

Fiction and the Theory of Action

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Abstract

This thesis explores four mid-twentieth century fictional texts in relation to concepts of action drawn predominantly from Anglo-American analytic philosophy and contemporary psychology. The novels in question are Anna Kavan's *Ice*, Samuel Beckett's *How It Is*, Vladimir Nabokov's *Pale Fire* and Malcolm Lowry's *Under the Volcano*. The theory of action provides concepts, structures, and language to describe how agency is conceptualised at various levels of description. My exploration of these concepts in relation to fiction gives a framework for describing character action and the conceptualisation of agency in my primary texts. The theory of action is almost exclusively concerned with human action in the real world, and I explore the benefits and problems of transferring concepts from these discourses to literary criticism. My approach is focused around close reading, and a primary goal of this thesis is to provide nuanced analyses of my primary texts. In doing so, I emphasise the centrality of concepts of agency in fiction and provide examples of how action theory is applicable to literary criticism.

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Introduction

I

This thesis circles around a concept of freedom, rather, a number of permutations of an idea of freedom. I make a major theoretical assumption which underpins this study and which relies upon a supporting notion of freedom: This is the common-sense claim that the experience of the feeling of action is the feeling that we are causing our own actions. This is the experience which is described by terms like volition and intention, terms which tether physical action to the agent's decision to act in a certain way. When we act, there is volition, and the phenomenology of free will seems to emerge from the sense that we actively choose what we do and how we do it. The sense that we are active participants in our actions is tied to the idea that, in a way, our actions *represent* us. In most cases, we take responsibility for what we do, because we have chosen one course of action over others, and have faith that this course of action is best for us at the time of choosing. Implicit in this is an idea of rationality. An agent is responsible for actions which they have authored, and our common understanding of responsibility relies on the traceability of actions to agents. In part, this relies on free action representing the choices of an agent to act in particular ways. This gives us the term 'autonomy', which captures the idea that a free agent is self-governing. These ideas articulate and construct an idea of subjectivity, which is described through a cluster of interdependent terms: agency, autonomy, intention, freedom and responsibility. These are the terms often used to understand and describe action, in everyday life and in academic discourses. Particularly for my purposes, these terms and the idea of agency that they support can be seen to underwrite much of the study of literature, philosophy and the social sciences.

Although this idea of agency seems to have intuitive force, it describes a very broad set of experiential features. The articulation of these features in academic discourse is, by necessity, more complex. This often takes the discourse away from what might be seen as a loose folk notion of agency: a description which is based upon assumptions and claims which ordinary people are likely to endorse. The particularities of certain methodological approaches mean that the ideas which are captured by an intuitive folk description are often subject to the standards of competing academic positions. This is the case even if these discourses are attempting to articulate a common-sense concept such as agency. The

concept of autonomy within Anglo-American analytic philosophy is a good example of this. Although there are often intuitive – folk – factors involved in the philosophical debate, there are also strong disciplinary norms. The primacy of autonomy within this literature has complex foundations. In one respect, the notion of a person that emerges in this brand of philosophy comes about through a process in which a particular philosophical outlook is defended as the most logically defensible explanation of a given concept. It is common for such approaches to reference, restate or defend historical arguments, and so the conceptual usage of a given term is not only subject to contemporary factors, but is in interaction with a series of historical manifestations of that same idea. In contemporary analytic philosophy, the ideas of autonomy, the will, and practical reason, for example, are often stated in ways which suggest their interaction with historical ideas of the subject. Kant and Hume are particular progenitors of the contemporary debate, largely because of their oppositional stances on whether reason can be thought of as a motivating power. Kant framed his view of free will around practical reason, in which he defends a position which relies upon the idea that human action can be directed by rational control. The classical rejection of this position is Hume's suggestion that reason alone is unable to provide motivation which can result in action.¹ References to the classical treatments of these problems are common in contemporary theory. The construction of an idea of the person, and what attributes a person should have, can be seen as an idea which emerges and continues through a specific philosophical tradition. I will address the main currents in contemporary action theory in detail later in this introduction.

One particularity of the analytic philosophical approach is its apolitical focus. Agency, in this discourse, is frequently approached at the micro-level of behaviour, concentrating on the mechanisms of individual action rather than the environmental framework in which those actions take place. This contrasts with disciplines, such as psychology or sociology, which approach the individual agent as embedded in particular social structures. Although this micro-level often dictates the type of description that an argument adopts, this does not mean that philosophising is hermetic. Instead, and especially in recent times, there has been a move to adopt the insights of science and the social sciences at points which bolster or oppose philosophical theorising. In traditional analytic approaches to the question of

¹ For an explanation of the classical approaches, see: Christine M. Korsgaard, 'Skepticism about Practical Reason', *The Journal of Philosophy*, 83 (1986), 5–25; See also: Michael Bratman, 'Review of Korsgaard's *Sources of Normativity*', in *Faces of Intention: Selected Essays on Intention and Agency* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), pp. 265–79, in which Bratman defends a Humean picture of the will against Korsgaard's Kantian view.

action and free will, the opposition which was negotiated through argument was the mutual incompatibility of autonomy, on the one hand, and determinism on the other. In this opposition, determinism stands for a causal view of the world, a broadly scientific view in which actions cannot be free because they are always caused by preceding events *ad infinitum*. When philosophical debate utilises insights from other disciplines, it is often to give specificity to this idea of causation. A case study from neuroscience might, for example, explain how neurons cause actions before we are aware of making a specific choice, and in this case, bolster the dominance of the determinist cause. The defence of free will in contemporary action theory always has to construct an argument which insulates the concept of autonomy from the threat of determinism. Different manifestations of free will theories generally differ in the specific way in which they protect the concept.

The structural opposition between freedom and determinism is pervasive. In *The Significance of Free Will*, Robert Kane describes the relation as ‘the dialectic of selfhood’, and suggests that our central experience of individual agency emerges through contact with both poles of thought. In this structure, the idea of free will is a response to this dialectic. In his description of the system, Kane posits an originary myth as the first stage in a child’s introduction to the free will problem. In this first stage, the self is constructed as a *causa sui*; as separate from the world, and the absolute spring of action:

[We] come to view ourselves as distinct sources of motion or activity in the world, separate from other things (animate or inanimate), which are moved by forces independent of our wills. We see our *selves*, on the one hand, as independent sources of motion over against the *world*, on the other, with its myriad sources of motion that are not directly under the control of our wills.²

This position is not an end point. Rather, it is a feeling which comes into contact with, and under threat from, the discovery that the self is not isolated from the world, but embedded in it. Phase two of the dialectic is the recognition that this embedding provides a threat to the type of subjectivity formed in phase one:

Perhaps we are not really independent sources of motion in the world at all, but are entirely products of the world, or of the not-self. Perhaps we only *seem* to ‘move

² Robert Kane, *The Significance of Free Will* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), p. 93, original emphasis.

ourselves' in a primordial way, when our motions are in fact caused by forces in the world of which we are unaware.³

The way in which this embedding is conceptualised has taken countless forms across the history of ideas. These can be grouped under the term 'determinism', as they tend to share a materialist approach which places explanatory priority on causal theories of human behaviour which locate the causes of action outside the control of the agent. These theories range across genetics, neurology, psychology and the social sciences, and offer causes which happen at multiple levels of description. The attempt to describe the mechanisms of determinism is a very old practice, and though the specificity of contemporary offerings is marked, the underlying ideology remains largely unchanged. Although Mary Midgley ridicules the 'odd spectacle of many competing determinisms', each providing 'the engine which runs all the other causes', it is worth noting that a huge variety of scientific and quasi-scientific disciplines have attempted to describe exactly *what* is involved in phase two of the dialectic.⁴ I will explore some of these ideas at greater length later in this introduction.

With both poles of the dialectic in place, Kane suggests that our feeling of free will is a higher stage response to the determinist threat to subjectivity. Kane's position, because of his particular loyalty to libertarian metaphysics, reasserts free will as the sense that we have ultimate control as distinct from determinist causation. This feeling is very similar to phase one of the dialectic, but it is forged anew from the confrontation with the detailed encounter with determinism in phase two. Even without adopting Kane's metaphysically 'independent selfhood' or his characterisation of determinism as a 'seditious' threat, the dialectic provides a useful model for representing the interaction between our subjective feeling of action and the world of determinist counterexamples.⁵ It is true that 'we associate being a self [...] with *doing* things – making, producing, creating, bringing about', but this needn't imply libertarian control.⁶ Others, Midgley and Thomas Nagel among them, have suggested that the philosophical challenge is to avoid reasserting either polarised doctrine, and instead 'combine the perspective of a particular person inside the world with an objective view of the same world, the person and his viewpoint included'.⁷

³ Kane, p. 94.

⁴ Mary Midgley, *Science and Poetry* (London: Routledge, 2006), p. 166.

⁵ Kane, p. 96.

⁶ Kane, p. 96, original emphasis.

⁷ Thomas Nagel, *The View From Nowhere* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986), p. 3.

The dialectic model can come to stand for any approach which recognises the need to attest to our experience as agents who both act and curiously investigate the structures which make up our world.

As I will describe in detail later in this introduction, analytic models of free will are just one response to the poles of freedom and determinism. They are often dialectic according to Kane's model, because they attempt to marry these poles in a way which maintains a recognisable sense of freedom while admitting determinist explanations of the world. The way in which the poles are mixed varies greatly between factions and disciplines, with some hard materialists maintaining a position that is distinctly non-dialectic. As I will explore later in this introduction, epiphenomenalism is one conclusion of this way of thinking. The debate has also been approached from its opposite position on a number of occasions in the history of ideas. As Midgley suggests, Cartesian dualism responds to the problem of materialism (and implicit determinism) by positing two types of stuff; one physical and one non-physical. Historically, when this position has been taken seriously

[I]t has usually tended to expand into absolute idealism – the idea that spiritual diamond-stuff is actually the stuff of the whole universe, a stuff that underlays physical matter as well as souls. Hence the mentalist tradition that runs through Leibniz, Berkeley, Hume and Hegel to modern phenomenism.⁸

The legacy of dualism is ongoing, and later sections of this introduction explore its contemporary manifestations in philosophy and psychology. These extreme positions – materialist and idealist – are not uncommon. However, the 'dialectic of selfhood' is also prevalent in theories, more or less successful, which attempt to unite the subjective and objective viewpoints.⁹

⁸ Midgley, p. 119.

⁹ This has been the case for some time, with support from influential proponents. At the turn of the century, through the ideas of Bergson, Nietzsche, and William James, adapted theories of free will were in intellectual focus. As Mark Micale suggests, these 'psychological philosophers' were indispensable contributors to the 'intellectual-historical background' of twentieth century psychology. All three dedicated energy to describing free will in ways which shifted focus away from traditional metaphysical problems in order to better describe a conception of agency modified in light of evidence of non-conscious and external control. See: Mark S. Micale, 'The Modernist Mind: A Map', in *The Mind of Modernism: Medicine, Psychology, and the Cultural Arts in Europe and America, 1880-1940* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2004), pp. 1–20 (p. 6).

II

So far, I have only described how the poles of freedom and determinism interact within a specific analytic philosophical context. Work in the social sciences has also structured debates according to models in which freedom and determinism are polarised. The structure of these debates is familiar, though the determinist intrusion on freedom is often less abstract than in the philosophical discourse. While analytic philosophy generally characterises determinism according to a broad causal model of the universe, the social sciences often investigate the particular mechanisms of everyday life in which action is unconscious or environmentally conditioned. This emphasis gives a slightly different conception of determinism, insofar as it models the social determinants of behaviour. Stanley Milgram's experiments in the 1960s provide a clear example of how the discourse of freedom and determinism overlaps with the investigation of environmental determinants of behaviour. Milgram's experiments also focus the timeframe of this discourse, as his research is conceptualised as a response to the Second World War. Although oppositional structure between freedom and determinism has a long cultural and conceptual history, Milgram shows how the debate becomes especially pertinent in the mid-twentieth century. His experiments were designed to show how obedience works, based on the assumption that it is a controlling social factor, 'the dispositional cement that binds men to systems of authority'.¹⁰ These experiments were a specific reaction to the atrocities of the Second World War, which were made possible by the disposition to obedience:

Gas chambers were built, death camps were guarded, daily quotas of corpses were produced with the same efficiency as the manufacture of appliances. These inhumane policies may have originated in the mind of a single person, but they could only be carried out on a massive scale if a very large number of persons obeyed orders.¹¹

Milgram's experiments revealed close adherence to commands, which were apparently accompanied by a 'reduction in conscious will'.¹² It is this final point which reveals the structuring dialectic. Through his claim that there is a 'reduction in conscious will',

¹⁰ Stanley Milgram, 'Behavioral Study of Obedience', *Journal of Abnormal and Social Psychology*, 67 (1963), 371–78 (p. 371).

¹¹ Milgram, p. 371.

¹² Daniel M. Wegner, 'The Mind's Best Trick: How We Experience Conscious Will', *Trends in Cognitive Sciences*, 7 (65-69), 2003 (p. 68).

Milgram implies that there is a ‘conscious will’ to be manipulated. He conceptualises his own findings, which evidence the ways in which agency can be manipulated, against the idea of agential control. Here, there is a polarised conception of agency, with freedom naturally aligned with a conscious will that is threatened by determinism. In this case, the threat of determinism is pictured through the agent’s dispositional adherence to social pressures.

Milgram suggests that ‘for many persons obedience may be a deeply ingrained behaviour tendency’, and that obedience is ‘the psychological mechanism that links individual action to political purpose’.¹³ These combined factors build upon an idea that environmental factors of behavioural control are not simply in the world, but are structured and manipulated by social forces. In this way, a distinction arises between abstract causal determinism, in which the individual is ‘controlled’ by blind physical forces, and social determinism, in which the individual is possibly subject to manipulation by other individuals. However, this distinction is not absolute. Even within the social sciences, there is slippage between specific experiments and evidence regarding behavioural control and more theoretical responses to the idea of determinism in its abstract causal manifestation. There is feedback between these conceptions of the problem, as evidence for behavioural control has been taken by some to prove broader determinist theses. In addition, some approaches to the social sciences maintain the interplay between free will debates and experimental research. Contemporary with Stanley Milgram, there was significant debate about the reach and ideology of the social sciences. Psychologists were called upon to describe the ways in which they thought their discipline and its findings interacted with folk concepts of freedom.

In behaviourism, the ideology of causal materialism was deeply ingrained in the scientific outlook which inflected the psychological approaches and conclusions of that school. In this tradition, as I will describe later in this introduction, a scientific worldview is taken to be the single level of behavioural explanation. As such, causal determinism is seen to subsume and overwrite subjective experience. As such, subjective experience is reduced to epiphenomena. This is contradicted by approaches which regard the findings of science to be active at a different, theoretically distinct, level of explanation from subjective experience. This question was meaningfully raised in the famous 1956 dialogue between

¹³ Milgram, p. 371.

the prominent psychologists Carl Rogers and B.F. Skinner. Skinner's staunchly behaviourist stance positioned the scientific worldview as a way of overwriting the democratic myths of freedom and autonomy. As Skinner makes clear elsewhere, ideologies of freedom are in direct 'conflict with the application of the methods of science to human affairs'.¹⁴ Rogers endorses the same conflict between science and individualism, but turns it into a paradox rather than a zero sum relation:

Behaviour, when it is examined scientifically, is surely best understood as determined by prior causation. This is one great fact of science. But responsible personal choice, which is the most essential element in being a person which is the core experience in psychotherapy which exists prior to any scientific endeavour, is an equally prominent fact in our lives. To deny the experience of responsible choice is to me as restricted a view as to deny the possibility of a behavioural science.¹⁵

Here, the question of individual freedom becomes entangled with methodology and ideology. While causation is the means through which science is conducted, the first-person experience of action and choice is the way in which individual life is understood. While both theorists steer away from a dialectic mixing of freedom and determinism, their responses show just how complex and pervasive the concept of free will is, demanding either rejection by or extrication from the domain of scientific investigation.

III

The debate between Rogers and Skinner took place within an intellectual environment in which psychology as an academic discipline was burgeoning. The Second World War saw the large scale funding of psychology as part of the war effort, particularly in the United States. This provided funding and experimental freedom, with a resultant boom in the behavioural sciences. The close contact between psychological research and the government also brought behavioural sciences into the mainstream political vocabulary. As Ellen Herman suggests, the

¹⁴ B. F. Skinner, 'Freedom and the Control of Men', *The American Scholar*, 25 (1955), 47–65 (p. 47).

¹⁵ Carl R. Rogers and B. F. Skinner, 'Some Issues Concerning the Control of Human Behavior', *Science*, 124 (1956), 1057–66 (p. 1064).

war had shown that controlling personalities, shaping attitudes and feelings, and guiding democracy through an era of emotional turbulence were major responsibilities of government. They were also the things that psychological experts did best.¹⁶

The transition from using ‘psychology as a weapon’ during the war,¹⁷ to utilising insights from behavioural science as a way of maintaining ‘social well-being’ kept psychology on the government agenda.¹⁸ The importance of psychology as a military asset in the post-war years intensified with the advent of the Cold War, when safeguarding the ideological safety of the United States became an overt military concern. The practical application of psychological research to national concerns found responses both guarded and fervent. Talcott Parsons was a particular believer in the reach of the social sciences:

Do we have or can we develop a knowledge of human social relations that can serve as the basis of rational “engineering” control? [...] The evidence we have reviewed indicates that the answer is unequivocally affirmative. Social science is a going concern; the problem is not one of creating it, but rather of using and developing it.¹⁹

The key phrase here is ‘control’, which positions the understanding of the social sciences as a tool through which the population could be manipulated. Just as Parsons is maintaining a structure in which behavioural science can provide evidence to predict and manipulate human action, Herman suggests that there is a distinct continuity between the militarisation of psychology in the Second World War and psychology’s Cold War history. The link between them comes from a ‘sustained vision of a rigorous and predictive behavioural science’²⁰, a project which courted suspicion of state control and intrusion. The other side of this was the growth of a humanistic psychology, the influence of which contributed to a change in social policy by the 1960s, in which “the political” was reconceptualised to encompass “the personal” and notions of social responsibility were saturated in the vocabulary of subjective experience’.²¹ The idea of a predictive

¹⁶ Ellen Herman, *The Romance of American Psychology* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1995), p. 81.

¹⁷ Herman, p. 130.

¹⁸ Herman, p. 239.

¹⁹ Quoted in: Herman, p. 128.

²⁰ Herman, p. 135.

²¹ Herman, p. 241.

behavioural science need not clash with the attempt to prioritise the psychological well-being of the nation as a government concern. This idea, in fact, chimes with the democratic capitalist ideology. As Herman points out, the psychological growth industry was not only there to cater for the militarised ‘social strains’ of the mid-century,²² it also grew symbiotically with late-capitalist consumerism:

Economic affluence and an ethic of avid consumption allowed people to think of empathy and warmth as items to be purchased without recoiling from the commercialisation of human connection [...] experts’ promise of supportive understanding also nourished the ongoing quest for existential meaning, just as new levels of geographic mobility did by placing more people than ever out of reach of the kin and community ties with which they had grown up.²³

Herman’s diagnosis points to the complex post-war milieu in which psychology grew in the west, a context in which individualism came under focus through ideology, policy, and the social consequences of capitalism. As the 1956 debate between Rogers and Skinner suggests, the wide-spread theory and practice of individualism does not necessarily raise new theoretical questions about the self in action. However, it does create a popular and contemporary discourse of action which, like current philosophical approaches, dialogues with classical dilemmas of the self.

The intertwining of these discourses is present in other cultural modes, not least cultural criticism. Contemporary with Skinner and Rogers, Lionel Trilling utilises the classical language of action theory and the psychological ideology of self-improvement, which he combines in order to describe the state of the novel. Although Trilling’s claims can be seen in relation to the intellectual culture from which they came, he sets his claims within the long historical emergence of individualism. Trilling draws heavily upon the idea that the novel is aligned with subjectivity. In his preface to *The Opposing Self*, he suggests that ‘the self that makes itself manifest at the end of the eighteenth century is different in kind, and in effect, from any self that had ever before emerged’.²⁴ Part of this new self, he suggests, involves a specific kind of agency which prioritises individuality, insofar as agency ‘has become not merely a question of whether the action conforms to the

²² Herman, p. 238.

²³ Herman, pp. 239–240.

²⁴ Lionel Trilling, *The Opposing Self* (New York, NY: The Viking Press, 1955), p. ix. This historical and literary claim is similar to that made by Watt in *The Rise of the Novel*.

appropriate principle or maxim of morality, but also of the manner in which it is performed, of what it implies about the entire nature, the *being*, of the agent'.²⁵ This idea – that an action expresses the autonomy of an agent – is still very current in contemporary free will debates. I will return to this later in this introduction. Along with his historical claim, elsewhere Trilling makes substantive claims about the role that the novel plays in relation to this new, post-1800, concept of agency.²⁶ In *The Liberal Imagination*, the same idea of agency is under focus, though here it is transposed to a specifically literary context. For Trilling, the 'novel at its greatest is the record of the will acting under the direction of an idea'.²⁷ Not content to recognise the common features of novels, Trilling psychologises the relation between the novel and society. Here, the novel is not only a product of the cultural context in which it emerges, it is in a dynamic relation with that culture. Offering a strong humanist claim, Trilling suggests that the novel has the potential for 'reconstituting and renovating the will' in the world.²⁸ Trilling assumes the primacy of autonomy and freedom, and this underlies his didactic claims.²⁹

Without accepting all of Trilling's conclusions, his analysis should be recognised for its integration of three separate discourses, a combination which sets the tone for this thesis. His example suggests that freedom is a point of importance and common understanding, that it can be described using psychological and philosophical terminology, and that it can be explored through literary fiction. This example opens doors theoretically. It also introduces the idea that the exploration of individual action is the defining characteristic of the novel form, a claim which is given special urgency by Trilling's position within a cultural milieu that was increasingly finding the language to explore the complexities of individuals and their actions. The novels chosen for this study can also be grouped around this confluence. All of my chosen works were written by authors who lived through the Second World War, though the majority of the texts are Cold War products.

²⁵ Trilling, *The Opposing Self*, p. xi, original emphasis.

²⁶ Similar claims are made in: Ian Watt, *The Rise of the Novel: Studies in Defoe, Richardson and Fielding* (London: The Hogarth Press, 1987), p. 13. Watt suggests that the novel's 'primary criterion was truth to individual experience - experience which is always unique and therefore new'. He closely associates this inward turn with Cartesian philosophy, in which 'truth is conceived of as a wholly individual matter, logically independent of the tradition of past thought [...] The novel is the form of literature which most fully reflects this individualist and innovating reorientation'.

