters in our engagements with them. Secondly, the old woman is so radically enigmatic as to raise the question of whether her 'character' - in Bernard Williams's sense of a 'pattern of interests, desires, and projects' (*Moral Luck*, 11) - is being perceived or *created* by the narrator. (This question becomes even more complex with respect to the reader's apprehension of the enigmatic narrator, who we know has no existence beyond the event of reading.) The figure of the old woman profoundly resists the primary means through which we try to understand what a character - and a person - thinks and feels: by interpreting their speech, actions, and facial expressions.

Given the linguistic nature of literary texts, a character's articulations are one of the most obvious ways that we come to 'know' how they experience the fictive world. The old woman seems be silent throughout *Ill Seen Ill Said*. There are two notable possible exceptions: an odd choice of verb in the opening paragraph (which I will discuss later), and the 'prayer' of the previously quoted passage:

> With herself she has no more converse. Never had much. Now none. As had she the misfortune to be still of this world. But when the stone draws then to her feet the prayer, Take her. Especially at night when the skies are clear. With moon or without. They take her and halt her before it. (48)

The passage is marked by two uncertainties which greatly complicate one another: is the woman's prayer thought or spoken, and what is it that she prays for? The contrast or qualification of 'But' might counter her lack of 'converse' with an instance of her addressing someone (or something) else, or it might compare her 'misfortune to be still of this world' with a prayer to be taken to God (or by death). This deeply depressive sentiment resembles many other sentiments expressed by the narrator;

assuming that this feeling is his rather than the old woman's, the prayer is presumably what he imagines she thinks and feels, rather than something she says aloud. Matters are complicated further, however, by the odd punctuation: the comma and upper-case suggest a quotation of speech or of thought in the form of what Cohn calls 'quoted monologue' (*Transparent Minds*, 98), yet the third-person pronoun and the absence of quotation marks indicate that the prayer is re-articulated by the narrator, perhaps in the manner of free indirect discourse. The echo of 'Take her' in 'They take her and halt her before it' introduces an alternative interpretation of the prayer, that she prays to be taken to the stone, in turn raising the possibility that 'to her feet' idiomatically describes her movements rather than her looking at her feet as she prays, the uncertainty about who or what might 'take' her (and in what way) becoming muddled with and compounding the uncertainty about the unknown addressee of the prayer. Even in a work as elusive as *Ill Seen Ill Said*, this prayer resists comprehension to an extraordinary degree. That the effort to understand the thought behind the narration is placed under severe strain at the same moment in which the woman may - or may not - articulate something not only raises the question of whether the narrator hears or imagines the prayer, but also whether any meaning or feeling can stably be inferred from such enigmatic language.

For most of the narrative, the narrator devotes his attention to the woman's movements and to making speculations about the motivations that might underlie them - speculations that invariably end in disavowal or doubt. The reasons for the woman's recurrent visits to the stone, for instance, ultimately remain obscure. Her actions are so inscrutable that the narrator questions whether any reasoning whatsoever lies behind them: 'Whither in her head while her feet stray thus? Hither and thither too? Or unswerving to the mirage? And where when she halts?' (61). 'Whither' means both 'where' and 'to what end,' capturing how this interest in her movements is impelled by a deeper interest about the nature of her desires. The possibility that she might be only 'straying' as her mind wanders elsewhere raises the prospect of there being no connection at all between her actions and intentions. The earliest use of 'stray' in the text is marked by a similar indecision: 'Here she who loves to – here she who now can only stray never strays' (46). The unfinished sentence, which presumably would have asserted that the woman loves to stray, is interrupted with the paradoxical claim that she can only, yet never does, stray. A later deliberation

about the woman's 'straying,' which draws on the word's animalistic associations, powerfully involves the reader in the narrator's equivocations about her agency (or lack thereof):

> One evening she was followed by a lamb. Reared for slaughter like the others it left them to follow her. […] Slaughter apart it is not like the others. […] Rather than walk it seems to glide like a toy in tow. It halts at the same instant as she. At the same instant as she strays on. (63)

There is a subtle tension between the mobilised cultural connotations of lambs as highly passive creatures and the grammatical agency of the lamb in these clauses. This grammatical agency is surprisingly maintained in the deceptively intricate final sentence, which exploits what Abbott calls 'garden-path' syntax (67). Initially, 'she' seems to be the agent of 'strays,' yet the sentence apparently finishes prematurely, with the comparison established by 'At the same instant' going unfulfilled. Only on re-reading do we realise that 'she' is the end of a subordinate clause and 'strays' the beginning of a main one, and mentally restore the implied but missing comma, pronoun, and verb: 'At the same instant as she does, it strays on.' By inducing us to read the woman as the agent of an action only to expose this as a misattribution, the sentence involves readers in the dynamic of assertion and doubt which characterises the narration, cautioning us not to infer intentions from the woman's movements - and even movements as aimless and weakly intentional as 'straying.'

The narrator's preoccupation with the woman's feelings concentrates most intensely on her face, and the possibility of reading some emotion there: 'Wooed from below the face consents at last. […] The lids occult the longed-for eyes. Time will tell them washen blue. Where tears perhaps not for nothing. Unimaginable tears of old' (56). The romantic suggestion of 'Wooed' takes on a more uncomfortably sexualised character with the implied overcome resistance of 'consents at last' and the more invasive desire to uncover the 'longed-for eyes.' The sense of the intrusiveness of the narrator is heightened by the odd assertion of narratorial authority in 'Time will tell them washen blue,' the proverbial implication of 'time will tell' - that something will only be revealed in the future - countermanded by an assertion about the colour of the woman's eyes which does in fact come to pass, when they are later described as 'washen blue' (65). The reader is disconcertingly subjected to a cognate narratorial

manipulation in the movement between the last two sentences, which direct us to imagine tears only to declare them 'Unimaginable,' implicating us in the narrator's propensity to imagine signs of emotion where there might be none. The uncertainty about whether or not the woman's face expresses any emotion builds over the course of the text: 'The thin lips seem as if never again to part. […] Impressive above all the corners imperceptibly upcurved. A smile? Is it possible? […] Off again to the dark. There to smile on. If smile is what it is' (71). The conflicting implications of 'impressive' ('making a deep impression on the mind or senses' [*OED*]) and 'imperceptible' (something which 'cannot be perceived or discerned' [*OED*]) raise the question of whether the narrator perceives or imagines the smile, and leaves it acutely unresolved.

The need to know the woman's emotions, and the attendant anxieties of misreading, reach a fever pitch at the narrative's close. But such doubts are in fact present from the opening paragraph, which contains some of the most apparently confident and straightforward description found in the text: 'From where she lies when the skies are clear she sees Venus rise followed by the sun. Then she rails at the source of all life. […] She sits on erect and rigid in the deepening gloom. Such helplessness to move she cannot help' (45). To rail is to complain vehemently, an act conspicuously at odds with the later observation about the woman's lack of 'converse' with herself or others and her silence through most - and possibly all - of the narrative. Even were this railing to be interpreted as a solely mental activity, the connotations of high passion remain humorously dissonant with her absolute immobility. Together with the aversion to life expressed later in the paragraph ('as had she the misfortune to be still of this world'), we are pushed to ask whether this hostility to the sun is the woman's or the narrator's. Her unresponsiveness and 'helplessness to move' even raise the question of whether she *does* see Venus rise, as opposed to simply sitting motionless in her chair. The very tenuousness of the narrator's attributions brings into sharp relief his desire to know the woman's feelings and the frustration of that desire - and this can, of course, only be apprehended by a reader possessed of a cognate desire to know what the narrator is thinking and feeling. *Ill Seen Ill Said* persistently troubles and interferes with the assumption that fictional characters are 'persons like ourselves,' and in so doing, pushes readers to question and worry about what can be known or imagined about the feelings of others.

6.

Ill Seen Ill Said both stages and gives rise to an intense and frustrated desire to know another person's thoughts and feelings, but it is also marked by a correspondingly intense need to be free of that desire:

> Not possible any longer except as figment. Not endurable. Nothing for it but to close the eye for good and see her. Her and the rest. Close it for good and all and see her to death. Unremittent. In the shack. Over the stones. In the pastures. The haze. At the tomb. And back. And the rest. For good and all. To death. Be shut of it all. On to the next. Next figment. Close it for good this filthy eye of flesh. What forbids? Careful. (59)

The accumulation of phrases signifying some surpassed limit or extremity ('Not possible,' 'Not endurable,' 'Nothing for it') suggest the urgency of the narrator's desire to be done with the woman, a desire 'What forbids?' indicates is doomed to frustration. It is moments such as this that have led some critics to interpret the text as an experience of mourning; I have already demonstrated that the narrative exceeds such a definitive account, and this passage is no exception. 'At the tomb,' for instance, might describe the narrator at the woman's tomb, or the woman at the tomb of another, or both, or neither (the sentence merely describing the location of 'The haze'). Likewise, 'see her to death' might be a confrontation with the fact of her death, or a commitment to staying with her until she dies, or even signal that the act of seeing precipitates her death; by mobilising each of these possibilities, the narration engenders deeply conflicting emotional responses. Nonetheless, Sigmund Freud's theory of mourning, alongside Tammy Clewell's recent revisionist interpretation (in 'Mourning Beyond Melancholia: Freud's Psychoanalysis of Loss'), can get us closer to the acute longing to forget the woman which haunts Beckett's text.

In 'Mourning and 'Melancholia,' Freud describes mourning as a process of relinquishing attachments to a lost object and transferring libidinal investments onto a substitute: 'Just as mourning impels the ego to renounce the object by declaring its death, and offers the ego the reward of staying alive, each individual battle of ambivalence loosens the fixation of the libido upon the object by devaluing, disparaging and, so to speak, even killing it' (*On Murder, Mourning and Melancholia*, 217). Part of the uncanniness of this theory is the premise that the mourner, despite

knowing that someone is dead, continues to feel about them as though they were still alive, thus creating a need for violent repudiation. But the murderous brutality Freud invokes tacitly implies that mourning might be more fraught than his theory of replacing one desired object with another allows. Clewell notes this tension and puts pressure on the concept of substitution, showing that Freud's premise that 'the people we love are imminently replaceable' (46) is incompatible with the revised picture of subjectivity he advances in 'Ego and the Id.' In a creative revisionist reading, Clewell claims that, for this later Freud, mourning would be conceived as a potentially 'interminable labour. […] [A]mbivalence in Freud's work thus names a uniquely human predicament: the predicament of being inhabited by otherness as a condition of one's own subjectivity. […] [It] counsels us, then, to relinquish the wish for a strict identity unencumbered by the claims of the lost other or the past' (61, 65).[7] Clewell draws out the most wide-reaching implication of Freud's notion that the mourner must loosen her attachment to the lost object - that the 'persons' to whom we attach feelings in some sense exist apart from their living selves - and qualifies this with the claim that some attachments cannot be relinquished. The sense of people being inhabited by those for whom they have intense feelings is mobilised in each of the works examined in this thesis: in *Ada or Ardor*, Van is possessed and haunted by his memories of Ada; as we will see, the narrative climax of *Ancient Light* revolves around the revelation that the woman who is so vital in the narrator's emotional life has been dead for many years; and in *Waiting for the Barbarians*, I will show how the narrator's intense uncertainties about a young woman's feelings become inseparable from his own feelings about himself. *Ill Seen Ill Said* also resonates with this image of being inhabited by otherness, though in a rather different way to these other works, with the narrator's desire to repudiate the old woman being expressed through a deranging of the near-dead metaphor of thoughts and feelings being 'inside' the mind (or heart).

This derangement is in evidence in a passage I partially quoted earlier:

> Already all confusion. […] Despite precautions. If only she could be pure figment. Unalloyed. This old so dying woman. So dead. In the madhouse of the skull and nowhere else. Where no more precautions to be taken. No

[7] In *Strangers to Ourselves* (182-192), Julia Kristeva arrives at a similar idea - that subjectivity contains a 'strangeness,' 'foreignness,' or 'otherness' - via a reading of Freud's essay on the uncanny.

> precautions possible. Cooped up there with the rest. Hovel and stones. The lot. And the eye. How simple all then. If only all could be pure figment. (53)

There is much one might say about this passage, but I particularly want to concentrate on the peculiar semantic instability of 'In the madhouse of the skull.' At first, this appears to be a relatively straightforward metaphor for the narrator's mind. 'Cooped up with the rest' employs another verb of enclosure, resuming the list of things 'In' the mind and nowhere else (though whether this is a desired or actual state of affairs remains unclear). 'Hovel and stones' suggests that 'the rest' refers to the contents of the narrative world, including the old woman. But the inclusion of 'the eye' in this list deranges the metaphoricity of the figure, confusingly collating and conflating the synecdoche for the narrator's self (itself of undeterminable metaphoricity) and the world of the old woman, not only suggesting that the narrator fails to separate himself from the subjects of his intense preoccupation, but also preventing the reader from conceptually separating the two as being, within the fiction, either literal or metaphorical. We might think of Paul de Man's claim, which I discussed in the introduction, that literature is essentially characterised by the undecidability of literal and figural meaning; the reiteration that 'precautions' have failed adds to the sense that this confusion is intractable. The ineradicable presence of the woman is similarly suggested through the characteristic slippage between 'If only *she* could be figment' and 'If only *all* could be pure figment.' Such shifts between the woman and 'all,' and vice versa, occur throughout the text: 'Let her vanish. And the rest. For good. And the sun. […] Nothing left but black sky' (60); 'finish with it all at last. With her and her rags of sky and earth' (73). Not unlike Van's inability to separate his desire for Ada and his perceptions of her, the narrator of *Ill Seen Ill Said* seems unable to extricate the woman from his thoughts and feelings about the world (and, indeed, about anything at all).

This points to a significant divergence between Nietzsche's account in *Human, All Too Human* and the implications of Beckett's text. Though both mobilise a deep epistemological scepticism, in *Ill Seen Ill Said* the impossibility of knowing the feelings of another person does not mean that one is any less susceptible to being affected by one's experiences of and attachments to them. As Christopher Bollas points out in his reading of Nietzsche's *Ecce Homo*, there is something misanthropically reassuring about feeling immune from being affected (or infected) by others:

> [Nietzsche] defines quite precisely the unconscious idealization of the self as an empty, and therefore pure, container. 'I possess a perfectly uncanny sensitivity of the instinct for cleanliness' he writes, adding that this instinct has given him a sense of smell for the unclean 'innermost parts, the "entrails," of every soul' which are the cause of his 'disgust.' No doubt in such moments he would have to vomit up these noxious internal objects in order to maintain his sense of inner purity […]. (204)

Bollas registers the curious ambivalence of Nietzsche's writing: on the one hand, probing souls sounds very deliberate, and, like the passage from *Human, All Too Human*, suggests a clear distance and demarcation between self and other; on the other, smell is the most involuntary of the senses, involving something from the outside entering the body.

Such imagery of bodily contamination is exploited in a similar way in *Ill Seen Ill Said* in the evocation of the narrator's desire to rid himself of his preoccupation with the old woman:

> Alone night fallen she makes for home. Home! As straight as were it to be seen.
> ||
> Was it ever over and done with questions? Dead the whole brood no sooner hatched. Long before. In the egg. Long before. Over and done with answering. With not being able. With not being able not to want to know. With not being able. No. Never. A dream. Question answered.
> ||
> What remains for the eye exposed to such conditions? To such vicissitude of hardly there and wholly gone. Why none but to open no more. Till all done. She done. Or left undone. Tenement and unreason. No more unless to rest. In the outward and so-called visible. That daub. Quick again to the brim the old nausea and shut again. On her. Till she be whole. Or abort. Question answered. (64)

Given that the old woman is the subject of the first and third quoted paragraphs, we deduce that the questions the narrator is unable either to answer or to 'not to want to know' concern her. These unanswerable questions are characterised through images of stillbirth, vomiting, defecation, and abortion, very much resonating with Bollas's description of voiding a 'noxious internal object' (and, indeed, Julia Kristeva's description of abjection in *Powers of Horror*). Perhaps most repellent is the non-mammalian implication of 'brood,' 'hatched,' and 'egg,' with its suggestion of a body being impregnated with something inhuman and dead. Mobilising affects of revulsion

and disgust, the passage not only vividly evokes the intensity of the narrator's need to be free of this epistemological desire, but also enjoins readers to share in these repudiative feelings.

7.

This chapter has argued that *Ill Seen Ill Said* at once engenders and seemingly represents intensely affective feelings of uncertainty. When reading most of the text, this apparent - and ultimately unverifiable - experiential proximity remains close to the surface but unacknowledged, though we have discussed some moments when it becomes especially visible, for instance through the imperative form of 'Quick seize her.' This sense of sharing the narrator's feelings is greatly amplified and then starkly exposed in the arresting, disorientating movement between the penultimate paragraph and the extraordinary closing lines. Though no less enigmatic than many other passages of *Ill Seen Ill Said*, the penultimate paragraph is more affectively stable than most:

> Absence supreme good and yet. Illumination then go again and on return no more trace. On earth's face. Of what was never. And if by mishap some left then go again. For good again. So on. Till no more trace. On earth's face. Instead of always the same place. Slaving away forever in the same place. At this and that trace. And what if the eye could not? No more tear itself away from the remains of trace. Of what was never. Quick say it suddenly can and farewell say say farewell. If only to the face. Of her tenacious trace. (77)

The global indeterminacy about whether the narrative world is observed, recalled, or made up by the narrator is very much sustained, whilst the mobile reference of 'trace' gives us a particularly striking instance of the muddling and conflation of the old woman and the world. The narrative ambiguity is further highlighted by the gnomic 'Of what was never,' which might acknowledge the gap between the narrator's descriptions and the reality of the woman's interior life, or register the fictionality of the woman and the narrator. But despite the enigmatic narrative, the narrator's feelings seem easier to discern than usual here, oscillating between a poignant inability to relinquish someone who has been the focus of such intensely fraught emotion, and an anticipation of relief at the prospect of the burden of such conflicted thoughts and

feelings being alleviated. Moreover, the passage enjoins readers to share in this ambivalence, conspicuously foregrounding the fact that this hauntingly beautiful language - but also the incessant demand of striving and failing to make sense of it - will soon be brought to a close. This apparent proximity is vividly pointed up through the density of imperatives in 'Quick say it suddenly can and farewell say say farewell,' urging both narrator and reader to come to terms with the imminent end. Though as epistemologically recalcitrant as ever, the penultimate paragraph does offer readers a relatively stable affective orientation towards the dramatised close of the text.

The possibility of establishing a consistent way of thinking and feeling about the narration is put into utter disarray, however, by the tonal aberration of the final paragraph:

> Decision no sooner reached or rather long after than what is the wrong word? For the last time at last for to end yet again what the wrong word? Than revoked. No but slowly dispelled a little very little like the last wisps of day when the curtain closes. Of itself by slow millimetres or drawn by a phantom hand. Farewell to farewell. Then in that perfect dark foreknell darling sound pip for end begun. First last moment. Grant only enough remain to devour all. Moment by glutton moment. Sky earth the whole kit and boodle. Not another crumb of carrion left. Lick chops and basta. No. One moment more. One last. Grace to breathe that void. Know happiness. (77-78)

The narrated scene has disappeared almost entirely, the passage instead forcefully directing attention towards the act of narration. Yet the confused melange of solemnity, tenderness, religiosity, yearning, ferocity, humour, colloquialism and cliché concertedly disrupts any attempt to determine the narrator's feelings - and, in so doing, denies the reader any consistent or definable feeling about the narration.

The frantic note of the opening rhetorical questions gives way to the serene evocation of a closing curtain dispelling 'the last wisps of day,' the uncertainty about whether the curtain closes 'Of itself by slow millimetres or [is] drawn by a phantom hand' further rarefying this gentle, ethereal image. 'Farewell to farewell' adds a certain pathos, heightening the sense of the narrator lingering on each remaining moment, whilst also raising the paradoxical impossibility of announcing one's own absence. The sense of serenity builds with 'that perfect dark' and the religious solemnity of the nonce 'foreknell' (presumably a bell announcing an impending death), but the portentous tone is disconcertingly interrupted by the vernacular 'darling,' and the even

more incongruous 'pip' - a sound so humorously, indecorously unlike a tolling bell. 'First last moment' reinvokes and heightens the pathos of imminent ending, with a biblical resonance picking up with 'Grant only,' which sounds so like a supplication to God. But the predatory 'devour all' introduces a new register, the sense of the narrator relishing each 'glutton moment' oddly coloured by the imagery of carnivorous feeding. The tone is unsettled further by the colloquial 'kit and boodle,' a comically bathetic way of describing everything in the world, including sky and earth. With 'Not another crumb of carrion left,' the sinister, slightly repulsive imagery of consuming flesh returns, yet the rather domestic sounding 'crumb' sits oddly alongside the more feral 'carrion.' There is yet another tonal upheaval with the colloquial 'Lick chops and basta,' which piles one gustatory idiom upon another, building a slight air of absurdity which is suddenly and soberingly dissipated by 'No. One moment more. One last,' with its acute sense of each precious remaining moment, and the yet more ominous 'Grace to breathe that void.' The connotations of 'Grace,' of a divine benevolence towards humanity, are starkly in conflict with this desire to breathe the airless void (in effect, a desire to cease breathing), whilst the word's placement at the beginning of the sentence, like 'Grant only,' accentuates the sense of supplication - to God, but perhaps also to the reader. The discomforting feeling of being addressed by the narrator is only intensified by the final sentence, 'Know happiness,' which reads both as the narrator anticipating a longed-for end and as a wry direction to the reader now free of this disorientating narration. The closing paragraph of *Ill Seen Ill Said* rapidly conveys the reader through a bewildering succession of affective states, the imminent end in turn an occasion of solemnity, pity, ferocity, desire, humour, and even happiness, powerfully disturbing our sense of the significance (or otherwise) of this climactic moment of the text. Like *Ada*, *Ill Seen Ill Said* concludes with an ironic gesture towards the futility of its own cardinal impulse, bringing into relief the impossibility of simply 'knowing' the feelings represented and evoked by this profoundly enigmatic work.

John Banville's *Ancient Light*: Recollection and Disorientation

John Banville's novels are widely recognised for their distinctly philosophical character. The narrators and protagonists are invariably preoccupied by the nature of their experiences of the world, a preoccupation mirrored in the already substantial, and growing, field of Banville criticism. *Birchwood* (1973), the first novel Banville considers part of his mature oeuvre, emblematically begins: 'I am, therefore I think. That seems inescapable. In this lawless house I spend the nights poring over my memories, fingering them, like an impotent Casanova his love letters, sniffing the dusty scent of violets' (11). The conspicuous allusion to René Descartes's *cogito ergo sum* compels readers to consider the possible connections between the novel and the most famous philosophical enquiry about what can be known about oneself and the world through experience. Many critics have earnestly taken up this invitation, with epistemological issues having become the presiding concern of Banville scholarship.[1] Yet the passage, like so much of Banville's writing, is more puzzling than the allusion alone might suggest - not least because of its unsettled tone, suspended somewhere between pomposity and playfulness. How seriously should we take this allusion? Does recognising it reveal something about the text, or is the text toying with a desire for revelation? The philosophical tenor of the short declarative sentences swiftly gives way to the languorous, erotic, even masturbatory evocation of memory, strangely replete with clichés of romantic fiction. Though it pointedly raises epistemological questions, and encourages readers to perceive it in these terms, part of what is surprising and intriguing about the passage is its shifting focus between between *knowing* and *feeling*.

In this chapter, I suggest that part of the difficulty of writing about Banville's prose stems from the way that it pushes readers and critics to take up a conceptual lens that obscures its affective qualities. To meet this challenge, it is necessary to pay very close attention to how the reader's movement through a given passage is affected by the style of the writing - the semantic resonance of a word, the syntax of a clause, the mixing of sensory registers, and so on. Though critics have often acknowledged the importance of style to Banville's writing, linguistic particularity tends to be

[1] See, for example: Rüdiger Imhof, 62; Elke D'Hoker, 1-11; Joseph McMinn, 49; Brendan McNamee, 'A Rosy Crucifixion,' 67.

marginalised in the actual analyses of his novels.[2] I will show that a slower, more immersive, mode of close reading enables us to capture how Banville's novels powerfully place knowing and feeling into contact, both through their descriptions of experience and through the experiences these descriptions solicit from readers. The following section will consider the opening of *Doctor Copernicus* (1976), which has become a key reference point in critical accounts of Banville's writing. The epistemological emphasis of these accounts has led to the novel being treated more as a conceptual thesis than as a literary work; as a result, much of what is vital and fascinating about it has been missed. In the remainder of the chapter, I offer an extensive reading of Banville's intensely evocative and moving novel, *Ancient Light* (2012). Banville's oeuvre is characterised by a consistent preoccupation with a common set of concerns and tropes; my discussion therefore has significant implications for our understanding of many of Banville's other works.

1.

The opening of *Doctor Copernicus* has become something of a *locus classicus* for Banville criticism:

> At first it had no name. It was the thing itself, the vivid thing. It was his friend. On windy days it danced, demented, waving wild arms, or in the silence of evening drowsed and dreamed, swaying in the blue, the goldeny air. Even at night it did not go away. Wrapped in his truckle bed, he could hear it stirring darkly outside in the dark, all the long night long. There were others, nearer to him, more vivid still than this, they came and went, talking, but they were wholly familiar, almost a part of himself, while it, steadfast and aloof, belonged to the mysterious outside, to the wind and the weather and the goldeny blue air. It was a part of the world, and yet it was his friend.
> *Look, Nicolas, look! See the big tree!*
> Tree. That was its name. And also: the linden. They were nice words. He had known them a long time before he knew what they meant. They did not mean themselves, they were nothing in themselves, they meant the dancing singing thing outside. In wind, in silence, at night, in the changing air, it changed and yet was changelessly the tree, the linden tree. That was strange. (1)

[2] The limited attention to the style of Banville's works is all the more surprising given that many critics make implicit and explicit reference to the author's intentions, and Banville has repeatedly emphasised the importance he places on the composition of sentences (for example, see 'Interview with John Banville').