²⁷ Lionel Trilling, 'Art and Fortune', in *The Liberal Imagination: Essays on Literature and Society* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1970), pp. 255–80 (p. 265).

²⁸ Trilling, 'Art and Fortune', p. 265.

²⁹ For a full investigation of Trilling's humanist literary criticism, see: Mark Krupnick, *Lionel Trilling and the Fate of Cultural Criticism* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1986).

Anna Kavan's *Ice* is an apocalyptic novel, published in 1967, in the midst of the Cold War. The novel is strongly engaged with the idea of agency, and the encroaching apocalypse is both an external and internal phenomenon. Complexly psychological, Kavan's writing combines a strongly subjective narratorial style with an emphasis on the victimisation and passivity of her central character. Kavan had longstanding form in her rejection of the intrusions of society on the individual. In 1944, she wrote a piece for *Horizon* magazine, in which she set out the traumas of a hospitalised soldier. 'The Case of Bill Williams' is an attack on the mechanising aspirations of wartime, and the values that this propagates within society at large. For Kavan, the rhetoric of war appears to become a political excuse to instigate a conformist agenda:

Inevitably, right from the start, the social machine is the enemy of the individual Bill Williams. It limits the avenues of his mind, it trips his feet and lays traps for his fingertips and his tongue. Every door closing, every form filled in, every official, every broadcast, every regulation, every propaganda slogan, is ammunition in the war; Society versus Bill Williams.³⁰

Malcolm Lowry covers similar concerns in his 1947 novel *Under the Volcano*. Here, the main protagonist is an ex-Consul, a figure of transitional political allegiance. As Andrew Miller notes, the Consul has left the diplomatic service, and so his 'words, actions, and desires have long since ceased to be clearly tethered to any state-based territorial formation'³¹. Instead, the political undertones in the novel are filtered through the strongly individualist focus of character and action. This is partly supplied by echoes of aestheticism, but is also shored up in part by Lowry's reading of José Ortega y Gasset's *History as a System*. For Ortega, as for Kavan, the 'mechanical interpretation of the universe'³² is in contrast with the individual; the 'self-made, autofabricated' man.³³ In addition to these social contexts, Lowry's focus on agency in *Under the Volcano* is predominantly supplied by his thematisation of alcoholism; a condition embedded in a complex set of associations and ideologies – both individual and social – regarding

³⁰ Anna Kavan, 'The Case of Bill Williams', *Horizon*, 9 (1944), 96–99 (p. 97).

³¹ Andrew John Miller, 'Under the Nation-State: Modernist Deterritorialization in Malcolm Lowry's *Under the Volcano*', *Twentieth Century Literature*, 50 (2004), 1–17 (p. 1); For a further political reading of Lowry, see: Hilda Thomas, 'Praxis as Prophylaxis: A Political Reading of *Under the Volcano*', in *Swinging the Maelstrom: New Perspectives on Malcolm Lowry*, ed. by Sherrill Grace (London: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1992), pp. 82–92.

³² José Ortega y Gasset, *History as a System*, trans. by Helene Weyl (New York, NY: W.W. Norton & Co., 1962), p. 117.

³³ Ortega y Gasset, p. 116.

freedom and the will. This association is made more complex if we follow Sharae Deckard in her suggestion that '[alcohol] functions in the novel as an escape from the homogenizing categories of identity which the Consul finds oppressive.'³⁴ Vladimir Nabokov's *Pale Fire* (1962) was published during the Cold War and aspects of the novel have been seen to bear the trace of communist political events.³⁵ This context is in interaction with the focus of the novel, in which localised relationships, and the behaviour of individuals within those relationships, carry significant burdens of influence and responsibility. Like *Pale Fire*, Beckett's *How It Is* (1961) also focuses intently on interpersonal relationships. In Beckett's dramatic monologue, however, the setting is a loosely defined, mud-filled world, in which the creaturely protagonists move and interact according to a sparse and sadistic set of encoded norms. *How it Is* has been loosely associated with Beckett's experiences during World War II,³⁶ offering additional historical context to the experimentalism of the text, which dialogues with psychology as both a theoretical and literary practice.

IV

So far, I have painted a broad picture of a social and intellectual context in the twentieth century in which the self was theorised extensively. As I have suggested, this trend had multiple manifestations and inflected debates across the arts, sciences and humanities. The novels under scrutiny in this thesis emerged and engaged with a culture that was preoccupied with questions of agency. The agent, as a theoretical entity, is historically formulated through two poles of thought; one which assumes that there is freedom, and that free choice and self-determination are accessible and constitutive aspects of the individual. This idea has several extreme manifestations, which theorise self-determination as a hermetic and transcendental right. This concept of freedom is often brought into conflict with the sense that free will can come under threat from myriad conformist and determinist forces. The wide discourse is one in which the agent appears in turn as free, conflicted, fallible, irrational, rational, self-directing, and socially embedded. In order to

³⁴ Sharae Deckard, *Paradise Discourse, Imperialism, and Globalization: Exploiting Eden* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2010), p. 55.

³⁵ As described in: Adam Piette, 'Political Assassination and the Communist Killer: Nabokov's *Pale Fire*' (presented at the Anti-Communism: Culture, Literature, Propaganda Conference, Institute of English Studies, University of London, 2013); See also: Steven Belletto, 'The Zemblan Who Came in from the Cold, or Nabokov's *Pale Fire*, Chance, and the Cold War', *ELH*, 73 (2006), 755–80; Andrea Pitzer, *The Secret History of Vladimir Nabokov* (London: Pegasus Books, 2013).

³⁶ See: Sophie Ratcliffe, *On Sympathy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008).

disentangle some of the complexities of this picture, I turn now to a more specific literature review which traces some aspects of the idea of agency which I will be using in this thesis. This is a partial summary, but through it builds an idea of how different concepts of agency interact, how they are used now in a variety of disciplines, and how they developed. This review brings concepts of agency up to date to frame the theoretical underpinnings of my literary readings in subsequent chapters. The state of the art in current conceptions of agency is not an isolated discourse, but one which has a long intellectual history which overlaps with much of the context-specific content in the earlier sections of this introduction.

Contemporary cognitive science and the philosophy of mind are, implicitly or explicitly, founded on their responses to two entwined positions that emerge from Cartesian dualism. The first is metaphysical control, which suggests that the mind is nonphysical, but has conscious, executive control over the body. As Stephen Stich and Shaun Nichols suggest, this is based on the premise that ‘there are two quite different sorts of substance in the universe: physical substance, which is located in space and time, and mental substance, which is located in time but not in space’.³⁷ Although Descartes sought to resolve the interaction between these substances by proposing ‘two-way causal interaction between the mental and physical’,³⁸ these causal happenings are hard to justify logically: ‘how’, asks Jerry Fodor, ‘can the nonphysical give rise to the physical without violating the laws of the conservation of mass, of energy and of momentum?’³⁹ The second Cartesian problem leads from this ‘homunculus’ version of mental causation. If we have absolute control over our actions, then it holds that we know what we are doing and why we are doing it, thus: ‘introspection gives rise to infallible knowledge about our own mental states’.⁴⁰ These are two sides of a specific image of the mind-body interaction that is itself part of a wider popular view of the human consciousness as somehow separate from the world, uncomplicated by the world, and transparently in control of its own processes. Responses to these problems in the cognitive sciences and disciplines influenced by the cognitive sciences have sought to recast the relationship between mind, body and world. This has largely been attempted through an empirical paradigm, with theoretical

³⁷ Shaun Nichols and Stephen P. Stich, ‘Folk Psychology: Simulation or Tacit Theory?’, *Mind and Language*, 7 (1992), 35–71 (p. 235).

³⁸ Nichols and Stich, ‘Folk Psychology: Simulation or Tacit Theory?’, p. 236.

³⁹ Jerry A. Fodor, ‘The Mind-Body Problem’, in *The Mind-Body Problem: A Guide to the Current Debate*, ed. by Richard Warner and Tadeusz Szubka (Oxford: Blackwell, 1994), pp. 24–40 (p. 25).

⁴⁰ Stephen P. Stich, *Deconstructing the Mind* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), p. 120.

description emerging in shared exchange with experimental approaches and findings. The study of action and perception, framed as the major ways in which we interact with the environment, is central to these studies.⁴¹

The history of psychology has frequently, and famously, contended with common-sense notions of action. The empirical and experimental obligations of the discipline provide a structure which is hard to align with the casual explanatory use of terms such as purpose, reason, want, intention, goal and volition, which are repeatedly called upon in the everyday comprehension of other people's actions and our own. Behaviourism was one of the earliest, and most influential, psychological schools which sought to bring an empirically verifiable mode of enquiry to the study of action. As I suggest in the earlier parts of this introduction, there were specific political and social ramifications entangled in the behaviourist agenda. Here, I want to concentrate on the way the behaviourist methodology interlinks with other discourses of the mind.

The behaviourist paradigm was based on the eschewal of mentalistic concepts in psychological explanation. The scientific programme which behaviourism brought to psychology pared down the number of admissible conceptual mechanisms involved in the explanation of behaviour in order to structure a mode of research which was capable of yielding observable, externally validated, data. This was in contrast to preceding psychological methods in which introspection and conscious attention to one's own states played a primary investigative role. The behaviourist agenda can be seen as a rejection of the Cartesian problems noted above. It rejects 'homunculus' control through a thoroughgoing physicalism and, both theoretically and methodologically, dismisses the reliability of introspection. The mechanistic approach of behaviourism is clearly stated by one of the movement's founders, J.B. Watson:

In his first efforts to get uniformity in subject matter and in methods the behaviourist began his own formulation of the problem of psychology by sweeping aside all mediaeval conceptions. He dropped from his scientific vocabulary all

⁴¹ For a summary of the relation between action and perception, see: Alva Noë, *Action in Perception* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2004).

subjective terms such as sensation, perception, image, desire, purpose, and even thinking and emotion as they were subjectively defined.⁴²

This approach is echoed in the work of the later behaviourist, B.F. Skinner:

We can follow the path taken by physics and biology by turning directly to the relation between behaviour and the environment and neglecting supposed mediating states of mind. Physics did not advance by looking more closely at the jubilation of a falling body, or biology by looking at the nature of vital spirits, and we do not need to try to discover what personalities, states of mind, feelings, traits of character, plans, purposes, intentions, or the other perquisites of autonomous man really are in order to get on with a scientific analysis of behaviour.⁴³

Skinner argues here against the adherence to folk modes of behavioural explanation. In doing so, he rejects ‘mediating states of mind’, those states by which the agent consciously interprets environmental and bodily cues. By removing these mentalistic concepts, Skinner assumes a direct line of processing between environmental stimuli and behavioural response. In this model, the agent’s consciousness of action and the reasons for action are epiphenomena.

Watson and Skinner take a hard line on the explanatory use of mediating mental states. However, others from within the behaviourist movement were more reluctant to do away with mentalistic language altogether. To distinguish between the two levels of explanation given by mentalistic language and physiological process, Edward Tolman introduced the terms ‘molecular’ and ‘molar’. As discussed above, Watson championed a model of behaviour which used the term ‘*stimulus* in psychology as it is used in physiology’.⁴⁴ According to this model, ‘movements of the muscles and activity in the glands themselves serve as stimuli by acting upon the afferent nerve endings in the moving muscles’.⁴⁵ This is the ‘molecular’ approach. In contrast, Tolman produced his ‘molar’ behaviourism, which regards observable features of action as worthy of observation in their own right:

⁴² John B. Watson, *Behaviorism* (New York, NY: W.W. Norton & Co., 1930), p. 6.

⁴³ B. F. Skinner, *Beyond Freedom and Dignity* (London: Penguin, 1988), p. 20.

⁴⁴ Quoted in: Edward Chace Tolman, *Purposive Behaviour in Animals and Men* (London: The Century Co., 1932), p. 4, original emphasis.

⁴⁵ Quoted in: Tolman, p. 5.

An act *qua* “behaviour” has distinctive properties all its own. These are to be identified and described irrespective of whatever muscular, glandular, or neural processes underlie them. These new properties, thus distinctive of molar behaviour, are presumably strictly correlated with, and, if you will, dependent upon, physiological motions. But descriptively and per se they are other than those motions.⁴⁶

Tolman’s suggestion is that behaviourism has to give way to molar description because ‘initially and as a matter of first identification, behaviour as behaviour reeks of purpose and of cognition’.⁴⁷ Despite Tolman’s introduction of the molar approach – the observation of action, and the admittance of ‘purpose and cognition’ into the behaviourist agenda – his theories received criticism for remaining at the ‘purposive, intelligent level’ and so being incapable of ‘explaining purpose or intelligence’.⁴⁸ He had no way of explaining purpose itself, and so left a gap between the description of molecular, synaptic, happenings, on the one hand, and purposive action description on the other.

After Tolman, attempts to bridge this gap came across logical problems. Chief among these were slippages into teleological reasoning; arguments which imply ‘a cause subsequent in time to a given effect’.⁴⁹ In action description, the teleological error occurs when it is implied that the goal somehow causes the goal-directed behaviour. This reasoning defies the deterministic necessity that causes precede effects. An explanation of purpose driving action is misleadingly teleological without a description of how a folk-understanding of ‘purpose’ can be explained causally. One explanation of this came in the 1940s with cybernetics. Arturo Rosenblueth and his collaborators followed Tolman in prioritising the molar, over the molecular, unit in behavioural interpretation:

[T]he purpose of voluntary acts is not a matter of arbitrary interpretation but a physiological fact. When we perform a voluntary action what we select voluntarily is a specific purpose, not a specific movement. Thus, if we decide to take a glass containing water and carry it to our mouth we do not command certain muscles to

⁴⁶ Tolman, p. 8.

⁴⁷ Tolman, p. 12.

⁴⁸ Maury Silver, “‘Purposive Behaviour’ in Psychology and Philosophy: A History”, in *Goal Directed Behavior: The Concept of Action in Psychology*, ed. by Michael Frese and John Sabini (Hillsdale, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 1985), pp. 3–19 (p. 9).

⁴⁹ Arturo Rosenblueth, Norbert Wiener and Julian Bigelow, ‘Behavior, Purpose and Teleology’, *Philosophy of Science*, 10 (1943), 18–24 (p. 24).

contract to a certain degree and in a certain sequence; we merely trip the purpose and the reaction follows automatically.⁵⁰

Rosenblueth et al. then redefine teleology using a mechanistic schema to account for how ‘purpose’ can be given some form of controlling role, without slipping into the metaphysical claim that purpose *causes* action. This is done using the model of ‘feedback’ to reframe teleology as a question, not of ends causing means, but of ‘purposeful reactions which are controlled by the error of the reaction’.⁵¹ This form of teleology is applicable to action because it allows feedback to modify action, by positing ‘the difference between the state of the behaving object at any time and the final state interpreted as the purpose’.⁵² In this way, cybernetics came up with a mechanistic schema for how behaviour can be controlled by an envisioned ‘final state’ without resorting to metaphysical slips in causality. Cybernetics, in its use of ‘system’ and ‘information’ terminology, was a forerunner of later – specifically cognitive – approaches to psychological investigation. In 1967 Ulric Neisser defined the cognitive psychologist ‘trying to understand human cognition’ as ‘analogous to that of a man trying to discover how a computer has been programmed’, insofar as he is attempting to understand how information is being processed.⁵³

The development of a distinct psychological field of action theory received more systematic attention with the cognitive shift. As noted above, feedback moved psychological emphasis away from an overly mechanistic paradigm. With this, modelling shifted toward organismic models, in which the agent was conceived of as dynamically embedded in its environment:

[Like] every other aspect of the universe, man will possess an inherent organization and activity and should be considered the source of acts. This source is complex and will consist of all kinds of psychological function [...]. These processes, which are subject to developmental changes because of physical and psychological

⁵⁰ Rosenblueth, Wiener and Bigelow, p. 18.

⁵¹ Rosenblueth, Wiener and Bigelow, p. 24.

⁵² Rosenblueth, Wiener and Bigelow, p. 24.

⁵³ Ulric Neisser, *Cognitive Psychology* (New York, NY: Appleton-Century-Crofts, 1967), p. 6.

maturation, growth, and development, will lead to changes in the psychological functions.⁵⁴

This kind of theoretical shift moves the focus away from an agent-centred perspective to and towards more complex contextualist models in which the act is set within developmental or social frameworks. For Louis Oppenheimer, the contextualist approach seems to court a level of complexity which makes it very hard to conceptualise action in the same terms as scientific study.⁵⁵

Despite reservations such as these, cognitive psychology has significantly developed the way in which we conceptualise action and the conscious control of action. One major contribution to this has been the study and isolation of unconscious cognitive processes. Work, largely conducted following John Kihlstrom's definition of the 'cognitive unconscious' in the 1980s, has provided a massive body of evidence which suggests that 'a great deal of complex cognitive activity can be devoted to stimuli that are themselves outside of phenomenal awareness'.⁵⁶ A large research paradigm in the cognitive sciences has developed around the discovery of the unconscious underpinnings of everyday thought and action. The validity of this model is enmeshed with the cognitive bias of the inquiry. As James Uleman notes, the computer model that historically underpins the cognitive approach 'legitimized complex theories about unobservable processes while apparently avoiding the sins of anthropomorphizing and using homunculi as causes'.⁵⁷ Early work on the cognitive unconscious was largely limited to the study of automatic memory and cognition, but this quickly broadened to include evidence of automaticity at work in affective and motivational processes as well, including goal-directed behaviour.⁵⁸ What exists now is a large body of evidence which suggests that many higher-order functions which were once thought to be dependent on conscious control are now proven to be undertaken by non-conscious processes. In many ways, this builds on long held insights on automaticity developed through the nineteenth century and given quasi-scientific

⁵⁴ Louis Oppenheimer, 'The Concept of Action: A Historical Perspective', in *Origins of Action: Interdisciplinary and International Perspectives*, ed. by Louis Oppenheimer and Jaan Valsiner (London: Springer-Verlag, 1991), pp. 1–36 (p. 3).

⁵⁵ Louis Oppenheimer, p. 6.

⁵⁶ John F. Kihlstrom, 'The Cognitive Unconscious', *Science*, 237 (1987), 1445–52 (p. 1448).

⁵⁷ James S. Uleman, 'Introduction: Becoming Aware of the New Unconscious', in *The New Unconscious*, ed. by Ran R. Hassin, James S. Uleman, and John A. Bargh (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), pp. 3–18 (p. 6).

⁵⁸ Jack Glaser and John F. Kihlstrom, 'Compensatory Automaticity: Unconscious Volition Is Not an Oxymoron', in *The New Unconscious*, ed. by Ran R. Hassin, James S. Uleman, and John A. Bargh (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), pp. 171–95 (p. 172).

articulation through Freudian psychoanalysis. The contemporary experimental exploration of the cognitive unconscious has resulted in an increased complexity in our understanding, and in some cases a recategorisation, of our concepts of mental processes. Particularly, this concerns the interaction between non-conscious and conscious elements.

Although the development of cognitive psychology – and its relation to previous psychological schools – is complex and contested,⁵⁹ work on the cognitive unconscious has revealed some continuity in historico-theoretical emphasis. As outlined above, the behaviourist dogma was a ‘refusal to consider mediating internal constructs and processes [...] in explanations of human behaviour’.⁶⁰ This contrasts with cognitive psychology, which is founded on the study of such mediating processes. Despite this methodological and ideological difference, John Bargh and Melissa Ferguson note a shared commitment to the materialist, determinist explanation of action. Determinism in this case is ‘the position that for every psychological effect (e.g., behaviour, emotion, judgment, memory, perception), there exists a set of causes, or antecedent conditions, that uniquely lead to that effect’.⁶¹ In cognitive psychology, the deterministic schema is especially evident in the experimental work on automatic processing. Automatic processing theories produce a model that is easily aligned with determinism because it demonstrates that mental structures are formed to a significant extent by ‘processes that can proceed without the intervention of conscious deliberation and choice’.⁶² The evidence for automatic motivation allows for an explanatory cognitive model which shows nonconscious processes interacting ‘in a flexible manner with ongoing environmental events’ in constant and dynamic feedback according to determinants of information and internal goal-structure.⁶³

V

If certain strands of contemporary psychology have sought to show how our common-sense ways of thinking about our own actions are flawed, then they contrast directly with the philosophical approach known as folk psychology (FP). FP, in its academic guise, is a

⁵⁹ Terry J. Knapp, ‘The Emergence of Cognitive Psychology in the Latter Half of the Twentieth Century’, in *Approaches to Cognition: Contrasts and Controversies*, ed. by Terry J. Knapp and Lynn C. Robertson (Hillsdale, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 1986), pp. 13–36.

⁶⁰ John A. Bargh and Melissa J. Ferguson, ‘Beyond Behaviorism: On the Automaticity of Higher Mental Processes’, *Psychological bulletin*, 126 (2000), 925–45 (p. 925).

⁶¹ Bargh and Ferguson, p. 925.

⁶² Bargh and Ferguson, p. 925.

⁶³ Bargh and Ferguson, pp. 937–8.

way of grouping and systematising the everyday language of mental description. FP grew out of contemporary, cognitively-oriented philosophy. In its early inceptions, the debate around FP sought to understand the relation between our lay-understanding of the mind and the scientific theories which sought to reject mental language entirely. Following on from the work in cognitive science, FP debates sought to establish whether terms like desire, volition, plan, goal and belief are useful in the conceptualisation of cognitive procedures, or whether they are simply epiphenomena that should, and will, be supplanted by a more rigorous scientific understanding of biological fact. The philosophical position which holds that the folk-language of mental description is defunct is known as Eliminativism.⁶⁴ Despite these contentions, the folk psychological model is still a major area of dispute, though the contours of the debate have shifted slightly from its original inception.

As with cognitive psychology, FP can be seen as an anti-Cartesian movement. For Stephen Stich, this shift is more methodological than theoretical. He suggests that the growth of behaviourism ushered in a different kind of questioning that moved away from ‘Descartes, Locke, or Berkeley’, who asked ontological questions: ‘What sort of thing (or stuff, or process, or substance) is the mind?’, and began interrogating the very ‘*concept* of mind: What is the *meaning* of our mental terms? What is the correct *analysis* of our mental terms?’⁶⁵ Folk psychology, as a descendent of this stance, positions itself as an *empirical* theory. Where Cartesianism is a metaphysical proposition that relies on positing and defending the existence of immaterial substance, folk psychology does not describe what the mind is made of, but only proposes to function as a low-level theory that maps the ‘regularities among stimuli and responses’.⁶⁶ Insofar as it is a theory, Stich claims that the role of folk psychology is to ‘give ordinary mental state terms their meaning’; it is the concretisation of the way in which we commonly understand conative states as reciprocally linked to action and the world.⁶⁷

⁶⁴ See: Stich, *Deconstructing the Mind*; Paul M. Churchland, ‘Current Eliminativism’, *Journal of Philosophy*, 78 (1981), 67–90; Alvin I. Goldman, ‘Consciousness, Folk Psychology, and Cognitive Science’, *Consciousness and Cognition*, 2 (1993), 364–82.

⁶⁵ Stephen P. Stich, *From Folk Psychology to Cognitive Science: The Case Against Belief* (London: MIT Press, 1985), p. 15, original emphasis.

⁶⁶ David Lewis, ‘Psychophysical and Theoretical Identifications’, *Australasian Journal of Philosophy*, 50 (1972), 249–58 (p. 256).

⁶⁷ Nichols and Stich, ‘Folk Psychology: Simulation or Tacit Theory?’, p. 237, entire sentence emphasised in original.

One major trend in FP concerns the way in which we use mental language to understand the actions of others. One distinct feature of social life is that we are remarkably accurate in our ability to predict the actions of other agents. In philosophical terminology, this ability is broadly known as ‘mindreading’. Mindreading seems to involve mental concepts; if we describe the actions of others by using the language of intention and desire, then we may well understand the actions of others using these same concepts. The ability to mindread is taken by some commentators to be innate.⁶⁸ It is also highly adaptable to a wide variety of environmental and circumstantial changes. This adaptability demands a theoretical explanation that can account for dynamic change as part of the enormous capacities of the mind. As a result, a number of contesting sub-groups emerged through the history of the FP project. The traditional poles of this debate were occupied by, on the one hand, ‘tacit theory’ theory (more commonly referred to as ‘theory theory’) and ‘simulation theory’. Theory theory posits the existence of a ‘largely tacit psychological theory that underlies [mindreading and interpretive] abilities’.⁶⁹ In contrast, simulation theory posits ‘a special sort of mental *simulation* in which we use ourselves as a model for the person we are describing or predicting’.⁷⁰ This is the special ability to imaginatively project ourselves into another’s position. From this position, the theory suggests, we can infer the motivations that underlie their actions. The opposition between theory and simulation models has not only concerned the interpretation of the underlying mechanisms of mindreading abilities. An accompanying difference in theoretical projection has also shaded the debate, with theory theorists not only positing, but also modelling, the tacit theory. In this way, they have attempted to map a specific structure of the mind. This contrasts with simulation theorists, who have largely limited themselves to a description of underlying cognitive capacities without attempting to link these capacities to a specific model of the mind.

The unifying feature of both theory and simulation theories is that they frame action interpretation as the ability to infer desires and beliefs into an agent’s actions. It is the comprehension of these desires and beliefs as motivating causes which explains the action. It is this point which has been targeted in recent years by a theoretical turn in the FP

⁶⁸ Innateness is a complex problem in its own right. For an overview of the problems involved, see: Peter Carruthers, Stephen Laurence and Stephen P. Stich, eds., *The Innate Mind: Structure and Contents* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005).

⁶⁹ Nichols and Stich, ‘Folk Psychology: Simulation or Tacit Theory?’, p. 36; See also: Jerry A. Fodor, *A Theory of Content and Other Essays* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1990).

⁷⁰ Nichols and Stich, ‘Folk Psychology: Simulation or Tacit Theory?’, p. 36, original emphasis.

debate. This has been accompanied by a return to the phenomenology of second-person interaction, which deemphasises the primacy of desire/belief inference in mindreading. Instead, theorists attempt to explain basic mindreading skills, not as a specific interpretative activity, but as a contextualised and pragmatic stance; contextualised because we often understand actions immediately because we have seen them before and know them as basic action scripts; pragmatic because we do not *need* to understand the actions of everybody we see, we just need to know enough to frame our own action. Neither point involves recourse to the desire/belief framework because they move the emphasis away from interpretation, and attempt instead to characterise the immediacy of second-person comprehension. For example, Matthew Ratcliffe rejects traditional conceptions of folk psychological interpretation in favour of a strongly situated second-person mode of action comprehension which is context specific, and driven by in-the-moment body-language.⁷¹

Although some theorists have used apparent phenomenological evidence to move away from desire/belief schemas, others have appealed to similar arguments to support directly contradictory theses. Karsten Stueber, for example, appeals strongly to a first-person experience of agency in order to root his argument for simulative mindreading abilities. While these might take place in the second- or third-person, he claims that they are fundamentally rooted in the interpreter's experience of themselves:⁷²

[Agents] in experiencing their agenthood have to view themselves in folk-psychological terms and [...] use the same terminology to explain and predict the behaviour of other human beings whom they conceive of as agents like themselves.⁷³

He develops this to signal the remaining uncertainties that are involved in mindreading. These revolve around the use and limitations of both first- and third-person knowledge in

⁷¹ Matthew Ratcliffe, 'There Are No Folk Psychological Narratives', *Journal of Consciousness Studies*, 16 (2009), 379–406; See also: Daniel D. Hutto and Matthew Ratcliffe, eds., *Folk Psychology Re-Assessed* (Dordrecht: Springer, 2007).

⁷² Although there is overlap here between the terminology of philosophy and literary criticism, there isn't any specific correlation between the terms 'first-person' and 'second-person' used here and the way in which they are used in narratological discourse. I discuss the convergences and divergences of FP and literary analysis in more detail in Chapter One.

⁷³ Karsten R. Stueber, *Rediscovering Empathy: Agency, Folk Psychology, and the Human Sciences* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2006), p. 47.

folk-reasoning, which are developed to augment and complicate the minimal desire/belief schema:

Agents should be understood as acting not only because of their beliefs and desires; agents act in a full sense only because they are also able to recognize their individual perspective on the world as their reason for their actions.⁷⁴

Here Stueber covertly articulates the two points which structure so much of the FP debate. On one hand, he is attempting to articulate a folk psychology which characterises the ease and immediacy of action comprehension. However, at the same time, he attempts to reconcile this with the first-person perspective which is unique to agenthood. This ‘individual perspective on the world’ cannot be fully accessed by other agents. Because of this, there is a sense in which action-comprehension is not an exhaustive or even a particularly accurate pursuit because mindreading, though apparently accurate much of the time, can only be an inference and an approximation.

It is this problem which leads some theorists to sidestep the issue of mindreading as a universal practice, and root it more decisively as a communicatory tool. This is a pragmatic stance insofar as absolute transparency is not integral to communication. Theorists who move away from designating the mechanisms which underlie folk psychological ability have tended instead to emphasise the reciprocal structures of psychology and society in which that ability is situated. For example, Jerome Bruner suggests that we ‘learn our culture’s folk psychology early, learn it as we learn to use the very language we acquire and to conduct the interpersonal transaction required in communal life’.⁷⁵ As this point suggests, the communicative function of mindreading is paramount. Simon Baron Cohen also takes up this point, suggesting that our innate ability to ascribe mental states is not an isolated practice, but is tied up with the efficiency of speech communication:

The notion is that not only do we pay attention to the actual words a speaker uses; we also focus on what we think was the gist of what he or she wanted to say or

⁷⁴ Stueber, p. 43.

⁷⁵ Jerome S. Bruner, *Acts of Meaning* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1990), p. 35.

wanted us to understand [...] the listener assumes that the meaning of an utterance will be relevant to the speaker's current intentions.⁷⁶

This would also hold for gestural communication, and for a whole range of intentional ascriptions that might be employed to comprehend body-language. The range of our mindreading skills is massive, and our skills are constantly open to change. As Bruner suggests, the intentional stance is uniquely adaptable and inclusive:

It focuses on the expectable and/or the usual in the human condition. It endows these with legitimacy or authority. Yet it has powerful means that are purpose-built for rendering the exceptional and the unusual into comprehensible form.⁷⁷

Here, the pragmatism of FP is clear. It can render the exceptional intelligible, but in doing so it may actively shape exceptional action according to norms of comprehension. These norms work both ways. An individual interprets action according to what actions they think are permissible in the context. In addition, agents attempt to make themselves understood according to these norms by narrating or explaining actions which are not immediately transparent. The normative element of folk psychological understanding allows for a plastic and inclusive mode of understanding. However, this is shaped by the strong connection between FP and rationality; we interpret actions by inferring intentions, and this inference is framed by an assumption of rationality. This connection has been disputed, but is strong enough to assume without detour.⁷⁸ Daniel Dennett makes the link as follows:

One fact so obvious that it is easily overlooked is that our “common-sense” explanations and predictions of the behaviour of men and animals are intentional. We start by assuming rationality [...] The presumption of rationality is so strongly entrenched in our inference habits that when our predictions prove false, we at first

⁷⁶ Simon Baron-Cohen, *Mindblindness: An Essay on Autism and the Theory of Mind* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1995), p. 27.

⁷⁷ Bruner, p. 47.

⁷⁸ For one claim that ‘mindreading does not depend on an assumption of rationality, or any reasonable construal of rationality’, see: Shaun Nichols and Stephen P. Stich, *Mindreading: An Integrated Account of Pretence, Self-Awareness, and Understanding Other Minds* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), p. 144.

cast about for adjustments in the information-possession conditions [...] or goal weightings, before questioning the rationality of the system as a whole.⁷⁹

In his early writings, Stich makes a softer argument for this link:

For a person's cognitive states to be intentionally characterizable, the states, the interactions among them, and their interactions with the environment must all be similar to our own. The minimal rationality condition follows from this, if we add the assumption that we ourselves are passingly rational in our inferences.⁸⁰

Stueber narrows the focus of the rationality-clause by suggesting that the notion of rationality that is most important to mindreading is an objective, rather than subjective use. Objective rationality concerns judging action 'in terms of its ability to objectively achieve the *intended goal* of the agent'. Subjective rationality examines 'merely from the point of the cognitive and conative perspective of the agent'.⁸¹

The rationality-clause and the normative power of folk psychology offer a strong model which is remarkably accurate in the explanation of a very broad range of actions. However, a criticism remains. The comprehensive sweep of FP does not stretch to cases in which the norms of interpretation are broken to a radical degree. In these situations, the theory must either shape the aberrant behaviour to make it comprehensible, or reject it as irrational and beyond understanding. Katherine Wilkes offers a charitable characterisation of this:

[Folk psychology] cannot handle irrational, abnormal, aberrant behaviour. It has never been able to. But the reason is simple; it succeeds as it does because it aims to show how the behaviour to be explained is, given the background, the circumstances, the rest of the agent's holistic web of psychological states, rationally intelligible after all.⁸²

⁷⁹ Daniel C. Dennett, 'Intentional Systems', in *Brainstorms: Philosophical Essays on Mind and Psychology* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1981), pp. 3–22 (pp. 9–10).

⁸⁰ Stephen P. Stich, *The Fragmentation of Reason: Preface to a Pragmatic Theory of Cognitive Evaluation* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1990), p. 48.

⁸¹ Stueber, p. 49.

⁸² Katherine V. Wilkes, 'The Relationship between Scientific Psychology and Common Sense Psychology', in *Folk Psychology and the Philosophy of Mind*, ed. by Scott M. Christensen and Dale R. Turner (Hillsdale, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum, 1993), pp. 167–88 (pp. 180–81).

What is left, then, is a way of framing and understanding the ease of second-person comprehension as based on regularities of action and interpretation. This ability has been characterised in a number of ways by contesting theories, but there is basic assent on the incontestable pervasiveness of the ability in everyday life. The impulse to characterise folk psychology as a distinct theory might be contrasted both with theories which emphasise the non-conscious aspects of everyday psychology, and harder materialist approaches which propose the elimination of folk-mentalising through the discovery of the brain science behind behaviour. This distinction, between intuitive psychology (or rather psychologising rooted in the phenomenology of everyday life) and scientific materialism, is a debate which repeats in a number of other areas in the cognitive sciences.

VI

Despite the unwittingly complicated theoretical involutions of folk psychology, its growth points to a strong intuition in action theory. Many believe that the attempt to describe the way in which the mind works should connect to our common-sense experiences of our own minds, and use the language through which we usually understand mental processes. An underlying intuition of FP is the idea that the first-person experience of agency is commensurate with how conscious processes and actions *actually occur*. The harder materialist stance, as maintained by some of the psychologists discussed above, disregards this position. There are two levels of description at work. The folk model suggests the operative importance of conscious processes, while the materialist model suggests a deep level of subpersonal process. For the materialist, this subpersonal level gives real insight into action. This position suggests that folk description might be the way in which we understand our actions, but it has no link to what is *actually* happening.

In mainstream debates, this split has found clearest expression in the responses to Daniel Wegner's *Illusion of Conscious Will*. In this book, Wegner puts forward the idea, based partly on Benjamin Libet's experimental findings, that conscious will is epiphenomenal.⁸³ Although we think we are exercising executive control over our actions, Wegner argues that we are not. Instead, he suggests that actions arise from neurophysiological happenings, and the will is a mind-game through which we retrospectively attribute intentions to our

⁸³ Daniel M. Wegner, *The Illusion of Conscious Will* (Cambridge, MA: MIT press, 2002); Benjamin Libet, 'Unconscious Cerebral Initiative and the Role of Conscious Will in Voluntary Action', *The Behavioral and Brain Sciences*, 8 (1985), 529–66.

actions. Wegner's polemic can be seen in dialogue with a distinct return among philosophers to the importance of first-person awareness, introspection and phenomenology. This approach is tied up with folk-notions of experience, though it tends to emphasise specific aspects of first-person experience – rather than the entire framework of folk psychology – in order to make claims about distinct philosophical and methodological problems. Tim Bayne, for example, bases his position on the widespread success of folk-functions in the world:

As folk, we appear to be deeply wedded to a conception of mental states according to which they not only rationalize our actions but also cause them, and their causal efficacy is dependent on their content. This conception of folk-psychology is not uncontested, but it is widely endorsed. Is it also a component of agentic experience?⁸⁴

The key emphasis comes at the end of this excerpt, where Bayne shifts focus to the 'agentic experience', which he later develops into an argument for the place of first-person experience in theories of consciousness. This work should be broadly construed as part of a recent experimental philosophical movement, in which findings and techniques from experimental psychology have been brought to bear on philosophical problems. Seminal in this regard is Bertram Malle and Joshua Knobe's work in the 1990s, which has spawned a number of disciplinary foci.⁸⁵ Those of key interest include work on free will, which seek to reconfigure the question of free action by posing arguments based on experimental, rather than metaphysical, premises.⁸⁶ The experimental focus of this movement is largely based around the systematisation of folk concepts, including the contextual and social variance in the use and understanding of everyday mental terms. As such, the discipline provides a crucial bridge between folk psychology and analytic philosophy.

Wegner's position does not just reject first-person agency, it rejects *conscious will*. His sensational dismissal of the will is a rhetorical choice, but it also ties into the close historical association between our feeling of causing our own actions, and the sense that

⁸⁴ Tim Bayne, 'The Phenomenology of Agency', *Philosophy Compass*, 3 (2008), 182–202 (p. 191).

⁸⁵ Bertram F. Malle and Joshua Knobe, 'The Folk Concept of Intentionality', *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology*, 33 (1997), 101–21.

⁸⁶ See: Eddy Nahmias and others, 'The Phenomenology of Free Will', *Journal of Consciousness Studies*, 11 (2004), 162–79; Shaun Nichols, 'The Folk Psychology of Free Will: Fits and Starts', *Mind and Language*, 19 (2004), 473–502.

we are free agents. In the analytic Anglo-American approach to action theory, the question of agency has almost always been structured by the free will debate. Here, as I described in the earlier parts of this introduction, the dialectic of selfhood receives its clearest articulation. The opposition and reconciliation between free will and determinism takes three clear positions in contemporary analytic philosophy. These are libertarianism, compatibilism (or soft determinism), and hard determinism. Libertarian theories are incompatibilist insofar as they regard physical determinism to be incompatible with free will. However, they posit free will based on an agent-causation model. Libertarians have been few in the twentieth century debates, though a cluster of recent studies have sought to resurrect agent-causation theories with more nuance. All libertarian theories are characterised by their convergence on two central tenets, as noted here by Shaun Nichols:

1. An agent is a causal factor in the production of an action.
2. For a given action of an agent, the agent could *not* have caused it. Roughly, the agent *could have done otherwise*.⁸⁷

The other species of incompatibilism is hard determinism. This doctrine seeks to deny the possibility of free will based on the idea that physical determinism prevails, that humans are therefore automata, and that the feeling of volitional influence is an illusion. Compatibilism attempts to resolve these positions by striking a balance between the scientific worldview and the phenomenological sense that we are free. Because the compatibilist project concedes the possibility of physical determinism, its main task has traditionally been to explain the extra factors of human thought that are present in free action, but which are not captured by the notion of determinism. The compatibilist problem is: If thoughts and desires arise in our bodies because of chemical signals and other elements of the determinist universe, what additional mechanisms are there for us to endorse these thoughts and desires to make them *ours*? David Velleman outlines the intuition as follows:

What makes us agents rather than mere subjects of behaviour – in our conception of ourselves, at least, if not in reality – is our perceived capacity to interpose

⁸⁷ Shaun Nichols, p. 475, original emphasis. Nichols uses the ‘could have done otherwise’ premise as part of the libertarian system. However, this formulation, also known as the Principle of Alternate Possibilities has also received a great deal of attention in the compatibilist literature. I treat this argument in greater detail in Chapter Three.

ourselves into the course of events in such a way that the behavioural outcome is traceable directly to us.⁸⁸

The philosophical challenge is to distinguish exactly what conditions and mechanisms make actions traceable to an agent. This approach has typically been answered with a kind of internalism which has placed the burden of freedom on the introspective awareness of one's psychological states. Like folk-concepts of action, this conceptualises free agency through a causal link between choice, intention, volition and action.

Key contemporary figures in this tradition include Harry Frankfurt, Gary Watson, Christine Korsgaard and Michael Bratman. These approaches can be roughly grouped because of their conceptual reliance on the idea of action endorsement. This is based on the idea that:

What distinguishes action from mere behaviour and other physical movements is that it is *authored* – it is in a quite special way attributable to the *person* who does it, by which I mean, the *whole* person.⁸⁹

The philosophical challenge is to characterise this action authorship; the addition which reinforces a reason, passion or motive as an act of agency. The distinctions between the approaches in question are largely determined by the different ways in which they characterise this endorsement. Frankfurt introduced the concept of volitional hierarchy to characterise the way in which an agent, when faced with two choices, might appeal to higher levels of volition in order to endorse one or other of the choices as truly their own.⁹⁰ Frankfurt's models are strictly compatibilist because they suggest that action endorsement can impose authorship on a determinist structure; a model which Frankfurt attempted to prove in a series of influential thought experiments.⁹¹ Bratman's work also tried to characterise this specific kind of endorsement. However, rather than appealing to an entirely internal, hierarchical structure of reasoning, Bratman suggests that individual actions are integrated into the everyday structures of personal and social organisation, such

⁸⁸ J. David Velleman, 'What Happens When Someone Acts?', *Mind*, 101 (1992), 461–81 (p. 465).

⁸⁹ Christine M. Korsgaard, 'Self-Constitution in the Ethics of Plato and Kant', *The Journal of Ethics*, 3 (1999), 1–29 (p. 3), original emphasis.

⁹⁰ Harry G. Frankfurt, 'Freedom of the Will and the Concept of a Person', *Journal of Philosophy*, 68 (1971), 5–20.

⁹¹ Harry G. Frankfurt, 'Alternate Possibilities and Moral Responsibility', *The Journal of Philosophy*, 66 (1969), 829–39.

as plans and goals. These cross-temporal structures have a normative role; plans provide a specific type of commitment to coherence which in turn endorses the actions which constitute them.⁹² Watson appeals to ethical values to provide the normative structure for action endorsement.⁹³ Korsgaard takes a similar, though broader, approach by appealing to the categorical imperative as a distinctive feature of the work of ‘self-constitution’, the normative standard which is both an ethical and self-legislative aspiration to ‘psychic unity, the work that we experience as necessitation’.⁹⁴

The concept of action authorship in the internalist tradition is closely related to questions of moral responsibility. Free will has often been conceived as integral to ethics insofar as an action has to be attributable to a specific agent, and in some way represent that agent, for the agent to be held responsible for it. Determinism poses a metaphysical challenge to the idea of responsibility because it seems to offer no space for the agent as distinct from the blind chain of cause and effect. The internalist model is one challenge to determinism. However, there are challenges to this model which complicate the strict attribution of actions, and moral responsibility, to an agent alone. One attempt to sever this strict association is the concept of moral luck as addressed in separate essays by Bernard Williams and Thomas Nagel. This examination opens the acting agent, and our moral assessment of that agent, to a complex system of external and internal influences. Separating control from loss of control, in Nagel’s conclusion, becomes a kind of balancing act that we perform which is based on our understanding of ourselves, the social dynamics of moral judgement, and a workable folk psychological framework that implies agent-causation:

There is a close connexion between our feelings about ourselves and our feelings about others. Guilt and indignation, shame and contempt, pride and admiration and internal and external sides of the same moral attitudes. We are unable to view ourselves simply as portions of the world, and from inside we have a rough idea of

⁹² Michael Bratman, *Intention, Plans, and Practical Reason* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1987).

⁹³ Gary Watson, ‘Free Agency’, *The Journal of Philosophy*, 72 (1975), 205–20.

⁹⁴ Christine M. Korsgaard, *Self-Constitution: Agency, Identity, and Integrity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), p. 7.

the boundary between what is us and what is not, what we do and what happens to us [...]. We apply the same essentially internal conception of the self to others.⁹⁵

Nagel's essay reasserts a common-sense position, but in doing so affirms the folk-intuitions about control that are halting mechanisms for an overly specific theory of the will. The environmental and social aspects of moral luck can be seen as a socio-ethical corollary to the mechanistic debates around the will and epiphenomenalism outlined above. Each approach attempts to disrupt the standard definition of action, in which the environment is malleable to the will of the agent, whose actions are constituted by 'a particular psychological state causing a relevant bodily movement'.⁹⁶ It is also worth noting that, just as moral luck trades on common-sense features of everyday ethics that are marginalised by the internalist model of responsibility, evidence for the epiphenomenal will argument has come, not just from neuroscientific evidence, but from everyday slips in conscious control. Daniel Wegner especially trades on this evidence. His theory chimes with the experience of non-conscious actions,⁹⁷ as well as more unusual forms of structured automatism such as hypnotism and automatic writing.⁹⁸

For Wegner, the widespread occurrence of, and fascination with, automatic and non-conscious action should encourage us to be more sceptical of the concept and feeling of control. More moderate theorists than Wegner are currently reformulating ideas of free will and control which take into account the evidence from the sciences, as well as a more balanced phenomenology which evidences shades, rather than absolutes, of authorship. One reformulated free will argument comes from Shaun Gallagher, who attempts to augment traditional compatibilist arguments with new evidence from cognitive science and experimental philosophy. His conception of free will moves away from addressing the determinist bias – the 'billiard ball' conception – which he sees as '[limiting] the notion of causality to the determined mechanics of motor control'.⁹⁹ Taking a cognitively-oriented stance, he seeks to reconceive free will as an open controlling state that is a kind of

⁹⁵ Thomas Nagel, 'Moral Luck', in *Moral Luck*, ed. by Daniel Statman (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 1993), pp. 57–72 (p. 68).