Rüdiger Imhof's early critical response to the passage in his 1989 monograph (subsequently revised in 1997) has been highly influential, and is worth quoting at length:

> Copernicus is first shown grappling with the same linguistic, but ultimately epistemological, problem as Stephen Dedalus, in *A Portrait of the Artist*: he, too, becomes aware that words are but arbitrary signs for things and ideas. […] The acquisition of language is a mixed blessing. The blessing is mixed since the things around us are robbed of their ontological purity and we of our epistemological innocence and certainty. […] It is when words interpose themselves that the essential quality of things gets lost. […] Without a name, that 'thing' which the child Koppernigk observes dancing outside the window of his room is still 'the thing itself, the vivid thing.' Through the act of its being given a name: 'the linden tree,' it is deprived of its whatness. Copernicus's way, as charted by Banville, is the way from the certainty as a child about 'the thing itself,' via a loss of that certainty as a result of the acquisition of language and the acquisition of the epistemological categories attached thereto, to a striving to regain the knowledge of the 'vivid thing.' (79-81)

The belief that the opening of *Doctor Copernicus* presents an epistemologically pure apprehension of the world later corrupted by language is a commonplace of Banville studies: for Joseph McMinn, the passage stages 'a pure, untarnished perception in which words are substituted for, but not confused with, things they symbolise' (49); for Ingo Berensmeyer, it represents 'an immediate access to reality' (133); for Derek Hand, it stages 'a fall from grace' as 'language becomes a barrier between the young boy and the reality he felt so close to' (75); for Elke D'Hoker, it is a 'primal scene of prelapsarian harmony' (22); and for John Kenny, it dramatises a 'pre-linguistic innocent perception of the world' (91). Though their interpretations differ in several respects, each of these critics, following Imhof, describes the beginning of the novel as presenting Nicolas simply and directly perceiving and knowing the world, prior to language placing this knowledge in crisis. This is a serious misreading which, in its neglect of the rhetorical qualities of Banville's writing, is symptomatic of the critical reception of his fiction.

The misunderstanding of this passage principally stems from a failure to consider the complexity of the narration, and specifically the role of focalisation. The above critics implicitly or explicitly recognise the presence of free indirect narration, which retains third-person pronominal reference but inflects a character's experience in the narratorial language, insofar as they account for the opening paragraph as a

representation of Nicolas's experience, despite there being only one perceptual verb ('hears'). This mode of narration has two significant variables: firstly, readers cannot always determine whether or not a given sentence *is* focalised; and secondly, even if a sentence is focalised, we cannot always determine whether the idiom is that of the character or the narrator.

The most obvious way in which focalisation is suggested in the opening of *Doctor Copernicus* is through the overtly anthropomorphic description of the tree: 'On windy days it danced, demented, waving wild arms, or in the silence of evening drowsed and dreamed.' We tend to think of dancing, being demented, and dreaming as specifically human, or at the very least as requiring a greater capacity for consciousness than trees possess. The suggestion that the tree is consciously choosing to move, rather than being blown by the wind, is strengthened by its grammatical agency in the sentence. We might initially interpret this anthropomorphism as a metaphorical description. But then we read, '[e]ven at night it did not go away,' the emphatic 'even' expressing *surprise* that the tree remains in one place. Most people possessing such a sophisticated vocabulary would know that trees are rooted to the ground and cannot move, but Nicolas seemingly doesn't, a belief which affects how he feels - in this instance, being a cause for surprise. (The connection between knowing and feeling is also raised thematically by the allusion to the biblical tree of knowledge, highlighted by the first sentence's inversion of 'In the beginning was the word' [John, 1:1].)

Focalisation is similarly registered through the two references to the tree being 'his friend'; friendship usually refers to relationships between people (or with animals at a stretch), whilst the suggestion of reciprocated affection further indicates that Nicolas imagines the tree experiencing the world much as he does. 'It was a part of the world, and yet it was his friend' only highlights the fact that 'friend' ultimately describes a relationship between people, rather than a person him- or herself (as the paradoxical concept of a friend-in-itself makes plain). Even the most direct sensory perception in the passage is shaped by Nicolas's feelings and imaginings: 'Wrapped in his truckle bed, he could hear it stirring darkly in the dark, all the long night long.' From the subtle sensory transition in Nicolas 'hearing' the tree 'in the dark,' readers infer that he hears something moving and *imagines* the tree stirring outside. Also note the implied agency of the verb 'stirring,' and how 'darkly' suggests Nicolas's

fascination with the tree and its movements, which he finds obscure and mysterious. Far from representing a direct perception and knowledge of the world, the passage richly evokes an experience in which beliefs, emotions, sensations, and imaginings are inextricably intertwined.[3]

That critics have treated the opening of *Doctor Copernicus* in excessively epistemological terms is not surprising, for it concertedly invites this kind of response. The portentously declarative opening sentences - 'At first it had no name. It was the thing itself, the vivid thing' - seem to be narratorial statements, and critics have straightforwardly interpreted them as such, claiming that Nicolas perceives 'the essential quality of things' (Imhof, 80). But, as we have already seen, the ensuing description does *not* present Nicolas grasping the essential quality of the tree, but rather evokes an experience in which his perceptions, emotions, imaginings, and (mistaken) beliefs are muddled together. This idea of Nicolas directly perceiving the world is in fact already troubled by the end of the second sentence, 'the vivid thing,' which (through the repetition of the definite article and 'thing' from the main clause) functions as a gloss or re-description. Yet vividness is not a property of objects but of experiences - specifically, experiences where something is 'distinctly perceived' or 'intensely felt' (*OED*). The later reference to the talking 'others' being 'more vivid still' further indicates that Nicolas does not perceive the tree with absolute clarity, but that he is strongly affected by it - and less so than by his family. That a vivid experience might have nothing to do with perceiving the essence of an object is illustrated by a sentence from Banville's recent novel, *The Blue Guitar* (2015): 'I was striving to take the world into myself and make it over, to make something new of it, something vivid and vital, and essence be hanged' (58).[4] Part of the reason the puzzling 'vivid' in the opening of *Doctor Copernicus* has been overlooked is because of the passage's philosophical tenor, with the notable Kantian echo of 'the thing itself' (which few

[3] We might think of Banville's description of the representation of consciousness in Henry James's late novels: 'That strange fuzzy sensation that we have, where we're not thinking words, we're not thinking in images, we're not thinking in feelings, but we're thinking a strange whipped-up egg white of all of these things. We seem to claw our way through this strange cloud of knowing, of barely knowing. Henry James came as close as anybody has come to what it is to be conscious, which is an incoherent state' ('John Banville: The Powells.com Interview').

[4] Given the influence of Imhof's interpretation, one wonders whether Banville is deliberately pushing back against critical readings of his earlier novels here.

critics fail to mention), and the conceptual idiom of 'names,' 'things,' and 'world.' But the *performative* effect of this abstract register is to delay the reader from comprehending what is being described, clarifying this only after we have been immersed in fervent emotions and imaginings, so that readers, like Nicolas, experience the tree vividly before knowing what it is (and even before possessing such elementary knowledge as its being rooted to the ground, let alone the more complex apprehension that the tree does not possess the capacity for conscious thought and feeling). The manner in which this writing pushes readers to account for it in epistemological terms is characteristic of Banville's prose, and illustrates the need to avoid falling back on a conceptualising mode of analysis, and to instead engage with the text as an event of reading, in which feeling plays a vital - and epistemologically disruptive - role.

The critical neglect of the literary qualities of Banville's fiction can be seen by briefly considering the central issue which has preoccupied previous readings of *Doctor Copernicus* - the representational efficacy (or inadequacy) of language. The beginning of the third paragraph ('Tree. That was its name') overtly suggests that the staging of a discovery of language is part of what is at stake in the passage. As I mentioned earlier, free indirect narration can create an uncertainty about whether a character's experience - which might be non-linguistic - is being described in their own idiom or that of the narrator. This evocation of a child's apprehension of the world prior to his learning language raises the question of *whose* language this is. The passage contains several short, grammatically simple sentences articulated in a simple and limited vocabulary ('darkly outside in the dark, all the long night long'), which seem to emulate a childlike cognition and diction - and, indeed, this is one way that we recognise the presence of focalisation. Yet other sentences are long, grammatically complex, and conceptually dense. Critics have repeatedly pointed out the resemblance between the opening of *Doctor Copernicus* and that of James Joyce's *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (1916), but have stopped short of examining what might be at stake in their similarities and differences. Kersti Tarien Powell, for instance, discusses this potential intertextuality at some length, but her observation that Banville has 'replaced the moocow with a more sophisticated concept of "the thing itself, the vivid thing"' (203) overlooks the crucial difference in idiom - that one is childish as the other is not. The tension between the affected simplicity and the descriptive complexity of the opening of Banville's novel draws attention to how Nicolas's experience is being described in

ways that blatantly exceed his comprehension. Upon closer inspection, even the short, simple sentences invoke concepts, such as 'dance' and 'friend,' which are difficult to imagine an infant grasping before he knows anything about language. The first sentence, 'At first it had no name,' has an equally problematic retrospective quality: Nicolas, not yet knowing what names are, presumably would not perceive the tree as lacking a name, and even the notion of a beginning is a concept retrospectively imposed upon experience in the process of transforming it into, or representing it as, a narrative. There is a sense in which the opening of *Doctor Copernicus* is a rich and fascinating failure, its paradoxes and elisions bringing into relief the conceptual excess of even the most basic words, and in doing so, raising the possibility that certain experiences, and perhaps all experience, might elude description.[5] That the narrative form of this widely-discussed passage speaks directly to critical concerns about language and representation, yet has received scant attention, demonstrates the need for more precise, more attentive, and more affective readings of Banville's novels.

The main reason that *Doctor Copernicus* has been so heavily discussed, aside from the fact that it has been in print long enough to have accrued a substantial body of scholarship, is that it raises a number of concerns which have persisted throughout the author's oeuvre - most notably, the preoccupation with representing phenomenal experience. However, the third-person form of this novel makes it significantly atypical of Banville's subsequent novels, most of which are first-person recollective memoirs narrated by a narrator-protagonist.[6] Recently, Banville has intriguingly claimed: 'The notion of the omniscient narrator has always seemed to me a con. […] I can't know anything of other people except what I see of them and hear of them,

[5] In this sense, the passage brings into relief the limitation of Dorrit Cohn's term for free indirect narration, 'narrated monologue,' 'monologue' being an unhelpfully linguistic way of conceiving a gamut of possible experiences a narration might represent, including non-articulated - and potentially non-articulable - feelings. Cohn initially suggests that narrated monologue 'reproduces verbatim the character's own mental language' (*Transparent Minds*, 14), only later to state that it leaves 'the relationship between words and thoughts latent' (103).

[6] *Doctor Copernicus* is predominantly third-person narration, though a first-person narrator takes over in the final section of the novel. *Kepler* (1981) is consistently narrated in the third person. As briefly discussed below, the narration of *Shroud* (2002) moves between its two main characters, Axel Vander and Cass Cleave, leaving it ultimately uncertain who narrates which sections. *The Infinities* (2009) is the most complex case, seemingly narrated by the Greek gods. Excepting the works written as 'Benjamin Black,' all of Banville's other novels to date are narrated in the first-person.

smell of them, taste of them, feel of them' ('John Banville on the Art of Writing'). One of the affordances of the first-person recollective form - which Banville's fiction consistently exploits - is the way that questions about the representation of an experience can be incorporated into the narration. As David James suggests, in Banville's fiction, '[i]nattention, uncertainty and their dissection via recollection become the source of dramatic action' ('Afterword,' *Modernist Afterlives*, 176). The narrators of Banville's memoir novels not only offer vividly realised evocations of the past, but also endlessly reflect upon their processes of recollecting and representing that past, a multifaceted engagement which escalates the critical challenge of writing about these works. This dimension of Banville's writing is especially prominent in *Ancient Light*.

2.

Ancient Light forms a loose trilogy with Banville's earlier novels, *Eclipse* (2000) and *Shroud* (2002). The narrator and main protagonist of *Eclipse* is the middle-aged actor, Alex Cleave. The novel begins shortly after Alex inexplicably 'corpses' on stage, precipitating a mental breakdown. He abandons his wife, Lydia, and moves into his late mother's house, where he relives memories of the past, befriends a strange man and his teenage daughter (both of whom may or may not exist), and is visited by ghostly apparitions, including that of his mentally fragile daughter, Cass. Towards the end of the novel, Lydia phones Alex and tells him that Cass has committed suicide. Cass is one of the central protagonists of *Shroud*, which details her affair with an elderly academic, Axel Vander, a character loosely based on Paul de Man and Louis Althusser. Vander initially appears to be the sole narrator, but later in the novel, the focalisation moves unstably between Vander and Cass, and refers to each of them using first-person pronouns, ultimately leaving readers uncertain about who narrates (and, within the fiction, writes) which sections of the text. *Shroud* ends shortly after Cass, discovering that she is pregnant, travels to Lerici, Italy (where Percy Bysshe Shelley drowned) and jumps from a cliff into the sea.

Alex Cleave returns as the narrator of *Ancient Light*, set ten years after Cass's death. After a decade-long hiatus in his acting career, Alex is invited to star in a film which plays out a thinly fictionalised version of the events of *Shroud*. Part of the dark

dramatic irony of the present-day narrative is Alex's apparent ignorance of the fact that he is playing the part of his dead daughter's lover. The shooting of the film is brought to a halt when the actress playing Cass, Dawn Davenport, attempts to commit suicide. Dawn and Alex travel together to Italy, but return home before they reach Lerici. The rather convoluted events of the present are dominated, however, by the story Alex recounts of his teenage affair with his best friend's mother, Celia Gray, when he was fifteen and she thirty-five. The plot follows the 'revelation' structure of most of Banville's novels, where the narrator's recollections of the past are profoundly altered by a discovery in the present. In *Ancient Light*, the agent of this revelation is Mrs Gray's daughter, Kitty, who has been tracked down by a private detective hired by Alex. Up to this point, Alex had believed that his affair with Mrs Gray was brought to an end when Kitty came upon the two lovers kissing, and told the rest of the village. Kitty reveals to Alex that she in fact only told her brother Billy - and, more devastatingly, that Mrs Gray was terminally ill throughout the summer of their affair, and died at the end of the year. As its narrative makes plain, *Ancient Light* is intensely concerned with the recollection of past experience and with experiences of recollecting and retelling the past. The novel is a moving and compelling exploration of the complex connections between what one knows and feels in the present and the past, and its central interest for readers lies in the recollected scenes (and the scenes of recollection), rather than the somewhat unconvincing present-day narrative.

The critical challenge presented by Banville's introspective narrators is particularly acute in *Ancient Light*. Alex's evocations of the past are punctuated by musings about the nature of memory, language, and desire, so much so that one can be left with the feeling that the novel has preempted and carried out its own interpretation, leaving the critic only with the task of synthesising the narrator's own insights. The self-consciousness of the narration, and the interpretative problems it raises, can be seen in the second paragraph of the novel, which I want to discuss in some detail. The passage seems to be about Mrs Gray, but swiftly digresses:

> What do I recall of her, here in these soft pale days at the lapsing of the year? Images from the far past crowd in my head and half the time I cannot tell whether they are memories or inventions. Not that there is much difference between the two, if indeed there is any difference at all. Some say that without realising it we make it all up as we go along, embroidering and embellishing, and I am inclined to credit it, for Madam Memory is a great and subtle

> dissembler. When I look back all is flux, without beginning and flowing towards no end, or none that I shall experience, except as a final full stop. The items of flotsam that I choose to salvage from the general wreckage—and what is a life but a gradual shipwreck?—may take on an aspect of inevitability when I put them on display in their glass showcases, but they are random; representative, perhaps, perhaps compellingly so, but random nonetheless. (3)

We might expect 'What do I recall of her' to be a rhetorical question which serves as a prompt for some recollections of Mrs Gray. But the subordinate clause, 'here in these soft pale days at the lapsing of the year,' elaborates not on Mrs Gray but on the circumstances in which Alex recollects, as is stressed by the use of two deictics in close succession ('*here* in *these* soft pale days'). There is an elegiac quality to the sentence, with its adjectives of fragility ('soft pale') and the closing sense of time passing, yet its grammar notably subordinates these feelings to the question about memory. Here we see on a small scale the strong epistemological drive of the narration, with the sentence raising, and encouraging readers to pursue, an enquiry about the relationship between the reality of the past and its recollection in the present. Holistically, the paragraph's declarations, rhetorical questions, and figurative characterisations suggest a firm scepticism about the mimetic potential of memory. In turn posing a question and proposing an answer, the narration seems to both open and close a conceptual problem. But if we register and, to some degree, resist this powerful pressure to resolve the passage in these terms, and pay close attention to its literary workings, a more equivocal and interesting picture emerges.

The paragraph simultaneously mobilises several competing and incongruous ways of thinking (and feeling) about memory. Consider, for instance, the fluctuations in implied agency. The first sentence very much presents Alex as consciously engaging in an act of recollection, but in the succeeding sentence, the 'images' which 'crowd' in his head are the grammatical subjects, a diminished agency stressed by his inability to distinguish between 'memories' and 'inventions.' The question of agency is complicated further by the introduction of the first-person plural pronoun: 'Some say that without realising it we make it all up as we go along, embroidering and embellishing.' Such subtle movements between individual persons and humanity at large, enacted through changes in pronouns, occur throughout the novel (and indeed throughout Banville's first-person fictions), most notably in passages where Alex appeals to human nature to explain his own experience, or vice versa. Though in this

sentence people are again the agents of recollection, the implication is not that 'we' intentionally embroider and embellish, but that we cannot do otherwise (an appeal through which Alex in some sense displaces responsibility for the fallibility of his own recollections). The nearly-dead pictorial and textural metaphors of 'embellishing' and 'embroidering' figuratively characterise memories as artworks, manufactured representations rather than stable records of the past. This suggestion is both extended and profoundly subverted in the extraordinarily conflicted final sentence of the paragraph:

> The items of flotsam that I choose to salvage from the general wreckage—and what is a life but a gradual shipwreck?—may take on an aspect of inevitability when I put them on display in their glass showcases, but they are random; representative, perhaps, perhaps compellingly so, but random nonetheless.

I will discuss the closing statement about the randomness of memory later; for the moment, I want to focus on the sentence's figurative characterisations of memory. Salvaging from wreckage - recovering, or recovering from, a loss - has grave, even tragic-heroic, connotations of desperate necessity tonally at odds with the narcissism and triviality of creating, collecting, and curating one's past in the manner of an artwork. The suggestion that there is something conceited or self-regarding about introspection is amplified by the textually excessive 'I put them on display' (rather than the less wordy, 'I display them'). But the use of 'display' as a noun, rather than a verb, also sharpens the underlying figurative representation of memories as 'items,' or material objects. To compare memories to salvaged objects in glass showcases is to present them as directly recovered from life; damaged by time yet conserved from further damage; discrete; stable; fixed; untouchable, yet transparently visible to introspection. This rhetorical characterisation is, of course, wildly inconsistent with the belief, which Alex credits, that we make up the past, and that there is little or no difference between memory and invention.

These multiple, inconsonant representations of memory raise a literary critical issue briefly discussed in the introduction to this thesis: how should we respond to narratorial assertions on the one hand, and figurative language on the other, especially when their implications seem to conflict? As the discussion of *Doctor Copernicus* demonstrates, it is vital that we avoid treating highly evocative language as

straightforward statement. By contrast with the above-cited critics, in the chapter on Nabokov, we encountered the strikingly different approach taken by Martin Hägglund. In a complimentary review of *Dying for Time*, Adam Kelly claims that: 'Occluded but identifiable here is something like a revisionary theory of literary realism, where the synthesis offered by the narrator or subject of a text can in fact be viewed as a repression of the true lessons of his story, embodied not in summary but in description' (591). I hope to have already shown that Hägglund's apparent attentiveness to literary description is more rhetorical than realised in his readings. Nevertheless, like Hägglund (or rather Kelly's version of Hägglund), I argue for a greater attention to experiential description than is generally found in prose criticism. But where for Hägglund, literary description reveals the 'truth' about the human experience of time (i.e. his theory of chronolibido), and where for his interlocutors, a novel's account of time is to be equated with the statements made by the narrator, both in some sense treat the literary work as an instrument for doing something else, namely philosophising about human experience. An approach which is more faithful to the literary work is one which suspends extra-textual truth claims of this kind, and instead accounts for both description and narratorial statement in their fictive context. After all, part of what is distinctive about first-person narrations is precisely that they don't make abstract propositions, because such propositions are always embedded in the narration of a fictional character. Furthermore, it is not clear that a stable distinction between description and statement can be sustained by many sentences from literary works when examined closely enough.

Consider, for example, the parenthetical aside in the passage above: 'and what is a life but a gradual shipwreck?' In characteristic fashion, with the change from the singular personal pronoun at the beginning of the sentence to the indefinite article of 'a life,' the frame of reference moves from the personal to the universal. The effect of the rhetorical question is to advance a general view about human life, namely that it is like a gradual shipwreck. Yet the invocation of a universally shared experience is peculiarly arrested, even disabled, by the very particular resonance of this image with the circumstances of Cass's suicide. Later in the novel, Alex declares that 'after Cass's death […] the sight of waves crashing on rocks was not to be borne' (76), and similar sentiments are expressed throughout the novel. Figures of drowning and wreckage violently erupt into the prose, perhaps most disconcertingly in the description of Alex

and Lydia's drinking habits: 'She drinks a little too much, but then so do I; our decade-long great sorrow simply will not be drowned, tread it though we will below the surface and try to hold it there' (18). Part of the startlingly affect of the line arises from the suddenness with which the fraught image of drowning intrudes - an affect heightened by the almost parodic description of parental grief as a 'great sorrow' and the shocking resuscitation of the near-dead metaphor of 'drowning one's sorrows.' Though the emotional charge of this sentence is more stark than in the passage above, it is vital that we account for figures of wreckage and drowning in their fictional context - as part of the memoir of a man whose daughter drowned herself and her unborn child. As literary critics, we should not resolve the paragraph's contradictory implications by privileging either its propositional or evocative content, but account for the contradiction as part of the deeply conflicted thoughts, feelings, and desires of a vividly realised character. The imagery of drowning and wreckage poignantly registers why Alex might be drawn to the idea of memories being like collected and preserved pieces of the past, despite his professed scepticism about the mimetic powers of memory. Moreover, the pathos of the moment is central to the emotional response the passage demands from sufficiently attentive readers, its pointedly soliciting our sympathy.

However, the invocation of drowning and wreckage elsewhere in the novel gives rise to far more ambivalent feelings. Most problematic is the use of this imagery when Alex describes the devastation he felt after his affair with Mrs Gray was brought to an end:

> What I was afraid of was my own grief, the weight of it, the ineluctable corrosive force of it; that, and the stark awareness I had of being, for the first time in my life, entirely alone, a Crusoe shipwrecked and stranded in the limitless wastes of a boundless and indifferent ocean. Or rather say a Theseus, abandoned on Naxos while Ariadne hastened off about her uncaring business. (224-5)

There is an odd tension between the emphasis placed on Alex's fear of being overwhelmed by his emotions in the opening clause and the passage's protracted description of abandonment and loss. The sense of emotion being a cause for fear is amplified by the description of the 'weight' and 'ineluctable corrosive force' of Alex's grief, which, in its evocation of drowning, seems to prompt the literary comparisons

which ensue. But this language also manifestly resonates with Cass's death, as though, when searching for ways of expressing loss, Alex draws on his most acute feelings of the past. Part of what can be so disconcerting, and even disturbing, about *Ancient Light* is the way it brings seemingly disparate feelings into contact. Here, there is something highly discomforting about the descriptive and affective proximity between Cass and Mrs Gray, in its raising the possibility that Alex might be exploiting his daughter's suicide for rhetorical effect. This discomforting proximity is brought into greater relief by the use of 'grief' at a point in the novel when Alex does not yet know that Mrs Gray is dead, apparently comparing the end of his affair with the experience of mourning his actually dead daughter. The forced quality of the sentence is only compounded by the contrived literary clichés, and the pretentious and rather tedious joke of substituting Alex and Mrs Gray for Ariadne and Theseus and reversing their situations, which seems to manifest an unattractive writerly desire to move readers. Where, in the previous quotation, knowledge of the narrative context generates a certain pathos, here, the self-conscious invocation of Cass's death powerfully disables sympathy. Meanwhile, the amassing of descriptive detail paradoxically distances readers from the feelings the passage tries to evoke, partly because the pretentious literary allusions fall flat, but also because their resonance has a certain anachronism. Put differently, here the past seems not to be being recalled and described, but narrated in a language that threatens to occlude rather than evoke the original event.

3.

The 'revelation' structure of the plot is central to *Ancient Light*'s explorations of how later thoughts, feelings, and desires impinge upon the recollection and retelling of the past. This is most apparent in the scene when Kitty tells Alex about her mother's terminal illness, a piece of knowledge on which the whole novel turns. The narration of the scene is abruptly interrupted by a digression in which Alex compares the Christian vision of the afterlife and the theory of parallel worlds, which concludes with the following:

> Which eternal realm shall I believe in, which shall I choose? Neither, since all my dead are all alive to me, for whom the past is a luminous and everlasting present; alive to me yet lost, except in the frail afterworld of these words.