⁹⁶ Joëlle Proust, 'How Voluntary Are Minimal Actions', in *Voluntary Action: Brains, Minds, and Sociality*, ed. by Sabine Maassen, Wolfgang Prinz, and Gerhard Roth (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), pp. 202–19 (p. 202).

⁹⁷ Wegner, *Illusion*, p. 157.

⁹⁸ Wegner, *Illusion*, p. 103.

⁹⁹ Shaun Gallagher, 'Where's the Action? Epiphenomenalism and the Problem of Free Will', in *Agency and Self-Awareness: Issues in Philosophy and Psychology*, ed. by Johannes Roessler and Naomi Eilan (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2003), pp. 109–24 (p. 119).

‘embedded or situated reflection [which] is neither introspective nor focused on my body’.¹⁰⁰ Gallagher’s model is representative of a shift in theoretical focus, which frees up the minutiae of logical intentional motor control, and moves the debate higher up the chain to more expansive discussions of how we can conceptualise a relation between consciousness and action that also takes in all that we know of the non-conscious underpinnings of everyday life.¹⁰¹

VII

The above outline describes a number of intersecting fields in the theory of action. Over the past fifty years, occasional movements in literary criticism and aesthetics have attempted to use elements of action theory as a way of bringing light to the description of character action in prose. In recent years, this field has gained momentum thanks to the efforts of Cognitive Poetics, a literary critical discipline which brings research from the cognitive sciences to bear on the reading of texts. Although the approach that I take in this thesis is not a cognitive approach, the terminology and philosophical orientation of this field is similar to my research. Cognitive poetics is a broad approach, united by an embodied, anti-Cartesian, idea of the mind. Peter Stockwell defines these foundations:

[T]he foundations of cognitive poetics obviously lie most directly in cognitive linguistics and cognitive psychology, together forming a large part of [...] cognitive science. We need to understand the basic premise that behind these innovative disciplines all forms of expression and forms of conscious perception are bound, more closely than was previously realised, in our biological circumstances.¹⁰²

The textual artefact, then, becomes the product of an embodied mind, and the concepts which structure a reading of the text are also features of an embodied mind. What this means in practice is that findings in cognitive science about perception, action comprehension, memory, attention, and myriad other structures, can be utilised as extra empirical material to be used in conjunction with traditional skills of literary interpretation. Ambitious readings aim to uncover the cognitive underpinnings of literary technique, as

¹⁰⁰ Gallagher, ‘Where’s the Action?’, p. 119.

¹⁰¹ For a view which reconstitutes free will in the light of neuroscience, see: Walter J. Freeman, ‘Consciousness, Intentionality, and Causality’, in *Agency and Self-Awareness: Issues in Philosophy and Psychology*, ed. by Johannes Roessler and Naomi Eilan (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2003), pp. 73–108.

¹⁰² Peter Stockwell, *Cognitive Poetics: An Introduction* (London: Routledge, 2002), p. 4.

well as the cognitive structures at play in text comprehension; broadly, the description and explanation of ‘the effects of literary texts on the mind of the reader,’¹⁰³ and a critical re-emphasis which regards ‘narrative as a strategy for creating mental representations of the world.’¹⁰⁴

Cognitive poetics approaches the text as the product of both the writer’s and reader’s cognitive faculties. From this point of view, there is clear cross-over between the functions of everyday abilities, such as action and perception, and the transfer or modification of those functions in the production or consumption of art. Earlier groups of philosophers or narratologists perhaps did not articulate this link as part of such a broad methodological outlook, but came to similar conclusions – at least about the application of action-comprehension – through an emphasis on the mimetic function of literature. Both Noël Carroll and Paisley Livingston note that the intentional stance toward characters is a useful, if partial, method of understanding literary interpretation. Noël Carroll suggests that narrative is, for the most part, made up of indicative representations, but that the situations that are represented inevitably provoke questions:

We ask these questions in virtue of certain background beliefs and presuppositions we already hold about the nature of [events] – that they involve agents – and about agents – that they have motives.¹⁰⁵

Paisley Livingston also adheres to this in his claim that ‘understanding narrative discourses invariably requires readers to apply background beliefs concerning not only intentional attitudes, but subjective schemata of practical reasoning,’ and through this, reads fictional action by relating it to ‘the depicted agent’s possible beliefs, desires, and intentions.’¹⁰⁶

Making a more specific point about our psychological involvement with fictional characters, Kendall Walton notes the use of first-person reflective attitudes in aesthetic experience. Walton seems to come close to transposing folk psychological simulation into an aesthetic context:

¹⁰³ Joanna Gavins and Gerard Steen, ‘Contextualising Cognitive Poetics’, in *Cognitive Poetics in Practice*, ed. by Joanna Gavins and Gerard Steen (London: Routledge, 2006), pp. 1–12 (p. 2).

¹⁰⁴ David Herman, *Story Logic: Problems and Possibilities of Narrative* (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 2004), p. 5.

¹⁰⁵ Noël Carroll, ‘Narrative Closure’, *Philosophical Studies*, 135 (2007), 1–15 (p. 8).

¹⁰⁶ Paisley Livingston, *Literature and Rationality: Ideas of Agency in Theory and Fiction* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), p. 53.

[As] in the case of participants in children's games, it is in a first-person manner that appreciators are to, and do, imagine about themselves; they imagine from the inside, doing things and undergoing experiences.¹⁰⁷

Gregory Currie has recognised this link more explicitly in his use of simulation theory to describe the paradox of literary emotion. The paradox of literary emotion comes from the oddity of our ability to be moved by what we know to be untrue. Currie suggests that the paradox can occur because readers operate through simulation at a remove. He posits a 'hypothetical reader' who directly simulates the beliefs and desires of fictional characters, and experiences some of the 'disappointment and turmoil' or exuberance and joy that the reader believes the character to be feeling. Rather than directly simulating the desires and beliefs of the character, the reader simulates the desires and beliefs of the hypothetical reader: 'I do that by having exactly those I-states [the imaginative states that emerge from simulation] myself.'¹⁰⁸ At this remove, Currie claims to escape the paradox of fictional emotion because we are not emoting with the character, but through the hypothetical reader. It is worth recognising the intuition at the heart of this analytic conceit, namely the simulatability of fictional characters, and the companionate comprehension that is worked out through the language and structures of folk psychology.

Currie's approach is one that has since been adopted in narratology and poetics, where it has steadily gained popularity as a way of writing about both literary action, and the reader's interaction with the literary text. Of the recent work in this field, the two significant contributions are Alan Palmer's *Fictional Minds* and Lisa Zunshine's *Why We Read Fiction: Theory of Mind and the Novel*.¹⁰⁹ The main point to be established by Palmer is how real life influences our understanding of fiction, and fictional minds in particular. Fictional understanding is shown to 'utilize fundamental aspects of our real-world knowledge of the mental functioning both of ourselves and of others'.¹¹⁰ Palmer elucidates this observation through the use of models and theories of the mind. From this starting point, Palmer's task is largely taxonomical, insofar as he uses the depth of theories of cognition to reflect on the nuance of literary depictions of action, and categorise them

¹⁰⁷ Kendall L. Walton, *Mimesis as Make-Believe: On the Foundations of Representational Arts* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1990), p. 214.

¹⁰⁸ Gregory Currie, 'The Paradox of Caring: Fiction and the Philosophy of Mind', in *Emotion and the Arts*, ed. by Mette Hjort and Sue Laver (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), pp. 63–77 (p. 69).

¹⁰⁹ Lisa Zunshine, *Why We Read Fiction: Theory of Mind and the Novel* (Columbus, OH: Ohio State University Press, 2006); Alan Palmer, *Fictional Minds* (London: University of Nebraska Press, 2004).

¹¹⁰ Palmer, p. 205.

accordingly. The insight that ‘a functional perspective on real minds is the basis of a teleological perspective on fictional minds’ leads Palmer to explore various features of experience that make up a teleological world view.¹¹¹ These include language, non-verbal consciousness, non-consciousness, dispositions, emotions, intentions, and intersubjectivity. These categories are not entirely discrete, but are constantly interacting. Palmer’s overriding point is that recognition of these features and close attention to how they relate to one another, are vital for a nuanced reading of literary action. This is the case both for our direct understanding of character action, and for the recognition of specific structural devices, such as embedded narrative.

Palmer spends some time on action theory, but offers little insight into the way that the structural tools given by analytic tradition in this field could actually be set to work in the interpretation of narrative. In this regard, he follows a disparate group of narratologists who have also recognised the apparent potential of action theory for narrative study, but have not pushed these insights or tested them out across close readings. Teun van Dijk pioneered this area with tentative claims about the mutually beneficial differences between action theory and literature. There is, he suggests, an ‘intuitive idea [...] that narrative discourse may be conceived of as a form of natural action description, whereas a philosophy or, more specifically, a logic of action attempts to provide formal action descriptions’.¹¹² David Herman describes a similar intuition when he suggests that, while philosophers ‘create taxonomies of act-types [...] mapping the structures and supports of human action’, storytellers make worlds through which readers can ‘better appreciate exemplary as well as exceptional varieties and modes of action’.¹¹³ If stories ‘rely implicitly on the same conceptual systems that action theorists strive to make explicit’, then action theory can potentially be used to elucidate the processes of understanding what we are reacting to when we read, as well as sketching the viable parameters for verisimilitude in fictional action.¹¹⁴

Lubomír Doležel recognises the cross-over between action theory and narratology, but rejects what he sees as the heavy emphasis that philosophy places on intentionality. Although the notion of intention might be useful in characterising the mental portion of an

¹¹¹ Palmer, p. 90.

¹¹² Teun A. van Dijk, ‘Philosophy of Action and Theory of Narrative’, *Poetics*, 5 (1976), 287–338 (p. 287).

¹¹³ David Herman, ‘Storied Minds: Narrative Scaffolding for Folk Psychology’, *Journal of Consciousness Studies*, 16 (2009), 40–68 (p. 55).

¹¹⁴ David Herman, *Story Logic*, p. 55.

action, intentionality per se appears too dogmatic for Doležel. While ‘the needs of narrative semantics will be satisfied if ‘intention’ is accepted as a primitive notion, irreducible to other mental factors of acting, such as desires, reasons, or beliefs’, the concept of intention cannot provide further insight. Doležel argues that the concept of intention is necessarily restricted in its inability to describe a whole range of non-intentional and non-conscious actions, as well as the range of motivational factors, such as environmental and intersubjective factors, that are not properly captured by the term. With these criticisms, he argues for a broader approach to character action: ‘[whereas] intention delimits the domain of acting from nonactional events, motivation is the key to understanding the diversity of acting, the why and how of actions’.¹¹⁵ Although Doležel is correct to champion a wide understanding of action and agency, his assumption that philosophical action theory has been preoccupied with intention gives a slightly imbalanced picture, which I will address in Chapter One.

My own position, following the traditions outlined here, is based upon the intuition that, because narratives are made up of character actions, then models of real world action and how we understand it might help to elucidate prose. This cannot be a wholesale application of action theory, as interdisciplinary work is curtailed to some extent by the competing conventions of each discipline. While literary action certainly deals with a diverse range and depth of psychological and motivational states, it does not necessarily describe these states in a way which allows for a clear application of theory. However, the theory of action – in many of its guises – provides a wealth of explanatory and terminological tools which are eminently useful to the literary-critical project. Literature has an incredibly broad scope, and needs models which are flexible enough to fit a wide range of textual features. For this reason, a diverse range of action-theoretical approaches is favourable. This point notwithstanding, literature does seem to draw upon clear intuitions about action. Because fictional action needs to be intelligible, it generally draws upon folk models of behavioural explanation. This suggests an implicit theoretical bias toward descriptions of action which use common-sense concepts and tally with first-person experience. This harmonises with a recurring attempt in some strands of theory, to focus models of agency on the experience of action. Although this approach has a strong intuitive claim, it does not fit all aspects of action. Experimental disciplines show that action is not just made up of

¹¹⁵ Lubomír Doležel, *Heterocosmica: Fiction and Possible Worlds* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1998), p. 63.

what we experience, but is spread across conscious and non-conscious control. The ways in which these disciplines model the slippage in first-person experience offer ways of broadening the concepts of action theory. My primary texts often focus on the questionable stability of agency and the experience of agency. As such, these wider models of action provide fruitful approaches for the interpretation of these texts.

A broad approach to action theory allows a range of interpretive approaches, which together minimise the failings of a single approach. Character action can be more fully explored by adopting elements of the folk psychological theory of mind and pushing them into dialogue with other elements of the identity cluster: morality, self-understanding, reason, and autonomy. Contemporary free will theory overtly describes the plastic interactions between conscious control and subpersonal, or non-conscious motivation, as well as how we interpret this in ourselves and others. Such focus is necessary to counteract the rationalist shortcomings of solely folk psychological readings of literary texts. In this way, the cross-over into literary studies should also be seen as a continuation of more traditional literary-theoretical models that have adopted psychoanalytic models as a way of describing the unconscious, irrational, or societal factors that demand expression in the explanation of character development and plot dynamics. A major benefit of the current scholarship is the focus it gives to the specific interactions between elements of the identity cluster. Empirical and phenomenological scrutiny in this area has given rise to a number of new models, the literary applications of which I hope to develop in the following chapters.

Chapter One focuses on Anna Kavan's writing. I explore the concept of character intention, and how readers understand fictional action. Folk psychology in the philosophical literature has attempted to describe the norms of interaction which allow agents to understand the actions of other agents without explicit description. As already described, this process is called mindreading, and appears to be an automatic ability which underpins social action. Traditional models of FP suggest that agents understand the actions of others through the inference of desire/belief structures; when we see someone acting in a particular way, we imagine the desires and beliefs which might underpin that action. In recent research, this idea has been applied to fiction, with the aim of describing how readers understand the actions of characters through the inference of motivational states. I use more recent explorations of folk psychology to counter the ease of

transmission between real-world mentalising, and fictional mentalising. Recent FP models have distinct similarities to other intentional frameworks, and I trace the idea of goal- or plan-based inference as it appears in folk psychology, action theory, and literary pragmatics. My theoretical explorations use examples from Kavan's short fiction. I then move to a close analysis of Kavan's novel *Ice*, with a specific focus on the use of intentional structures within that text.

In Chapter One, I suggest that there are common ways in which we understand character actions. In some respects, these seem similar to the ways in which we understand real-world action, insofar as we understand that action and agency are closely aligned, and that agency has attendant structures – such as coherence between plan and action – which define it. In Chapter Two, I explore the idea that these agency-centred norms are not only implicit in the *way* in which we understand fiction, but that they inform the very structure of fictional work. To present intelligible action, fiction seems bound to abide by some of these norms in the construction of action. *How It Is* is a highly experimental novel. In this chapter, I suggest that Samuel Beckett creates his experimentalism by disrupting the practice of rendering agency intelligible. He does this by avoiding and transgressing norms of expression which ordinarily structure the description of action within fictional discourse. I frame the agential questions that Beckett raises in his writing and his own philosophical explorations by bringing it into contact with contemporary research which explores the place of introspection in action and self-understanding.

While Chapters One and Two focus directly on the way that character action is understood, and the ways that authors subvert this understanding, Chapter Three shifts focus slightly to consider the entanglement of morality and intentionality. Because actions are the means through which we interpret others, we depend on them to give us insight into the intentions of the agent. It is the combination of action and the intention that it represents that allows us to make a moral judgment. A moral judgment is not only the praise or blame associated with a particular action, but a reaction to a person; a response to an action is generally a response to the agent as if the action were representative of them. This returns to the link between agency, autonomy and action, and the underlying assumption that an agent acts according to tacit endorsement of particular expressions which they have deemed in some way to constitute their self. According to this proposition, action is to some extent a self-expression of character. This chapter explores how Vladimir Nabokov's *Pale Fire* is

closely involved with this set of assumptions. The character of Kinbote appears to be morally suspect, but there is no distinct evidence in the book which would allow a strong or conclusive moral judgment to take place. Rather than attempting this, I explore how the structural play of Kinbote's narrative invites certain philosophical interpretations. Insofar as these interpretations are ways of characterising morality, the reading primarily reveals how the structures of morality are tested and manipulated by the narrative. Morality is a facet of intention and agency, and Kinbote's use of judgment and action-structures can be seen interacting with other ideas of agency within *Pale Fire*. Particularly, I draw them into comparison with the characterisations of Gradus and John Shade, and explore how Nabokov's formal innovations are closely related to the representation of agency within the novel.

Theories of intentionality are important for helping us to understand which structures underpin our understanding of ourselves and others. The effort to describe what intention consists of has often meant that some motivational process, whether subpersonal, automatic, or apparently compulsive, have been left out of models of action. This trend is particularly clear in the literature on addiction, where the range of approaches and conclusions suggests the difficulty of reconciling an idea of addictive compulsion with agency. The variety of approaches to addictive action gives a shifting picture of intentionality. This is also reflected in the way that freedom and responsibility are conceptualised in therapeutic approaches to addiction. Malcolm Lowry's novel *Under the Volcano* is deeply concerned with questions of addiction. This is borne out through a shifting, often character-focalized, perspective on alcoholism and craving which is bolstered by allusions to specific models of addiction. In this fourth and final chapter, I trace these allusions and develop them in line with contemporary approaches to the question of addiction and intention in an attempt to reposition alcoholism within the critical appraisal of *Under the Volcano*. This focussed analysis also brings other thematic questions into play, which my discussion roots in the agency-centred approach that addiction establishes.

Chapter One

Character Intention: Anna Kavan

Replying to Philip Inman's charges that the first draft of *Ice* lacked 'internal logic' and needed 'more pronounced' action, Anna Kavan stated a case for the novel's psychological anti-rationalism:

When I started writing, I saw the story as one of those recurring dreams (hence the repetitive voyages etc.) which at times become nightmare. This dreamlike atmosphere is the essence of the whole concept. [...] It is meant to be a fantasy or a dream, and dreams are not logical; that's what makes them strange and fascinating (frightening too).

This exchange, precursory to Peter Owen's publication of *Ice* in 1967, is the clearest articulation of Kavan's late style. Here, the balance that sustains the effect of this 'present day fable' is achieved, she suggests, by moving away from 'detailed characterisation', and focussing instead on the relationship between the protagonist and 'the girl'; two of three main agents in the book. It is through this relationship that the entirety of the 'pursuit' structure is justified:

The girl's importance as a victim should be enough to justify the pursuing. I mean that peculiar attraction between victim and victimiser, drawing two opposite poles together until finally they are almost identified with one another. This should become clear through all she says and does, as well as what happens to her, inferred rather than stated directly.

Although the structure of the novel may not be logical, Kavan is still appealing to a broad narrative arc – the ongoing pursuit –and the characters who sustain this arc through their actions. This arc is experimental in its pointed underdevelopment and repetitious episodes, but the main object of focus around which this structure turns is the characterisation. In her reply, Kavan subordinates the structural play of the novel to the importance of character, emphasising her removal from a covert literary norm by exercising inference, based on 'all [the girl] says and does, as well as what happens to her' over a direct explanation of action

and motivation. Wryly avoiding Inman's criticisms, she promotes the adventure-story credentials of the novel:

When you say that you hope for some dramatic incident I am puzzled. I thought the book was full of dramatic incidents with all those fights, shootings, escapes and so on. How could I make the action more pronounced? The book consists of actions, doesn't it?¹

This is incontrovertible. However, taken with her other insights into the novel, the implied focus is on the way in which the causal relationship between motivation and action is treated. If the action itself is 'pronounced', then it must be the way in which the action is linked to the agent which is obscured. If the link between character and action is obscured, then we are led to explanatory models of behaviour. It appears from her letter that part of the anti-logical progression that Kavan tries to achieve in the novel is rooted in the treatment of the relation between action and agent. Although the mentalising attitude that Kavan is promoting – one that focuses on the psychological states of characters – does not necessitate a correlate theory of the relation between mind and body, it appears, at least in her earlier writing, that she erred towards a mind-body split. Describing a collection of Victorian mysteries, she characterises the writers in this way:

¹ Quoted in: David Callard, *The Case of Anna Kavan: A Biography* (London: Peter Owen, 1992), pp. 137–8; throughout this chapter I refer to Callard's biography of Kavan. It should be noted that a more recent biography also exists Jeremy Reed, *A Stranger on Earth: The Life and Work of Anna Kavan* (London: Peter Owen, 2006); in addition, Young's response to Callard's biography provides an interesting companion piece, especially regarding the position of drugs in Kavan's life and writing: Elizabeth Young, 'Dependencies: *The Case of Anna Kavan* by David Callard', *London Review of Books*, 15 (1993), 22–23; other critical studies attempt to draw parallels between Kavan's biography, her drug taking, and her fiction. The resultant readings are often disappointingly superficial. See: Lawrence Driscoll, *Reconsidering Drugs: Mapping Victorian and Modern Drug Discourses* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2000); Doris Lessing, 'Anna Kavan', in *Time Bites* (London: Fourth Estate, 2004), pp. 142–45; Geoff Ward, 'The Wibberlee Wobberlee Walk: Lowry, Hamilton, Kavan and the Addictions of 1940s Fiction', in *The Fiction of the 1940s: Stories of Survival*, ed. by Rod Mengham and N. H. Reeve (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2001), pp. 26–45; other criticism has more fruitfully read Kavan in relation to historical, literary and political forces. These include: Brian W. Aldiss, 'Kafka's Sister', in *The Detached Retina: Aspects of SF and Fantasy* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 1995), pp. 159–69; Janet Byrne, 'Moving Toward Entropy: Anna Kavan's Science Fiction Mentality', *Extrapolation*, 23 (1982), 5–11; Jane Garrity, 'Nocturnal Transgressions in The House of Sleep: Anna Kavan's Maternal Registers', *Modern Fiction Studies*, 40 (1994), 253–77; Victoria Walker, 'Ornithology and Ontology: The Existential Birdcall in Jean Rhys's *Wide Sargasso Sea* and Anna Kavan's *Who Are You?*', *Women: A Cultural Review*, 23 (2012), 490–509; Victoria Nelson, 'Symmes Hole, or the South Polar Romance', *Raritan*, 17 (1997), 136–66. These latter three papers provide the most interesting and wide ranging readings of Kavan. This survey covers almost all of the serious writing on Kavan. The field is small, and there is very little crossover between these papers and the concerns of my own writing.