> If I must choose one memory of Mrs Gray, my Celia, a last one, from my overflowing store, then here it is. (241-2)

Even this most impassioned and triumphant celebration of the recuperative powers of memory and language is riddled with conjunctions and qualifications, shot through with equivocation and doubt, capturing the extent to which this novel is *animated* by anxieties about recollection. Alex is a narrator who veers between supreme confidence and profound doubt about the degree to which the past can be recaptured in language, an uncertainty which the jarring movements between intensely evocative description and clichéd rhetorical excess encourages readers to share - most notably when we encounter sentences that leave us unsure which they might be.

The memory Alex chooses from his 'overflowing store' begins with a lengthy description of a beam of sunlight shining through a hole in the roof of the cabin where he and Mrs Gray held their trysts, before the focus shifts to Mrs Gray herself:

> Just then Mrs Gray shifted her shoulder, dousing the beam of sunlight, and the spoked wheel was no more. My dazzled eyes hastened to adjust to her shadowy form above me, and quickly the moment of eclipse passed and there she was, leaning down to me, holding up her left breast a little on three splayed fingers and offering it to my lips like a precious, polished gourd. What I saw, though, or what I see now, is her face, foreshortened in my view of it, broad and immobile, heavy-lidded, the mouth unsmiling, and the expression in it, pensive, melancholy and remote, as she contemplated not me but something beyond me, something far, far beyond. (242)

The closing refrain, 'something far, far beyond,' strongly intimates that Celia Gray was contemplating her own death, raising the suspicion that Alex, now he knows about her terminal illness, experiences this memory differently. (The possibility of a changing perception of the past is also registered through the shift in tense of 'What I saw, though, or what I see now.') The malleability of memory is most subtly captured in the deceptively rich and complex simile of Mrs Gray's breast being 'like a precious, polished gourd.' A gourd is a fruit, or the container made from the fruit when it is hollowed out and the skin dried, with the adjectives 'precious' and 'polished' very much suggesting the latter. Comparing her breast to a drinking vessel obviously evokes breast feeding, and the perverse maternalism of the relationship. But it also characterises part of her body as something which was once living and is now dead, and Alex as feeding on something which is now hollow and lifeless. The way this

description seems to be shaped by Alex's knowledge of Mrs Gray's death suggests that disinterested or impersonal memory is no more possible than 'pure perception' (of the kind that critics have ascribed to Nicolas at the beginning of *Doctor Copernicus*); the evocations of perception and memory in *Ancient Light* stress the ways both are affected by what one knows, feels, and desires in the present and past.[7]

With this in mind, it is important to register how the above passage also speaks to a related issue bound to the narrative form - the question of which events and details Alex chooses to narrate, and why. The movement from an ardent proclamation of the power to recall the dead to a recollection of Mrs Gray - rather than of Cass - brings into relief how choosing one subject can exclude others, the finitude of textual space highlighted by the preamble, 'If I must choose one memory.' Alex Woloch has examined the ways that novels give different degrees and kinds of attention to different characters in *The One vs. the Many*. He points out that literary texts

> cannot 'possibly give equal emphasis to all' characters; but narratives certainly do call attention to the process of emphasizing and the problems of 'stinting' (to use Chaucer's term)—constantly suggesting how other possible stories, and other people's full lives, are intertwined with and obscured by the main focus of attention. (40)

Ancient Light illustrates how questions of narrative and descriptive attention can take on greater ethical weight in the confessional memoir form, insofar as other characters really exist (or existed) for the narrator-protagonist, who chooses to emphasise one person's life over another. This is not simply a structural or compositional issue, but one which readers are made aware of and which powerfully shapes our thoughts and feelings when reading:

> We feel interest and outrage, painful concern or amused consent at what happens to minor characters: not simply their fate within the story […] but also in the narrative discourse itself (how they are finally overshadowed or absorbed into someone else's story, swallowed within or expelled from another person's plot). (Woloch, 38)

[7] In this respect, we might compare this moment from *Ancient Light* to the 'clover honey' (75-6) passage of *Ada* discussed in my chapter on Nabokov.

Cass's story is precisely absorbed and overshadowed by Mrs Gray's, as the novel stresses through the descriptive contacts, substitutions, and confusions between the two women. But the feelings this 'stinting' gives rise to are more complex and ambivalent than those described by Woloch. On the one hand, the possibility that the cost of Alex's erotic recollections of Mrs Gray might be the neglect of the memory of his dead daughter dramatically brings into relief the ethical and affective stakes of what and whom we choose to remember and narrate. The worry about Cass being marginalised in *Ancient Light* is only intensified by the comparatively vivid realisation of her inner life in *Shroud*. On the other hand, though Cass is displaced from the centre of the narrative, her death persistently haunts Alex's prose, interrupting and corrupting other people's stories ('and when am I not thinking of Cass?' [78]). The eddying, uncertain, indefinite shifts in focus between these two subjects of loss forcefully raises the question of whether Alex tells the story of his love affair with Mrs Gray to distract himself from grief, or to work through feelings of loss by contemplating a less painful subject, or both, or indeed neither. It seems unlikely that there is any particularly meaningful or interesting answer to this question; what I want to stress is how the novel conspicuously points up the feelings implied by its distribution of narrative and descriptive attention, and that these feelings can themselves be a cause for surprise, dismay, hilarity, and many other emotions.

The affective and ethical implications of narrative attention are simultaneously registered and disavowed on the first page of *Ancient Light*, when Alex asserts that his memories 'are random; representative, perhaps, perhaps compellingly so, but random nonetheless' (3). The possibility that memories might be 'compellingly representative' tacitly suggests an important way in which the content of the narration is *not* random, or at least not in the simple sense of lacking coherence or conscious intention, insofar as the degree to which Alex finds an experience *compelling* influences whether or not it is included in his memoir, and the manner in which it is described. Meanwhile, in indicating that memories might be at once random *and* compelling, there is a sense in which the clause refuses to locate the particularity of what one finds compelling within the recollecting subject, an effect heightened by the absence of possessives and personal pronouns. One affordance of Banville's use of parallel narrative temporalities is to make visible the contingency of what Alex finds compelling, in the changes in the descriptive emphasis and affective significance of particular memories as his

thoughts, feelings, beliefs, and desires change over time. This is drawn out beyond the confines of *Ancient Light* through the novel's relationship to *Eclipse*, another recollective memoir in which Alex ruminates over many of the same subjects - his mother, childhood, early sexual experiences, and so on - but makes no allusion to his affair with Mrs Gray. Jean-Bertrand Pontalis suggests: 'One shouldn't write one autobiography, but ten of them, or a hundred because, while we have only one life, we have innumerable ways of recounting that life to ourselves' (cited in Phillips, *On Flirtation*, 73). Like many of Banville's narrators, Alex is obsessively preoccupied with the question of what experiences he finds compelling and why (a preoccupation readers of his narration are encouraged to share). Or, to put it in Pontalis's terms, why do people tell these stories about themselves rather than others?

4.

Ancient Light's preoccupation with the issue of why individuals find certain experiences especially compelling is paradoxically most in evidence in moments of the novel which seem to have no discernible relevance to the narrative, being unconnected with the story of Alex's affair with Mrs Gray, or even his grief for Cass. Early in the novel, Alex recounts how he was overcome by an enigmatic feeling, characterised by a heightened sense of significance, as he and Billy sat together drinking Mr Gray's whiskey:

> Outside in the little square the wan sunlight of early spring was gilding the cherry trees and making the black, arthritic tips of their branches glisten, and old Busher the rag-and-bone man on his cart went grinding past, a wagtail scurrying out of the way of the frilled hoofs of his horse, and at the sight of these things I felt a sharp sweet ache of yearning, objectless yet definite, like the phantom pain in an amputee's missing limb. Did I see, or sense, even then, away down the tunnel of time, tiny in the distance yet growing steadily more substantial, the figure of my future love, chatelaine of the House of Gray, already making her abstracted, dallying way towards me? […]
> I would like to be able to say it was that day, because I remember it so particularly, that I came face to face with Mrs Gray for the first, real, time, at the front door, perhaps, she coming in as I was going out, her face flushed from the thrilling air of outdoors and my nerves tingling still after the whiskey; a chance touch of her hand, a surprised, lingering look; a thickening in the throat; a soft jolt to the heart. But no, the front hall was empty except for Billy's bicycle […] and no one met me in the doorway, no one at all. (15-16)

The second paragraph, with a certain comic bathos, slyly points up the absence of obvious narrative relevance, playing with the reader's expectations by anticipating, building, and deflating suspense. Discussing the enigmatic emotion of this passage, Brendan McNamee distinguishes between 'significance' (which he defines as 'pre-linguistic') and 'meaning' ('the imperative of consciousness to grasp and embody that significance in language'), and claims that 'the impossibility of the endeavour [of articulating significance] is the root of the torment that afflicts Banville's protagonists' (*The Quest for God*, 2). Yet, like many of Banville's narrators, Alex is preoccupied by much more than problems of language; he is profoundly bewildered - and fascinated - by *why* he found this experience compelling. The complex figurative description - 'a sharp sweet ache of yearning, objectless, yet definite, like the phantom pain in an amputee's missing limb' - seems not to correlate with or be caused by any of the phenomena that Alex perceives. The gustatory connotations of the adjectives 'sharp' and 'sweet,' perhaps evoking the taste of the whiskey, blur the distinction between the somatic and the mental and inhibit readers from determining how metaphorical this description is, and what it might be a metaphor of. Meanwhile, the dissonant suggestions of pain and pleasure heighten the deep ambivalence of the 'ache of yearning,' subsequently likened to a traumatic bodily loss. The emotion evoked by the sentence eludes simple re-description, but it predominantly suggests feelings of desire and loss - feelings which, not coincidentally, dominate *Ancient Light*.

This moment is complicated further, however, by its conspicuous similarity to a passage from the earlier *Eclipse*:

> I have a particular memory—though memory is not the word, what I am thinking of is too vivid to be a real memory—of standing in the lane that goes down beside the house one late spring morning when I was a boy. […] A broad, unreally clear light lies over everything, even in the highest trees I can pick out individual leaves. A cobweb laden with dew sparkles in a bush. Down the lane comes hobbling an old woman, bent almost double, her gait a repeated pained slow swing around the pivot of a damaged hip. […] What was it in the moment that so affected me? Was it the lambert [*sic*] air, that wide light, the sense of spring's exhilarations all around me? Was it the old beggar-woman, the impenetrable thereness of her? Something surged in me, an objectless exultancy. A myriad voices struggled within me for expression. I seemed to myself a multitude. I would utter them, that would be my task, to be them, the voiceless ones! Thus was the actor born. (10-11)

As in the passage from *Ancient Light*, Alex both describes an experience and hypothesises about why it so affected him. A similar idiom and similar phenomena are present in both scenes (the old man and the old woman; the sunlight of a clear spring morning; the detail of the moist leaves) - so much so that we might suspect that this is the same moment being differently recollected. The enigmatic feelings are also alike, both being 'objectless' and characterised by a sense of something arising from within. But in the passage from *Eclipse*, Alex accounts for the significance of this moment in terms of his vocation as an actor - the central preoccupation of his emotional life during the present-day story of the novel, much as grief and desire are in *Ancient Light*. Notably, Alex gives a very different account of the origins of his vocation as an actor in the later novel ('I believe that it was in those fraught intervals in the Grays' kitchen that, without knowing it, I took my first, groping steps out on to the boards; nothing like an early clandestine love to teach one the rudiments of the actor's trade' [98]). The similarities and disparities between these two passages provokes us to question the veracity of the narrated scenes, but also, more interestingly, the felt significance Alex ascribes to them; do Alex's descriptions capture how he felt at the time, or only how he now imagines he felt then?

We can clarify what is at stake here by briefly examining the issues surrounding Sigmund Freud's notion of 'nachträglichkeit,' variously translated as 'deferred action' (Laplanche and Pontalis, 111), 'afterwardness' (Laplanche, 268), and 'subsequentiality' (Freud, *Interpreting Dreams*, 220). In *The Language of Psychoanalysis*, Pontalis and Jean Laplanche describe 'deferred action' as 'experiences, impressions and memory-traces [which] may be revised at a later date to fit in with fresh experiences or with the attainment of a new stage of development,' and which 'may in that event be endowed not only with a new meaning but also with psychical effectiveness' (111). Much later, in *Essays on Otherness*, Laplanche discusses the divergence between the 'retroactive' position outlined by Freud and the 'retrospective' position of Carl Jung (268): for Freud, the newly-discovered meaning of a memory arises from the activation and recognition of feelings which were actually present at the time but obscured from consciousness; for Jung, the new meaning is extraneous to the originary moment, retrospectively imposed by the recollecting subject. *Eclipse* and *Ancient Light* together raise the question of whether the felt significances ascribed to moments in the past are 'retroactive' or 'retrospective' - and leave the matter fundamentally unresolved.

The ambiguous cause of the feelings in these passages is made all the more undecidable by the curiously hackneyed expressions found in both. The reference to Mrs Gray as 'the chatelaine of the house of Gray,' with its aristocratic idiom and anachronistic formality, again draws upon clichés of romantic fiction - in a novel obsessively preoccupied by feelings of love and desire. 'Thus was the actor born,' with its archaic syntax, definite article, third-person pronoun, and ceremonious formality, has a thespian grandiosity which is conspicuously apt for a novel about an actor in crisis. The contrived quality of these sentences raises the suspicion that these passages are merely *performing* intense feeling. Were these clichéd manners of expression sustained throughout the novels, they might be thought of as only burlesque, yet both are imbedded in unusually earnest and evocative description free from any note of parody: there is nothing sardonic about the 'sharp sweet ache of yearning' or the 'objectless exultancy.' Moving rapidly between fine writing and cliché, profundity and pastiche, these passages exemplify the way that Banville's narrators manifest a fervent desire to evoke and examine intense feelings in beautiful and moving prose, yet are also capable of playfully mocking this impulse.

The very conspicuousness of Alex's preoccupation with compelling experiences encourages readers to share in his concern. The majority of the vignettes in *Ancient Light* (and, indeed, in most of Banville's novels) conform to the same pattern: the evocation of an experience, followed by a speculation about its significance or meaning (a format not unlike that of quotation and exegesis in literary criticism). In the first recollected scene of the novel, Alex is walking along a road watching a woman on a bicycle when an upward gust of wind momentarily exposes her underwear to view; the scene concludes with the following gloss:

> What affected me so in that encounter in the churchyard, besides the raw excitement of it, was the sense I had of having been granted a glimpse into the world of womanhood itself, of having been let in, if only for a second or two, on the great secret. (6)

This movement from recollection to elucidation occurs again and again in Banville's fiction. One consequence of this recurrence is to make readers especially aware of moments when explication is either implausible or absent, more generally encouraging us to be sceptically attentive to the interpretations the narrators offer. The above

sentence, for instance, parenthetically sets aside the affective ('besides the raw excitement') and seeks to explain the encounter in the epistemological terms of being 'let in' on a 'great secret.' Yet this very separation of knowing and feeling is palpably troubled by the descriptive orientation of the sentence.

The characterisation of Alex's excitement as 'raw' makes one wonder: what other kinds of excitement might there be? There is an obvious epistemological excitement to the sentence, with the elucidation of 'the world of womanhood itself' lingering over its subject whilst generating a sense of anticipation, heightened by the qualifying clauses, which delay the reader from arriving at the no less enigmatic 'great secret.' Both phrases curiously emphasise Alex's passivity; he is not so much an agent of discovery as someone susceptible to being affected by certain sights and insights, as is emphasised by the polysemous 'raw' - to be exposed, bare, or emotionally sensitive. On closer inspection, the sentence is as much about being exposed to feelings of knowing as coming to know through exposure (in the literal and figurative senses of the word). The covered female body as the privileged site of a man's epistemological desire is, of course, a well-worn trope, with the familiar problematic implication that the 'great secret' of womanhood is only the concealment of the body, whilst the weak humour of the excessively portentous tone leaves us uncertain about how ironic or self-aware the narrator is about these implied values. In characteristic fashion, the movement between experiential description and reflection seems to open and close a question about the perceived significance of a moment in a single gesture, yet this concern is precisely highlighted by the movement, making readers acutely aware of the way that the proffered explanation mobilises an array of particular affective and erotic dispositions - with their own particular political and ethical charges.

5.

Conflicted sentences which are at once saturated with, fascinated by, and peculiarly resistant to feeling are found throughout *Ancient Light*. In one particularly suggestive example, the tension between these impulses is self-reflexively played out through the figure of storytelling:

> Mrs Gray began to tell me how when she was small her father used to take her out on evenings such as this to gather mushrooms, but then broke off and became pensive. I tried to see her as a girl, picking her way barefoot through the mist-white meadows, with a basket on her arm, and the man, her father, going ahead of her, bespectacled, whiskered and waistcoated, like the fathers in fairy tales. For me she could have no past that was not a fable, for had I not invented her, conjured her out of nothing but the mad desires of my heart? (194-5)

There is a subtle but significant temporal shift in the final sentence from the statement that Mrs Gray's (unknown) past was necessarily Alex's fabrication to the suggestion that the woman herself was always already only his invention. The passage is stereotypically gendered, both in the ethically troubling implication that the woman is nothing until she has been conjured up by the man's desire, and in the wryly oedipal representation of the father as an ostentatiously anachronistic and ridiculous figure, as though denigrating a rival creator. The heart, in conjuring a woman into being, seems to be endowed with extraordinary agency, yet the rhetorical question, 'had I not invented her,' grammatically and figuratively subordinates the heart's desires. The sentence not only dwells on the potency of Alex's feelings for Mrs Gray (from which such a captivating figure is conjured), but drives towards the issue of whether she can be known through them, and offers a deeply sceptical response: to proclaim that she is nothing but his invention is to profoundly dismiss the reality of her interior life, and his own capacity and inclination to comprehend it.

However, not unlike *Ill Seen Ill Said*, this dismissiveness uneasily coexists with a fervent desire, which pervades and indeed inaugurates the narrative, to recall and represent Mrs Gray herself. Following their first sexual encounter, Alex is described struggling to assemble a 'series of disparate and dispersed parts' into a 'satisfactorily clear and coherent image' of Mrs Gray:

> I was not accustomed yet to the chasm that yawns between the doing of a thing and the recollection of what was done, and it would take practice and the resultant familiarity before I could fix her fully in my mind and make her of a piece, in total, and me along with her. But what does it mean when I say in total and of a piece? What was it I retrieved of her but a figment of my own making? (46-7)

The initial representation of recollection as a kind of art, refined through practice, is dramatically undermined by the rhetorical question, which again rejects the possibility

that Alex's memories might capture something essential of who Mrs Gray was. This turn in the passage pivots on the polysemous 'fix,' meaning to concentrate on, to pin down, or to mend. Initially, 'fix' seems to be being used in the first sense, but then 'of a piece, in total' invokes the object-related meanings - enacting a shift in the rhetorical characterisation of memory from a mental concentration upon past experiences ('the doing of a thing') to a gathering of parts into a whole secured against change and loss. But this mobilisation of disparate meanings also brings into relief a tension in the sentence, in that Alex's effort to preserve an experience from loss in time seems to paradoxically involve 'fixing' the memory as an atemporal 'image,' a loss of temporality which the narration struggles to recuperate.

The tension between the temporality of lived experience and the potential to pare down or flatten out time when recollecting an experience and representing it as a memory is repeatedly played out in the novel, most notably in passages which simultaneously invoke and resist atemporal figurations of memory:

> When I think of those whom I have loved and lost I am as one wandering among eyeless statues in a garden at nightfall. The air about me is murmurous with absences. I am thinking of Mrs Gray's moist brown eyes flecked with tiny splinters of gold. When we made love they would turn from amber through umber to a turbid shade of bronze. 'If we had music,' she used to say at Cotter's place, 'if we had music we could dance.' She sang, herself, all the time, all out of tune, 'The Merry Widow Waltz,' 'The Man Who Broke the Bank at Monte Carlo,' 'Roses Are Blooming in Picardy,' and something about a skylark, skylark, that she did not know the words of and could only hum, tunelessly off-key. These things that were between us, these and a myriad others, a myriad myriad, these remain of her, but what will become of them when I am gone, I who am their repository and sole preserver? (157)

The opening sentence obscurely figures those whom Alex has loved and lost as eyeless statues, unmoving and unseeing. This is complicated by the succeeding sentence, which seems to sustain the garden scene but refigures the lost loved ones as voices emanating from nowhere, the confusion between two conflicting yet vividly realised metaphors generating an uncertainty about who or what is being remembered. These oddly unstable and miscarrying abstract characterisations dramatically give way to an intimate description of the changing colour of Mrs Gray's eyes, and the evocative recollection of her singing, as though rhetorically rejecting the impoverishment of memory in its figuration as a statue by exhibiting the power of language to capture

the passage of time. In this respect, perhaps the most affecting detail is the repetition of 'something about a skylark, skylark,' the narratorial report gathering up the resonance of a singing voice, an aural memory caught in motion (skylarks are known for singing in flight). But by the close of the paragraph, evocative description again calcifies into an inert 'thing' of which Alex is the 'repository and sole preserver.' The grandiosity here, apparently untempered by self-awareness or irony, disperses much of the pathos built up in the preceding sentences, the poignant sense of things lost to time undermined by Alex's hectoring emphasis upon his own significance. Meanwhile, the narrative attention afforded to Mrs Gray, foregrounded by the general invocation of 'those whom I have loved and lost,' again introduces feelings of discomfort - exacerbated by the echo of Axel Vander's elegiac lament for Cass at the end of *Shroud* ('The air in which I move is murmurous with absences' [405]). Though the evocation of Mrs Gray's eyes is affecting in its foregrounding Alex's desire to capture his lost love in every last detail, the description begins to spills over into excess, displaying an infatuation with rhetoric which is at once comic and oddly disconcerting. Literary language here seems to be both an instrument for fixing Mrs Gray and a seductive distraction - a descriptive failure perhaps gestured to in the allusion of 'eyeless statues in a garden' to Hugo von Hofmannsthal's *The Lord Chandos Letter*, a text famously eloquent about the impossibility of representing human experience in language.[8]

There is, however, yet another richly suggestive way in which this evocation of Mrs Gray miscarries, for, throughout *Ancient Light*, depictions of Mrs Gray's eyes and those of her son Billy are persistently blurred, conflated, or confused. There are numerous passages which stress the resemblance between them, and which deploy a common repertoire of adjectives denoting their colour and moist appearance.[9] For instance, the evocation of the changing colour of Mrs Gray's eyes in the above passage, 'amber through umber,' closely echoes the very first description of Billy: 'He had his mother's eyes, too, of a liquid umber shade' (10). Note how the grammatical construction of the sentence makes the singular 'a liquid umber shade' describe the eyes of both mother and son, interfering with our ability to separate one from the other. The word 'amber' similarly echoes a passage in which Alex strives to relive his

[8] The same allusion is present in a passage of *Mefisto* (109). Banville has penned an introduction to *The Lord Chandos Letter*.
[9] See: 10, 46, 67, 145, 148, 160, 169-170, 216.

first sexual encounter with Mrs Gray, with the sentence similarly exploiting the arrangement of clauses: 'I could see her eyes of wet amber, unnervingly reminiscent of Billy's, brimming under half-closed lids that throbbed like a moth's wings' (46). The parenthetical invocation of Billy introduces a momentary uncertainty about whose eyes are being so lovingly described, and, more widely, the object of this erotic language. This uncertainty is compounded by the muddling of deliberate and unvolitional modes of recollection, with Alex reminiscing about Mrs Gray who is herself reminiscent of Billy. The resemblance between them is not simply observed, but gives rise to and is bound up with complexly equivocal feelings. Why is the resemblance 'unnerving'? Why not amusing, comforting, or cause for no particular feelings at all? After all, that children often look like their parents is hardly a new piece of knowledge for Alex. The confusions and substitutions of the eyes of mother and son represent only some of the most visible ways in which the people described in this novel are oddly lacking in definition (as we have already seen in the unsettling descriptive proximity between Cass and Mrs Gray). This phenomenon in turn opens out onto the wider affective terrain of the novel, which is concerned with the discreteness - or otherwise - of feelings for different people, and the ways in which that might (or might not) matter. More specifically, Alex's narration is deeply preoccupied by whether or not he can know those whom he loves and why he loves them.

6.

Ancient Light characteristically raises the question of whether the origins of one's desires for other people can be known both conceptually and affectively, through the narrator's musings and through his descriptions of past experiences. Midway through the novel, Alex recounts a moment when he became acutely conscious of his feelings for Billy having changed after having had sex with his mother, as the two boys sit together in the Grays' living room, this time drinking Mr Gray's gin:

> [W]hen he came and leaned down to pour another inch of gin into my glass and I saw the pale patch on the crown of his head the size of a sixpence where his hair whorled, a sense of uncanniness swept over me so that I almost

> shivered, and I shrank back from him, and held my breath for fear of catching his smell and recognising in it a trace of his mother's. I tried not to look into the brown depths of those eyes, or dwell on those unnervingly moist pink lips. I felt that suddenly I did not know him, or, worse, that through knowing his mother, in all senses of the word, ancient and modern, I knew him also and all too intimately. So I sat there on his sofa in front of the flickering telly and gulped my gin and squirmed in secret and exquisite shame. (145)

The passage mobilises a complex array of feelings at once provoked by and giving rise to various experiences of 'knowing.' The parenthetical 'all senses of the word, ancient and modern,' obviously invokes the biblical sense of carnal knowledge, but, in fact, a whole range of senses of the word are in play, including to recognise, perceive, be familiar with, and become aware of. Alex notably accounts for his feeling at this moment as 'a sense of uncanniness' - a paradigmatically epistemological affect, famously described by Freud as the experience of encountering something once known but, because repressed, become unfamiliar.[10] In the desire not to see or smell the resemblance between Billy and his mother, there is a definite sense of fear about something both known and unknown, and an anxiety about the unknown not remaining so. That Alex is unable not to 'dwell on those unnervingly moist pink lips' is ironically suggested through the use of the demonstrative 'those,' the way 'unnervingly' registers that Alex has already been affected by the perception, and the erotically-charged adjectives, 'moist' and 'pink.' His powerlessness to prevent these thoughts and feelings is also suggested by his passivity in the uncanniness having 'swept over' him, and the connotations of infection in his 'catching' Billy's smell. Alex's rising feelings of self-consciousness culminate in an acutely ambivalent affect of self-knowledge: his 'secret and exquisite shame.'