Afraid of the vast indifferent world, they cling to the familiar safety of everyday domestic objects; houses, chairs, beds; things which comfort the mind as they support the body. To the child, body and mind are one.²

Other examples of Kavan's occasional writings also give some idea of her particular stance on what a novel should consist of. In a review for the journal *Horizon* in 1944, a dogma is laid out:

A writer must speak, as it were, the language of the subconscious before he can produce his best work. And this is true, not only of such writers as Kafka and James Joyce, who communicate by means of a dream or fantasy medium, but also of those who describe the external happenings of the outer world. Even in stories of action employing a realistic technique, the source of genuine interest springs from an understanding of the fundamentals of personality. It is the interpretation of complexes, together with their sequence of inevitable events, which gives to any book the truly satisfactory rhythmic progression of music.³

Kavan's emphasis here is on the primacy of the subconscious in determining action. Her explanation offers an interesting counterpoint to her defence of *Ice* above, in which she seemed to be cultivating the obscuration of motive and intention. At this point, far from offering a clear distinction between motivation and action, she suggests that 'complexes' – which are motivational states – give rise to a 'sequence of inevitable events'. The 'interpretation of complexes' happens in conjunction with action events, and it is through the manipulation of this interaction that the author can create a 'rhythmic progression' from an understanding of how 'complexes' lead to events. A similar conception of the literary task is implied in another *Horizon* review from 1945 in which the stories of the Woodrow Wyatt edited anthology, *English Story*, are attacked for their unviable psychological attitudes:

Many of them are incompletely worked out from the subconscious angle, the motivating complexes unexplained, the characterization negligible, the general pattern confused. [...] The individuals whom they describe remain nebulous; one does not know whether the personality traits which govern their actions are

² Anna Kavan, 'Back to Victoria', *Horizon*, 13 (1946), 61–66 (p. 64).

³ Anna Kavan, 'Selected Notices: *The Inquest*. By Robert Neumann; *The Powerhouse*. By Alex Comfort', *Horizon*, 10 (1944), 359–62 (p. 359).

dominantly normal or paranoid or obsessional or depressive or manic; one does not see their movements or hear them speak.⁴

This passage, taken with the above review from 1944, offers a schematic description of psychological literature. Here, the ‘motivating complexes’ appear to be the same subconscious forces that appear in the earlier review. Far from offering a non-logical description of actions, Kavan’s concept of the psychological, at this point, seems to imply that there are clear and established links between complexes and actions. The ideal that she promotes here is one in which the speech and movements of characters give some insight into their personality traits as conceived as psychoanalytic paradigms. Her demand for recognisable ‘personality traits’ is not so different from the ‘conventional psychological patterns’ that she rejects in her 1946 review, ‘Back to Victoria’.⁵ More charitably, we can see Kavan taking a broad approach to character action by adopting a strict psychologising discourse. As appears to be the case in her exchange with Inman regarding *Ice*, her mature characterisation does not rely upon clear causal relationships between motivational complexes and actions, but gains its psychological interest by partially obscuring these causal relationships. I will discuss this more fully in my reading of *Ice* later in this chapter.

The Concept of Intention in Theory

As I suggest above, Kavan is deeply interested in the ways in which motivation leads to action. In this, she predominantly focuses on the psychological and unconscious mechanisms that bias behaviour towards certain ends. Kavan’s focus on this topic is particularly prominent in her fiction which follows her first major experimental texts, the short prose pieces which make up the 1940 collection, *Asylum Piece*. Kavan’s psychological style, by concentrating on the link between motivation and action, is broadly focussed on the idea of *intention*, insofar as the idea of intentionality is central to our concept of action, whether that action is unconscious or not. Before moving onto an exploration of the way that intention is written and read in Kavan’s fiction, it is first necessary to establish a picture of the intellectual questions which have grown up around the concept of intention in recent years. This has largely emerged through the discourse of Anglo-American analytic philosophy, which, in the last fifty years, has strongly

⁴ Anna Kavan, ‘Selected Notices: *English Story*. Edited by Woodrow Wyatt; *The Windmill*. Edited by Reginald Moore and Edward Lane; *The Ballad and the Source*. By Rosamond Lehmann; *In Tyrannos*. Lindsay Drummond.’, *Horizon*, 11 (1945), 143–46 (p. 144).

⁵ Kavan, ‘Selected Notices’, p. 144.

emphasised the concept of intention within the theory of action. As I will suggest, the philosophical concept of intention provides a fruitful theoretical base for the exploration of the way in which intentionality occurs in the plotting of narrative.

In my introduction, I suggested that literary interpretation should not be seen as entirely separate from second-person interaction. Rather, there are processes and assumptions involved in the creation and comprehension of fictional characters which are congruent with real-world structures. The real-world structures at play here are those terms and concepts through which we describe and understand our own actions and the actions of others. As Marcia Cavell suggests, this often takes the form of ‘a mentalistic or intentionalist language’. The terms that might be utilised in this context are ‘wish, belief, desire, fear, emotion, feeling, motive, reason, intention’, and so on, which all give ways of describing actions which suggest an underlying mental framework for those actions.⁶ It is clear from Kavan’s comments above that she had an abiding interest in psychological, and particularly, unconscious forms of motivation. This use of mentalising language might assume an affinity with conscious, rather than unconscious, action. However, Cavell suggests that mentalising language often has to respond to actions which have mixed unconscious and conscious motivations, with those states interacting. As such, the province of reason-giving has to be flexible enough to assume the descriptive validity of both unconscious and conscious reasons.

Cavell is writing in the Anglo-American analytic philosophical tradition, and follows philosophers like Donald Davidson in prioritising the link between *reasons* and *actions*. A reason seems to tie an action to a particular agent, and an expanded province of reasons – both conscious and unconscious – would provide a combined model of motivation. Cavell’s combined model strays from the orthodox association between agency and conscious action. However, it broadly continues a Wittgensteinian approach to unconscious action. Wittgenstein suggested that there is a ‘muddle [...] between a cause and a reason’ in the method of psychoanalysis.⁷ While psychoanalysis appears to be proposing causes for action, Wittgenstein rejects this: ‘A cause is not seen from within or

⁶ Marcia Cavell, *Becoming a Subject: Reflections in Philosophy and Psychoanalysis* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), p. 110.

⁷ Ludwig Wittgenstein, ‘Conversations on Freud; Excerpt from 1932-3 Lectures’, in *Philosophical Essays on Freud*, ed. by Richard Wollheim and James Hopkins (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982), pp. 1–11 (p. 10).

from without. It is found by experiment'.⁸ Instead, he suggests that psychoanalysis proposes reasons. A reason is not found by experimentation, but 'entails as an essential part one's agreement with it'; it is a method of explanation which might broaden, but does not break out from, our common ways of interpreting behaviour.⁹ Cavell continues this approach by suggesting the interaction between unconscious and conscious motivational states. This is opposed to models in which the unconscious is seen as an independently motivating causal apparatus.¹⁰

The combinatory model broadens, but does not reject, the common analytic assumption that action is intelligible when it is associated with an agent. Authorship ties consciousness to intention and action insofar as being conscious of action 'is inseparable from action [...] in the sense that we are always able to answer the question – 'What are you doing now?''¹¹ If the unconscious is a way of positing intentions that instigate action without the knowledge of the agent then the notion of 'intention' becomes untethered from its specific explanatory role. As Stuart Hampshire suggests: 'If my intentions are [...] unknown to me, then I have no fixed and formed intentions'.¹² For Hampshire, the idea of intention as part of agency is crucial because it ties the action to a notion of endorsement which validates the centrality of action authorship. On this point, Peter Hacker explains that:

[First-person] authority with regard to my beliefs and intentions stems not from privileged, introspective 'access' to one's mind, which yields [...] indubitable and infallible knowledge, but stems rather from the fact that I am their author. I form some of my intentions and beliefs through deliberation and decision, and others, though not the upshot of deliberation, are endorsed by me in their expression.¹³

This provides a brief explanation of the analytic model of action that I will be exploring for much of this chapter. As Hacker suggests, actions are inextricable from the person who

⁸ Wittgenstein, pp. 10–11.

⁹ Wittgenstein, p. 10.

¹⁰ Jerome Neu takes issue with Cavell's holistic approach in her earlier work. 'Is [psychoanalytic explanation] just an extension of common sense reason-action explanations to the unconscious? Or does it involve a different kind of thinking, a kind of thinking incompatible with Davidsonian holism and the notion that rationality is constitutive of the mental?' Jerome Neu, 'The Psychoanalytic Mind: From Freud to Philosophy, by Marcia Cavell', *The Philosophical Review*, 104 (1995), 289–93 (pp. 291–2).

¹¹ Stuart Hampshire, *Thought and Action* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1959), p. 119.

¹² Hampshire, p. 103.

¹³ Peter M. S. Hacker, 'Thought and Action: A Tribute to Stuart Hampshire', *Philosophy*, 80 (2005), 175–97 (p. 196).

acts. Much of the time, this relationship is expressed through intention and endorsement, which give an agent ownership of that action.

This model of agency is central to this chapter, because my task here is not to defend or develop a specific view of the unconscious within literature, but to present some more general readings of intention. The models that I draw upon, following the tradition within which Cavell is placed, are largely taken from Anglo-American action theory. The majority of this tradition is implicitly concerned with conscious and rational intention. Assuming – as Cavell does – that unconscious and conscious structures interact, the language of reasons and intentions should also help to elucidate actions which include unconscious elements. This might take the form of standard, or negative, description. In the form of negative description, the language of consciousness and rationality might help to frame an action which is not contained by those terms. Other readings of unconscious action might simply provide additional reasons for action which contribute to, but do not necessarily contradict, a conventional understanding of conscious action. In this case, an intentionalist framework which is expanded to include both conscious and unconscious reasons for action is not theoretically problematic. This offers a flexible model for the literary application of intentionalist language. If, as Katherine Wheeler suggests, Kavan attempted to write in a ‘language expressive of the richness of the world of the unconscious saturating every conscious thought or feeling we experience’, then the conscious thoughts and feelings also have a primary role; interacting with, rather than trumped by, the unconscious.¹⁴

In order to expand a reading of action which might contribute both to how conscious and unconscious motives come into play, the first step is to get a firmer grasp on what is meant when we talk about character action. As evidenced above, Kavan placed a very strong emphasis on the importance of a psychologised form of storytelling. As part of this, she practised a method through which characters are created by inference ‘rather than stated directly’.¹⁵ This claim seems to rely on a missing stage of the argument. Characterising through inference relies upon describing through how the character acts, rather than offering direct explanation of their personality. If characterisation is shaped by actions, then an account of how action is read in fiction becomes necessary in order to suggest how

¹⁴ Kathleen Wheeler, ‘Anna Kavan 1901-1968’, in *A Critical Guide to Twentieth Century Women Novelists* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1997), pp. 153–55 (p. 154).

¹⁵ Quoted in: Callard, p. 138.

inference *can* lead from action to characterisation. For this to happen, actions cannot just represent unconscious referents, but must be related to a general mentalisation of character action, which ties character action to conscious states associated with action authorship. Chief among these is intention. To elaborate on the role of intention in action, I turn first to a discussion of intention in the analytic philosophical tradition. From here, I move to a description of the recent cross-over work in literary criticism and Theory of Mind which has sought to explain the folk psychological structures that underlie the interpretation of character action in relation to a mentalising framework. In order to elucidate my position in this section, I draw extensively on examples from Kavan's short fiction. Finally, I analyse Kavan's novel *Ice* with an emphasis on how the author manipulates ideas of intention and action in relation to broader structural features of the narrative.

Philosophical theories of action in the analytic tradition are largely concerned with intentional action; that is, the conditions needed for an action to be considered the product of an agent. Traditionally, this is articulated in the cases of free will theories and theories of morality and jurisprudence, where the intentionality of an action is tied to a moral assessment of the agent. Although frequently involved in these larger questions, the philosophy of action as a discipline in itself began by separating intention off as a specific object of enquiry. This has been attributed to G.E.M. Anscombe's *Intention* which isolated the question of intention to be: 'What distinguishes actions which are intentional from those which are not?'; to which she answers: 'they are the actions to which a certain sense of the question 'Why?' is given application; the sense is of course that in which the answer, if positive, gives a reason for acting'.¹⁶ The question of whether an action is intentional is not necessarily the same as the question of whether an action is conscious. Rather, as Alvarez points out, Anscombe's definition – which aligns intention with reasons for action (without conceding that reasons and intentions *cause* actions) – came to structure the debate around three main points: 'the nature of actions, the nature of reasons, and the relation between the two'.¹⁷

Since Anscombe, the notion of intention has been central to the investigation of action. Its centrality to the debate is because intention appears to capture a sense of the connection between an agent and their action, and how ownership of action is conceived. As such, intention has come under close scrutiny, which has split the concept into a number of sub-

¹⁶ G. E. M. Anscombe, *Intention* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1958), p. 9.

¹⁷ Maria Alvarez, 'Agents, Actions and Reasons', *Philosophical Books*, 46 (2005), 45–58 (p. 45).

problems, the details of which are discussed by Alvarez in her history of the discipline.¹⁸ One main point to draw from the literature is the way in which the conditions for an intentional action have been theorised in different ways over the course of the debate. As Michael Bratman notes, a central problem in characterising the notion of intention comes from the fact that we commonly use the term to refer both to mental and physical states; one can intend to do something (a future-directed mental state), and one can intentionally do something (a description which notes the agent's commitment to the action). In order to bridge the gap between the mental and physical concepts of intention, Donald Davidson and Alvin Goldman among others, minimally defined intentional action to be constituted by a background combination of beliefs and desires.¹⁹ Bertram Malle and Joshua Knobe state the position as follows: 'to act intentionally one needs to have a desire (for an outcome) and appropriate beliefs (about how the act would lead to that outcome)'.²⁰ Later models, such as Bratman's, modified the belief/desire model by defining intention as a specific capacity in itself, rather than a composite of beliefs and desires.²¹ In Bratman's model, intention has a specific role as a planning function. Other approaches have identified links between intentions and the ability or skill to perform an action.

Some recent theories of intention have strayed from the lines defined in the early years of research. One of the more significant movements has been an experimental turn which has sought to define intention according to how the term is understood in folk usage. A folk theory, as used in philosophy, refers to a set of concepts and platitudes held by common people. Malle and Knobe's 1997 article was seminal in its use of folk evidence in this context. The results of Malle and Knobe's experiments distinguished a structured theoretical model. One of the main insights of this was a distinction between the terms *intention* and *intentionally*:

People [...] apply the term *intention* to persons (who intend to do something) and the term *intentional* to actions (which are performed intentionally). When we speak of *intentionality*, then, we should speak of actions that were performed intentionally. In contrast, when we speak of an action that was *intended* (i.e.,

¹⁸ Alvarez.

¹⁹ Donald Davidson, 'Actions, Reasons, and Causes', in *Essays on Actions and Events* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1980), pp. 3–20; Following Davidson: 'In the normal situation, some cluster of wants *and* beliefs cause the performance of a basic act'. Alvin I. Goldman, *A Theory of Human Action* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1970), p. 72 .

²⁰ Malle and Knobe, p. 105.

²¹ Michael Bratman, 'Two Faces of Intention', *The Philosophical Review*, 93 (1984), 375–405.

preceded by an intention), we should not automatically infer that such an action was performed intentionally; for if awareness or skill were missing, the action would be intended but not performed intentionally.²²

This use of terms allows Malle and Knobe to develop a systematic model of conditions for both intention and intentionality:

[People's] folk concept of intentionality consists of five components (belief, desire, intention, awareness, and skill) that are hierarchically arranged, such that belief and desire are necessary conditions for attributions of *intention* and, given an intention, skill and awareness are necessary conditions for attributions of *intentionality*.²³

The experimental turn in philosophy is useful for the utilisation of theoretical action terms in literary scholarship because it points to the common ways in which these terms are used and understood. The schematics of action philosophy might find a more natural fit with literary criticism if both draw on a common folk understanding of terms. Literary usage must draw upon common understandings of actions, motivations and causes in order for its narratives to be intelligible without constant explicit commentary. It is also worth noting that, although Malle and Knobe's model is useful as both empirical and clarifying, the model that emerges has several commonalities with previous concepts. As such, it seems to legitimise the intuitive power of the previous models to some extent. In addition, the distinction allows a clearer view of what it might mean for unconscious reasons to enter into the explanation of intention. Malle and Knobe only identify 'belief and desire' as preconditions for *intention*. This can be seen as congruent with unconscious reasons. Because *intentionality* demands awareness at the time of action, it bars unconscious explanation, unless those processes are interacting with conscious processes.

Although folk psychology (FP) follows the schematic modes of action definition, and especially intention definition, the key difference at play is that FP reverses these definitions to a different descriptive end. Rather than describing the mental states that are needed for an action, FP describes the way in which we interpret behaviour and in so doing, infers the mental states behind that behaviour. As I discussed in the introduction, folk psychological schematics have traditionally been divided between two competing

²² Malle and Knobe, p. 115, original emphasis.

²³ Malle and Knobe, p. 114, original emphasis.

ideas; Theory and Simulation conceptions of how interpretation works. These, as Malle puts it, are designated as ‘domain-specific’ cognitive processes.²⁴ In the specific comprehension of intentions, it is not entirely clear how much of a role these cognitive processes have, and the models are still largely contested. As above, Malle notes a number of factors involved in the explanation of an intentional action. The four broad categories he isolates are ‘causal history’, ‘reasons’, ‘intention’ and ‘enabling factor’. These are arranged in a hierarchical model, with ‘causal history’ and ‘reasons’ contributing to ‘intention’, and ‘enabling factor’ bypassing these stages to answer a parallel question about what additional factors – skills or abilities – enable an intentional action to take place.

Malle’s comments on the explanatory power of Simulation and Theory theories suggest that our use of different interpretive models is context specific. According to this, these cognitive processes might be involved in both conscious and unconscious action, both when an intention is ascribed, and when it is not. Because of this, actions might be explained by any of the points in the hierarchical structure, though a specific intention has to be ascribed for intentional action (see above). Simulation cannot account for a number of factors involved in action-comprehension. These include ‘enabling factor explanations’ – the specific skill- or ability-oriented explanations which might answer a ‘How Possible?’ query²⁵ and ‘cause explanations of physical or biological behaviour’ – such as sweating.²⁶ However, other causal factors involved in action-comprehension, such as unintentional behaviour related to psychological or emotional factors, Malle marks as dominantly simulative. The term simulation refers to the empathetic responses that facilitate second-person comprehension; to some extent, we understand the actions of other agents through the simulation of their thoughts and feelings. Malle’s comments outline the broad explanatory remit of folk psychology, and the basic mechanisms that might be at play when we offer mentalising descriptions of other persons.

Fiction and Folk Psychology

Extra complications condition the interpretation of fictional characters with the same folk psychological methods with which we interpret persons. This section explores these

²⁴ Bertram F. Malle, ‘Folk Explanations of Intentional Action’, in *Intentions and Intentionality: Foundations of Social Cognition*, ed. by Louis J. Moses, Bertram F. Malle, and Dare A. Baldwin (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2001), pp. 265–86 (p. 283).

²⁵ Malle, p. 280.

²⁶ Malle, p. 284.

complications through examples taken from Kavan's *Asylum Piece*. This collection of short stories is largely focussed on the experiences of individual patients in a continental clinic. The stories seem particularly pertinent to an examination of how we read mental states because they are focussed on closely studied mentalised descriptions of patients as individual agents, as well as in relation to other characters and the broader forces at work in the medical and legislative world of the clinic. These stories, following Anaïs Nin's description of *Asylum Piece*, might be analysed as studies of 'the world of the divided self.'²⁷ As a clarification of her terms, Nin offers a passage from R.D. Laing:

It can be readily understood why the schizoid individual so abhors action. The act is simple, determinate, universal. But his self wishes to be complex, indeterminate, and unique. He, his 'self' is endless possibility, capacity, intention. *The act is always a product of a false self.*²⁸

Although Kavan's characters are not necessarily diagnosable as 'schizoid', she does scrutinize the way in which deliberation might be disconnected from action. In this way, her characterisations are overtly mentalising. As such, the stories provide an ideal foil for discussion about how character action is interpreted as expressive of mental capacities.

Before moving to a more complex discussion of the relation between folk psychology and fiction, some clarification of basic FP terms is needed, and their basic role in reason attribution. In reason attribution, Malle suggests that the action-specificity of inference mechanisms means that a mix of Theory and Simulation is likely to provide the cognitive background of interpretation, with clear reservations about the specificity of Theory. As a general rule to infer intentionality, it might be able to signal where and when to rationalize action but this does not necessarily mean that Theory alone will be able to rationalize the action correctly: 'Inferring on the basis of a rationality rule that the agent had *some* beliefs and desires is one thing; inferring the specific ones in this context is quite another'.²⁹ However, he also suggests that some element of Theory needs to be present in order to report the need for inference in the first place:

²⁷ Anaïs Nin, *The Novel of the Future* (London: Peter Owen, 1969), p. 139.

²⁸ R. D. Laing, *The Divided Self* (Harmondsworth: Pelican Books, 1965), p. 88; Quoted in: Nin, p. 139, original emphasis.

²⁹ Malle, pp. 284–5, original emphasis.

[Simulations] would be hard to get started without general rules that guide the search for possible explanations – rules such as “If the behaviour looks intentional, search for beliefs and desires and plug them into the deliberation mechanism.”³⁰

Here, Malle seems to drift into harder developmental questions about Theory of Mind which he does not resolve. Despite this, his emphasis on balancing Theory and Simulation according to a case-by-case basis seems sensible, and one that might be useful in a literary-critical context. Although the following is a slightly misleading use of the theory, it is helpful to use a literary example to show how Theory or Simulation might be used in the comprehension of fiction. Consider this excerpt from Kavan’s short story, ‘Asylum Piece IV’:

‘My mother and father? They haven’t been here.’ She looks at him blankly, yet with distrust, out of her sparkless eyes.

‘Oh, yes, indeed – they were here this morning. I was in the corridor when they came out of the doctor’s study [...]’ The Italian boy seems to be only interested in his food, but really he is all attention, all on the alert.

Zélie takes a mouthful of veal from her plate. Suddenly she grasps the meaning of what has just been said to her; the implication of the words dawns upon her. She lets her knife and fork fall. ‘My mother has been here...and she went away...without seeing me!’³¹

Artificially approaching an excerpt like this with only the models of Theory and Simulation, one is drawn to distinguish between points in the narrative which seem to demand explanation, either by logical or emotional means. Zélie’s distrust of the boy we infer from the dramatic-ironic context in which her distrust takes place. Because of the situational demands, a Theoretical approach seems fitting, as her distrust implies a background of unsatisfactory interactions with the Italian. Here, the partial access to Zélie’s mental states draws us to infer related beliefs, desires, and past attitudes which we relate to the situation of distrust. In addition, this is related to the fact that we know the Italian to be telling the truth based on the previous dramatic context of the story. This situational demand in addition to the Italian boy’s interest in Zélie’s reaction might lead us to infer that the boy is attempting to intentionally upset her. The emotional content of

³⁰ Malle, pp. 284–5.