Silvan Tomkins claims that shame is an 'auxiliary affect' which 'operates ordinarily only after interest or enjoyment has been activated,' and that '[t]he innate activator of shame is the incomplete reduction of interest or joy' (353). Tomkins gives some pertinent examples of why one's interest might be incompletely reduced: 'because one is suddenly looked at by one who is strange, or because one wishes to look at or commune with another person but suddenly cannot because he is strange, or one expected him to be familiar but he suddenly appears unfamiliar' (354). Eve

[10] Banville conspicuously alludes to Freud's theory of the uncanny in several novels, including *The Sea* (10) and *The Blue Guitar* (130).

Sedgwick (Tomkins's most famous reader in the field of literary studies) gives the following, characteristically expansive, gloss:

> The conventional way of distinguishing shame from guilt is that shame attaches to and sharpens the sense of what one is, whereas guilt attaches to what one does. Although Tomkins is less interested than anthropologists, moralists, or popular psychologists in distinguishing between the two, the implication remains that one is *something* in experiencing shame, though one may or may not have a secure hypothesis about what. […] As best described by Tomkins, shame effaces itself; shame and pride, shame and dignity, shame and self-display, shame and exhibitionism are different interlinings of the same glove.[11] (*Touching Feeling*, 37-8)

Tomkins's claim that partially repressed interest activates shame, and Sedgwick's characterisation of shame as the inexorable consciousness of being *something* (whether or not one knows what that is), can help us to grasp the complex ambivalence of Alex's 'secret and exquisite shame.' 'Exquisite' can refer to a range of intense feelings, including bodily pain, but is generally associated with sensual pleasure. Though the passage does not overtly describe pleasure, a palpable sense of excitement is manifest in the lingering on Billy's features and the feelings they evoke. This intermingling of pleasure and fear (and fear of possible pleasures) has a definite homoerotic-homophobic implication, Alex seemingly both drawn and averse to recognising the resemblance between his male friend and the woman he sexually desires. Yet the narration importantly stops short of directly articulating such an ambivalence; shifting between the said and the implied, the explicit and the obscured, the passage is - to use Sedgwick's suggestive phrase - 'epistemologically arousing' (*Epistemology of the Closet*, 95) for readers. This dramatised struggle to contain hidden desires engenders a cognate excitement, a precarious pleasure in our seeming to intuit what Alex does not, attended by a certain nervousness in our uncertainty about how self-aware this narrator is - whether we are interpreting his feelings, or whether he is toying with ours. At once saturated with and giving rise to intensely epistemological feelings, the passage descriptively and performatively brings into relief the ways in which knowing

[11] Emmanuel Levinas similarly suggests that 'shame's whole intensity, everything it contains that stings us, consists precisely in our inability not to identify with this being who is already foreign to us and whose motives for acting we can no longer comprehend' (63).

and not knowing can be a cause for pleasure, fear, and so many other emotions (and that we might not know which emotions we feel or why).

The involutions of knowing and feeling are so vividly realised in *Ancient Light* partly because of the unsettled and unsettling relationship between reader and narrator. The text often leaves us uncertain about how self-conscious (or 'knowing') Alex is about the implications of his narration, and particularly the slippages between his feelings for different people. This becomes most disconcerting when the text seems to anticipate - and to denounce - the interpretation it obviously invites:

> What used I call her, I mean how did I address her? I do not remember saying her name, ever, though I must have. […] I have a suspicion, which will not be dismissed, that on more than one occasion, in the throes of passion, I cried out the word *Mother!* Oh, dear. What am I to make of that? Not, I hope, what I shall be told I should. (15)

The parapraxis is simply too stereotypically 'Freudian' to take seriously, especially given the teasing humour of the affectedly earnest 'I have a suspicion, which will not be dismissed' and the theatrically camp, 'Oh dear. What am I to make of that?' The closing sentence both makes it plain that Alex is aware of the possible oedipal implications and negatively characterises such an interpretation in the dictatorial terms of telling others how to think, a dogmatic, domineering response with which few readers would want to be associated. That is, the passage pushes us towards a particular interpretation only to implicitly critique us for making it, exemplifying the conflicted way that this narration is utterly unable to resist the lure of dwelling on emotion and yet at times can be vociferously hostile to any interpretation of the feelings it presents.

The tension generated by the text at once soliciting and repelling particular modes of interpretation demonstrates what is unsatisfactory about reading for 'surface' or 'depth': it is precisely the impossibility of distinguishing between the two which makes Banville's writing so unsettling. The overt way in which the narrative invokes the potential oedipal reading can leave readers feeling not only that the narrator has already carried out the interpretative work for us, but, worse, that acts of interpretation are in some sense ethically suspect. As literary critics, it is important to neither accede to nor dismiss this feeling, but to capture its role in the literary workings of the text. This interpretative resistance is affectively complex, but its presiding effect

is to make readers acutely self-conscious about our interpretations, and alert to the possibility of being entrapped by them. There is a degree of anxiety here, but also a ludic pleasure in testing oneself and the text. More positively, it also encourages us to hold back on obvious or preconceived readings, and closely attend to the singular experiences the novel evokes (as we should when reading any literary work carefully enough). After all, maternal desire is not a mere decoy, but something Alex's narration luxuriates in, as the opening sentence of the novel makes plain: 'Billy Gray was my best friend and I fell in love with his mother' (3). Alex's earlier-quoted admission that he cannot remember what he used to call his lover highlights how referring to her as 'Mrs Gray' stresses the fact that she is his best friend's mother; not many people refer to their lovers by marital name. The novel's fluid movements between exhibition and concealment push readers to think and feel their way into other modalities of experience - in this instance, prompting us to consider what other forms of maternal desire there might be.

There is, of course, nothing repressed about the maternalism of Alex and Mrs Gray's relationship:

> When it came to girls I was as insecure and self-doubting as any average boy, yet that Mrs Gray should love me I took entirely for granted, as if it were a thing ordained within the natural order of things. Mothers were put on earth to love sons, and although I was not her son Mrs Gray was a mother, so how would she deny me anything, even the innermost secrets of her flesh? (109)

This mischievously perverse logic treats the great diversity of feelings described by 'love' as equivalents, and uses 'mother' and 'son' to describe people rather than the relations between them, with the unspoken but implied premise that love means not denying the beloved anything, including the use of one's body. Mark O'Connell suggests that:

> The Oedipal dimension of the relationship is not so much subtext as supratext. […] But it isn't so much the incestuous implications of this reasoning that make it disturbing as the creepy lyricism of the phrase 'innermost secrets of her flesh.' It's as though this woman is less a person than a thing - a location - to which access is sought and granted as something like a natural right. (34)

This is nearly but not quite right. The 'innermost secrets of her flesh' is not just 'creepy lyricism,' but euphemistically plays upon an erotics of concealment, the mother's vagina figured as a sight (and site) of sexual and epistemological arousal. It is the *combination* of incestuous reasoning and the suggestion that Alex has a right to Mrs Gray's body that makes the passage disturbing - its exploiting and deranging the ethical notion of a maternal duty of care. It's not that Alex treats Mrs Gray as a thing, but that he acts as an infant towards its mother, subordinating her needs and desires to his own. The passage points up how one can mistreat another person by acting towards them on the basis of what one feels rather than what one knows, as is emphasised by the asymmetry of 'although I was not her son Mrs Gray was a mother,' which draws attention to the rhetorical sleight of hand of overlooking the fact that she is not *his* mother. (We might compare this to Van's abuse of the child prostitutes who he knows are not Ada, but for whom he feels a similar desire.) Alex's sense that Mrs Gray's love was 'a thing ordained within the natural order of things,' with its suggestion of a naïve belief in permanence, is touchingly childish, yet the moralistically coercive quality of the final sentence is no less troubling for that. The stress on the maternal in *Ancient Light* is certainly comic, but also decidedly unsettling when it invokes and manipulates the connections between familial obligation, power, and culpability.

Part of what makes those moments in the novel when Alex appears to exploit Mrs Gray's propensity for maternal care so troubling is the apparent inversion of received morality about under-age sex. *Ancient Light* plays on readers' ethical anxieties about who might be being exploited by whom and in what ways. At one point, Alex rhetorically asks: 'Was she guilty of rape, if only in the statutory sense?' (65). A few pages later, he recounts a scene in the ruined cottage where he and Mrs Gray used to secretly meet; the sound of voices in the surrounding hills panics Mrs Gray, but her departure is halted when Alex bursts into tears:

> I began to cry, startling even myself. It was the real thing, a child's raw, helpless blurting. […] She had seen me weep before, but that was in rage or to try to get her to bend to my will, not like this, abjectly, defencelessly, and I suppose it was borne in on her afresh how young I was, after all, and how far out of my depth she had led me. She knelt down on the mattress again and embraced me. It was a shivery sensation to be in her arms naked when she was dressed, and even as I leaned into her and bawled for sorrow I found to my pleased surprise that I was becoming aroused again, and I lay back down and drew her

> with me and, despite her squirms of protest, got my hands under her clothes, and so we were off again, my sobs of childish fear and anguish now become the familiar, hoarse panting that would rise and rise along its arc to the final, familiar whoop of triumph and wild relief. (69-70)

The vocabulary of the opening sentences ('raw,' 'helpless,' 'blurting' 'abjectly,' 'defencelessly') emphasises Alex's vulnerability and the sincerity of his emotion: his tears are, apparently, 'the real thing,' and not simply a means 'to try to get her to bend' to his will. The faintly accusatory note of 'how far out of my depth she had led me,' though it stops short of denunciation, overtly raises the question of whether this sexual relationship - which, regardless of Alex's own desires, was initiated by Mrs Gray - amounts to child abuse. This worry is only compounded by the fact that Alex's crying does return a mother's attention to a child, a maternal response he finds perversely arousing and which again makes Mrs Gray sexually available to him. Where *Lolita*, though it places us in the grip of a seductively articulate narrator, nevertheless invites readers to take up a relatively stable moral position, *Ancient Light* is much more equivocal, soliciting no unbridled censure or unambiguous sympathies. There is a degree of directness and sincerity to the tone of the opening sentences, placing the stress on Alex's childishness in disturbing relief. But there is also a marked change in tone midway through the passage; the absurdly infantile 'bawled for sorrow' borders on the burlesque, leading us to the suspicion, strengthened by Alex's 'pleased surprise' at 'becoming aroused again,' that he is now behaving childishly for his own sexual ends, the discomforting humour only intensified by his forcefully pulling Mrs Gray to the ground 'despite her squirms of protest.' The long final sentence moves breathlessly from clause to clause, culminating in the ejaculatory 'whoop of triumph and wild relief,' and the ribald comedy of Alex's jubilant pride in achieving orgasm. In its fluid movements between the humorous and the troubling, the passage exemplifies how the ethical anxieties that attend the novel's 'inappropriate' romance give rise to 'affective disorientations,' feelings of confusion about what one is feeling (Ngai, 14). *Ancient Light* demands that we read Alex's desire for Mrs Gray as both sexual and filial, but leaves us unsure about how aware the narrator is of these slippages between different ways of feeling; such a recognition, far from making us feel we know more, in fact produces an intense ambivalence, a disorientation of knowing, and feeling, and feelings of not knowing.

7.

The retrospective form of *Ancient Light* amplifies readers' uncertainties about what the narrator knows at any one point, often by generating ambiguities about whether the affects of a described moment reflect Alex's thoughts and feelings in the past, or only in the present. There are several passages where the gap between the affective description and Alex's proffered insight strains credulity, as in this particularly suggestive example:

> Whatever liberties Mrs Gray might grant me, I would never be as near to her as Billy was at that moment, as he always had been and always would be, at every moment. I could only get into her from the outside, but he, he had sprung from a seed and grown inside her, and even after he had shouldered his brute way out of her he was still flesh of her flesh, blood of her blood. Oh, I do not say these are the things I thought, exactly, but I had the gist of them, and suddenly, in that moment, I was sorely pained. (101)

The caveat, 'Oh, I do not say,' unusually gives the impression of spontaneous speech, as though the exceedingly rich preceding description were only an unrehearsed approximation of Alex's past feelings. The concise expression of distress which follows - 'suddenly, in that moment, I was sorely pained' - places the linguistic excess of the preceding detailed description sharply into relief, underlining the extent to which Alex's thoughts and feelings 'in that moment' elude capture, obscured by the perceptions he now brings to bear. The highly figurative and visceral language of 'seed,' 'flesh,' and 'blood,' with its atavistic connotations and echoes of Genesis, suggests a peculiar kind of envy of Billy, with Mrs Gray's body - and, by implication, her vagina - a contested space for which they compete for possession. Yet, by reductively characterising Mrs Gray's own sexual desires as her merely 'grant[ing]' him 'liberties,' the sentence refuses to register the obvious sense in which Alex is privileged in a way that Billy is not, accentuating the perceived contest between the two boys. Sedgwick, in her discussion of 'love triangles' in *Between Men*, claims that 'the bond that links the two rivals is as intense and potent as the bond that links either of the rivals to the beloved: […] bonds of "rivalry" and "love," differently as they are experienced, are equally powerful and in many senses equivalent' (21). Sedgwick's suggestion that relationships of sexual desire and of rivalry might be neither as distinct

nor discrete as is often supposed opens up the possibility that Alex's fantasy of being in a vicarious rivalry with Billy might be no less potent than his filial and sexual desire for Mrs Gray (and that one might not be separable from the other).

The novel brings feelings of sexual desire and rivalry into close proximity by deranging the semantics of 'love,' and by unsettling the idea of a 'primary' object of desire. The opening line of *Ancient Light* is closely echoed a few pages later: 'I think I was a little in love with Billy Gray before I was a lot in love with his mother' (8). The potential semantic range of 'love' is constricted so as to imply that Alex's feelings for mother and son differed only in degree rather than kind, whilst the awkwardness of 'a lot in love with' draws attention to how the sentence forces the comparison. Throughout the novel, scenes of sexual excitement are interrupted with seemingly unprompted invocations of Billy: 'I would divert myself by pinching her breasts to make the nipples go fat and hard—and these, mark you, were the paps that had given my friend Billy suck!' (146). The comically archaic 'paps' and 'suck' in its noun form, with their pronounced New Testament echo (Luke, 23:29), add to the air of bantering delight in Alex's having apparently supplanted Billy at his mother's breast, in this rather contrived sense of vicarious contact between the boys through a body which both have known, in different but related senses. The laboured quality of these sentences further emphasises the excitement the perceived connection has for Alex; but the elision of Billy's feelings in these examples also raises doubts about how reciprocated this sense of rivalry was.

One rare but significant exception to the elision of Billy's emotional life is the altercation which takes places between the boys after Kitty tells her brother about the affair, which is alluded to and partially described several times in the novel: 'But, ah, how he wept, for pain and rage and humiliation, the day he met me after he had found out about his mother and me; how he wept, and I the prime cause of his bitter tears' (11-12). The sentence, with its retarding exclamation, repetitions, and gathering up of emotions, lingers over Billy's distress; combined with the oddly conceited self-accusation (why is he the 'prime cause' rather than Mrs Gray?), we have the sense of Alex cherishing evidence of Billy having felt strongly about him, however damning or repudiative those feelings might be. We see something similar later in the text, when Alex notes that he cannot remember what Billy said to him that day: 'but I do see his tears, and hear his sobs of rage and shame and bitter sorrow. […] I had never felt such

care, such compassion, such tenderness—such, yes, such love for Billy as I felt there on that hill road' (223). The slip into the present tense (emphasised by the sensory shift from 'see his tears' to 'hear his sobs') and the accumulating description again concertedly suggest the intensity of Alex's preoccupation with Billy's feelings for him. Meanwhile, the repetition of the emphatic 'such' underscores the close connection between Billy's distress and Alex's sudden and surprising feelings of love, as though his friend's dramatic rejection, by establishing the impossibility of reciprocation, gives Alex licence to feel what is otherwise suppressed or made absurd. When Alex later observes that he and Billy 'enacted […] some version […] of the parting scene that had not played itself out between [himself] and Mrs Gray' (223-4), a different possibility is also conspicuously raised: that Alex's sexual affair with the mother might be a way of living out feelings and desires for the son.

The potential complexity of what Billy might have thought and felt most fully comes into view in the most striking depiction of their final altercation, where Alex questions the emotional interpretations which he so forcefully overdetermines elsewhere in his narration:

> He bore a strong resemblance to his mother, have I mentioned that? […] Families are strange institutions, and the inmates of them know many strange things, often without knowing that they know them. When Billy eventually found out about his mother and me, did I not think his rage, those violent tears, a mite excessive, even in a case as provocative as the one in which we all suddenly found ourselves mired? What do I imply? Nothing. Move on, move on, as we are directed to do at the scene of an accident, or a crime. (32)

Set amidst a narration which repeatedly interrogates its own implications, the rhetorical 'What do I imply?' draws the reader's attention to this resistance. The implication is that Billy intuitively knows that Alex is having an affair with his mother, and that the violence of his reaction is in part affected, in turn raising a number of possibilities - perhaps Billy protests too much at the thought of his mother being sexually desirable, or perhaps his excessive reaction is partly due to his having to confront the fact that Alex has chosen his mother over himself. Meanwhile, the emphasis on the physical resemblance between Mrs Gray and Billy ensures that the (potential) complexity of the relationships between the three of them remains firmly in view. The passage illustrates how *Ancient Light* persistently raises and renders

undecidable the question of whether repressed homosexual desires are present. The interest for readers is not ultimately in the 'nature' of Alex's love for Billy (or Billy's love for Alex), but precisely in the refusal to occupy stable and recognisable terms, in the evocation of intense feelings suspended between *eros* and *philia*, disturbing our sense of the discreteness of different ways of perceiving and describing desire.

8.

As we have seen, the complications of desire in *Ancient Light* are fostered by tonal fluctuations in the narration, which moves between earnestness and ostentatious affectation. At their most extreme, the novel's depictions of desire are more or less undisguised burlesque, as in the following absurdly overblown performance of rampant heterosexual masculinity:

> Nowadays we are assured that there is hardly a jot of difference between the ways in which the sexes experience the world, but no woman, I am prepared to wager, has ever known the suffusion of dark delight that floods the veins of a male of any age, from toddler to nonagenarian, at the spectacle of the female privy parts, as they used quaintly to be called, exposed accidentally, which is to say fortuitously, to sudden public view. Contrary, and disappointingly I imagine, to female assumptions, it is not the glimpsing of the flesh itself that roots us men to the spot, our mouths gone dry and our eyes out on stalks, but of precisely those silken scantlings that are the last barriers between a woman's nakedness and our goggling fixity. It makes no sense, I know, but if on a crowded beach on a summer day the swimsuits of the female bathers were to be by some dark sorcery transformed into underwear, all of the males present, the naked little boys with their pot bellies and pizzles on show, the lolling, muscle-bound lifeguards, even the hen-pecked husbands with trouser-cuffs rolled and knotted hankies on their heads, all, I say, would be on the instant transformed and joined into a herd of bloodshot, baying satyrs bent on rapine. (4-5)

Part of the humour of this passage is its preposterous generalisation (there are four references to 'all' men and two lists enumerating males of all ages), its affected ignorance of other forms of desire, as though all men were identically aroused by the same sights. But the comedy also arises from the sheer ostentatiousness of the rhetoric - the convoluted sentences, the excessive assertions and reiterations, the outmoded modesty of 'privy parts' and 'silken scantlings,' and the absurdly hyperbolic figuration of the arousing power of underwear as bringing about a supernatural transformation.

There is something farcical about this profligate expenditure of verbiage, with its air of delivering a profound and original insight whilst belabouring a commonplace, even clichéd, observation - that a covered (woman's) body can be more arousing than a naked one, as the eroticism of underwear bears out. Regarding the connection between the 'flesh itself' and the fetishised object, Freud famously - or perhaps infamously - claimed:

> [T]he fetish is a substitution for the woman's (the mother's) penis that the little boy once believed in and - for reasons familiar to us - does not want to give up. […] Furthermore, an aversion, which is never absent in any fetishist, to the real female genitals remains a *stigma indelebile* of the repression that has taken place. […] [P]ieces of underclothing, which are so often chosen as a fetish, crystallize the moment of undressing, the last moment in which the woman could still be regarded as phallic. (*On Sexuality*, 352-5)

For Freud, fetishes are not displaced, anticipatory, or ancillary desires, but arise from a deeply ambivalent fixation with the mother's genitals, in which both desire and aversion are present. The above passage of *Ancient Light*, with its flamboyant fetishism, reads almost as a parody of something written by a repressed man apparently demonstrating his desire for women but in a way that tacitly registers that desire is more complex than he allows. The rhetorical absurdity enjoins readers to take up an amused scepticism towards totalising schematisations of desire - and, more widely, the philosophical impulse to generalise about human experience. Yet even this most blatant sending up of the efficacy of language is inhabited by recuperative, evocatively striking affective descriptions - the 'suffusion of dark delight that floods the veins,' for instance, capturing something of the bodily feeling of excitation.

Banville's novels are suffused with feelings and desires that are in turns hidden and conspicuously exposed. *Ancient Light* engenders an unsettling and pleasurable kind of paranoia, which leaves us fundamentally uncertain about whether we are reading the narrator's feelings or if the narrator is knowingly toying with ours. Suspicions about partially uncovered desires involve readers in recognising the erotic potential of mothers, childhood friends, clothing, and much else besides; 'it takes one to know one,' the novel seems to say.[12] Banville's fiction not only stages failures to know

[12] The connection between paranoia and the principle of 'it takes one to know one' I take from Sedgwick (*Epistemology of the Closet*, 100).

feeling, but also induces such failures in readers, tempting us to take up an epistemological stance, only to persistently compromise explanatory impulses by raising the possibility that we are being had - that the joke is on us. The significance of these epistemological seductions is not, ultimately, a matter of whether we decide that Alex is 'really' driven by repressed (or not so repressed) oedipal, homoerotic, or fetishistic desires - and the text precisely precludes any stable decision of this kind - but that they arouse our interest in knowing and feeling, orienting us on an affective-epistemological terrain. That is, the text puts readers to contemplating, examining, and enquiring about desire, to pursuing acts of knowing which are powerfully affective, giving rise to feelings of pleasure, unease, amusement, self-consciousness, excitement, and myriad other emotions. Which is to say that Banville's novels are preoccupied by the feelings of knowing as well as by knowing the conditions and character of feelings and desires.

J. M. Coetzee's *Waiting for the Barbarians*: Presence and Uncertainty

Issues of knowing and feeling are at the heart of J. M. Coetzee's novels, and particularly his early masterpiece, *Waiting for the Barbarians* (1980), as this short passage from the novel makes plain:

> [I]t is the knowledge of how contingent my unease is, how dependent on a baby that wails beneath my window one day and does not wail the next, that brings the worst shame to me, the greatest indifference to annihilation. I know somewhat too much; and from this knowledge, once one has been infected, there seems to be no recovering. (22-3)

The recognition that one is vulnerable to being affected by the fate of others is perhaps not so unusual, but why might this knowledge be a source of unease, shame, or indifference to annihilation? If some knowledge is like an infection from which one cannot recover, might it be desirable not to know? What ways of knowing and not knowing might be unbearable or pleasurable (or be a source of unbearable pleasure)? That the text powerfully raises such questions has been partially recognised by critics, who have implicitly characterised the narrative as charting the narrator's passage from ignorance to a knowledge of his own feelings. My own discussion will begin by establishing what is at stake in this interpretation of the narrative, before going on to offer a very different and, I hope, more compelling account of Coetzee's remarkable novel.

1.

Waiting for the Barbarians is narrated by an unnamed magistrate of an unnamed town at the frontier of an unnamed empire. The events of the novel are set in motion by the arrival of a secret policeman, Colonel Joll, who has been sent from 'the capital' to investigate rumours of a barbarian uprising. Joll and his party capture and torture a number of 'barbarians,' killing at least one. During the period of Joll's tenure, the magistrate largely absents himself, though his reluctant care for and queries about one victim attract the policeman's suspicion. In the aftermath of Joll's first departure, the magistrate begins a relationship - for want of a better word - with a woman known to us only as 'the barbarian girl,' who has been partially blinded and lamed by her

torturers.[1] The magistrate installs the girl in his apartments and engages in a peculiar and ambiguous ritual of washing and oiling her body, which has rightly been central to the novel's interest for many readers and critics. Though his engrossment with her body has a certain eroticism, these sessions mostly culminate with the magistrate falling into a deep sleep, and more than once he discourages the girl from initiating more recognisably sexual acts. The magistrate finds himself increasingly disenchanted and frustrated with his situation and with the girl herself, and makes a perilous journey across a desert to return her to 'the barbarians,' during which their relationship is at last sexually consummated. Before their final parting, the magistrate asks the girl to return to the town with him, but she declines. Upon his return, the magistrate is imprisoned and tortured by Joll's colleagues on suspicion of collaborating with the barbarians, only to be released without trial. Joll and his retinue later flee the town after their campaign to track the barbarians ends in disaster, leaving the magistrate to resume administrative control.

Though their relationship spans less than a third of the text, the magistrate's profound uncertainty and fervid speculations about his feelings for the barbarian girl dominate the novel. Early in the narrative, the magistrate begins to suspect that his desire for the girl might not differ fundamentally from the corporeal fascination of her torturers; by the end, these suspicions seem to have calcified into self-accusing certainty. Consequently, the majority of critics have described *Waiting for the Barbarians* as charting a passage from self-deception to illumination. Susan VanZanten Gallagher, for instance, characterises the magistrate as a 'man of conscience who must come to an understanding of responsibility and guilt' (120). For Dominic Head, the novel is 'a journey of self-discovery' (74), staging 'an ambivalent process of self-evaluation and

[1] Most critics have referred to the male narrator-protagonist as 'the magistrate,' and, following his lead, to the central female character as 'the barbarian girl.' As will become clear, part of the argument I make in this chapter is that, as readers and critics, we should be more sceptical of the magistrate's descriptions. Clearly the label 'barbarian' is problematic, as is the paternalistic connotation of 'girl.' The 'unnamed woman' might be the most appropriate term of reference, but there are several other unnamed women in this novel, and even 'woman' unambiguously designates her as an adult, when the text in fact does not clarify her age. Calling her a 'woman' might even risk occluding an ethically problematic aspect of the magistrate's narration; we would feel uncomfortable referring to Lolita or the young Ada as 'women' rather than 'girls,' with its greater moral charge. In the absence of an appropriate language, the reader should assume the presence of 'scare quotes' in my use of 'the barbarian girl' throughout this chapter.

self-critique: the uncovering of the magistrate's own complicity helps him to a deep understanding of the nature of Empire's imperialism, and to a burgeoning ethical stance' (72-3). Put in the terms of this study, the prevailing consensus is that the magistrate is initially bewildered by his feelings for the girl, but through the passage of time (and particularly through his own subjection to torture), he comes to know the underlying or essential nature of these feelings (that is, their being complicitous with the torturer's). In this chapter, I will illustrate that this is a fundamental misreading which has serious consequences for our understanding of the novel.

2.

I want to begin elucidating my disagreement with previous critics by considering the significance of the novel's narratorial tense and narrative temporality. Several early critical responses to *Waiting for the Barbarians* made much of its use of first-person present-tense narration, whereby the act of narrating seems to take place at the same time as the events being narrated. Dorrit Cohn suggests that 'Coetzee's novel provides no intrinsic reason for attributing past meaning to events referred to in [the] present tense' (*The Distinction of Fiction*, 102), and therefore should not be understood as a 'historical present' narration (by which she means the use of the present tense to describe past events for rhetorical effect). Nor can it be understood as an interior monologue in the manner of Molly Bloom's soliloquy in the final chapter of *Ulysses*, as Cohn points out with reference to the following manifestly paradoxical sentence: 'I doze and wake, drifting from one formless dream to another' (*Barbarians*, 102). Anne Waldron Neumann similarly argues that 'Coetzee rules out any possible occasion of narration,' though this emphatic claim is immediately undermined by her suggestion that '[t]he magistrate's (purported) narrative is perhaps only finally explicable in the reader's imagination as an act of the magistrate's imagination, perhaps the narrative he may wish *now* that he had made of his life had he been able to frame it *then*' (70), which reinstates the historical present interpretation she apparently ruled out. Cohn more cogently concludes that the 'innovation' of simultaneous narration is 'to emancipate first-person fictional narration from the dictates of formal mimetics, granting it the same degree (though not the same kind) of discursive freedom that we take for granted in third-person fiction: the license to tell a story in an idiom that

corresponds to no manner of real-world, natural discourse' (104-5). The claim being made here is that, like a third-person narrator's 'unnatural power to see into their characters' inner lives,' simultaneous narration employs a 'fiction-specific artifice' which is 'irretrievable on realistic grounds' - and is accepted as such by readers (105-6). Irmtraud Huber makes a similar argument in *Present Tense Narration in Contemporary Fiction* (1-2), which points to the increasingly widespread use of simultaneous narration in contemporary fiction and suggests that readers are no longer troubled by the form but rather accept what Cohn calls its 'artifictionality' (105). This seems to be borne out by contemporary critical responses to *Waiting for the Barbarians*, which rarely comment on the 'impossibility' of the novel's narratorial mode.

Nonetheless, it is worth pointing out that the claim made by both Neumann and Cohn, that Coetzee's novel provides *no* grounds for approaching it as a historical present narration, is something of a hostage to fortune. Consider this frequently discussed sentence: 'Of the screaming which people afterwards claim to have heard from the granary, I hear nothing' (5). The magistrate here invokes very specific posterior knowledge, which is irreconcilable with a consistent simultaneous narration.[2] That no critic has registered the blatant anachronism of this passage indicates the degree to which the predominant impression the novel makes upon readers is of a simultaneity of narration and event.[3] The temporal slippage here raises questions about what the magistrate knows at various points in the narrative and about what kinds of knowledge he might possess with peculiar power. But perhaps just as significant is the way the sentence blurs or renders undecidable the distinction between immediate experience and intense recollection - a blurring of equal thematic importance to the novel.

Rather than making global characterisations which the text resists, as the example above illustrates, it is more fruitful to explore what particular effects are facilitated by the present-tense form.[4] Coetzee's novel exploits the potential of present

[2] Matt DelConte (428) cites a very similar instance of implied future knowledge in Truman Capote's 'A Christmas Memory,' yet goes on to straightforwardly characterise *Waiting for the Barbarians* as a consistent simultaneous present narration.

[3] Sam Durrant (44-5), for instance, discusses this sentence at length without mentioning its anachronistic quality.

[4] John Bowen suggests that 'literary texts' inability to be interpreted by a consistent set of principles and methods may well be the (paradoxical) condition of their (impossible) existence' (*Other Dickens*, 2).

tense narration to heighten uncertainties about whether a given passage describes an experience of perception, dreaming, or fantasy. Similarly, present tense fictions can leave it ambiguous whether a given action occurs once or many times (for instance: 'From our ramparts we stare out over the wastes' [*Barbarians*, 41]). As Derek Attridge points out, as readers, '[e]ncouraged by the present tense and [first] person, we undergo, along with the Magistrate, the complex unfolding of feelings and associations. (The "impossibility" of this mode of narration, which we have already noted in Coetzee's earlier work, is never signalled, and is no barrier to the experience of immediacy)' (*J. M. Coetzee*, 44). James Phelan likewise claims that 'the absence of any retrospective perspective […] places the authorial audience's prospective experience of the narrative very close to the magistrate's ongoing experience' (234). Phelan goes on to argue that 'we frequently struggle to attain the necessary distance from the magistrate's views and actions' and that 'Coetzee uses [this effect] […] to exemplify one of his major thematic points about complicity' (235).

My reading of *Waiting for the Barbarians* in this chapter will have recourse to these effects and many others. But for the moment, I want to make a more obvious and general observation: only a simultaneous present tense narration can describe an 'immediate' lived experience (from which posterior reflection is absent), and then describe later recollections of and reflections on that experience once past.[5] The question of how experiences are transmuted in memory is explored, thematically and formally, by each of the authors in this study. The intense recollection of the past in *Ada or Ardor* is marked by erratic and disorientating changes in the person and tense of the language, complicating the relationships between memory and representation; the undecidable narrative of *Ill Seen Ill Said* produces a fundamental ambiguity about whether the narrator perceives, recollects, or invents the diegetic world; and the evocations of perception and memory in *Ancient Light* stress the ways that both are affected by what one knows and feels in the present and past. The innovative form of *Waiting for the Barbarians* enables a more direct, and perhaps more ambitious, engagement with this concern. Because the magistrate both narrates his thoughts and

[5] As with the question of whether the narrator of *Ill Seen Ill Said* 'really' perceives, recollects, or imagines the diegetic world, the immediacy of this experience is of course no less fictional than the events of the novel; the more salient and interesting point is that, for the most part, *Waiting for the Barbarians* reads *as if* the narrated events and the act of narration are occurring at the same time.

feelings about the girl as they occur and reflects on these experiences during and after their relationship has come to an end, as readers, we are placed in unusual proximity with both present and past experience.

This raises a serious methodological question, which is closely related to the issue of experiential description and narratorial synoptic statement I explored in relation to Banville. Because *Waiting for the Barbarians* presents us with descriptions of the magistrate's thoughts and feelings *and* his contemporaneous and retrospective characterisations of them, we need to address the relationship between these multiple engagements - especially given that their implications often differ from and even contradict one another. There is a marked contrast between the magistrate's initial bewilderment about his feelings for the girl and the more confident, self-lacerating account he gives later in the novel. Just as I argued, with respect to Banville, that we should suspend extra-textual truth claims and situate description and statement within their fictive context, here, I suggest that critics have too quickly identified the magistrate's retrospective characterisations as the definitive 'meaning' of the novel, rather than accounting for the interconnections between the text's descriptive and declarative qualities. For Paul de Man, the tension between statement and rhetoric is what fundamentally defines a work as 'literary' - understood as 'any text that implicitly or explicitly signifies its own rhetorical mode and prefigures its own misunderstanding as the correlative of its rhetorical nature […] [whether] by declarative statement or by poetic inference' (*Blindness and Insight*, 136). One need not go as far as de Man to accept that, as literary critics, we should not restrict our attention to textual statement, but attend to the relationships between the constative and the rhetorical dimensions of literary language.

Many critical accounts of Coetzee's novel have focused on one particular passage where, at the most self-reflexive and declarative point of the magistrate's narration, he describes his past feelings for the barbarian girl as 'lugubrious sensual pity,' 'envy, pity, cruelty all masquerading as desire,' 'the laborious denial of impulse,' and 'confused and futile gestures of expiation' (147-8). Later, I will quote this passage in full and show these characterisations to be much more equivocal and complex than critics have recognised. For the moment, however, I want to put forward a simple theoretical contention: we should not necessarily consider the claims of a first-person narrator as more accurate and impartial just because they appear to be motivated by

self-derision rather than self-justification. There is no intrinsic reason for us to treat the magistrate's claims as insights, rather than fundamental mischaracterisations. After all, he describes his feelings very differently elsewhere in the text: 'I wanted to do what was right, I wanted to make reparation: I will not deny this decent impulse, however mixed with more questionable motives: there must always be a place for penance and reparation' (88). As will become clear, my criticism of prior accounts is not that they have unquestioningly accepted all of the magistrate's retrospective claims as true, but that they have been methodologically inconsistent, treating some of his statements as the recognition of a truth whilst ignoring or rejecting others as self-deceptions, without explaining their reasoning behind these disparate treatments. This inconsistency has led many critics credulously to accept some of the magistrate's highly questionable self-accusations, resulting in a significant misunderstanding of the novel. Illustrating this requires a focused, extended reading, which attends closely to the present-tense evocation of the magistrate's feelings, and then to his later retrospective descriptions. For this reason, the critical narrative sketched above will be bracketed for much of this chapter, before being returned to and explicitly challenged.

3.

Many readers of *Waiting for the Barbarians* have understandably been drawn to the extraordinary scene, early in the novel, when the magistrate washes and massages the barbarian girl's body for the first time. A few days after he notices her begging on the streets, the magistrate seeks the girl out and brings her to his apartments:

> The fire is lit. I draw the curtains, light the lamp. She refuses the stool, but yields up her sticks and kneels in the centre of the carpet.
> 'This is not what you think it is,' I say. The words come reluctantly. Can I really be about to excuse myself? Her lips are clenched shut, her ears too no doubt, she wants nothing of old men and their bleating consciences. I prowl around her, talking about our vagrancy ordinances, sick at myself. Her skin begins to glow in the warmth of the closed room. She tugs at her coat, opens her throat to the fire. The distance between myself and her torturers, I realize, is negligible; I shudder.
> 'Show me your feet,' I say in the new thick voice that seems to be mine. 'Show me what they have done to your feet.' (29)

The passage troubles our ability to distinguish external action from interior experience, at once conveying and concealing the magistrate's feelings with great effect. The magistrate's noting the lit fire, drawing the curtains, and lighting the lamp lead us to suspect that he is planning to seduce the girl, a suspicion heightened by the sexually charged dynamic of resistance and capitulation in 'refuses' and 'yields,' and the girl's (potentially) submissive pose. From his protestation - 'This is not what you think it is' - we gather that he imagines that the girl has interpreted his actions in precisely these terms. The question, '[c]an I really be about to excuse myself,' prompts Attridge to rhetorically ask: 'an excuse for what exactly? Neither the Magistrate nor the reader knows' (44). Though strictly true, the tropes of seduction do initially encourage readers to suspect that the magistrate's excuse has something to do with sexual desire. But then the passage takes a peculiar turn. The 'old men and their bleating consciences' might still allude to unwanted sexual attentions, and the succeeding sentences certainly maintain an erotic charge, but, as the magistrate's thoughts turn increasingly towards the girl's torture, another possibility is raised: that this stifled, unarticulated excuse might be for his failure to protect the girl from Joll and his men. This is an early example of how the magistrate, at some conscious or unconscious level, associates his obscure desire for the girl with the fact of her torture. Yet, it is important to recognise that any suspicions readers might have about the magistrate's feelings are not generated by explicit descriptions of sexual desire or guilt; in fact, our only clear indications about his feelings capture the reluctance, hesitancy, and revulsion which accompanies his actions - and, the passage insinuates, the feelings which underly them. In *Touching Feeling*, Eve Sedgwick writes: 'Affects can be, and are, attached to things, people, ideas, sensations, relations, activities, ambitions, institutions, and any number of other things, including other affects. Thus, one can be excited by anger, disgusted by shame, or surprised by joy' (19). The passage gives us several affects - including excitement, shame, and disgust - and initially encourages us to surmise that they are responses to recognising feelings of erotic desire, only to cast doubt upon that assumption.

The suspicion that the magistrate might be compelled by sexual desire is most overtly suggested through the descriptive attention lavished on the girl's physical features. 'Her skin begins to glow' gives grammatical agency to and concentrates upon '[h]er skin,' invoking the warmth of the room only by way of how it affects her body.

This corporeal fascination takes on a more threatening aspect with the description of how she 'opens her throat to the fire,' which, in its evocation of exposure and vulnerability, seems to prompt the startling pronouncement that follows: 'The distance between myself and her torturers, I realize, is negligible.' Though the use of 'realize' suggests that the magistrate apprehends this as a 'fact,' a closer reading will illustrate that this perception is more conflicted than 'realize' might suggest. Attridge claims that:

> [A]t one level it is an absurd statement: the distance between him and the girl's torturers is anything but negligible. The association is felt, not thought, however: the sudden vulnerability of the exposed throat, the surge of erotic attraction, the obscurity of the impulses that make themselves known—these are elements in the reader's experience as well as the Magistrate's. (44-5)

This seems right up to a point, though, given his emphasis on the 'obscurity' of these impulses, Attridge likely means that they are 'present' rather than 'known.' Indeed, the drama and affective pull of the passage originates in the way that precisely what impels the magistrate's actions is both known and profoundly unknown (as Attridge implicitly recognises in his description of the 'complex of feelings' as 'momentary complicity with *something* dark and destructive' [45, emphasis added]). By only *intimating* some obscure and illicit emotion - a desire which, when recognised, needs excusing and gives rise to self-revulsion - the passage powerfully arouses a prurient interest in the nature of the magistrate's feelings. This is part of the more general way in which the novel solicits from readers a curiosity about the magistrate's experience - a curiosity which, of course, has its affective dimension. Though the passage fosters a growing anticipation that the magistrate intends to sexually seduce the barbarian girl, this anticipation is complicated, or even confounded, with his request (or demand?) that she show him her feet.[6] Is this a repudiation of his erotic interest - an attempt to redress the damage done to her - or is the damage integral to the magistrate's interest? Is this a pretext for stripping the girl, or are her feet the focus of his desire? Might this act confirm or refute his proximity to the torturer? What feelings are being

[6] This anticipation is not significantly diminished for re-readers of the text: the sexual suggestiveness of the writing still encourages us to make inferences about the magistrate's intentions and desires, and the nature of his intentions and desires ultimately remains unknown.

suppressed, or diverted, or pursued? The passage generates multiple expectations which are in tension with one another, including the expectation that this is going to be a familiar scene of seduction, but also the sense that something much more unusual is taking place.

The inscrutability which surrounds the magistrate's experience only increases with the strange and enigmatic description of his washing the girl's feet:

> 'You should sit,' I say. I help her off with the coat, seat her on the stool, pour the water into the basin, and begin to wash her feet. For a while her legs remain tense; then they relax.
> I wash slowly, working up a lather, gripping her firm-fleshed calves, manipulating the bones and tendons of her feet, running my fingers between her toes. I change my position to kneel not in front of her but beside her, so that, holding a leg between elbow and side, I can caress the foot with both hands.
> I lose myself in the rhythm of what I am doing. I lose awareness of the girl herself. There is a space of time which is blank to me: perhaps I am not even present. When I come to, my fingers have slackened, the foot rests in the basin, my head droops.
> […] I am aware of the girl struggling to stand up; but now, I think, she must take care of herself. My eyes close. It becomes an intense pleasure to keep them closed, to savour the blissful giddiness. I stretch out on the carpet. In an instant I am asleep. (30)

The passage again plays on the potential for the narration to inflect the magistrate's experience to greater and lesser degrees. The initial description of his sitting the girl down and beginning to wash her feet details his actions without explicitly invoking his affective experience. As the focus shifts to her feet, though direct reporting of his feelings is still eschewed, an eroticised mode of description picks up with the magistrate 'gripping her firm-fleshed calves' and 'caress[ing] the foot with both hands' (note the depersonalising definite article rather than possessive personal pronoun). This apparent eroticisation, and the way the earlier quotation enjoins readers to imagine that the magistrate is seized by sexual desire, encourages us to read the passage up to this point as occluding or cloaking feelings of rising excitement, arousal, and anticipation. But any such expectation is unsettled by the surprising shift of the third paragraph, the magistrate being so absorbed that he loses awareness of himself and the girl. The later assertion that the girl must now 'take care of herself' subtly insinuates that the magistrate might even think of his actions as a form of care. It

would seem that washing her body is not, then, a mere pretext, or perhaps he becomes so engrossed that he loses interest in pursuing more directly sexual fulfilment. The use of the present tense makes it particularly ambiguous whether, in the 'space of time which is blank' to the magistrate, he is unconscious or only later unable to recall what he experienced. The speculation, 'perhaps I am not even present,' presumably identifies 'I' with his conscious rather than bodily self, the 'perhaps' crucially suggesting that the magistrate is himself uncertain about the state he has entered. This uncertainty is sustained by 'When I come to,' which might be him returning to consciousness after sleep, or a trance, or after being otherwise absorbed. When a stronger affective register does surface, the magistrate finds 'intense pleasure' and 'blissful giddiness' not in the girl, but in keeping his eyes closed.

This strange state of semi-consciousness sounds nothing like envy, pity, cruelty, desire, or the denial of impulse, given how intentional and object-directed these feelings are. But if the magistrate's pleasurable insentience cannot straightforwardly be described as a manifestation or repression of sexual desire, what feelings and motivations can we say *are* present? Is this the gratification of a fetish, an attempt to relate to the girl's body in a way that differs from torture, a pursuit of forgetfulness, or a slip from erotic reverie into stupor? All these things seem to be in play, yet fall short of capturing this moment of the novel. The sense of a gap between our understanding and the magistrate's feelings is only heightened by the obvious biblical associations of washing feet, which the magistrate, living in a fictional world in which the bible is neither mentioned nor alluded to, presumably does not share. It's not that the passage lacks affective content or character, but that the magistrate's experience, and the manner of its evocation, powerfully resists being grasped or articulated. Indeed, one of the critical challenges of writing about *Waiting for the Barbarians* is the difficulty of finding a language to describe the peculiarity of the magistrate's affective experience. Not unlike the way Banville's narrators are mystified and fascinated by *why* they find certain experiences compelling - and forcefully solicit our involvement in that fascination - the magistrate's strange feelings both invite and

disable unambiguous explication, from himself and from readers.[7] Much of the drama of the novel is generated by the sheer allure and discomfort of enigmatic, and perhaps unknowable, feelings - both one's own feelings and those of other people.

In the pages which describe the magistrate's relationship with the barbarian girl, an array of obscure affects seem to be present. But most ubiquitous are the magistrate's *feelings of uncertainty* about his own feelings - what Sianne Ngai calls 'affective disorientation' (the state of feeling 'confused about *what* one is feeling') (14). The novel's descriptions are persistently marked by such affective disorientation, one effect of which is to suspend the reader's capacity to make sense of the magistrate's experience and actions, complicating our own affective responses:

> [O]ften in the very act of caressing her I am overcome with sleep as if poleaxed, fall into oblivion sprawled upon her body, and wake an hour or two later dizzy, confused, thirsty. These dreamless spells are like death to me, or enchantment, blank, outside time. (33)

The magistrate's being 'overcome' and 'falling into oblivion' draws on the language of sexual gratification, but we also have affects resembling illness or fever; whatever feeling is being evoked here, it is not, or not only, suppressed erotic desire. The discomforting image of the magistrate 'sprawled upon her body' is only made more troubling by the ancillary, almost incidental, reference to the girl amidst the intricate description of his own experience. Yet the sheer strangeness of this depiction leaves us uncertain about how and why he is so affected by caressing the girl, inhibiting or interfering with any simple ethical resolution. The magistrate's 'inexplicable attentions' (35) - inexplicable to himself? to the girl? to readers? - illustrate how contagious feelings of confusion about what one is feeling can be; how literary representations of affective disorientations can also be affectively disorienting for readers (a phenomenon discussed in each of the chapters of this thesis).

The magistrate's bewilderment about his feelings and intentions towards the barbarian girl are manifest not only through experiential descriptions, as in the

[7] Based on his reading of the manuscript drafts of *Waiting for the Barbarians*, David Attwell suggests: 'The literary criticism makes much of the *indirection* of these encounters in the novel, the mystery of non-connection and alterity; what the manuscripts reveal is that this quality is a function of editing, of late, tactical omissions; deletion is shown to be not incidental but central to the process of invention' (*J. M. Coetzee and the Life of Writing*, 124-5).

quotation above, but also through his statements of feeling uncertain, which are rife throughout the early chapters of the novel: 'I know what to do with her no more than one cloud in the sky knows what to do with another' (36); 'It seems appropriate that a man who does not know what to do with the woman in his bed should not know what to write' (63); 'I am with her not for whatever raptures she may promise or yield but for other reasons, which remain as obscure to me as ever' (71). After their hazardous journey across the desert to return the girl to her people, the magistrate has a change of heart and asks the girl to return to the town with him: '"Why?" The word falls with deathly softness from her lips. She knows that it confounds me, has confounded me from the beginning' (77). Note that the magistrate not only confronts his helplessness to answer her question, but also his sense that she knows and has always known him to be fundamentally mystified by his desire for her. 'The word falls with deathly softness from her lips' affectingly conveys a sense of the plaintive futility of the magistrate's need to understand the girl, the sentence giving agency only to the word, which can only fall, and with a deathly softness.

This oddly poignant epistemic desire reaches a crescendo in the scene of their final parting:

> She is going, she is almost gone. This is the last time to look on her clearly face to face, to scrutinize the motions of my heart, to try to understand who she really is: hereafter, I know, I will begin to re-form her out of my repertoire of memories according to my questionable desires. (79)

There is a pathos to the use of the present tense here, generating a sense that the girl is disappearing even as we read, an effect intensified by the shortness of the clauses, as these fleeting last moments pass all too quickly. The finality of the moment is subsequently explicitly brought into view: 'This is the last time to look on her.' The opening of the second sentence exploits the various different possible uses of commas to extraordinary effect, troubling our ability to grasp the syntactical relationships between the constituent clauses, and, as a result, the connections being drawn between the magistrate's looking at the girl's face, scrutinising the motions of his heart, and trying to understand who the girl really is. We might read these commas as simply separating items in a list - this is his last chance to do three distinct things. Yet the shift from one verb of visual perception ('to look') to another ('to scrutinize') suggests

that the second phrase qualifies the first, the commas being used to open and close a dependent clause - the implication being that the magistrate looks at the girl's face in order to scrutinise the motions of his heart. A similar ambiguity attends 'to try to understand who she really is,' which might describe a distinct act, or qualify one of the first two phrases. Again, the semantic proximity of 'scrutinize' and 'try to understand' suggests a qualifying relationship - with the striking implication that the girl is the real locus of the magistrate's need, and that he scrutinises his heart only to understand her. These syntactical ambiguities generate and involve readers in a profound uncertainty about whether the magistrate can distinguish his own feelings from his understanding of another person, and vice-versa. (The magistrate's desires are 'questionable' in the sense of being ethically dubious, but also in the sense of being subject to questions - from himself, and from the girl, and from readers.) The close of the quotation sustains the pathos of finality, the elegiac 'hereafter' suggesting that, from this moment, the girl will in some sense cease to live for the magistrate.[8] Implicit to this sentiment is a deprecation of memory, a repudiation of its power to capture and preserve the vitality of experience, and the vitality of others; we should keep this deprecation in mind when considering passages from later in the novel. Notably, critics have not taken up the magistrate's direct forewarning here that he will begin to 're-form her' through recollection; that time will obscure rather than illuminate both the girl and the motions of his heart.