³¹ Kavan, ‘Asylum Piece IV’, p.148-9.

Zélie's position within the story might also suggest that we use elements of Simulation to uncover the meaning behind the actions of the characters. Simulation involves mimicking the thought-states of another individual in order to try and recreate, and discover, their reasoning processes. The interplay between Zélie taking 'a mouthful of veal' and then suddenly '[grasping] the meaning' of the Italian's words provides a physical and emotional combination of events, the comprehension of which might involve our mental simulation of the building contrast between the act of eating and the emotional impact of the revelation as she understands it. '[Letting] her knife and fork fall' suggests that she is no longer interested in eating; a demonstrative act which suggests that the combination of desire and belief which led her to eat has now been overridden by a competing set of desires and beliefs which related to uncovering the truth and ramifications of the Italian's claims: 'My mother has been here...and she went away...without seeing me!'

A description like this seems to overemphasise the mechanisms of reading, derailing the subtlety of the interaction between characters by overtly claiming access to belief and desire structures which, in traditional folk models, underpin action. Daniel Hutto takes a different line on folk psychology, which distances reason explanations from the *in situ* demands of either Theory or Simulation models. His criticism is two-fold with both points relating distinctly to any literary application of FP that might be attempted. The traditional theoretical approaches to FP emphasised the ways in which reason explanations are at the heart of behaviour explanation, and these explanations are reached through active cognitive effort; either by accessing a tacit theory which would explain an action according to a rationalising matrix or by simulating the thought-states of the other person to try and mimic their reasoning processes. Hutto cuts through much of this by suggesting that, in the majority of cases, we do not understand actions according to beliefs and desires. Rather, much behavioural understanding is better characterised as embedded in the world, and as such, comprehensible simply through normative processes of social interaction. Victoria McGeer describes these everyday situations evocatively:

[I]f we make ourselves more readable to one another by conforming to shared norms of readability, it follows that much of the work of understanding one another in day-to-day interactions is not really done by us at all, explicitly or implicitly.

The work is done and carried by the world, embedded in the norms and routines that structure such interactions.³²

Returning to Kavan's 'Asylum Piece IV', and transposing McVeer's insights into a literary context, we might read Zélie '[letting] her knife and fork fall', not as an action which needs the input of desires and beliefs, but as a cultural, norm-laden, way of exhibiting shock. The attribution of a desire/belief framework behind the action is not necessary, because the action is simply understood, and is used by Kavan specifically because it has a received meaning.

Comprehension of this kind is not strictly folk psychology; because there is often no need for any recourse to a belief/desire schema, or any question about why a person acted as they did. This then narrows the definition of what is meant by folk psychology. For Hutto, FP *stricto sensu* 'incorporates the practice of making sense of a person's actions using belief/desire propositional attitude psychology'.³³ It is not therefore a term which can be used to describe every instance in which one human understands another. In this sharper definitional usage I distance myself from Lisa Zunshine. Zunshine defines the phrase 'Theory of Mind' (ToM) in broadly similar terms, as 'our ability to explain people's behaviour in terms of their thoughts, feelings, beliefs, and desires'.³⁴ However, she does not constrain the situations in which this kind of explanation might be used. For Zunshine, '[attributing] states of mind is the default way by which we construct and navigate our social environment'.³⁵ Zunshine's ToM is the underlying mechanism of all social interaction whereas Hutto strictly delimits the situations in which belief/desire models are needed.

Zunshine's broad definition of ToM becomes the basis for a wholesale application to the literary situation. Zunshine makes great claims for this transference, suggesting that '[literature] pervasively capitalises on and stimulates Theory of Mind Mechanisms', that

³² Victoria McGeer, 'Psycho-Practice, Psycho-Theory and the Contrastive Case of Autism: How Practices of Mind Become Second-Nature', *Journal of Consciousness Studies*, 8 (2001), 109–32 (p. 119).

³³ Daniel D. Hutto, *Folk Psychological Narratives: The Sociocultural Basis of Understanding Reasons* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2008), p. 3.

³⁴ Zunshine, p. 8. Where I can, I will be using 'folk psychology' in its precise definition. In the philosophical literature, 'theory of mind' is generally used to refer to 'tacit' or 'theory' theory (see introduction). Zunshine's loose use of the term 'theory of mind' is perhaps closer to the general terms 'mindreading' and 'mentalising' which simply refer to the ability to understand the actions of others through the attribution of mental states and processes.

³⁵ Zunshine, p. 6.

‘ToM [...] makes literature as we know it possible’, and that ‘as a sustained representation of numerous interacting minds, the novel feeds the powerful, representation-hungry complex of cognitive adaptations’ that are normally socially stimulated.³⁶ Attention to Hutto’s reconsideration of FP has clear consequences for the application of FP to literature. He reduces emphasis on belief/desire inferences and focuses instead on our reliance on other factors, such as social norms and behavioural cues, to understand action. Because such cues often rely upon seeing another agent acting, this adds further weight against the easy symmetry that Zunshine maintains between literary and social interaction. A clear distinction needs to be drawn regarding the modes of behavioural understanding that Zunshine and Hutto engage in. Zunshine seems to be perpetuating a largely third-personal view of ToM, while Hutto emphasises the second-personal situation of the majority of our social behaviour. In these everyday events, we do not need to engage in ‘spectatorial’, external, ‘mentalistic predictions or explanations’.³⁷ Instead, as suggested above, we engage in more basic ‘embodied expectations’:

Like most creatures, our basic dealings with others are more visceral; we get by with scriptlike patterns of recognition-response, some of which can be quite sophisticated and complex. Typically, these are initiated and guided by indexical signs that take the form of the expressive behaviour of others.³⁸

This mode of comprehension does not necessarily involve mentalising behaviour; it is immediate understanding based on norms of action and interaction. Matthew Ratcliffe suggests that ‘[rather] than attributing mental states to an observed third party, we understand each other *through* structured interaction’.³⁹ This characterisation of social behaviour is a clear departure from Zunshine’s claims about the omnipresence of belief/desire mindreading.

Hutto makes a further departure from the FP-primacy argument, which is again rooted in his emphasis on the second-person character of most interaction. Although some events may elicit some recourse to a theoretical heuristic, these instances are rare and generally only occur when we witness behaviour that is particularly perplexing. Even among these cases, it is not clear that an attempt to decipher a person’s behaviour by projecting beliefs

³⁶ Zunshine, p. 10.

³⁷ Hutto, *Folk Psychological Narratives*, p. 3.

³⁸ Hutto, *Folk Psychological Narratives*, p. 3.

³⁹ Matthew Ratcliffe, pp. 383–4, original emphasis.

and desires onto them is always successful. A large amount of background knowledge is needed about an individual's character to come close to an accurate belief/desire model made spectatorially. Instead, folk psychology is better conceived as a narrative process which is largely conducted through dialogue:

[The] greatest chance of obtaining a successful explanation – of deciding for which reason an action was performed – depends on the authors of actions identifying and explicating their reasons for themselves. [...] it is only in second-person contexts that we confidently obtain true folk psychological explanations (to the extent that we do at all), as opposed to merely speculating about possible ones.⁴⁰

This limiting of folk psychological usage and accuracy has significant repercussions for the way in which the link between mindreading and literary comprehension should be theorised. Above, I tried to isolate points of explanation in a Kavan's 'Asylum Piece IV', and used FP terminology to describe the character interactions at these points of interest. If the explanations feel slightly artificial, this is because I used a post-hoc heuristic to try and explain action which does not need distinct explanation through desire/belief terminology. Perhaps, in a similar way to Hutto's explanation, an FP heuristic is not constantly needed to scaffold a narrative.⁴¹ Instead, it might be better understood as an interpretive tool occasionally used at points of extreme narrative opacity, or a readerly attitude that is only brought about by specific narratorial devices.

Folk psychology *stricto sensu*, is also limited in its literary application by the difference between fictional and real-world comprehension. In everyday life, as Hutto emphasises, the second-person is the primary mode of every interaction and address. Literary interaction might be better characterised as a mixture of quasi-first-person, quasi-second-person and third-person attitudes, as encapsulated in the broad distinction between narratorial and non-narratorial personalities. However, this is in flux and dependent upon the amount of information, including access to mental states, given in the narrative. If narratorial self-explanation or mentalised discourse is prioritised in a narrative, then it seems clear that folk psychology is not needed to decipher character attitudes, because these are often explicit. In addition, a narration might fluctuate between different levels of mentalised discourse; some of which might be more plausibly or transparently linked to

⁴⁰ Hutto, *Folk Psychological Narratives*, p. 20.

⁴¹ David Herman, 'Storied Minds: Narrative Scaffolding for Folk Psychology', pp. 44–5.

the self-knowledge of the character in question. ‘Psycho-narration’ makes FP application problematic by disrupting the point of engagement of the reader.⁴² These points, among other structural modes of information management found in narrative fiction, produce blending through which the story is managed largely without the need for recourse to specific mindreading exercises by the reader. As Matthew Belmonte suggests: ‘a great deal of narrative understanding, including the appreciation of characters’ perspectives and desires, can be accomplished without a ToM in its narrowest, psychological sense’.⁴³ The ‘narrowest, psychological sense’ of Theory of Mind that Belmonte refers to is congruent with Hutto’s *stricto sensu* definition of the term folk psychology. This is a mentalising description of action which is reliant upon the projection of desires and beliefs.

These are distinct limitations of the application of folk psychology to literary understanding. This is predominantly because the majority of interpretive positions do not necessitate an understanding of character action through a projection of their desires and beliefs. Another Kavan story from her *Asylum Piece* collection illustrates the limitations of folk psychology well. ‘Asylum Piece III’ follows an inmate of a sanatorium through third-person psycho-narration. The story is a good example of a story in which folk psychology *might* be expected to take a role in interpretation. Because the psycho-narrative remains on the level of articulable (i.e. not sub-verbal or sub-intentional) mental activity, it often touches on the beliefs and desires which structure the action of the protagonist, Hans. Movements into sub-intentional states are brief and generally support statements which are describable at a higher level. In addition, the narration deals with Hans in the process of interpreting the actions of others while exercising his own mindreading capabilities. For my reading, I have isolated points in the narrative which present Hans interpreting the actions of other agents.

The story is structured around a particular discrepancy between the way in which events usually take place in the sanatorium and the way in which they unfold on the day of the action. This discrepancy forces the protagonist into an interpretive position as he attempts to decipher the reasons for the change of routine:

⁴² See Dorrit Cohn, *Transparent Minds: Narrative Modes for Presenting Consciousness in Fiction* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1983), psycho-narration refers to modes of description which use verbs of perception to enter the mind of a character and reveal their thoughts and feelings.

⁴³ Matthew Belmonte, ‘Does the Experimental Scientist Have a “Theory of Mind”?’ , *Review of General Psychology*, 12 (2008), 192–204 (p. 193).

Hans glances round uneasily. It is part of his routine, too, to work in the atelier at this hour. Until a few days ago someone would certainly have come to investigate his absence: but now nobody comes near him; nobody seems to care how he occupies his time.⁴⁴

Here there are two points of interpretation; the reader's interpretation of Hans's actions and Hans's embedded interpretation of events in the storyworld through free indirect discourse. Hans glancing 'uneasily' is an initial candidate for the consultation of FP matrices as we might ask *why* he behaves in that way. However, his unease is immediately explained by his embedded interpretative stance; he is uneasy *because* his routine is disrupted. Even the embedded stance does not directly relate to a belief/desire network of the kind utilised in folk psychology. We do not jump to interpret the hospital's lack of interest in Hans as the result of a coordinated set of desires, individual interests, or even specific intentional states. The lack of interest is framed against a normal routinized pattern of work in the atelier – as set up and monitored by the institution – and so deviation from this norm is assumed to also be an institutional decision. Hans's interpretation of events takes this structural line:

My brother must have written to say that he can't afford to keep me here much longer. Soon I shall be sent away from the clinic – and then what will become of me?⁴⁵

In this case Hans's explanation does utilise folk psychology because it gives a reason for his brother's action (writing a withdrawal letter to the sanatorium *because* of lack of funds), which scaffolds the actions of the hospital that Hans experiences. Although the narration embeds FP, the reason explanation given for his brother's action does not demand the use of the reader's FP resources because the belief/desire set is given by the narration.

In direct communication with other agents, the narration is controlled to produce a disparity between what we know of Hans's mental states, and what we know (via Hans) of the mental states of those he interacts with. The interaction with the gymnastics teacher 'with whom, up to a few days ago, Hans has been indulging in a mild flirtation', produces

⁴⁴ Anna Kavan, 'Asylum Piece III', in *Asylum Piece and Other Stories* (London: Peter Owen, 2001), pp. 132–41 (p. 133).

⁴⁵ Kavan, 'Asylum Piece III', p. 133.

this result. The main play of the scene is the disparity between Hans's explicit set of desires which are dependent on the involvement of the gymnastic teacher, and the dismissal of these desires which occurs in the immediacy of the interpersonal communication:

She carries a black swimming suit over the handlebars of her cycle.

‘How I wish she would ask me to go swimming with her!’ he thinks to himself, as a smile of eager anticipation appears on his face. It is not that he really wants to swim in the lake; but what he longs for above everything at this moment is laughter, companionship and a friendly voice.

The girl is abreast of him now; [...] there is a greeting, a flash of teeth and a whirring noise. She has gone.⁴⁶

The narration is structured toward emphasising Hans's feeling of disconnection, which it achieves through loading the style with his mental states at the expense of conjecture about her motivations. This episode is still not relevantly describable using FP because Hans's beliefs and desires are explicitly evidenced through the narration, and the gym mistress's actions are explainable based on conventions of interpretation; the swimsuit over her handlebars explains her actions as far as Hans is concerned, and, as far as the reader is concerned, it is not any more likely that she would stop to speak with Hans than she would pass – the ‘greeting’ fulfils the expectations of the interaction, these simply happen not to meet Hans's particular desired outcome.

Further interactions are devoid of necessary FP involvement. The structured routine of the clinic is evidenced by a number of working patients Hans comes across. Two of these are ‘hoeing the parched earth’, while another tends a blackberry bush, ‘carefully picking out the berries and putting them into a basket’. The first two men ‘do not speak to each other, nor do they look happy’, and there is no attempt to model their mental states beyond this. Rather, it is the lack of a mentalised description which gives the episode its narrative charge. This is based on a discrepancy between what Hans wants and what actually occurs. Hans ‘would like to speak’ with the berry picker. However, he is deterred by the

⁴⁶ Kavan, ‘Asylum Piece III’, p. 134, there are, of course, aspects of literary comprehension that are not captured by the language of intention. In this scene, there are significant sexual undertones which give a specific tone to Hans's interaction with the gym mistress. These are not particularly amenable to intentionalist description, though give vital sense of frustration to the narration, as focalized through Hans.

‘unresponsive look of the man’s back’.⁴⁷ Here, the standard conversational route for understanding the other agent is barred, and we are left with the pragmatic action description of his job. The only deviation from this style of description, in which a character’s actions are accounted for by their specific function within the storyworld, is Hans’s meeting with another inmate who is painting a picture:

He stops and leans against the stone wall of the veranda. He would like to see what she is painting, but the effort required to mount the steps is too great, and he stays where he is, looking up at her wistfully.⁴⁸

Here, Hans’s attention is focused on finding out what is absorbing the other patient’s attention. This becomes more demanding following a brief exchange, during which Hans’s interest in the propositional states of his interlocutor become explicitly folk psychological, as Hans starts to think of possible mental states which might explain the girl’s non-involvement in the conversation. This, like the previous encounter with the gym mistress, is focussed on the slippage which arises from a disparity in attentional expectation in conversation; Hans reacts to the girl not noticing his mental states as he believes they are manifest through his expressions:

The girl doesn’t say any more. She doesn’t see his forlorn expression. Perhaps she is not interested; perhaps her painting absorbs her just then; or perhaps she has simply fallen into a dream.⁴⁹

These interactions are made strange by the focalisation, as Hans is apparently very demanding of his conversational interactions. This focus becomes the closing turn of the narrative as the sensitivity to behaviour-explanation, though largely normalised in the rest of the story, here becomes justified:

Carefully, with much thought, Hans writes out his message and hands the telegraph form over the counter.

After the young man has gone, the postmaster stands for a time holding the telegram against his huge belly, and watching the door as if he half expects the sender to come back. Then, in a methodical way, he sets about tearing the form into

⁴⁷ Kavan, ‘Asylum Piece III’, pp. 135–6.

⁴⁸ Kavan, ‘Asylum Piece III’, p. 138.

⁴⁹ Kavan, ‘Asylum Piece III’, p. 139.

small pieces, until nothing is left but a handful of shreds which he negligently tosses out of the open window.⁵⁰

Hans's careful actions, which are explicitly motivated by his desire to send the telegram to his business partner, are defied by the equally methodical, though non-interpretable behaviour of the postmaster. The narratorial emphasis on Hans's motivations and hopes throughout the story becomes the means of expressing the postmaster's behaviour as deliberately explanation poor. FP is largely useless in this instance, because there is not the narrative background which would allow an interpretation of the postmaster's behaviour based on previous form or known motivations. Instead, the action is read in line with Hans's nervousness about his uncertain position with the hospital, and the unknown forces that seem to be determining his life outside his operational control. The narrative turns on the discrepancy between the amount of information that we have about Hans's inner-life, and the lack of information that we have about the characters and institutions with which he interacts. Neither of these positions is explicable by the reader using FP as the information is either explicit in the narrative, or blocked to the extent that FP has no conjectural tools to work with.

Alternative Models of Action Interpretation

Although folk psychology has its interpretive uses, the above example shows that these can be limited by their reliance on belief/desire pairings. What seems clear from the recent work on FP by Hutto and others is that beliefs and desires should not be overly prioritised as the sole means of interpreting action. Behaviour, Hutto claims, can be interpreted according to numerous macrostructural features, such as action scripts and norms of object use, which do not need the attendant scaffolding of mentalising desire/belief structures to give them sense. These developments, which have occurred in tandem with a reinvestment in the possible role that narrative plays in folk psychological interpretation, echo earlier movements in discourse analysis and pragmatics. In the analysis of narrative, schematics both broke down narratives into constitutive thematic units and described the interaction between these themes. A common description indexes the textworld on 'five situational

⁵⁰ Kavan, 'Asylum Piece III', p. 141.

dimensions: time, space, causality, intentionality, and agents.’⁵¹ The way in which these dimensions are manipulated, and the coherence or lack of coherence between them gives basic structural features to the narrative, which carry interpretative load. The next level of analysis regards the way in which these features are understood, and what cognitive features subserve narrative comprehension. For example, the above claim that ‘causality, intentionality, and agents’ are all indexed as separate dimensions in a narrative seems to be underwritten by everyday understanding of how motivational states work to bring about specific ends. This is a case in which real world knowledge transfers to the context of literary interpretation:

The knowledge about the world that is necessary to understand narratives seems closely tied to the idea of action sequences and their motivations. Narratives consist of a series of actions and events which are related by their function in a sequence and are tied together by overarching motivations and themes.⁵²

Although the emphasis on ‘motivations’ might point to pro-states, such as desires, or unconscious motives, these are not necessarily emphasised by the reader as interpretive tools, because one does not always need to infer them in narrative comprehension. Rather, comprehension seems to operate, at least in part, according to scripts or norms of action:

These pragmatic inferences all involve forming a connection between propositions and knowledge already in memory. The connections are based on schematic structures in memory which cluster knowledge about prototypical situations. The schemas provide “default” information to be inferred when no explicit information is given, and consequently are normative but not necessarily true in any particular situation.⁵³

The inference of information seems to be minimal, and on that basis we might assume that it operates at the highest pragmatic level appropriate to the need of the episode. Again, this is a structure from real world action descriptions which passes over into the literary context. The ‘highest pragmatic level’, refers to a way of describing actions by describing

⁵¹ Stephanie Kelter, Barbara Kaup and Berry Claus, ‘Representing a Described Sequence of Events: A Dynamic View of Narrative Comprehension’, *Journal of Experimental Psychology: Learning, Memory, and Cognition*, 30 (2004), 451–64 (p. 452).

⁵² Colleen M. Seifert, Scott P. Robertson and John B. Black, ‘Types of Inferences Generated During Reading’, *Journal of Memory and Language*, 24 (1985), 405–22 (p. 407).

⁵³ Seifert, Robertson and Black, p. 406.

the goal of that action, rather than the particular movements involved in achieving that goal. This is a common-sense way of attributing reasons which often bypasses belief/desire frameworks entirely. Shaun Gallagher gives a full description of the phenomenon:

[Quite] naturally, we understand our own actions on the highest pragmatic level possible [...] For example, if, as I reach for a cup, someone asks me what I am doing, I do not say, ordinarily, ‘I am reaching for a cup’; rather I say, ‘I’m taking a drink’. I tend to understand my actions just at that pragmatic, intentional (goal-oriented) level, ignoring possible sub-personal or lower-level descriptions, and also ignoring ideational or mentalistic interpretations, e.g. ‘What are you doing?’ ‘I’m acting on a belief (desire) that I am thirsty’. Likewise, the interpretation of the actions of others occurs at that same pragmatic (intentional) level.⁵⁴

Gallagher’s point here is that intention to fulfil a goal is often understood in its own right as a description of an action. In this way, intention seems to be separable from the low-level descriptions which earlier theories posited as necessary scaffolding for the notion of intention itself. This idea seems to suit a theory of action in which intention is prioritised as a motivating factor in its own right. While Anscombe notes that the ‘primitive sign of wanting is trying to get’,⁵⁵ Michael Bratman suggests that a modified statement is better suited to intention: ‘the “primitive sign” of an intention to *A* is trying to *A*’.⁵⁶ The latter description seems, in line with Gallagher above, to favour the idea that an automatic part of action comprehension involves the inference of motivational states, and that this is inextricable from the idea of intentionality.

Without belief/desire pairings playing a strong role, we are left with a notion of intention but without a description of what intentional action actually consists of. As described above, this is the very problem that action theory approached from its earliest manifestations. Another way in which intentions have been characterised as independent from desires and beliefs is in Bratman’s planning theory. For Bratman, intentions have a particular role to play as planning functions, or as ‘elements of plans’.⁵⁷ It is the way in

⁵⁴ Shaun Gallagher, ‘The Practice of Mind: Theory, Simulation or Primary Interaction?’, *Journal of Consciousness Studies*, 8 (2001), 83–108 (p. 89).

⁵⁵ Anscombe, p. 68.

⁵⁶ Bratman, *Intention*, p. 121.

⁵⁷ Bratman, *Intention*, p. 121.

which plans are formed and aligned with other plans that is the key to Bratman's notion of the interaction between plans and intentions:

[Plans] are not merely executed. They are formed, retained, combined, constrained by other plans, filled in, modified, reconsidered, and so on. Such processes and activities are central to our understanding of plans, and so to our understanding of intentions.⁵⁸

Intentions involve a 'characteristic kind of commitment' which both allows them to play a unique volitional role in action, and to act as a functional unit of a plan.⁵⁹ It is this commitment which sets intentions apart from desires. Whereas 'ordinary desires' are only '*potential influencers* of action', 'the volitional dimension of the commitment involved in future-directed intention derives from the fact that intentions are conduct controllers'.⁶⁰ As parts of plans, intentions have a cohesive role: 'associated with our tendency to adjust in the direction of jointly consistent intentions is a norm enjoining such consistency'.⁶¹ Because we plan, we make networks of intentions that have to work together in order to make future-directed actions happen. Thus we adjust our intentions toward consistency, and interpret the actions of others based on the same consistency principle.

The consistency principle is a norm which constrains and promotes planning, both as a function of the individual, and of the individual as part of a group; an agent's actions need to be both comprehensible and functionally binding in order to effectively organise group behaviour. Further, the planning impulse is closely aligned with a general conception of rational personhood. Following Thomas Nagel, Peter Singer defines personhood as entangled with the first-person view of oneself over time:

[N]ot to take one's own future desires into account in one's practical deliberations – irrespective of whether one now happens to desire the satisfaction of those future desires – would indicate a failure to see oneself as a person existing over time, the present being merely one time among others in one's life. So it is my conception of

⁵⁸ Bratman, *Intention*, p. 8.

⁵⁹ Bratman, *Intention*, p. 15.

⁶⁰ Bratman, *Intention*, p. 16, original emphasis.

⁶¹ Bratman, *Intention*, p. 9.

myself as a person that makes it rational for me to consider my long-term interests.⁶²

Neil Levy elaborates on this to define a person as ‘centrally a being who conceives of themselves as a single being across time with plans and projects that they pursue’.⁶³ In the case of Anna Kavan’s fiction, it is clear that she is not directly interested in representing rational and coherent characters. However, as with the general model of intention, it is worth exploring how the concept interacts with other assumptions that we make about what makes an agent. Movements away from these norms are meaningful, in life and in literature, only if we establish what constitutes the norm in the first instance. The idea of coherence is important to models of action theory, because it provides a way of accounting for behaviour which is not necessarily willed through direct attention, but which is consistent with an agent’s other patterns of action. In this way, it can account for unconscious or automatic behaviours which might nonetheless fit in with a general pattern of action. In this way, although a coherence model cannot account for actions which stray too far from common reason attribution, it can invest non-conscious actions with intention. This is consistent with a general trend in analytic action theory, which has conceived of agency as involving the endorsement of action, and of actions representing the goals and values of an individual. Tim Bayne and Neil Levy illustrate this position according to a rather stark distinction between ‘good’ and ‘bad’ actions:

On this view, failures to appreciate reasons or to conform our actions to reasons are exculpatory to the extent that the resulting actions do not reflect our character. Character is a reflection of the totality of our reasons and plans, and actions that do not derive from our plans do not (fully) reflect our characters. On this view, bad actions are bad because they reflect and stem from a bad character.⁶⁴

Although this picture tends to override the variety of actions that might be performed by an agent, the basic idea is that agents seek coherence and reason in their behaviour. Again, this might not seem immediately applicable to a novelist like Kavan, whose characters are often psychologically atypical, but it helps to build an idea of what features a coherent

⁶² Peter Singer, *Practical Ethics*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), p. 321.

⁶³ Neil Levy, *Psychopaths and Responsibility* <<http://blog.practicaethics.ox.ac.uk/2013/03/neil-levy-psychopaths-and-responsibility-podcast/>> [accessed 11 April 2013].

⁶⁴ Neil Levy and Tim Bayne, ‘A Will of One’s Own: Consciousness, Control, and Character’, *International Journal of Law and Psychiatry*, 27 (2004), 459–70 (p. 467).

agent might have. What emerges is a cluster of qualities that place planning as a central aspect of intentionality, personhood, agency, and action interpretation. As such, it appears to span both the first-person phenomenology of agency and the heuristics of action explanation. However, even within this view, a distinction can be drawn between two modes of intention; those future directed intentions which are plans to act, and the kind of intention-in-action which might not need any prior intention to instigate them. As Searle notes, '[the] intention in action just is the Intentional content of the action; the action and the intention are inseparable'.⁶⁵ This might be the case both of spontaneous actions and of actions which are subordinated within a higher-level description, such as the specific acts which make up the higher-level intention to 'drive to work'. Across these levels of intention, Searle suggests that continuity is given by the phenomenal and logical conditions of action: 'for every intentional action there is the experience of performing that action, and that experience has an Intentional content', which is tied to the satisfaction conditions of an action.⁶⁶ In relation to this phenomenal experience, Searle also aligns the ability to self-describe action. This ability, as I have suggested above, is subject to minimal norms of rationality and coherence.

Intention in Fiction

This link between intentions and plans holds potential for understanding and interpreting the role of intention within literary works. In part, this approach has been pre-empted by psychological work on narrative comprehension which has emphasised the role of storyworld goals in narrative comprehension. Like the work on narrative scripts and schema noted above, psychological findings have emphasised the way in which readers rely on goal structures to scaffold narrative action. There is experimental evidence that suggests that readers infer goals where they are non-explicit.⁶⁷ In addition, '[knowledge] of a character's goal or motivation will often radically alter our experience of a text'.⁶⁸ There is further relevant work on the projection of emotional states onto characters. Although emotional states are inferred, it seems that these largely take place within the context of known goals. It might be the case that 'just as in real life, we make inferences about

⁶⁵ John R. Searle, 'The Intentionality of Intention and Action', *Cognitive Science*, 4 (1980), 47–70 (p. 52).

⁶⁶ Searle, p. 57.

⁶⁷ David V Poynor and Robin K Morris, 'Inferred Goals in Narratives: Evidence from Self-Paced Reading, Recall, and Eye Movements', *Journal of Experimental Psychology: Learning, Memory, and Cognition*, 29 (2003), 3–9.

⁶⁸ Richard J. Gerrig, 'Text Comprehension', in *The Psychology of Human Thought*, ed. by Robert J. Sternberg and Edward E. Smith (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), pp. 242–67 (p. 250).

people's emotions when we comprehend stories',⁶⁹ and experimental work that proves this has closely aligned this capacity with goal-oriented tests.⁷⁰ These suggest that a narrative situation in which we know the goals of characters might allow us to infer emotional states when those goals are fulfilled or denied. Goals, like desires and beliefs, are propositional attitudes. A plan is a way of structuring goals across time, interpersonally, and in accord with other goals. Because planning structures are in a feedback relationship with these propositional attitudes, they should not be seen as entirely separate from FP scaffolding, but my use of them here shows a slight shift of emphasis from the claim that FP *stricto sensu* is heuristically valuable, to the moderated claim that planning structures, as themselves indicative of intentions, give an interpretive framework which enriches the basic concepts of desire and belief.

By placing intentions within larger structures of agency, which span structural, interpretive, and phenomenal concerns, the term has broad valance in the description of character action. This wide application is in direct opposition to narratologist Lubomír Doležel's rejection of an intentional focus in literary exegesis. Doležel argues that the concept of intention is necessarily restricted in its inability to describe a whole range of non-intentional and non-conscious actions, as well as the range of motivational factors, such as environmental and intersubjective factors, that are not properly captured by the term. With these criticisms, he argues for a less focussed approach to character action: '[whereas] intention delimits the domain of acting from nonactional events, motivation is the key to understanding the diversity of acting, the why and how of actions'.⁷¹ In line with this, he only accepts the term 'intention' within a limited semantic usage, which regards it as 'a primitive notion, irreducible to other mental factors of acting, such as desires, reasons, or beliefs'.⁷² As I have explained above, intention is not a discrete mechanism, but is implicated in a number of other fundamental functions of agency, including planning and goal structures. Use of this broader concept of intention can characterise specific dynamics within a description of motivations. Contrary to Doležel's main claim, intentional language *can* describe non-conscious acts *if* those acts are contained within larger models of coherence. A caveat remains regarding those actions – transgressively

⁶⁹ Rolf A. Zwaan, 'Situation Models: The Mental Leap into Imagined Worlds', *Current Directions in Psychological Science*, 8 (1999), p. 17.

⁷⁰ Morton Ann Gernsbacher, H. Hill Goldsmith and Rachel R.W. Robertson, 'Do Readers Mentally Represent Characters' Emotional States?', *Cognition & Emotion*, 6 (1992), 89–111.

⁷¹ Doležel, p. 63.

⁷² Doležel, p. 63.

irrational or non-coherent – which are not contained within the normative structures of agency. Here, the general structure of action theory provides a way of describing exactly what norms are being transgressed in the description of radically different motivational states. If characterisation – like those characters in Kavan’s ‘Asylum Piece IV’ – attempts to build a picture of an atypical mental state, then this must occur against a background of assumptions about how an agent does generally act. The norms above provide a model for these background assumptions.

I will attempt throughout this chapter to make clear an interpretation which largely promotes an enriched model of intentionality which uses script-based and planning structures, rather than the desire/belief structures of FP, as the basic interpretive approach to character action. Before I move onto my structured exegesis of Kavan’s *Ice*, I wish to deal with a criticism which might arise in the first instance. Script-based understanding, as my examples from Hutto have made clear, is most powerful in an everyday second-person interpretative context. This means that, although it predominates when we are interpreting the actions of fellow agents in the world, it may not simply transfer to the narrative context, and an alternative model – perhaps closer aligned to ToM-style active interpretation – might better explain complex levels of intentionality in a text. Zunshine’s work seems broadly predicated on this, as she foregrounds the cognitive background needed for interpreting dynamic, interactive intentionality involving multiple agents; the phenomenon known as ‘nested intentionality’. The ability to negotiate multiple levels of intentionality is a cognitive faculty explainable by, and indicative of, a Theory of Mind. Broadly, the ability to nest intentions is based upon the understanding that others have knowledge, thought processes based on this knowledge, and intentions which they construct from their own bounded perspective. This allows us to add other minds, with their own bounded perspectives, to a multiply nested set of intentions. Zunshine illustrates this as follows:

Although ToM is formally defined as a second-order intentionality – for example, “I *believe* that you *desire* X,” [...] the levels of intentionality can “recurse” further back, for example, to the third level [...] or to the fourth level, as in “I believe that you think that she believes that he thinks that X,” and so forth.⁷³

⁷³ Zunshine, p. 28.

These higher orders of intentionality are of particular interest to imaginative situations that stretch beyond second-person interpretation. These include science, religion, counterfactual reasoning, and, as Robin Dunbar emphasises, literary fiction. All of these imaginative situations demand that we imagine the world to be ‘other than we perceive it to be’ – basic second-order intentionality – and increased complexity in these areas demand extra layers of intentional understanding.⁷⁴ We can, for example, both maintain the idea of a fictional world which is different from our own, and understand the intersecting actions of several characters within that world who each have separate bounded perspectives. Although it seems clear that these capacities have a scaffolding role in understanding relations between characters, and the possibility for differing mind-states between characters, it is unclear to me that, even in cases of nested intentionality, the ToM capacity goes beyond a scaffolding role to become a specific interpretive tool. This distinction is blurred in Zunshine’s discussion of the topic. Again, this question leads to a case-by-case enquiry into the myriad ways in which narrators control information, and how authors use this method of distribution to create different characterisations through the reader’s interpretation of differing fictional mental states. However, what is clear is that stories can manage multiple levels of intentionality, foreground such nesting within the story, and still evade accurate description using ToM terminology. Kavan’s short story ‘The Summons’, for example, highlights the ineffectualness of using ToM as an interpretive tool, though it is clear that it scaffolds our basic understanding of the fictional mechanisms at work.

‘The Summons’ is delivered through first-person narration, and derives its narrative charge from the way in which the narrator interprets the behaviour of others: ‘R must have been astonished by my disagreeable tone, for he looked sharply at me’⁷⁵; ‘When I had finished speaking I looked at him anxiously to see how he had taken my arguments. He appeared impressed’⁷⁶; ‘My friend [...] laid his hand on my arm. The affectionate touch, so full of sympathy and compassion, demoralized me even more than his words’.⁷⁷ These represent a mentalising discourse; they show the narrator interpreting the underlying mental states of

⁷⁴ Robin Dunbar, ‘On the Origin of the Human Mind’, in *Evolution and the Human Mind: Modularity, Language and Meta-Cognition*, ed. by Peter Carruthers and Andrew Chamberlain (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), pp. 238–53 (p. 241).

⁷⁵ Anna Kavan, ‘The Summons’, in *Asylum Piece and Other Stories* (London: Peter Owen, 2001), pp. 85–96 (p. 88).

⁷⁶ Kavan, ‘The Summons’, p. 94.

⁷⁷ Kavan, ‘The Summons’, p. 95.

those around her based on the way in which she sees them act. Her emphasis on how she should interpret the behaviour of others suggests a strange uncertainty which foregrounds the act of interpretation, and the margin for error in judgment. This is played out, as the way in which the narrator interprets the actions of others becomes the turning point in the story, and the final lines reflect on the moment in which followed the advice of those around her: 'I began to wonder [...] whether the good opinion of anybody in the world is worth all that I have had to suffer'.⁷⁸

The first-person narration in the story is utilised to show a turn, from trust to distrust, in the narrator's dealings with others. In doing so, the narration scrutinises the way in which the narrator interprets the actions of others, not to imply that she interprets them incorrectly, but that she acts incorrectly in the situation by adhering to their wishes. Although the narrator is uncertain about her behavioural interpretations, the way she understands her interlocutors is entirely reasonable. Instead, the story hinges on a disparity between localised interpersonal interpretation, and structural motivations for behaviour which are not accessible through the basic norms of understanding. Although folk psychology is central to the way in which the story reveals the act of mentalising interpretation between characters, this faculty is negotiated by the narratorial voice. As such, the interpretative responsibility is removed from the reader. The turn of the story reframes the folk psychological insights of the protagonist within a wider context of agency, particularly regarding the intentions of the stranger and the organisation he seems to represent. The key change in the story reveals a discontinuity between apparent folk psychological transparency, and the opacity of the planning structures into which the protagonist's internment is written. Dissociating folk psychology from the wider faculties of agency, then, appears insufficient for an explanation of how behavioural interpretation works within this narrative context.

Ice and Intention

Kavan's novel *Ice* takes up a similar strategy, using a mentalising discourse to foreground the use of folk psychological comprehension at the same time as obfuscating other structures of agency which, in a more naturalistic setting, we might assume to occur in tandem with FP. The way in which Kavan utilises and disrupts these action structures is

⁷⁸ Kavan, 'The Summons', p. 96.

central to the narrative play. Although Kavan often has recourse to mentalising character descriptions, she operates in different modes within this discourse. At points, the mental is stated as bare description. These occasions of blunt assessment – in their obtrusiveness – often become part of a vacillating and perplexing picture of action. The following excerpt delivers this characteristic style:

Her face wore the victim's look, which was of course psychological, the result of injuries she had received in childhood; I saw it as the faintest possible hint of bruising on the extremely delicate, fine, white skin in the region of eyes and mouth. It was madly attractive to me in a certain way. I had barely caught sight of it now before the car began moving; I was automatically pressing the starter, not expecting it to work in the freezing cold.⁷⁹

Focalised through the narrator, the text gives partial access to the girl's mind state which seems deliberately oversimplified. The 'of course psychological' drama of the girl's victimisation abruptly limits the scope of her action by fixing it with a non-complex aetiology. The incongruous tone of this claim becomes a vague farce when, though 'madly' attracted to the girl, the narrator accidentally drifts away in his car. Causal power moves from the car, which 'began moving', to the man 'automatically' accelerating, and is finally rationalised as a quasi-intentional state; he was 'not expecting it work in the freezing cold'. The confused action-plans of the narrator become more opaque when, in pun, he explains himself as being 'driven' to seek out the girl: 'There was no rational explanation, I could not account for it. It was a sort of craving that had to be satisfied'.⁸⁰

Similar claims relating to the girl's victim-status are repeated throughout the novel. When the narrator reiterates his claims, these appear to be concertedly overdone:

I rushed after her as she started to climb some stairs [...] The short steep stair led to one room only, large, sparsely furnished, its polished floor bare like a dance floor. I was immediately struck by an unnatural silence. [...] I was puzzled, until it dawned on me that the room had been sound-proofed, so that whatever took place there would be inaudible beyond its four walls. [...] *Forced since childhood into a*

⁷⁹ Anna Kavan, *Ice* (London: Peter Owen, 2005), p. 16.

⁸⁰ *Ice*, p. 18.

victim's pattern of thought and behaviour, she was defenceless against his aggressive will, which was able to take complete possession of her. I saw it happen.

He approached the bed with unhurried steps. She did not move until he bent over her, when she twisted away abruptly, as if trying to escape, buried her face in the pillow.⁸¹

Part of the exaggerated effect in this excerpt comes, not just from the reiteration of the girl's purported childhood trauma, but from the bizarre fluidity of the storyworld in which this stark statement is set. Although the narrator seems to follow the girl to her room, she does not acknowledge his presence. In addition, the narrator is apparently in the room when the warden rapes the girl. Despite this, the narration does not include any spatial references which would explain his ability to see this without being seen, rendering his description incongruous. In addition, the narration occasionally breaks out of its limited viewpoint to provide apparent access to other characters' mental states. In his description of the rape, the narrator shifts focus from his spectatorial position to note that '[t]o her, this silence was one of the most terrifying things about him, in some way associated with his power over her'.⁸²

A similar device occurs at other points in the book. Movement out of first-person report retains the same narratorial tone, but occasions insights into mental states of other characters, particularly the girl: 'She shuddered, identifying herself, as a victim, with the dead bird. It was she who had been snared by nets of black branches'.⁸³ This is part of a larger trend in the novel which blends concrete observations and unobtrusive fictional statements (i.e. statements which are not resisted within the storyworld) with points of narrative dissonance. Although these slippages occur as part of a number of distorting narrative devices, one of the main methods is intention-slippage, which problematizes points of communication between characters. These instances are numerous within the novel, and are often implicated within other localised strategies of narratorial dissonance. An early sequence documents one of the girl's (several) deaths. Preceding this, the narrator meets with the Warden, and the dynamics of their relationship are played out through an attention to implicit mindreading. This moves from naturalistic to surreal description very

⁸¹ *Ice*, pp. 35–6, my emphasis.

⁸² *Ice*, p. 37.

⁸³ *Ice*, p. 68.

quickly. The scene is invested with the power play between narrator and Warden, which – because their ‘real’ intentions are largely implied – is disclosed through their mutual mindreadings, as interpreted by, and hence nested within, the intentions of the narrator. These start off with basic mindreading based on gaze-following:

He took his chair at the head, an imposing figure. I was seated beside him. A third place was laid opposite. Seeing me glance at it, he said: ‘A young friend from your country is staying with me; I thought you might like to meet her.’ He gave me one of his piercing looks as I replied calmly that I would be delighted.⁸⁴

In Kavan’s reported dialogue, the emphasis on the interaction between words and gestures, and the way in which these are interpreted by the narrator, create an overlaboured emphasis on mindreading that is part of the distinct atmosphere of the novel. The following event reveals a similar style:

His face changed as he read the few words, he ripped the paper across and across, reducing it to minute fragments. ‘It appears the young person is indisposed’.⁸⁵

The conspicuous emphasis on the non-verbal aspect of the dialogues – the Warden’s ripping of the note – parodies the dramatic tension that structures the narrative action. There is tension in the scene; the reader knows that the narrator knows who the girl is, and wants to see her. The Warden seems to know this, though he obscures the fact, leaving the narrator to infer both his knowledge and motives. However, the points that indicate this drama are burdened, and in this style, Kavan slows the action down to a lingering focus. This focus becomes more complex when the transparency between speech and action, as exhibited in the above excerpts, becomes obscured by additional motivations, and an introduction of extra foci of intention into the exchanges. The narrator’s wish to exit the Warden’s company before he is removed by guards at an allotted time becomes an additional motive, which then plays into the exchange through largely non-verbal inference. When the narrator requests to see the girl, he interprets the Warden’s reaction as follows:

⁸⁴ *Ice*, pp. 41–2.

⁸⁵ *Ice*, p. 42.

He said nothing, but I could feel opposition behind his silence. Evidently there had been a change in his attitude since the day when he had proposed to introduce us at lunch. Now I felt pretty sure he would not agree to the meeting.⁸⁶

At this point, the Warden introduces another mind into the bargain by making the narrator aware of the girl's prospective decision to meet him: 'She's been unwell, and is nervous about meeting people. I shall have to ask if she'll see you'.⁸⁷ This merges with a refocus on interpretive mindreading, in which the narrator gives an account of the Warden's behaviour which is based on how he believes the Warden to be interpreting *his* behaviour:

There was only one minute left. 'I really must go now. I've taken up too much of your time already.' His unexpected laughter took me by surprise; he must have known what was going on in my head. His mood seemed to alter suddenly, all at once his manner was easy. Once more I was momentarily aware of an obscure sense of inner contact with him.⁸⁸

Here, an attentive scene of second-person comprehension gives way to an 'obscure sense of inner contact' between the men. This shift appears to be between a description and interpretation of conscious motives, and unconscious – and unexplainable – exchange. The intersection between the conscious and unconscious becomes particularly important as the scene develops, as the transparency of both the narrator's conscious comprehension of events, and his obscure 'contact' with the Warden are abruptly ended; the Warden leads the narrator to the girl's room, and then vanishes. The obscuration of events leads the narration back to a conscious, interpretation-driven response. The narrator's uncertainty about how to act following this change, or rather, his uncertain predictions about the behaviour of the Warden, induce him to leave, ending the chapter on an anti-climax:

I listened, but could hear nothing through the sound-proofed wall. After some moments I went down the stairs and wandered round dark passages until I met a servant who showed me the way out. My lucky period certainly seemed to be over.⁸⁹

⁸⁶ *Ice*, p. 45.

⁸⁷ *Ice*, p. 45.

⁸⁸ *Ice*, p. 45.

⁸⁹ *Ice*, p. 45.