The magistrate's fears and anxieties about failing to remember the girl build through the scenes immediately following their parting, before gradually subsiding. This disquiet is most intensely evoked in the following passage:

> I am forgetting the girl. Drifting towards sleep, it comes to me with cold clarity that a whole day has passed in which I have not thought of her. Worse, I cannot remember certainly what she looks like. From her empty eyes there always seemed to be a haze spreading, a blankness that overtook all of her. I stare into the darkness waiting for an image to form; but the only memory on which I can absolutely rest is of my oiled hands sliding over her knees, her calves, her ankles. I try to recall our few intimacies but confuse them with memories of all the other warm flesh in which I have sheathed myself in the

[8] There is a compacted and muted version of the magistrate's tortuous struggle with his ambivalent desire to both remember and forget the barbarian girl at the end of his briefer, much less intense, relationship with the cook, Mai: 'For an evening or two I experience a quiet, fickle sadness, before I begin to forget' (167).

> course of a lifetime. I am forgetting her, and forgetting her, I know, deliberately. Not from the moment when I stopped before her at the barracks gate and elected her have I known the root of my need for her; and now I am steadily engaged in burying her in oblivion. (94-5)

The passage invokes various (potentially conflicting) senses of what it means to forget a person, including simply not thinking about someone, being unable to recall them, and confusing them with others. The 'cold clarity' with which the magistrate becomes aware of not having thought about the girl suggests the admission of a personal failing, a guilt at recognising a responsibility betrayed. The negative ethical charge is sharpened with the implication that '[w]orse' than not thinking about the girl is being unable to recall her. That he is 'only' able to picture her legs, whilst a 'haze' and 'blankness' spreads from the expressionlessness of 'her empty eyes,' suggests that, more than recalling physical detail, what is at stake here is a fading sense of a distinct subjectivity, of 'who she really is.' This sense of forgetting, not as simply not remembering but as distortion or fabrication, is intensified with the magistrate confusing images of the girl with 'memories of all the other warm flesh' he has 'sheathed' himself in. The distastefully depersonalised use of 'flesh' to evoke the bodies of all the women he has had sex with, as though women were only their genitalia (the Latin 'vāgīna' meaning 'sheath' or 'scabbard'), encourages us to share the magistrate's moralising indictment of his failure to recall the girl in her distinctiveness.

There is, perhaps, an ambiguity as to whether the magistrate sheathes his penis or his whole body in this warm flesh, raising the possibility that one might use a woman's body for many things, including to feel secure and insulated, whilst still identifying her only with the comforts and pleasures she brings; as undifferentiated, impersonal. There is a similar referential multiplicity in the deceptively complex sentence, 'I am forgetting her, and forgetting her, I know, deliberately.' In this context, 'I know' again suggests a self-recognition, referentially prising apart the self, or part of the self, who 'deliberately' forgets (can one deliberately forget?) and the self who perceives and deplores that forgetting. (We are very much on the terrain occupied by Banville's novels, with a narrator-protagonist confronting a conflicted relationship to recollection, desiring at once to remember and to forget, and finding that some experiences resist both impulses.) There is a renewed pathos with the magistrate's being 'steadily engaged in burying her in oblivion,' an implicit self-recrimination in

invoking the idea of someone dying for us as our memories of them fade and distort. This powerful evocation of the magistrate's sorrow and guilt at his failure to grasp who the girl is ends with a direct and explicit statement about the enigmatic nature of his feelings about her: 'Not from the moment when I stopped before her at the barracks gate and elected her have I known the root of my need for her.' Importantly, this assertion reflects the experiential descriptions in the early parts of the novel which, as we have seen, are marked by the magistrate's profound uncertainty about his feelings and desires for the barbarian girl.

4.

Though the earlier sections of *Waiting for the Barbarians* stress the magistrate's ignorance of his own feelings and desires, the later parts of the novel characterise his experience in very different terms, the most significant example being the passage I partially quoted earlier (147-8). Before turning to that passage, I want to consider another moment from earlier in the novel, which has also been invoked by several critics to support the received interpretation of the narrative. It shortly follows on from the most straightforward sexual act between the magistrate and the barbarian girl, prior to their journey into the desert. The girl halts the magistrate's ritual massaging and 'guides' his hand between her legs; he manually stimulates her until 'she arches and shudders':

> I experience no excitement during this the most collaborative act we have yet undertaken. It brings me no closer to her and seems to affect her as little. I search her face the next morning: it is blank. She dresses and stumbles down to her day in the kitchen.
> I am disquieted. 'What do I have to do to move you?': these are the words I hear in my head in the subterranean murmur that has begun to take the place of conversation. 'Does no one move you?'; and with a shift of horror I behold the answer that has been waiting all the time offer itself to me in the image of a face masked by two black glassy insect eyes from which there comes no reciprocal gaze but only my doubled image cast back at me.
> I shake my head in a fury of disbelief. *No! No! No!* I cry to myself. It is I who am seducing myself, out of vanity, into these meanings and correspondences. What depravity is it that is creeping upon me? I search for secrets and answers, no matter how bizarre, like an old woman reading tea-leaves. There is nothing to link me with torturers, people who sit waiting like beetles in dark cellars. How can I believe that a bed is anything but a bed, a woman's body anything

> but a site of joy? I must assert my distance from Colonel Joll! I will not suffer for his crimes! (47-8)

Phelan claims that the magistrate is 'protesting too much,' and 'is too close to his complicity with the Empire to recognize how his confused effort at expiation actually perpetuates [the girl's] oppression' (236). Similarly, for Susan VanZanten Gallagher, the scene stages a 'recognition' which '[t]he magistrate immediately denies' (127), and, for David Attwell, it is a 'realization of complicity' (*J. M. Coetzee: South Africa and the Politics of Writing*, 80). It is important to recognise the implicit epistemological carriage of this critical vocabulary, 'recognise' and 'realise' both strongly suggesting that the magistrate apprehends a *truth*, a disturbing fact about himself.

Precisely what 'fact' these critics believe the magistrate recognises is not, however, immediately clear. This is partly because the magistrate's complicity (or otherwise) can be conceived in two quite different ways. There is the question of institutional complicity - the magistrate's role as an official of the empire who condoned Joll's actions. To my knowledge, no critic has denied that the magistrate is institutionally complicit in the torture of 'the barbarians.' But the crux of the issue is this other sense in which the magistrate might be 'complicit' - because his interest in the girl might be essentially no different from Joll's.[9] The magistrate's consciousness of the fact that the barbarian girl has been subjected to torture is manifestly part of both his interest in the girl and his hesitation in pursuing a more ordinary sexual relationship. But to recognise that the magistrate's feelings are in part caused by the cognisance of her torture does not necessarily make these feelings any less enigmatic. Attwell describes the magistrate as 'awakening to the fact that his desire is diabolically complicit with Joll's' (*J. M. Coetzee: South Africa and the Politics of Writing*, n9, 132), a comment which makes explicit the epistemological charge of his reading. There is certainly a perverse aspect to the magistrate's attentions to the girl's feet and the marks on her body. But we might think of Freud's suggestion that a 'predisposition to all perversions is a universal and fundamentally human trait' (*The Psychology of Love*, 168). Indeed, Attwell invokes precisely this sense of desire as 'polymorphously perverse' in

[9] The lack of clarity about what kinds of 'complicity' the magistrate might be guilty of is especially surprising given that many critics have connected the issue of torture in *Waiting for the Barbarians* with political events in South Africa at the time Coetzee was writing the novel. For instance, see: Attwell (*J. M. Coetzee: South Africa and the Politics of Writing* and *J. M. Coetzee and the Life of Writing*) and Durrant.

his later reading of *Waiting for the Barbarians* (*J. M. Coetzee and the Life of Writing*, 111). To equate the magistrate's undoubtedly perverse interest with a complicity in torture is to impose an impoverished and restrictively normative view of desire; by this standard, who would not be condemned? Further, such a move risks colluding with the magistrate, whose obsessive preoccupation with the relationship between his desire and Joll's threatens to distract from the way in which he is unequivocally complicit - in his failure to protest against the mistreatment of 'the barbarians.'

Like Attwell, Gallagher suggests that '[t]he magistrate participates in the acts of the torturer first by his passive acceptance of the actions of Colonel Joll and later in his objectification of the woman as the site of torture' (128), a position she supports with the claim that 'What do I have to do to move you?' is 'the question of the torturer' (127). But *is* this the question of the torturer? We might imagine that torturers have all sorts of motivations: perhaps to elicit information, or, as Elaine Scarry suggests, 'not to elicit information but visibly to deconstruct the prisoner's voice' (*The Body in Pain*, 20), or any one of several motivations mapped out by Foucault, such as the desire 'to reproduce the crime on the visible body of the criminal' (55).[10] It is far from obvious that torturers are primarily concerned with eliciting any kind of emotional reaction. Equally, we might ask 'what do I have to do to move you?' in many situations: when trying to persuade an intransigent bureaucrat, or rebuking those who are impassive to our pleas for help, or when confronting an unrequited love. Gallagher credulously accepts the connection the magistrate, again at some conscious or unconscious level, makes between his desire for the girl to respond emotionally and the interrogative drive of torture - a connection which, on closer inspection, looks, if not implausible, then at least strained.

Critics have tended to treat the passage as more declarative than speculative, and yet have conspicuously ignored the magistrate's sense that he might be making a specious association: 'It is I who am seducing myself, out of vanity, into these meanings and correspondences.'[11] The sentence raises the possibility that, for the

[10] The pertinence of Foucault's understanding of torture to *Waiting for the Barbarians* is indicated by the scene in which Joll writes the word 'ENEMY' in charcoal on the backs of the captured barbarians, which is then 'washed clean' (115) by the soldiers beating them with staves. As many critics have noted, this scene bears a notable resemblance to Franz Kafka's 'In the Penal Colony.'

[11] Phelan (236) omits this sentence from his quotation, a decision which is indicative of the way critics have presented the passage as more declarative than it in fact is.

magistrate, perceiving a correspondence between himself and Joll might be distressing but also seductive, in the double sense of being alluring and misleading, a luring astray. Not unlike the vicarious connections Alex contrives between himself and Billy through Mrs Gray, behind the magistrate's fraught preoccupation with the potential resemblance between his feelings and Joll's lies the implicit suggestion that the two might be rivals, a bond which, as Sedgwick shows, can be 'as intense and potent as the bond that links either of the rivals to the beloved' (*Between Men*, 21). Or we might think of de Man's claim about the pleasures of confession in his reading of Rousseau, discussed by Coetzee in an essay published a few years after *Waiting for the Barbarians*.[12] Referring to Rousseau's tale of stealing a ribbon and framing another servant called Marion for the theft, de Man notes the 'easy flow of hyperboles' and the 'obvious satisfaction in the tone and the eloquence' of the writing, and claims that:

> What Rousseau *really* wanted is neither the ribbon, nor Marion, but the public scene of exposure which he actually gets. […] [S]hame used as excuse permits repression to function as revelation and thus to make pleasure and guilt interchangeable. Guilt is forgiven because it allows for the pleasure of revealing its repression. (*Allegories of Reading*, 285-6)

As Coetzee points out, there is a naivety in de Man treating Rousseau's desire as 'historically knowable' (*Doubling the Point*, 267), but the presiding insight - that the contemplation and confession of shameful desires can be a source of peculiar, perhaps perverse, pleasures - is both illuminating and pertinent. The above passage of *Waiting for the Barbarians* contains a resistance not only to the perceived association with Joll, but also to the very idea that motivations and desires might be more complex or ambivalent than they appear. We see this in the disparaging way in which the desire to probe feelings is likened to 'an old woman reading tea-leaves,' in the magistrate's affectedly artless incredulity that 'a woman's body [could be] anything but a site of joy,' and in the tension between these two sentiments (is the old woman's body a site of joy?). Or we might consider the magistrate's description of his sexual stimulation of the girl as 'the most collaborative act [they] have yet undertaken,' 'collaborative' being an incongruously cerebral term, and one which oddly suggests a 'traitorous

[12] 'Confession and Double Thoughts: Tolstoy, Rousseau, and Dostoevsky,' reprinted in *Doubling the Point*, 251-293.

cooperation with the enemy' (*OED*). To read the passage, as Phelan, Gallagher, and Attwell do, as the magistrate apprehending and rejecting a truth about his desire (and a truth he will later articulate as fact), is to lose sight of the way the writing mobilises larger questions about the conflicting and hidden motivations we might have for perceiving ourselves and others in different ways - and especially in ways that at first sight seem to be a source of shame and distress.

5.

Within the critical narrative that claims that the magistrate comes to know the 'nature' of his past feelings, the following passage of *Waiting for the Barbarians* has played the pivotal role of apparently confirming what, prior to this point, the magistrate had only suspected about himself. The prose is tightly reticulated, each sentence qualifying or responding to those which precede them, and it is therefore necessary to quote at some length:

> There is no limit to the foolishness of men of my age. Our only excuse is that we leave no mark of our own on the girls who pass through our hands: our convoluted desires, our ritualized lovemaking, our elephantine ecstasies are soon forgotten, they shrug off our clumsy dance as they drive straight as arrows into the arms of the men whose children they will bear, the young and vigorous and direct. Our loving leaves no mark. Whom will that other girl with the blind face remember: me with my silk robe and my dim lights and my perfumes and oils and my unhappy pleasures, or that other cold man with the mask over his eyes who gave the orders and pondered the sounds of her intimate pain? Whose was the last face she saw plainly on this earth but the face behind the glowing iron? Though I cringe with shame, even here and now, I must ask myself whether, when I lay head to foot with her, fondling and kissing those broken ankles, I was not in my heart of hearts regretting that I could not engrave myself on her as deeply. […] [S]he will never be courted and married in the normal way: she is marked for life as the property of a stranger, and no one will approach her save in the spirit of lugubrious sensual pity that she detected and rejected in me. From the moment my steps paused and I stood before her at the barracks gate she must have felt a miasma of deceit closing about her: envy, pity, cruelty all masquerading as desire. And in my lovemaking not impulse but the laborious denial of impulse! I remember her sober smile. From the very first she knew me for a false seducer. She listened to me, then she listened to her heart, and rightly she acted in accord with her heart. If only she had found the words to tell me! 'That is not how you do it,' she should have said, stopping me in the act. 'If you want to learn how to do it, ask your friend with the black eyes.' Then she should have

> continued, so as not to leave me without hope: 'But if you want to love me you will have to turn your back on him and learn your lesson elsewhere.' If she had told me then, if I had understood her, if I had been in a position to understand her, if I had believed her, if I had been in a position to believe her, I might have saved myself from a year of confused and futile gestures of expiation. (147-8)

Part of the complexity of the passage is its subtle and fluid shifts between speculatively describing the magistrate's experience, and speculatively describing the girl's. We have already seen how the novel surprisingly - and movingly - unsettles this distinction. Nevertheless, to engage with the received interpretation of the narrative, for the moment, I want to set aside the characterisations of the girl's thoughts and feelings and focus on the characterisation of the magistrate's.

Several critics have treated this moment in the novel in a similar manner to the previous passage, either quoting it partly or fully without explication, as though its meaning and significance were self-evident, or by describing it using the epistemologically loaded vocabulary of 'recognition,' 'understanding,' 'realisation,' 'insight,' and so on. Rosemary Jolly, for instance, claims that the magistrate 'understands to some degree the nature of his desire for the "girl"' (129), without clarifying why this represents a genuine or true insight, as opposed to the very different 'insights' articulated elsewhere in the novel. Phelan gives perhaps the most explicit account of why he privileges this passage above the magistrate's other, disparate assertions about his feelings:

> [H]e acquires a new understanding of his actions towards the woman, an understanding that Coetzee highlights by the length and occasional eloquence of its articulation […]. This moment of insight is so powerful because in it the magistrate so clearly articulates the view of himself that Coetzee has asked his audience to adopt. (236-7)

This invocation of the author is both problematic and besides the point: without evidence, one might attribute any view to Coetzee, not to mention the serious objections we might have to the assumption that the author's view of a text is the authoritative one. As literary critics, surely we show a greater fidelity to the text by attributing the style of a first-person narration to the *narrator-protagonist* before we make any extra-textual appeals, unless we have powerful reasons to proceed otherwise. Moreover, when the stylistic qualities of the above-quoted passage are considered in

their fictive context, it is far from clear why the 'length' and 'eloquence' of a description should encourage us to treat its content as truthful, or even sincere. Recall that, for de Man, the length and eloquence of Rousseau's tale about the ribbon signified not its truthfulness but rather his pleasure in fulfilling a desire for exhibitionistic confession. Given how close present-tense narration is to the narrator's phenomenological experience, it would be more plausible to read length and eloquence as reflecting the period of time and degree of intensity with which a narrator dwells on or is preoccupied by a given subject; the magistrate's obsessive concern with the barbarian girl and his feelings about her throughout the novel would certainly support this view.

We should also put pressure on Phelan's claim that the style of the passage *is* characterised by 'eloquence,' and the wider critical belief that this eloquence bears out the sincerity of the magistrate's 'insight.' The quotation is, in fact, marked by an 'easy flow of hyperboles' (as de Man says of Rousseau), an excess of assertion which borders on cliché. Note the repeated use of 'no' as an adjective signifying *absolute* absence ('There is no limit to the foolishness of men of my age'; 'Our loving leaves no mark'; 'no one will approach her'), and the magistrate's insistence that the girl *instantly* perceived the nature of his desire ('From the moment'; 'From the very first'). Or consider the sentences with which Phelan begins his quotation: 'From the very first she knew me for a false seducer. She listened to me, then she listened to her heart, and rightly she acted in accord with her heart.' The melodramatic tenor should make us pause before we ascribe to these sentences the epistemological status of a truth perceived. Why is this sincerity, rather than an aggrandisement of evil, or even playful irony? The apparent insight behind this confession is also far more ambiguous than it might appear. Presumably the magistrate is calling himself a 'false seducer' in the usual sense of an unfaithful lover. But he is also 'false' in another sense, being inauthentic, deceptive, someone who appears to be but is not in fact a seducer - and this second sense actually accords more closely with the novel's earlier descriptions. Which sense is Phelan endorsing as 'insight,' and why? This small phrase is part of the wider tonal instability of the passage, its overly dramatic style raising questions about the degree to which the magistrate means what he says or says what he means. The ambiguity of this moment is critically important, insofar as it shows how predominantly treating the passage as declarative, and quoting it as if its declared meaning were

straightforwardly true, risks mischaracterising it, domesticating and shutting down its rhetorical complexity. To be clear, I am not suggesting that all of the magistrate's reflections are equally unreliable, but that the text gives attentive readers good reason for questioning many of his putative 'insights,' as is the case here.

Critics have tended not to delve into the semantic ambiguities of the passage partly because its rhetoric is very much that of a reluctant recognition of an unpalatable truth. This effect is perhaps most pronounced in the magistrate's comparison between himself and Joll: 'Though I cringe with shame, even here and now, I must ask myself whether, when I lay head to foot with her, fondling and kissing those broken ankles, I was not in my heart of hearts regretting that I could not engrave myself on her as deeply.' Gallagher suggests that 'the magistrate's desire to "know" the woman' is a desire 'to uncover her deepest and most hidden feelings, to engrave himself on her' (128), paraphrasing and invoking this sentence in an affirmative manner, treating it more as assertion than speculation. DelConte similarly re-states this complex sentence in a simplified, propositional form: 'The magistrate regrets that he cannot have nearly the effect on the woman that Joll does' (138).[13] Though neither critic spells this out, presumably it is the negative formulation ('whether […] I was not'), the frame of unavoidable self-interrogation ('must ask myself'), and, above all, the presence of shame, which encourages us to read this as the magistrate reaching a painful realisation about himself. Yet one of the peculiarities of shame - the feeling of distress or humiliation in the cognisance of one's own faults - is its epistemological duplicity; we can feel shamed by things we mistakenly believe to be true of ourselves and even, as Bernard Williams points out, by imaginary circumstances which we know not to be real.[14] Shame is bound up with self-recognition but entails no epistemic guarantee - one can feel ashamed by something *misrecognised* about oneself. Put differently, the magistrate's sense of shame should not necessarily be interpreted as signifying that he has recognised the 'truth' about his feelings for the girl; there is, in fact, no sign of this ostensible desire to engrave himself on the girl, whether pursued or suppressed, anywhere in the novel.

[13] Also see: Jennifer Wenzel, 66.

[14] 'Even if shame and its motivations always involve in some way or other an idea of the gaze of another, it is important that for many of its operations the imagined gaze of an imagined other will do' (*Shame and Necessity*, 82).

The magistrate's description of his feelings as 'envy, pity, cruelty all masquerading as desire' has been similarly quoted by critics without explication.[15] Part of the difficulty and density of the clause is the way the emotions it invokes are usually oriented towards persons or objects, yet none are specified; who or what does he envy, pity, or show cruelty towards? Given the context provided by the rest of the quotation, we might assume that the magistrate means that he was envious of Joll, pitied the girl, and acted cruelly towards her, the confusion of objects bearing out the incoherence of the sentiment behind the sentence, its lack of clarity or definition.[16] Further, the very accumulation of description, in this clause and in the passage as a whole, paradoxically stages the way in which this language is failing to capture the richness of the affective experience it purports to represent (much like moments of descriptive excess in Banville's and Nabokov's fiction). None of the magistrate's characterisations in this passage come close to capturing his mysterious, tangled, ambivalent affects, as described earlier in the novel. When placed alongside each other, these characterisations appear to be abstracting simplifications, misrepresentations of intense and profoundly enigmatic feelings.

What the passage stages, I suggest, is not the magistrate's coming to recognise and articulate feelings which previously resisted recognition and articulation, but rather his succumbing to the need or desire to apprehend his experience as being more recognisable and articulable than it in fact was. We have seen how the novel generates a similar epistemic desire in readers, through the experiential proximity the narrative form engenders, through the technique of describing secondary affects which hint at more primary affects that remain hidden, and through the narrative placing an ethical importance on the magistrate's feelings. This need to pin down precisely what the magistrate thought and felt is likely to be particularly strong for literary critics, who are, in a sense, professionally defined by their competence or expertise in the explanation of texts - an activity which *Waiting for the Barbarians* fundamentally resists. That so many critics have simply quoted parts of the novel as

[15] For instance, see: Rosemary Jolly, 130.

[16] Notably, the only time 'pity' is used in the novel to refer to an emotion, rather than with respect to something being unfortunate, is when the magistrate expresses pity for the torturers' supposed inability to know what they wanted or were trying to achieve in torturing the girl: 'For the first time I feel a dry pity for them: how natural a mistake to believe that you can burn or tear or hack your way into the secret body of the other!' (46).

though their meaning were transparent is perhaps symptomatic of the way the novel, in a similar fashion to Banville's fiction, at once solicits and troubles readerly explication.

6.

We can begin to understand how *Waiting for the Barbarians* pushes readers to accept the magistrate's questionable interpretations of his own feelings by turning to Head's perceptive suggestion as to why *In the Heart of the Country* (1977) has received scant critical attention compared to Coetzee's other novels:

> [P]erhaps, the novel's self-consciousness supplies the explanation, since the narrator offers her own sophisticated 'explanations for her predicaments,' thus usurping the critic's function. A closer look at the novel, however, indicates that the book demands interpretation in several areas. Despite Magda's 'explanations,' the inconsistencies in her accounts require explication; and the contradictions of the style itself, for all its apparent 'flawlessness,' have a significance which is opaque. (50)

Head captures the central interpretative problem that *In the Heart of the Country* presents to literary critics, which is much the same as that of reading Banville's fiction; the narratorial statements seem to pre-empt and carry out the most vital interpretative work, leaving us with the feeling that all that is left to do is to synthesise the narrator's own insights. Head rightly resists this feeling. But although *Waiting for the Barbarians* is no less dominated by narratorial explanations than *In the Heart of the Country*, the magistrate's interpretations are more subtle and less conspicuous than Magda's, and critics have therefore been more predisposed to cede interpretative authority, allowing their critical faculties to be usurped by the magistrate's.

There are a number of reasons for this. The magistrate's narration is pervaded by a rhetoric of brutally honest self-reflection, an apparent willingness to consider his own actions in the worst possible light. His account is also punctuated by admissions of ignorance and confusion, forestalling the charge that he might be an epistemologically over-reaching narrator, claiming to know more than he does. But perhaps most significant is the way the narrative form cultivates in readers a *desire* for

the magistrate to perceive the ethical implications of his relationship with the barbarian girl, as Phelan comes close to recognising:

> [B]ecause our prospective reading experience is so close to the magistrate's moment-by-moment lived experience, we frequently must struggle to see beyond his limited vision. At the same time, our fundamental sympathy for the magistrate moves us to want his vision to be as clear and honest as possible. Once the magistrate's struggle to see clearly leads him to a place where his vision matches ours, we take a certain satisfaction in his achievement, even as we recognise that the truth he voices is a chilling one. (237)

I would strongly dispute the epistemological charge of Phelan's claim that the magistrate perceives a 'truth,' for reasons that should I hope be plain. The magistrate's strident critique of his (unquestionably dubious) feelings for the girl is melodramatic, in the sense of being rhetorically and emotionally exaggerated, but also in Peter Brooks's more specific sense of a 'dramatized apprehension' of 'ethical conflicts' (6). Concurring with and recapitulating the magistrate's critique enables readers to occupy a position of ethical perceptiveness and superiority. That is, the ethical weight the narrative places on the magistrate's feelings arouses a readerly desire for him to perceive their true nature, and thus makes us especially susceptible to explanations which, upon closer inspection, are open to doubt. It is also worth noting that recognising the ways in which the magistrate misconstrues his past feelings for the girl does not preclude critics from perceiving other kinds of ethical progress. The magistrate's increased awareness of his potential complicity in the crimes of others, for instance, clearly has a certain ethical appeal. This should not, however, lead us to accept that he has retrospectively perceived the true nature of his past feelings for the girl, which remain profoundly enigmatic.

As I indicated in my introduction to this chapter, my claim is not that critics have acceded to all of the magistrate's explications, but that they have acceded to some and dismissed others without justifying their reasons for doing so. Sam Durrant offers perhaps the most persuasive reading which explicitly challenges the magistrate's retrospective self-characterisations:

> Most critics have emphasized the ethically dubious nature of the Magistrate's caresses, quoting the passages in which he himself describes his actions as an ineffectual version of the Colonel's own ministrations. However, if we read

> his actions as an attempt to come to terms with 'the impact of the torture chamber' on his life, then it becomes clear that the Magistrate's seemingly distanced self-absorption is at the same time an attempt to deal with his newfound awareness of the unbearable proximity of other lives.[17] (44)

Gallagher also argues for the ethical value of the magistrate's actions when commenting on the final sentence of the novel: 'Although the magistrate ends his narrative "feeling stupid, like a man who lost his way long ago but presses on along a road that may lead nowhere," his moment of self-recognition and the changes in his behaviour suggest that he may have found the right road after all' (130-1). Head, in an idiom that brings Martin Hägglund to mind, similarly argues of the final sentence that 'these are words which the logic of the sequence calls into question,' because 'the negativity of the final "nowhere" of the novel' is 'belied' by the magistrate's 'ethical awakening' (91, 92, 72).[18] Indeed, Head attempts to demonstrate the 'positive cast' (89) and 'positive underpinning' (90) of the magistrate's expressions of uncertainty and befuddlement throughout his reading of *Waiting for the Barbarians*. Part of what is significant and appealing about these critical accounts is their allowing for more complex understandings of human subjectivity, their openness to the possibility that a person might not know what they think, feel, or desire. This shared sense of the ethical value of the magistrate's relationship with the barbarian girl is a subject which I will address in detail later in this chapter. For the moment, however, I want to mark the broad opposition between my reading and the critical view represented by Durrant, Gallagher, and Head. Though sceptical of the magistrate's self-condemnations, these critics ultimately *do* assign some hidden meaning or intention to the magistrate's actions (which remains unknown to himself), insofar as they perceive his treatment of the barbarian girl as the manifestation of an unconscious ethical judgment. By contrast, I have argued that the magistrate's cognisance of the girl's torture gives rise to affects which are in some sense prior to his acting upon ethical considerations. In 'The Harms of Pornography,' Coetzee suggests, with

[17] The end of this quotation conspicuously veers away from the subject of torture into the more abstract register of 'otherness.' Later in this chapter, I will show that the critical preoccupation with 'alterity' has often served to obscure rather than illuminate the ethical stakes of Coetzee's fiction.

[18] Hägglund employs what he calls 'the logic of chronolibido' (4) throughout *Dying for Time*, for instance when he suggests that an assertion in Proust's *In Search of Lost Time* is 'contradicted by the logic of Marcel's own text' (23).

reference to Catherine Mackinnon, that '[t]he interests and desires of human beings are many times more complex, devious, inscrutable, and opaque to their subjects than she seems to allow' (*Giving Offense*, 62).[19] Interests and desires that are complex, devious, inscrutable, and opaque to their subjects - this is a fair description of the central dynamic of *Waiting for the Barbarians*. Bewilderment is a prevailing affect of this novel; the magistrate's feelings remain unknown to himself and to readers, but also, as I will now show, to the barbarian girl herself.

7.

My reading of *Waiting for the Barbarians* thus far has argued that the increasingly self-reflexive and declarative quality of the narration, which reaches an apotheosis in the crucial passage quoted above (147-8), marks less of an illumination than an occlusion of the magistrate's affective experience. However, as alluded to earlier, this passage is equally important for our understanding of how the magistrate characterises - or, as I shall suggest, *mischaracterises* - the barbarian girl's experience, which will be the focus of discussion for the remainder of this chapter.

The magistrate's acute consciousness of the complexity of his own memories makes his radically constricted conception of the girl's recollections all the more conspicuous. It is worth again quoting the relevant section of this key passage:

> Whom will that other girl with the blind face remember: me with my silk robe and my dim lights and my perfumes and oils and my unhappy pleasures, or that other cold man with the mask over his eyes who gave the orders and pondered the sounds of her intimate pain? Whose was the last face she saw plainly on this earth but the face behind the glowing iron? Though I cringe with shame, even here and now, I must ask myself whether, when I lay head to foot with her, fondling and kissing those broken ankles, I was not in my heart of hearts regretting that I could not engrave myself on her as deeply. (147-8)

The magistrate's leading questions imply that the girl will remember only one man or the other, restricting memory to a mutually exclusive binary. There is a similar, exceedingly narrow, conception of memory in the magistrate's suspicion that he might

[19] In an interview with David Attwell, Coetzee similarly places emphasis on 'the word *want* in all its own resistance to being known' (*Doubling the Point*, 208).

have regretted not 'engraving' himself on the girl as deeply as Joll apparently did, collapsing the question of *how* one might be remembered into the quantitative or measurable terms of shallowness and depth. There is, of course, a marked sexual dimension to the association of pain and intimacy, and to the construction of the girl as a passive medium merely to be marked more or less deeply by two men who, in the magistrate's mind at least, are in a rivalrous relationship. DelConte's typically credulous gloss - '[t]he magistrate regrets that he cannot have nearly the effect on the woman that Joll does' (138) - illustrates how simply affirming the magistrate's self-criticism risks endorsing characterisations of the girl which are improbable, reductive, and ethically problematic. There is no room here for the possibility - indeed, the strong probability - that the girl will remember both men, and remember them very differently. It seems unlikely that she would perceive the magistrate as merely an impotent version of Joll, as he here supposes and as many critics have affirmed; given the narrative information we have, it is far more plausible to imagine that she will recall Joll as terrifying and cruel and the magistrate as a conflicted but much kinder man. But part of the rhetorical logic of the passage is its equating the degree to which the men affect the girl (as though this could be measured or known) with her remembering or forgetting them. There is something peculiarly affectless about this idea, which divests the girl's experiences and memories of their particularity, and treats the gamut of her possible feelings - pain, fear, hatred, uncertainty, apprehension, pleasure, excitement, desire, joy, relief, and myriad other emotions - as undifferentiated and interchangeable.

This strangely cerebral representation of the girl's experience resurfaces across the quoted passage:

> From the moment my steps paused and I stood before her at the barracks gate she must have felt a miasma of deceit closing about her […]. From the very first she knew me for a false seducer. She listened to me, then she listened to her heart, and rightly she acted in accord with her heart. (148)

The non-visual figures of knowing - the girl's smelling deceit and listening to her heart - suggest that the magistrate is conscious of and is attempting to empathise with her

state of partial blindness.[20] This empathetic reaching out only brings into sharper relief how patently fanciful is the magistrate's suggestion that the girl possessed a preternatural ability to instantly perceive her feelings and his own.[21] The image of searching one's own heart to understand another person closely echoes the earlier-discussed scene of the magistrate and the barbarian girl's final parting ('to scrutinize the motions of my heart, to try to understand who she really is' [79]). This heart, which knows and sounds out the feelings of others, is something of a mise-en-abyme of the passage, mirroring the epistemological excess of the magistrate's representations of his experience and the girl's.[22] Though the magistrate's portrayal of the girl as all-knowing seems to endow her with a certain authority, it also diminishes any sense of her as a person subject to complex thoughts, feelings, and states of knowledge, which might be as conflicted and enigmatic as his own. The magistrate seems unable or unwilling to contemplate the possibility that *neither* he nor the barbarian girl knew their own feelings or the feelings of the other. Once again, to affirm the magistrate's self-characterisations is also to accede to this radically diminished sense of the girl's subjectivity - something sensitive readers and critics surely want to resist. Furthermore, this moment is in fact an anomaly in the magistrate's narration, for here he *does* ascribe thoughts and feelings to the girl, in his rather paranoid belief that she instantly perceived his innermost desires which he himself could not recognise. For the most part, the magistrate emphasises his bewilderment about the girl, whom he consistently presents as opaque and enigmatic.

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[20] This is in contrast with the magistrate's becoming painfully aware of his insensitive use of verbs of visual perception as synecdoches for lived experience (so familiar as to have become almost dead metaphors) when speaking to the girl: '"Would you not like to see your sisters again?" I ask. The blunder hangs grotesquely in the air between us. We both smile. "Of course," she says' (57). There is a similar moment in *Slow Man* (2005), when Paul Rayment is speaking to a woman who he has arranged to have a sexual liaison with, and who he assumes is blind: '["]the idea came from our friend Elizabeth. […] She issues instructions, we follow. Even when there is no one to see that we obey." *See*. Not the right word, but he lets it stand. She must be used to it by now, to people who say "see" when they mean something else' (111).

[21] The epistemological charge is stronger in an earlier draft of the novel: 'From first to last she listened to her heart and acted in harmony with it. She knew me for a false seducer from the very first. Who knows, if she had had the words she might even have told me the truth, told me what was in my own heart: "Join your Colonel with the black eyes. Find a fresh body. Let him show you how to sign it with your mark"' (cited in Attwell, *J. M. Coetzee and the Life of Writing*, 127).

[22] The way the magistrate seems to confuse perceptions of himself and speculations about the girl bears a close resemblance to the central problematic of *Ill Seen Ill Said*.

This is most explicitly drawn out in a short section of the novel where the magistrate compares the barbarian girl with a prostitute he refers to as his 'little bird-woman' (45). The section begins:

> There are other times when I suffer fits of resentment against my bondage to the ritual of the oiling and rubbing, the drowsiness, the slump into oblivion. I cease to comprehend what pleasure I can ever have found in her obstinate, phlegmatic body, and even discover in myself stirrings of outrage. (44-45)

The idea of the magistrate being bound or enslaved by his inability not to be interested in the girl's body raises questions about the limits of self-volition (and, with the sadomasochistic associations of 'bondage,' the potential perverse pleasures of being so compelled). The strange depletion of agency also marks the slightly incongruous description of her body as 'obstinate' and 'phlegmatic,' with the magistrate seeming to mistake how he feels about the girl with something that inheres in or is essential to her physical self, a confusion pointed up by the adjectives which semantically hover between the subjective and the physiological. The same sense of weakened volition is present in 'I cease to comprehend,' which brings into relief the difference between two conceptions of comprehension - the gap between grasping a proposition (he found pleasure in her body) and being able to imaginatively revive or inhabit the feelings and desires of another person or one's own feelings and desires in the past.

The magistrate's 'fits of resentment' and 'stirrings of outrage' lead him to visit the bird-woman at the inn:

> I embrace her, bury myself in her, lose myself in her soft bird-like flurries. The body of the other one, closed, ponderous, sleeping in my bed in a faraway room, seems beyond comprehension. Occupied in these suave pleasures, I cannot imagine what ever drew me to that alien body. The girl in my arms flutters, pants, cries as she comes to a climax. (45)

The present tense is especially striking here, with the series of verbs in close succession, followed by a measured contemplation of the barbarian girl, only to return suddenly to the scene of intercourse as the woman pants, cries, and climaxes. Again, there is something incongruous in the description of the barbarian girl's *body* as 'beyond comprehension,' comprehension being a strangely cognitive way of describing a relation to someone's corporeality, rather than their subjective

dispositions (though the *OED* does list 'seize' as a now obscure definition of 'comprehend'). The adjectives used to describe her body - 'closed,' 'ponderous,' 'alien' - similarly stress its resistance to being grasped, accentuated by the magistrate's referring to sex with the bird-woman as 'suave pleasures,' with its suggestion of sophistication and easy familiarity.

As the magistrate returns to his rooms and watches the barbarian girl sleeping, he expounds his sense of her fundamental difference to the bird-woman:

> [W]ith this woman it is as if there is no interior, only a surface across which I hunt back and forth seeking entry. Is this how her torturers felt hunting their secret, whatever they thought it was? For the first time I feel a dry pity for them: how natural a mistake to believe that you can burn or tear or hack your way into the secret body of the other! The girl lies in my bed, but there is no good reason why it should be a bed. I behave in some ways like a lover - I undress her, I bathe her, I stroke her, I sleep beside her - but I might equally well tie her to a chair and beat her, it would be no less intimate.
> […] If a change in my moral being were occurring I would feel it; nor would I have undertaken this evening's reassuring experiment. (46-7)

That some critics have affirmed the magistrate's provocative claim that it would be no less intimate to beat the girl than undress her demonstrates the extent to which accepting his melodramatic self-critique risks promulgating deeply problematic positions and values.[23] Durrant offers a more nuanced response to the magistrate's encounter with the barbarian girl:

> Although he claims that 'if a change in my moral being were occurring, I would feel it,' it is precisely this displacement of his own feelings that indicates that an ethical change is indeed taking place […]. However, if the Magistrate's consciousness is radically opened up to the fact of the barbarian girl's existence, her consciousness still remains closed off, inaccessible. Although he takes her into his bed, she remains cryptically other; although her life has invaded his, he is unable, unlike Colonel Joll, to make a significant impact on hers. (44-45)

Note how Durrant's characteristically recuperative reading, even as it disputes the magistrate's claim to have experienced no moral change, repeats and endorses his

[23] Laura Wright, for instance, describes the equivalence of beating the girl and undressing her as something the magistrate simply 'recognizes' (79). DelConte is similarly credulous, quoting the line as though self-evidently true (138).

earlier speculation (147-8) that he failed to 'impact' on the girl's life as significantly as Joll - a speculation which, as we have seen, reflects the magistrate's own sense of rivalry more than any evidence we have about the girl's feelings. But what I particularly want to pursue is this contention that the girl's consciousness 'remains closed off, inaccessible,' a contention which has led many critics, including Durrant, to characterise her as a figure of alterity.

8.

Critical accounts which describe the barbarian girl as a figure of alterity are predicated on the premise that the magistrate earnestly strives to imagine what she thought and felt, and fails in that endeavour. Gallagher, for instance, claims that the magistrate 'continually asks her about her experience of being tortured,' and describes his 'desire to "know" the woman—to know what happened in the torture chamber, to uncover her deepest and most hidden feelings,' a desire which ends with his 'frustration at his inability to enter her […] psychologically' (127-8). But if we look at those scenes where the magistrate most directly probes the girl about her torture, we see that his questions are in fact primarily about how her body was damaged. When she eventually tells him how she was blinded, he asks: 'What do you feel towards the men who did this?' (44). Even at the moment in the novel when the girl's experience of torture is most explicitly discussed, the locus of the magistrate's interest is not simply to enter her psychologically, to 'uncover her deepest and most hidden feelings,' but more specifically to know how she now feels about those who tortured her, again manifesting a peculiarly sexualised, rivalrous fascination and anxiety about the intensity of her feelings - of any kind - for other men.

There are several points in the novel when the barbarian girl plainly indicates what she is thinking and feeling - indications which the magistrate conspicuously ignores. Perhaps the most obvious example is when the girl reacts to the magistrate once again rebuffing her sexual advances:

> 'You visit other girls,' she whispers. 'You think I do not know?'
> I make a peremptory gesture for her to be quiet.
> 'Do you also treat them like this?' she whispers, and starts to sob.

> Though my heart goes out to her, there is nothing I can do. Yet what humiliation for her! She cannot even leave the apartment without tottering and fumbling while she dresses. She is as much a prisoner now as ever before. I pat her hand and sink deeper into gloom. (59-60)

The idiomatic 'my heart goes out to her,' poised somewhere between cliché and sincerity, raises the question of empathy, forcefully inviting us to imagine what the girl is feeling, and making the incongruous link the magistrate draws between her distress and her disability all the more marked; her words and tears more readily suggest feelings of frustration, neglect, and loneliness.

This seems to be corroborated later in the novel when the magistrate's cook and former lover, Mai, tells him:

> [']She could not understand you. She did not know what you wanted from her. […] We talked to each other about what was on our minds. Sometimes she would cry and cry and cry. You made her very unhappy. Did you know that?' She is opening a door through which a wind of utter desolation blows on me. (166)

Given the strange use the magistrate makes of her body, and that he makes no attempt to explain this to her, it is not difficult to imagine why the girl might have been confused and distressed. ('More ordinary than I like to think, she may have ways of finding me ordinary too' [61], the magistrate gloomily speculates shortly after the girl breaks down into tears.) The metaphor of the opening door suggests that the magistrate does begin to perceive the suffering his tactlessness caused her, whilst the somatic register and passive construction of 'a wind of utter desolation blows on me' intimates that this new understanding is not something he chooses to perceive, but rather a new sense of the world thrust upon him against his will. The fact that the magistrate made no attempt to understand the girl by simply talking to her, but instead engaged in his peculiar ritual of massaging and contemplating her body, is brought into relief by Mai's straightforward remark: 'We talked to each other about what was on our minds.' Though the rhetoric of the magistrate's narration strongly suggests that he strives to 'know' the girl but fails, what we encounter is less an inability than a disinclination, a fetishisation of her as mysterious, and enigmatic. There is an overtly gendered dimension to the magistrate's fascination with the girl's ostensible obscurity; by contrast, he feels only 'irritation at [Joll's] cryptic silences, at the paltry theatrical

mystery of dark shields hiding healthy eyes' (4). The magistrate averts his gaze from anything that might alter his impression of the girl as an unknowable 'other.' From these moments, we gain a very different perspective on the novel, in which the magistrate appears not simply bewildered by the girl, but rather to treat or construct her as a figure of profound enigma.

The magistrate's sense of the girl as utterly incomprehensible is especially concentrated on the scars caused by her torture: 'It has been growing more and more clear to me that until the marks on this girl's body are deciphered and understood I cannot let go of her' (33). Two things are worth noting: firstly, the passive syntax does not specify that the magistrate need be the one to decipher and understand;[24] secondly, although 'deciphered' does suggest a code or piece of writing to be interpreted, the sentence does not quite clarify how the magistrate thinks and feels about these marks. The analogy the magistrate might be drawing here has been subject to much critical commentary. Jennifer Wenzel suggests that:

> Torture has transformed her into a text to be read […]. The magistrate finds the girl's body impenetrable, unwilling to yield its secrets, and as such he finds it as wholly other, unknowable, to the point that he cannot even remember what the girl looks like when he is away from her. […] [He] exerts intellectual and physical energy trying to read the hieroglyphic inscription of force on the body of the girl, but she does not provide any satisfactory answers. […] By not allowing her tortured body to be translated into language, she prevents the othering that the magistrate's categorizations would impose in transforming her story into his own. (65-66)

Wenzel re-describes the magistrate's efforts to understand the barbarian girl in explicitly textual terms, yet at no point does the magistrate actually conceive his relationship to the girl in quite this way. This assessment broaches a much larger question about whether, as readers and literary critics, we might be too willing to make and accept analogies between reading and empathetic understanding. A contrapuntal thought-experiment illustrates just how problematic and limited is this conception of persons as texts: what would it mean if the magistrate *could* read the girl's - or anyone else's - body? Do bodies yield secrets in this way? And what could someone do to

[24] In an essay written at the same time as *Waiting for the Barbarians*, 'The Agentless Sentence as Rhetorical Device' (*Doubling the Point*, 170-180), Coetzee, referring to a passage from Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe*, suggests 'that the intention behind the use of the passive is to avoid mentioning agency' (172).

allow or prevent another person from translating their body into language? The use of 'deciphered' certainly suggests that the magistrate incongruously thinks of the marks of the girl's torture as bearing some symbolic or coded meaning, but they are scars, not hieroglyphs or alphabetic characters. If one conceives of bodies as readable, who would we not find unknowable and wholly 'other'? The magistrate's narration might *invite* us to think about the barbarian girl's body as something which can be deciphered, but, as attentive readers and critics, we should be sensitive to how implausible and ethically questionable this conception can be. Despite the magistrate's apparent desire to comprehend what the girl experienced, his obsessive preoccupation with her body is a way of *not* engaging with any story she might tell.

Several critics have extended the comparisons the magistrate draws between the bird-woman and the barbarian girl, and have accounted for them in terms of textual analogies. Attwell's discussion has perhaps been the most influential:

> The contrast between the two relationships is, of course, the point of interest: in a strictly semiotic sense, it represents the difference between what Roland Barthes called the writerly and readerly texts. (The 'bird-woman' is readerly, giving herself over to the agency of the Magistrate; the barbarian girl is writerly, admitting no access to an imagined, fecund essence.) So the barbarian girl will simply not be delivered up to the Magistrate's probings; her otherness cannot be domesticated. (*J. M. Coetzee: South Africa and the Politics of Writing*, 79)

Though Attwell foregrounds the limitations of the semiotic analogy, he stops short of considering the implications of its being made in the first place; the magistrate is not so much trying to interpret the marks on the girl's body but construing them as signifiers of indecipherability, of an unknowable 'otherness.' Head comes closer to registering just how peculiar the figure is, noting the contrast Attwell draws and suggesting that we

> place emphasis on what kind of a reader the magistrate is in each case, rather than on what kind of text each woman resembles: the agency of the 'reader' in the analogy is the point at issue. The girl's torturers try to make her into a readerly text, submissive to their own agenda, and this is why they leave their mark on her. (85)

Though Head recognises that the women do not actually resemble texts, he nevertheless perpetuates the reading analogy - and, in doing so, confuses the peculiar

way in which the magistrate imagines the torturers with their actual 'agenda'; as has been discussed, torturers might have all kinds of motivations and desires, but it seems unlikely that they precisely share the magistrate's very particular perceptions of the girl.[25] By augmenting the magistrate's peculiar representation of the girl as (un)decipherable, critics have risked naturalising what is actually a highly problematic way of relating to another person, both because of its classically gendered sense of female desire as a 'dark continent' (Freud, *An Autobiographical Study*, 212), and because of its implication that 'who the girl really is' is something temporally constant, an indelible and fixed essence (however variably experienced and interpreted). In doing so, these critics have also failed to recognise how the magistrate constructs the girl as ineffable and unknowable, with the serious consequence of reinforcing the questionable description of her as an 'other' - a designation present in each of the critical accounts we have just considered.

9.

My argument that the magistrate is not only genuinely perplexed by the girl, but also constructs her an an unknowable other, raises the question of how these two claims might be differentiated. This is best addressed by briefly discussing some of the other characters in Coetzee's oeuvre whom critics have labelled 'figures of alterity.' What if we were to consider the 'alterity' of each of these characters as constructions of their narrators, or constructions of other characters?

As the first novel Coetzee wrote in the third-person, *Life & Times of Michael K* is something of a test case, because we are given narratorial descriptions of Michael K and gain access to his interior world. Consider this evocation of Michael's heart-felt relation to the plants he grows:

> He thought of the pumpkin leaves pushing through the earth. Tomorrow will be their last day, he thought: the day after that they will wilt, and the day after that they will die, while I am out here in the mountains. Perhaps if I started at

[25] Like many other critics, Head also compares the girl with the painted poplar slips the magistrate uncovers from the ruins of a previous civilisation ('the slips, like the uninterpretable barbarian girl' [89]). Sam Durrant similarly describes how the magistrate 'stared at the marks on the walls of his cell, seemingly no closer to deciphering these marks than he was to deciphering the marks on the girl's body' (46).

> sunrise and ran all day I would not be too late to save them, them and the other seeds that are going to die underground, though they do not know it, that are never going to see the light of day. There was a cord of tenderness that stretched from him to the patch of earth beside the dam and must be cut. It seemed to him that one could cut a cord like that only so many times before it would not grow again. (65-6)

As the narration drifts in and out of Michael's body and mind, a number of different linguistic techniques for representing consciousness are employed. The narrator both directly describes Michael's thoughts ('He thought of the pumpkin leaves pushing through the earth') and 'quotes' these thoughts in Michael's own words ('he thought: […] they will die, while I am out here in the mountains'). In the final two sentences of the passage, these two techniques seem to complexly combine: the highly literary language of 'a cord of tenderness' appears to be the narrator's, yet the beginning of the second sentence, '[i]t seemed to him,' intimates that Michael has some conscious awareness of this feeling, and might even be able to articulate it in this manner. As Dorrit Cohn points out (*Transparent Minds*, 98), choosing whether to describe a character's experience from the outside or have them articulate their thoughts in their own words necessarily involves a trade-off between depth and directness; by moving fluidly between these modes, Coetzee gives us as full and intense an engagement with Michael's experience as the resources of the novel allow - and the consciousness we encounter is undeniably a very strange one.

We might instead think of Friday of *Foe*, whom Foe finds utterly ineffable: 'We must make Friday's silence speak, as well as the silence surrounding Friday. […] [A]s long as he is dumb we can tell ourselves his desires are dark to us, and continue to use him as we wish' (142, 148). The plural personal pronouns invoke a shared failure of understanding; but might Foe construct the darkness of Friday's desire? Given the degree to which we understand other people through their uses of language, I would suggest not; Friday's (apparent) mutilation, or at the very least his not communicating through speech or writing, debilitates any attempt to understand what he thinks and feels, shrouding his consciousness in mystery. There is also his ritual of laying petals on the water - a profoundly enigmatic act. Readers can and have interpreted this ritual in many ways, but such interpretations are necessarily speculative. Friday does seem to be a deeply unknowable figure, and the novel gives us no reason to suppose that Foe is not genuinely perplexed by him.

The depiction of Vercueil in *Age of Iron* is perhaps most similar to that of the barbarian girl. Mrs Curren confers upon Vercueil a special status, sometimes perceiving him as a kind of angel; yet, as a homeless man and an alcoholic, he is a far from unfamiliar figure, and there is nothing discernibly mysterious about his appearance or behaviour. Where Mrs Curren differs from the magistrate, however, is in her greater awareness of the gap between her perceptions of people and their own lived experience: 'I wondered whether you were not, if you will excuse the word, an angel come to show me the way. Of course you were not, are not, cannot be—I see that. But that is only half the story, isn't it? We half perceive but we also half create' (168).[26]

Though the magistrate does very occasionally register the possibility that the girl might not be as ineffable as he supposes ('More ordinary than I like to think'), his sense of her as enigmatic and uninterpretable dominates *Waiting for the Barbarians*. Yet, when he describes her actions and words, rather than his feelings about her, she appears not to be especially strange or mystifying. In fact, the novel offers us numerous illustrations of the barbarian girl's ordinariness, most memorably in the scene when she belches and says 'Beans make you fart' (31). We also get no indications that other characters are confounded by her: Mai reports that the girl was 'friendly,' that all the servants 'liked her very much,' and that '[t]here was always something to laugh about when she was around' (166); the girl also strikes up an easy friendship with the soldiers on the trek into the desert ('The banter goes on in the pidgin of the frontier, and she is at no loss for words' [68]). There is, of course, the matter of her torture, but this only reframes the question - does this experience make her unreadable, or does only the magistrate perceive her as such because of his consciousness of that history?

These textual indications that the barbarian girl might be less strange than the magistrate finds her ultimately raise the question of whether this alters or diminishes our sense of the appropriateness or validity of his responding to her as an enigmatic 'other.' There are two quite different ways of conceiving the alterity of persons, and critics do not always seem to be clear which they are arguing for: is it the case that

[26] The allusion to William Wordsworth's 'Tintern Abbey' - itself cribbed from Edward Young's 'The Complaint' (Keach, 165-6) - registers the way in which culturally received ideas might alter the world one half-perceives and half-creates.

particular people are 'other' to an individual or community, or is it that *all* people are fundamentally enigmatic (to themselves and others)? *Waiting for the Barbarians* gives us good reasons to be suspicious of the magistrate's construction of the girl as exceptionally unknowable. But what if we were to understand the novel's representation of all human relations as necessarily involving the treatment of other people as more knowable than they are? Under such a view, the magistrate's sense of the girl as profoundly enigmatic might be *less* of a misapprehension than his engagement with the other characters he encounters. We might think of how, in the manner of an omniscient narrator, he describes the sleeping soldiers 'dreaming of mothers and sweethearts' (2) and, later, their 'imagining it is [his] throat they cut' when they butcher a horse (81). Most striking is the assured way in which he relates the intimate experience of the 'bird-girl' ('[to] stir the quiet of her interior into an ecstatic storm'), despite being fully aware that her shows of passion might be faked ('what a pleasure to be lied to so flatteringly!') (45-6). There is a significant sense in which we might see the magistrate's engagement with the barbarian girl as more authentic than his engagement with other characters: it is not that he misconstrues the girl as 'other,' but rather that he fails to recognise the enigmatic 'otherness' of everyone else - that he does not appreciate how profoundly unknowable *all* people are.

There is, of course, a crucial ethical valence to this issue, and indeed to the critical invocation of alterity. Sam Durrant claims that:

> [T]he reader is invited to identify with the narrator's inability to identify with the other. […] Coetzee's novels implicitly argue that to transcend the other's alterity is to efface that alterity, that the act of empathy is the attempt to imagine the other as the same, as another version of the self. Coetzee's novels insist on the difference of the other in order to explore the impossible task of relating to the other as other. […] My reading of these novels will not attempt to decrypt, to render legible, this cryptic history. For this would be merely to repeat the futile attempts of their narrators […]. Rather, I will attempt to chart a movement that takes place in the wake of the failure to read Coetzee's figures of alterity, the failure to recover a history. (27, 32)

Durrant perhaps means 'understand' or 'empathise' rather than 'identify,' which sets an impossibly high bar. The reader certainly is invited to share in the magistrate's failure to empathise with the barbarian girl, but we should be very cautious about ascribing an ethical value to that failure, as Durrant does. We might think of *Lolita*,

which similarly invites readers to identify with a middle-aged narrator's inability to empathise with a 'girl'; part of why Nabokov's novel is so disturbing is the possibility that we might have unwittingly accepted that invitation. Like Durrant, Mike Marais claims that 'it is precisely the Magistrate's sense of her otherness that renders him responsible for the girl' (32). Discussing the scene we examined earlier, when the magistrate washes the girl's feet for the first time (*Barbarians*, 29-30), Marais notes the magistrate's 'inability to account for his actions in *rational* terms,' and argues that 'he unintentionally, and unbeknownst to both himself and the girl, assumes responsibility for her. In the process, he becomes a stranger to himself, notwithstanding his protestations to the contrary […]. The Magistrate, it would appear, is a servant not of sexual desire, but of responsibility' (28-30). Though rhetorically appealing, these claims are difficult, perhaps impossible, to reconcile with the evidence which strongly suggests that the magistrate's relating to the girl as an 'other' greatly distresses her. If his washing and massaging her body is a manifestation of responsibility to the other, it is unclear why we should think such responsibility is ethically desirable.[27]

This conflict between critical claims about 'alterity' and the evidence of the novel brings into relief what is problematic about the metaphysical connotations of the term, its suggestion of an absolute and irreducible 'otherness.' Marais distinguishes his own understanding of alterity from Attridge's in this respect: 'the other can never be accommodated or known, as Attridge suggests is possible. […] [T]he other is ultimately unknowable rather than produced' (xii-xiii). Setting aside the epistemo-ontological debate about alterity that Marais sets up, it is precisely *because* the magistrate treats the girl as an 'other' who can never be known that he causes her such distress. Furthermore, part of what is so unusual about the magistrate's human relations, as we have seen, is his tendency to oscillate between polar extremes, treating people either as entirely readable, as he does with the soldiers, or as profoundly

[27] Elizabeth S. Anker has recently expressed a similar concern: 'the premise that Otherness inherently resists incorporation is worrisome: it can smuggle in assumptions reminiscent of other colonialist and paternalistic prejudices and stereotypes. A hermeneutic preoccupation with unknowability and difference can consequently inculcate not only a fetishization of those traits but also the perception that cultural difference and exclusion are innate and insurmountable' ('Why We Love Coetzee,' 198).

enigmatic, as is the case with the barbarian girl.[28] There is something ethically appealing about the magistrate's seeming to recognise that the richness and complexity of the girl's interior life will elude his grasp, particularly compared with his dismissive treatment of other characters as incapable of thought, feeling, or desire beyond his knowledge or imagination. But critics, including Durrant and Marais, have gone too far in the other direction, valorising the magistrate's treatment of the girl as unknowable despite the novel showing us that this inhibits basic sympathy and kindness.[29]

Of course, in our everyday lives, most of us don't cleave to these opposing poles; we tend to accept that we cannot know everything that another person thinks and feels with absolute certainty, but rather make and act upon provisional suppositions based on speech, behaviour, body language, and so on. This elementary pragmatic empathy is missing from the magistrate's relationship with the barbarian girl, either because he maintains a sense of her as profoundly enigmatic by refusing to imagine her thoughts and feelings, as in the earlier sections of the novel, or, as in his retrospective characterisations, because he fails to imagine that her feelings might be as rich, complex, and conflicted as his own. By contrast, in his life prior to meeting the barbarian girl, the magistrate is the quintessential pragmatist; we might think of

[28] We might think of this dynamic of simultaneously treating someone as utterly knowable and utterly enigmatic in terms of the coloniser's discourse about the colonised. Derek Attridge seems to make this connection in his reading of *Dusklands*: 'the familiar discourse of the servant by means of which we have come to know Klawer is exposed, in retrospect, in all its conventionality: Jacobus's claims to know his servant through and through are revealed as worse than false, since the very terms in which such claims are made are barriers to knowledge' (*J. M. Coetzee*, 20-21).

[29] It is worth noting that many accounts which claim that the magistrate undergoes an ethical development cite or rely on the dream sequences which punctuate the novel. Durrant, for instance, offers the following conclusion to his discussion of *Waiting for the Barbarians*, *Life & Times of Michael K*, and *Foe*: 'In their waking, conscious lives, Coetzee's characters manifestly fail to make any headway; in their dreams—and it is no coincidence that all three narratives culminate in reverie—they seem, by contrast, to arrive at a kind of ethical understanding, a highly qualified *rapprochement* with the other' (49). For reasons of space, I cannot discuss the magistrate's dreams at length here, though two points are worth making briefly. Firstly, the magistrate's first dream of the woman/child figure precedes his meeting the barbarian girl; we should therefore be cautious about straightforwardly identifying the two, as many critics have. Secondly, and more critically, readings like Durrant's are implicitly premised on the idea that any ethical progression the dreams might stage necessarily reflects or determines the magistrate's waking life; there is no intrinsic reason that we should accept that the two realms of experience are related in this way.

how he lives amicably alongside the fisher folk, possessing a rudimentary understanding of and empathy with their everyday lives, despite differences of language, culture, and race. But something about the girl, and the torture to which she is subjected, provokes in the magistrate an intense consciousness of how complex and enigmatic another person might be. The crisis the girl induces in the magistrate's pragmatism does have a qualified ethical value, most obviously in its precipitating his resistance to the empire.[30] Perhaps the most dramatic consequence of this crisis is the magistrate's journey into the desert to return the girl to her people, which he cannot rationally justify to the soldiers or to himself - an act which is at once absurd, brave, foolhardy, and yet borne out of an obscure sense of ethical responsibility. But the magistrate's relationship with the barbarian girl, his treating (and mistreating) her as an unknowable other, clearly cannot and should not be held up as an ethical norm or aspiration. Rather, in Coetzee's representation of human relations, a fuller appreciation of the enigmatic complexity of others does not necessarily lead to a more ethical life.

10.

My reading of *Waiting for the Barbarians*, along with the other readings in this thesis, might be thought of as following in the wake of Bernard Williams, whose thought was marked by a suspicion of totalising theories. A. W. Moore suggests that Williams 'simply refused to allow philosophical system-building to eclipse the subtlety and variety of human ethical experience' (*Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*). The crux of my disagreement with previous critical accounts amounts to a difference about how literary fictions work (and play). Where other critics have argued that Coetzee more or less explicitly advocates a particular conception of human relations, I have argued that the concept of alterity fails when confronted with the subtlety and variety of the magistrate's affective and ethical experience. More specifically, where previous accounts claim that the magistrate articulates the nature of his past feelings, I suggest that these feelings, and the novel itself, are more complex and elusive, placing into relief the way that feelings resist being re-articulated or conceptually framed. Not

[30] We might situate this within the wider scepticism of rationality that characterises much of Coetzee's fiction.

coincidentally, the magistrate's epistemological desire closely resembles the critical propensity to prematurely foreclose the troubling uncertainties that literary works give rise to. A guiding premise of each chapter in this study is that literary writing engages with questions of knowing and feeling not by advancing theoretical propositions but by presenting and involving readers in the affective and ethical intricacies of what can and cannot be known or guessed about other people's lives - and the resources and limitations of literature to engage with such complexity. The works of Nabokov, Beckett, Banville, and Coetzee draw out the interconnections between affective and epistemological experience not through the didacticism of philosophy, but through the force of literature, playing on readers' capacities to know and feel.

Coda: Reading Difficulties

I began this thesis with a quotation from a short prose piece by Samuel Beckett called 'Still 3.' In this coda, I want to give a brief critical response to this remarkable text to illustrate how the modes of close reading developed over the course of this study enable us to release more of its cognitive and affective complexity. Here is 'Still 3' in its entirety:

> Whence when back no knowing where no telling where been how long how it was. Back in the chair at the window before the window head in hand as shown dead still listening again in vain. No not yet not listening again in vain quite yet while the dim questions fade where been how long how it was. For head in hand eyes closed as shown always the same dark now from now all hours of day and night. No nightbird to mean night at least or day at least so faint perhaps mere fancy with the right valley wind the incarnation bell. Or Mother Calvet with the dawn pushing the old go-cart for whatever she might find and back at dusk. Back then and nothing to tell but some soundless place and in the head in the hand where such questions once like ghosts where what how long weirdest of all. Till in imagination from the dead faces faces on off in the dark sudden whites long short then black long short then another so on or the same. White stills all front no expression eyes wide unseeing mouth no expression male female all ages one by one never more at a time. There somewhere some time hers or his or some other creature's try dreamt away saying dreamt away where face after face till hers in the end or his or that other creature's. Where faces in the dark as shown for one in the end even though only once only for a second say back try saying back from there head in hand as shown. For one or more why while at it one alone no one alone one by one none it till perhaps some time in the end that one or none. Size as seen in the life at say arm's length sudden white black all about no known expression eyes its at last not looking lips[1] the ones no expression marble still so long then out. (*Texts for Nothing*, 173).

Even for readers familiar with Beckett's writing, 'Still 3' is, to say the least, a bewildering work. Perhaps for this reason, the only two critics who have considered

[1] In his preface to the Faber edition of *Texts for Nothing*, Mark Nixon notes that, on the suggestion of John Pilling, he has changed 'lips' as found in the original publication (an appendix to Pilling's article in *Essays in Criticism*) to 'lids' (xix): 'The word in question is difficult to read in the original manuscript […] but considering the emphasis on notions of perception and sight in this text, it follows that Beckett wrote "lids" rather than "lips"' (n26, xxiv). Both seem plausible, but, given how the ninth sentence moves from 'eyes' to 'mouth,' it seems more likely that the final sentence similarly moves from 'eyes' to 'lips.' In *Samuel Beckett: The Complete Short Prose*, the text retains 'lips' from the original *Essays in Criticism* publication.

the text in any detail, John Pilling and Ruby Cohn, draw numerous connections with other Beckett works, as though trying to locate a framework within which to make sense of this perplexing fiction. Pilling, in an essay to which 'Still 3' was first published as an appendix, claims that the text 'shows Beckett following the premisses of "Still" and "Sounds" through to their logical conclusions. All activity has ceased, all inquiry has been abandoned, all categories have been destroyed' (152). I want to show how a slower mode of criticism, one that stays close to the event of reading in both its cognitive and affective dimensions, can capture much more of this literary work than this characteristically conceptualising kind of account.

The most striking shared attribute of Pilling's and Cohn's representations of this narrative is the lack of acknowledgement of just how difficult it is to understand - the great extent to which it resists comprehension.[2] Eve Sedgwick suggests that 'novel-readers voluntarily plunge into worlds that strip them, however temporarily, of the painfully acquired cognitive maps of their ordinary lives […] creat[ing], especially at the beginning of books, a space of high anxiety and dependence' (*Epistemology of the Closet*, 97). Whether this is true of all books is doubtful: reading the beginning of a novel can be exciting, reassuring, or even boring. Nevertheless, Sedgwick's remark closely accords with the opening of 'Still 3,' which simultaneously invokes basic questions readers tend to ask when trying to make sense of literary narratives and *delays* the reader from being able to answer them, frustrating the desire to know and intensifying anxieties of not knowing. (Activities, inquiries, and categories, far from having ceased, been abandoned, or been destroyed, are simultaneously mobilised and powerfully troubled here.) The first sentence does, however, offer up some small insights about the narrative: we gather that the narrator is not omniscient ('no knowing where no telling where been'), and, more concretely, that the narrative begins with a return ('when back'), though from what place or state remains unclear.

The minimal diegetic detail of 'back' is picked up and expanded upon in the second sentence, with its vague depiction of a figure in a chair before a window. At the same time, the difficulty of parsing the prose dramatically escalates, with the

[2] For instance, Pilling refers to 'the speaker' and 'the protagonist' as though they were self-evidently distinct (152), whereas Cohn, noting that the figure in the chair is 'lacking a pronoun' (323), implies the opposite; each of these conflicting interpretations makes a definitive determination about the text (of the kind it actually precludes), and both critics write as though their interpretation should be assumed without any need for justification.

'multi-path' (Abbott, 84) syntax of 'dead still listening again in vain' opening up several possible readings. Depending on where one mentally places the commas to separate the clauses, this might indicate that the figure is 'dead' and yet 'still listening,' or that he or she is 'dead still,' either in the idiomatic sense of being motionless, or in the more unusual sense of remaining dead.[3] The underdetermination of the narrative keeps each of these possibilities in play. The suggestion that the narrator might be engaged in a contemplation of loss, for instance, is heightened by two phrases in the sentence I mentioned at the beginning of this thesis: the (potential) feelings of sadness and despondency intimated by the pose of 'head in hand,' and the sense of plangent futility of 'in vain.' The uncertainty about whether the narrator should be identified with the figure in the chair is sustained by the third sentence: 'No not yet listening' might present the narrator changing his or her mind about how the figure should be imagined or recalled, or it might indicate that the narrator-as-figure is not yet listening because the questions 'where been how long how it was' have not yet faded. With the more direct fourth sentence, we seem to move inward, 'the same dark' presumably being the darkness perceived by the figure, whose eyes are covered. But what should we make of the strange air of resignation in the assertion that there will be 'the same dark […] *from now* all hours of day and night'? Might the figure be blind, or paralysed, or might this unending darkness be the darkness of death? Though the narrative situation remains obscure, with the opening sentences generating persistent ambiguities about who is thinking and feeling what about whom, affects of grief and loss are conspicuously implied.[4]

But any straightforward reading of this narrative as an evocation of mourning is disrupted by the tone of the succeeding sentences, which counterfactually describe the sounds (that may or may not be imagined) by which the figure might know the time of day or night: the song of nightbirds, the ringing of church bells,[5] and Mother

[3] The same use of undecidable syntax is exploited at the very close of the text, 'marble still so long then out,' chiefly because the adjective 'still' might qualify 'marble' or 'so long,' or it might independently describe the face.

[4] It is worth noting that Beckett wrote 'Still 3' in June 1973, in a period following the death of two friends (Jack MacGowran and Christine Tsingos) and shortly prior to writing 'As the Story Was Told,' a piece for a book to commemorate Günter Eich who had committed suicide in December the previous year (Nixon, xix; Knowlson, 599-600).

[5] The 'incarnation bell' presumably refers to the Angelus prayer commemorating the incarnation, recited three times a day and usually accompanied by the ringing of a bell.

Calvet's daily comings and goings.[6] There is something quaint, even nostalgic, to the speculation that the 'right valley' wind might carry the sound of the bells, and the fond familiarity of the description of the solitary, slightly pathetic, figure of Mother Calvet. Note how 'mere fancy,' with its suggestion of pleasant reverie, is placed at the beginning of the clause, whereas 'the incarnation bell' is postponed to the end, giving readers the feeling and only later the subject of that feeling. The tone undergoes another sudden change, with the sentence beginning 'Back then and nothing to tell' returning us to the figure in the chair, the allusion to a 'soundless place' and the questions being like 'ghosts' adding to the air of sorrow and despair. The sentence seems to assert that 'such questions' as 'where,' 'what,' and 'how long' are '*in* the head in the hand' (my italics), and that the figure rather than - or as well as - the narrator poses these questions. But whether this is a self-representation or a focalised narration remains unclear. On the one hand, 'once' and 'like ghosts' suggest that the figure no longer thinks these questions; that they then *are* articulated at the end of the sentence seems to indicate that the narrator and the figure are distinct from one another. On the other hand, the questions closely echo those of the opening sentence, which *do* seem to be posed by the narrator, given that the figure has not yet been invoked. This powerful unsettling of our ability to determine who or what contemplates whom greatly complicates the second part of 'Still 3,' leaving the question of who imagines the faces of the dead acutely unresolved.

Before discussing the latter half of 'Still 3,' it is worth making a general observation - that this elusive work produces manifold uncertainties in readers which are implicated in various, often conflicting, affective dispositions. Put differently, the text *involves* readers in struggling to imagine a person, to distinguish one person from another, and to discern what emotion he, she, or they may or may not feel. This experience is, of course, strikingly proximate to the experience the second part of 'Still 3' seems to describe, raising doubts about whether the reader discerns something inherent to the text or projects thoughts and feelings onto it, intensifying anxieties of misreading - and especially of misreading emotion. This is only compounded by the way the text itself seems to stage a struggle to articulate what is known and felt (with

[6] There is a scavenger figure named 'Mother Calvet' in the second of the *Texts for Nothing* (7), though she is recalled less nostalgically than in 'Still 3.' There are several similarities between the two texts, most obviously the sound of ringing bells (8).

its emphasis on there being 'nothing to tell' and recurrent use of 'say' in its imperative form). That neither Pilling nor Cohn registers this point is principally due to the fact that both describe Beckett's writing in a more assured manner than it actually allows, minimising and domesticating the discomforting feelings of not being able to understand this work, or the feelings it presents, or one's own feelings about it. Unknowable and inarticulable feelings powerfully contribute to the strange indefinite quality of this remarkable work.

Indeed, the changing role of affect produces the sudden turn in the middle of 'Still 3': where the first half of the text describes an indefinite subject in affectively charged ways, the second half combines a highly affective-subject matter (not many people would be unmoved by images of dead faces) with a bare, abstract, almost logical vocabulary, which rapidly oscillates between binary terms (on/off, white/black, long/short, another/same, male/female, his/hers). Nonetheless, more emotive language does rupture into this rather cerebral prose. The word 'creature,' for instance, can refer to a creation, a non-human animal, or a person one despises (*OED*). The disconcerting movement from 'hers or his' to 'some other creature's' might suggest that images of male and female faces are succeeded by an image of an inhuman face, or that the narrator thinks of people who are not defined sexually as in some sense less than human (and perhaps even despises them for it). Such language can be intensely disorientating for readers because, without knowing what kind of narrative this is, we are denied any consistent or easily defined feeling.

Pilling and Cohn recognise how unsettling the second half of 'Still 3' is: Pilling refers to the dead faces as an 'unexpected horror' (153), and Cohn similarly describes how 'we are plunged into a nightmare of faces' (324). Cohn goes on to suggest that the faces 'appear "one by one never more at a time," and yet the feeling is that of an entire population—as in *Le Dépeupleur* [*The Lost Ones*]. Ageless, bodiless, colourless, and genderless, the faces are almost geometric entities' (324). Initially, there is some sense of a multitude of the dead, but as the text unfolds, other possibilities and other feelings emerge: 'There somewhere some time hers or his or some other creature's try dreamt away saying dreamt away where face after face till hers in the end or his or that other creature's.' The recurrent possessive pronouns, 'hers' and 'his,' intimate that the narrator and/or the figure is imagining the faces of *specific* people, introducing pathos to the macabre vision of the preceding sentences. Meanwhile, the ambiguous address

of the imperatives of 'try dreamt away say dreamt away' again raises questions about whose imagination this is, and what kind of imaginings these might be. Cohn straightforwardly asserts that the dead faces are a 'dream that came to [the] one seated with head in hand' (324). The narrative does not quite allow such a definitive claim, and, just as importantly, 'dreamt away' - with its incongruous connotations of idle reverie - is so much more equivocal and ambivalent than this, in leaving us uncertain about whether the narrator reassures him- or herself that this is only a dream, or desperately *wishes* for it to be so. Both prompt feelings of compassion, but of significantly different orders.

One of the secondary ambiguities generated by the lack of clarity about what kind of experience the text describes is the question of how volitional or otherwise these imaginings might be. Pilling describes the images of the dead coming against the figure's will, whereas Cohn ascribes much greater agency, suggesting that the narrator deliberately 'seeks […] to visualize a single face' (324). The scarcity of personal pronouns and verbs again precludes us from making a decision of this kind. However, the refrain, 'no expression,' which sounds throughout 'Still 3,' *does* suggest a desire to discern emotion upon the faces of the dead, or at the very least a consciousness of the possibility of an emotion being expressed. This work which so radically disorients and deranges the desire to understand it - and especially to understand its language in terms of expression - abruptly ends with the image of a face upon which 'no known expression' is to be found. That the feelings this writing both presents and engenders are so complex and enigmatic does not give us licence to account for the text without reference to its affects, nor to traduce its textual and affective complexity by describing it in consistent emotional terms, but *intensifies* the demand that we account for the ways that feeling is elided, intimated, diverted, desired, and transformed in this remarkable work.

I have deliberately chosen to end this thesis with a text that engages the reader's emotions less directly than *Ada or Ardor*, *Ill Seen Ill Said*, *Ancient Light*, or *Waiting for the Barbarians* - indeed, a text which at first glance may seem to be devoid of emotion. Even when discussing works where affect does not appear to be the primary concern, a mode of close reading which attends to the feelings it both represents and gives rise to can get us much closer to the work. Such a mode of criticism involves: a willingness to inhabit uncertainties - and especially uncertainties

about feeling - which texts preclude us from resolving; a recognition of how texts can mobilise conflicting feelings with conflicting ethical implications that might not be reconcilable; an awareness of the ways in which knowing and not knowing can be felt as much as thought; and a receptiveness to a broader range of epistemological-affective states, encompassing not only what one knows and does not know, but also what one suspects, intuits, desires to know, and desires not to know (and sometimes all of these at once). Beyond contributing to our understanding of four late modernist authors, the larger ambition of this thesis is to exemplify a mode of criticism that enables us to respond to the ambivalences, undecidabilities, disorientations, and uncertainties of aesthetically difficult writing - to do greater justice to the singular experience of reading such extraordinary literary works.

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