The intensely rendered self-description of mindstates and the narrator's interpretative focus on the Warden's behaviour creates action descriptions which go between transparently linking a mind-state to an action, and attempting an interpretation or prediction which jars with the actual action. This experience is also evident in the perfunctory relocations of narrative focus, like the one that ends the above chapter. Through these vacillations, the reading experience is characterised by both an over- and under-determined narrative insight; at once deprived of and overloaded with storyworld information.

Like the girl's 'victim's pattern of thought and behaviour', the narrator is similarly subject to a non-complex motivational structure. In contrast to the girl's passive state, the narrator is described within an overloaded obsessional goal structure, which, we are repeatedly told, directs his action:

Somehow or other I had to find her; the fact remained. I felt the same compulsive urge that had driven me straight to the country when I first arrived. There was no rational explanation, I could not account for it. It was a sort of craving that had to be satisfied.⁹⁰

Once again the urgency of the search had reclaimed me; I was totally absorbed in that obsessional need, as for a lost, essential portion of my own being. Everything else in the world seemed immaterial.⁹¹

I was too depressed to go on talking. The situation was hopeless. I needed the girl, could not live without her.⁹²

Although these motivating points determine the action of the text, they function as part of a repetitious structure of acquisition and loss, tied in with the death and regeneration of the girl. In these repetitions, the ostensibly structural role of the narrator's goal loses some of its natural narrative cogency. Even as part of the storyworld, this goal structure is not necessarily rationalised. As such, the link between intention and planning moves away from norms of comprehension. A court scene stages the interrogation of the narrator's goal structures within the setting of the narrative:

⁹⁰ *Ice*, p. 18.

⁹¹ *Ice*, p. 25.

⁹² *Ice*, p. 91.

[S]omebody asked: ‘What was your relationship with her?’ ‘I’ve told you; we were old friends.’ More laughter, silenced by an official. ‘You expect us to believe that you changed your plans all at once, dropped everything you were doing, in order to follow a friend to a foreign country?’ They seemed to know all about me. I said: ‘That is the truth’.⁹³

The court seems to be abiding by a regulating point of behavioural interpretation, which, within the court room scene, thematises the role of action comprehension. Specifically, the scene focuses on the explanatory power of the narrator’s reasons for action as determined by their normative, regulative or rationalist cogency.⁹⁴ There is crossover in this aspect of the scene insofar as the interpretative stance taken by the inquisitor mimics that taken by the reader, with the shared basis of this predicated on the folk psychological standard of goal transparency. Here, then, there is clear crossover between goal transparency as a normative feature both of the narrative and of the real world. The incredulity of the inquisitor is based on the inability to fit the narrator’s actions into a wider scheme of plans and motives; the regulative power of his original plans would be expected to have maintained his actions because the motivational disruption of the girl’s relocation is hard to deem a strong enough factor to explain abandoning those plans in favour a new goal. The stretch to account for the new goal structure is made more demanding by the narrator’s non-fulfilment of the goal despite its ostensible motivating power:

I was asked: ‘What happened when you met your friend?’ ‘We did not meet.’ Subdued excitement broke out, an official voice had to order silence [...] ‘I wish to state that the witness is a psychopath, probably schizoid, and therefore not to be believed’.⁹⁵

The legal setting is vital for this scene, because Kavan uses a jurisprudential model to isolate a standard of intention in its social role. Characterising the legal definition of ‘paradigm intention’, A. P. Simester, following Anthony Duff, notes both that ‘[an] agent intends those results which she acts in order to bring about’ and that ‘[an] agent intends a result when she acts because she believes that what she does will or might bring that result

⁹³ *Ice*, p. 75.

⁹⁴ Victoria McGeer, ‘The Regulative Dimension of Folk Psychology’, in *Folk Psychology Re-Assessed*, ed. by Daniel D. Hutto and Matthew Ratcliffe (Dordrecht: Springer, 2007), pp. 137–56.

⁹⁵ *Ice*, p. 77.

about'.⁹⁶ The narrator transgresses both of these conditions by leaving his apparent intentions unfulfilled; although his actions suggest that he intends the result of meeting the girl insofar as his actions seem designed to bring this about, the plan does not reach the final point which would justify the means. Although the dynamics of the scene are partly predicated on these norms of behavioural transparency, the narrative does not rest on this shared ground for long. The court's questioning leads from the problem of the narrator's intentions, but redirects this focus to a separate claim about whether he is 'to be believed'. This explanation avoids the immediate coherence problems of the narrator's testimony by positing an alternate set of coherent actions. Invalidating the testimony in this way preserves the dominance of intention as manifest in coherent and committed planning structures. Further, it suggests that even if the narrator is 'a psychopath' and 'probably schizoid', this is evident in his obfuscation of the truth, but not in a rejection of coherent action.

This assessment points in two different directions. Firstly, the court's claims might be justified within storyworld knowledge structures that are inaccessible to the reader. Slight evidence is provided for this by the claim that the prosecutors 'know all about' the narrator, and that one aspect of this might be knowledge about the narrator's actions which are not relayed in the text. However, there is no investigation of these possible beliefs, nor is there any suggestion of how or why the court has acquired this information. Because of this, a secondary interpretation moves away from the possibility of inaccessible knowledge structures, and toward a more immediate rejection of the possibility of coherence within the storyworld. This is compounded by the lack of framework for the intentions of the court. Although the normative role of planning coherence seems to be rigidly adhered to, it is unmoored from a pattern of action and action explanation which would allow the reader to verify the role of plans in the wider context of the narrative. In the directions of the court, this is further enmeshed with other normative features associated with agency. The court notes the narrator's 'utter contempt for the sanctity of family life, and for all decent feeling!', and characterises his attitude as 'not only abnormal, but depraved, infamous, a desecration of all we hold sacred'.⁹⁷ Again, the normative framework that the court are appealing to – in this case a value system which would inform agency – is presented as a solid base against which to compare what we know of the narrator's actions. However, like

⁹⁶ A. P. Simester, 'Paradigm Intention', *Law and Philosophy*, 11 (1992), 235–63 (p. 240).

⁹⁷ *Ice*, p. 77.

the planning structures, this moral framework fails because it is dissociated from wider structures of action such as the claim against the narrator, the way in which this claim fits with narrator's plans, the way in which this claim fits with the narrator's actions, and the way in which this claim articulates the motives of the court.

The problematic alignment of these elements is intensified when, though making brief comment on the obscure intentions of the court, the narrator's description of this scene is notably austere in its lack of examination:

I was taken away, locked in a cell for seventeen hours. In the early morning they released me without explanation. In the meantime, the ship had gone, and with it my luggage.⁹⁸

The scene develops a difficult characterisation of the narrator. The presentation of the narrator reporting on the court room and responding to the inquisitor's questions seems to invite the idea that the narrator can recognise and respond to folk psychological phenomena and norms of behavioural description. This is also coherent with what we know from the narrator's previous interpretative descriptions of action earlier in the novel. This idea is then contraposed with the narrator's lack of interrogation, both about the quality of his own motives and those of the court. The incongruity of the scene comes from the narrator's unwillingness to utilise FP structures which are so heavily emphasised elsewhere. Because planning norms are central to the scene, a partial intentional structure is adhered to. However, the narrator's recognition of planning structures does not attempt to tie them into more immediate networks of agency concerning his own actions and those of the court. This fragments the natural grouping that characterises these faculties and gives them their specific interpretative and organisational roles within broader models of temporally-extended agency.

This informational disparity disrupts transparency between separate action sets, and between actions and the mentalising description of those actions. This occurs both intra- and inter-agonally. As part of the larger structure of the book, localised actions interact with goal structures which have clear input into how the characters behave, but which are non-explicit. An apocalyptic, global spread of ice and a World War are the major features of the *Ice* storyworld. They moderate and determine the action, not only of the narrator and

⁹⁸ *Ice*, p. 77.

the Warden, but also of the peripheral characters that populate the storyworld. The events, in which control, movement, and loss of the girl are the primary focus, occur against the obstacles that war and ice present. However, because these obstacles are largely defined by their relation to the main goal structures of the narrator, these larger controlling events often appear, not as a coherent backdrop to the focus of the novel, but as rationalising evidence brought in to account ad hoc for localised actions. This method of disclosure means that the apocalyptic conditions remain sketchy and sparsely described, though Kavan tries to shift this away from an issue of narratorial control, to one of obscurity as a defining feature of the storyworld:

Global conditions were worsening. There was no sign of destruction coming to a halt, and its inexorable progress induced general demoralization. It was more impossible than ever to find out what was really happening, impossible to know what to believe. No reliable source of information existed.⁹⁹

Although the ice seems to play a major role in shaping the events that happen at a supra-narratorial level, it is not often approached as a topic in its own right, but rather through its motivational capacity. Because of this, the ice-plot doesn't seem to offer a distinct structuring role. Instead, it rationalises specific movements, but does this against an inchoate system which does little to clarify the actions against norms. The reader is asked to accept a minimal concept; that the characters' actions are rational in response to certain conditions which are known to them but not known to us:

‘Where are we going? Why do we have to go at this time of night?’ She expected no answer, doubted whether she heard correctly when he muttered, ‘It’s the one chance,’ adding something about the approaching ice.¹⁰⁰

These non-explicit aspects of the storyworld are closely related to the way in which folk psychology seems to be used within the text. The reticence around revealing information conditions the ways in which the characters interact. Above, the girl ‘expected no answer’ from the Warden because their movements within the storyworld interact with strands of non-disclosure and information poverty. This is more explicit in the following excerpt, in

⁹⁹ *Ice*, p. 100.

¹⁰⁰ *Ice*, p. 66.

which the narrator seems to become embroiled in a complex subplot which we assume is some kind of subterfuge related to the ongoing war:

I had not disposed of the carnation. I tried to pull it out of my buttonhole, but the stem had been securely pinned by the steward. I turned back my lapel, peered down, felt about for the pin. Someone said: 'Let me do that for you.' I looked up; the flower girl was smiling at me. [...] I was on the point of saying I did not want it, when something occurred to me and I kept silent. She fixed the fresh flower in my buttonhole and continued to stand beside me, though not as if she was merely waiting for payment. It looked as if my idea was correct, but I said nothing in case I was mistaken.¹⁰¹

Here there is a clear thematisation of the way in which the narrator interprets the situation; the way in which he acts in response, not just to the actions of another agent, but to the reasons behind the actions of another agent. Here we have a complex example of nested intentionality. The scene is predicated on the narrator interpreting the flower girl's actions, not simply as the actions of a flower girl, but as an individual who is also acting on behalf of the intentions of an unknown party. The scene is complicated because it deals, not just with nested intentionality, but with a truncated form of nested intentionality. I have numbered the levels of intention to illustrate their interaction: [1. the reader is interpreting the narrator's actions] [2. based on the suggestion by the narrator that he is interpreting the actions of the flower girl], [3. based on the possibility that she is acting for someone else]. The intentions of the 'someone else' are unknown, or rather, only inferred through the actions of their agent, the flower girl. Because of this, the nesting of intentionality is truncated by the continued poverty of information available to the reader regarding the mysterious organisation which seems to be determining the action of the scene. Although the scene exhibits nested intentionality and strongly foregrounds the narrator's interpretative process, the intentional elements that are known (i.e. the narrator's deduction that the flower girl is acting for some reason beyond what is explicit) are outlined by the narration, and the remaining points (the actual substance of the intentions which underwrite the flower girl's actions) are unknown. In this way, even though the interpretative process is strongly emphasised, the main dilemma of the narrative is still the unknown element. The active intentions in the scene are those that are unknown. The plans

¹⁰¹ *Ice*, p. 78.

and goals of the shadowy organisation seem to be determining actions behind the scenes. Even as a planning element in the storyworld, the organisation is quickly subordinated in the plot to the narrator's explicit goals when he unwittingly uses the code of the organisation to utilise their resources:

I went straight to the point, there was no object in prevaricating. Naming the town from which the warden was operating, I asked if it was possible for me to get there.¹⁰²

[...]

I kept quiet while she fixed the carnation. It was fatally easy to show my ignorance of the organization to which she belonged.¹⁰³

Even though the delicate mentalising manoeuvres of the narrator are highlighted in this scene, they are subordinated to larger planning structures. Here, the utilisation of folk psychology within broader agential structures is truncated, both as they pertain to the organisation, and to the narrator. The structure of the organisation remains unknown as the narratorial focus remains on the protagonist's actions. Although the narrator's actions are explicit at this point in the narrative, localised actions are incorporated within the recurring plot:

I tried to believe the warden had sent [the girl] to safety, but knew too much about him to feel sure of that. It was absolutely essential for me to see him; otherwise I would never find out what had happened to her.¹⁰⁴

As I have noted, this recurring plan structure is partly justificatory insofar as it appears to direct action and lend some coherence to limited action groupings. However, it is also information-poor as it fails to mesh with other action. As such, recourse to it is not necessarily explanatory, but simply justifies ongoing action within the narrative. Again, this is an example of Kavan building an agential structure outwards from an intricate folk psychological description, pointing towards the broader intentional structures within which these localised actions should fit, and then truncating the description before it plays an

¹⁰² *Ice*, p. 80.

¹⁰³ *Ice*, p. 81.

¹⁰⁴ *Ice*, p. 81.

explanatory role within the wider scheme of the novel. Instead, the narratorial focus relocates to a separate locale and a separate action description, unrelated except for the sparse links provided by the girl-plot. By separating inter-character folk psychology from more distinct motivational insights, Kavan is presenting a semi-deconstructed model of character intention. This is a distinct aspect of the experimental work within the book. Action is made strange by being both a product of agency, and untethered from that source by a lack of supporting intentional structures. Kavan's non-logical novel is, at least in part, constructed from a studied semi-realisation of agency as a narrative tool.

As the theoretical literature suggests, intention is inextricable from our understanding of agency. Contemporary analytic philosophy has repeatedly attempted to isolate the core features of intention, and the broad results testify to the multiple dynamic ways in which our uses of the term interact with the structures of agency and action. Because of this, the concept is both part of the vocabulary of first-person agency, and central to second-person and spectatorial modes of behaviour comprehension. In this folk role, intention is most frequently understood at the highest level of pragmatic description, rather than as a focused analytic tool. In line with this usage, intention has a strong normative role, both as part of the way in which intention-descriptions are used in order to understand actions and make actions understood, and as part of social organisational structures such as plans and goals. This wide usage of the term brings continuity to the apparent distinction between levels of intention; both prior intentions which describe a future plan, and intentions-in-action. Because of the wide currency of intention discourse and its penetration through different aspects of agency, it is explainable in different ways according to context. This means, as Hutto notes, that belief/desire structures are not always needed to underpin action comprehension. Instead, the action can be subsumed within a script which is comprehensible on its own terms. In narrative discourse, this also means that intentional action is often implied by, or written into, higher level descriptions of agency, such as plans. The operation of intention on multiple, often interdependent, levels allows Kavan to describe a dismantled agency. She does this by adhering to, and in some cases overemphasising, the language of action comprehension, but dissociates this from other agential structures.

Chapter Two

Action and Introspection: Samuel Beckett

In the previous chapter I described the models available for the interpretation of character action in fiction and explored their suitability. These discussions are underpinned by the assumption that there is transfer between the way in which we interpret other agents in real life, and the description and interpretation of agency in fiction. I push this idea further here by exploring the way in which Samuel Beckett utilises the concept of agency in his short novel, *How It Is*. I sketch some norms of agential understanding by exploring how Beckett transgresses these norms in his experimental characterisations.

Beckett's readings in philosophy show a distinct taste for introspection. His extensive notes on philosophy and aesthetics show him to be working repeatedly through the same problems of self-knowledge and epistemology. These appear as coherent notes in his Philosophy Notes and his jottings on Geulincx's *Ethics*, and are frequently reiterated as jargon-filled claims in his letters and occasional reviews. The probing questioning of his philosophical reading is often thought to have given rise to his aesthetic statements, which rephrase sceptical arguments as models of artistic uncertainty. Whereas once, perhaps, events in the world could be discussed unreflectively as known, and taken as objects of artistic expression, now, says Beckett, it is 'awareness of the vanished object', which has become the 'criterion of worthwhile modern poetry'.¹ This narrows the artist's possible field of enquiry; 'the only terrain accessible' is 'the no man's land that he projects round himself, rather as the flame projects its zone of evaporation.'² If artistic scepticism rejects the world as an object of scrutiny, then it seems to entail an inward turn. This might manifest as a broad focus on the self. However, as Beckett's subsequent letter to Georges Duthuit suggests, self-scrutiny can become reflexive insofar as it becomes a focus on the mechanism of introspection itself:

Can one conceive of an expression in the absence of relation, whatever they may be, as much between the I and the not-I as within the former?

¹ Samuel Beckett, 'Letter to Georges Duthuit, 2 March 1949', in *The Letters of Samuel Beckett, Volume II: 1941-1956*, ed. by Martha Fehsenfeld and others, trans. by George Craig (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), p. 131.

² Beckett, 'Letter to Georges Duthuit, 2 March 1949', p. 131.

Is it necessary to specify the nature of these relations of self to self?...Let's say it is a matter of the happy knack of existing in several forms, in which each in a sense takes turns at certifying the others...³

Here, Beckett raises a puzzle about first-person awareness which probes the apparent incoherence of the self being both the object of scrutiny, and the scrutinising consciousness. If there is no particular state which is external to the degree where it can validate the 'self', then as Beckett suggests, the model seems to become circular, because each self needs both to be validating other selves and validated by them. As I will argue later in the chapter, the relation of 'self to self', which seems to be simultaneously exteriorising and introspective, is one aspect of a cluster of problems which position identity within a matrix of action, self-awareness, and knowledge of other minds.

Between 1932 and 1933, Beckett transcribed large volumes of notes on western philosophy. These largely derive from Wilhelm Windelband's *History of Philosophy*, and mostly consist of direct, though edited, quotations from Windelband's original text.⁴ This period of self-education shows Beckett repeatedly referring to the same cluster of philosophical problems, but through the complex interactions and conflicts between metaphysical, psychological, and phenomenological approaches. Because these are often responses to similar basic puzzles, a criticism on Beckett which utilises the notes should not fall on one mode of approach as an exegetical strategy for probing the original questions and their place within his texts. Instead, the dynamics of these different approaches can be elucidated in order to clarify what the original questions are, how they arise, and what can be learned from the questioning attitude itself rather than from the answers which might be generated. Ulrika Maude seems to endorse such an approach by recruiting phenomenology as a way of elaborating on the logical and metaphysical problems that Beckett poses by focusing on the experiential base from which such abstractions emerge:

Beckett turns his focus on the tactile because of the way in which touch collapses the boundaries between the active and the passive, the endogenous and the

³ Samuel Beckett, 'Letter to Georges Duthuit, 9-10 March 1949', in *Beckett after Beckett*, ed. by S. E. Gontarski and Anthony. Uhlmann, trans. by Walter Redfern (Gainesville, FL: University Press of Florida, 2006), pp. 15–21 (pp. 18–19).

⁴ For a full discussion of Beckett's connection with Windelband, see: Matthew Feldman and David Addyman, 'Samuel Beckett, Wilhelm Windelband, and the Interwar "Philosophy Notes"', *Modernism/Modernity*, 18 (2011), 755–70.

exogenous and the concrete and abstract, hence complicating the preconceived categories and binarisms through which we organise our perceptions and thought patterns.⁵

In this way, the body becomes the focus of explanation which attempts to be descriptive rather than reductive. The implied secondary effect of Maude's method is not simply to complicate the 'preconceived categories and binarisms' of thought and perception, but to show how these frameworks develop by linking them to their experiential precursors. In this way, Maude is able to operate using a more fluid model for the interaction between philosophy and Beckett's texts. Here, a theoretical reading does not have to reflect back on the text as a unitary explanation, but can interact with the content if both philosophy and writing are viewed in an interactive relationship, not only with each other, but with a common experiential base.

This kind of response is also evident in Beckett's notes from philosophical texts. These often take a historical view which repeatedly approaches the same experiential questions, but does this through a number of sources and responses. Beckett's notes from Geulincx's *Ethics* are specifically in the metaphysical vein, but concern with questions of the self is evident from the careful selection of passages, which treat agency, freedom, habit, obligation, and reason. In Geulincx, a strict rationalism is strangely combined with scepticism of the will, which in turn leads to a deism that posits all human action as the will of God. The argument, from Beckett's rendering of it, is inconsistent and convoluted in its logical paucity. However, these arguments are developed in response to basic philosophical concerns surrounding agency. Beckett's notes on Geulincx frequently touch on the possibility and fallibility of introspective self-knowledge. In a key passage, the fallibility of self-knowledge is used by Geulincx to argue against autonomy *ad absurdum*:

It is perfectly evident, and nothing can be thought more clearly than that what I do not know how to do is not my action. (...I have not claimed that *what you do not know how to do does not happen*, but: *what you do not know how to do is not your action* [...]) Nor is there any need for arguments here, only anyone's consciousness...I say...that if you are willing to describe yourself as the doer of anything that you do not know how to do, there is no reason why you should not

⁵ Ulrika Maude, *Beckett, Technology and the Body* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), p. 77.

believe that you have done or do anything that happens or has been done. If you do not know how motion is made in the organs of your body while being nevertheless quite sure that you made it, you could say with equal justification that you are the author of Homer's *Iliad*, or that you built the walls of Nineveh, or the Pyramids.⁶

Subpersonal movements are drawn in to support this claim, with the assumption that, if we perform an action, then we must have full knowledge of every part that constitutes it. In this, the ease and spontaneity of behaviour is recruited against autonomy:

With the aid of Physics and Anatomy I may be able to trace this motion for some distance, but I still feel sure that in moving my organs I am not directed by that knowledge; and that on occasion I have moved them just as promptly, or perhaps even more promptly, when nothing could have been further from my mind.⁷

This argument looks similar to a sceptical argument which Beckett transcribes in his *Philosophy Notebooks*:

Our faculties cannot furnish us with information concerning essence of the relations of phenomena to one another. Subject déteint sur l'objet. Doctrine leads to absolute inaction. Pyrrhonism.⁸

Here, perception is also untrustworthy because of its limited scope. The doctrinal emphasis on complete knowledge, such as the kind seen in Geulincx, appears to mean that 'absolute inaction' is favoured over action which is performed under conditions of epistemological incompleteness. The important move in both arguments from Geulincx and Pyrrho seems to be the point at which the partiality of knowledge and self-knowledge is deemed to be incompatible with the notion of self-willing; because we do not have complete control, we do not have control at all. The same concept is at play in the answers of both philosophers, as they each turn the argument toward a sceptical conclusion. This move tries to answer epistemology by exploding it, shifting from the limited scope of psychological interrogation to conclusions which make absolute claims upon the individual. The focus

⁶ Arnold Geulincx, *Ethics, with Samuel Beckett's Notes*, ed. by Martin Wilson, J. A. van Ruler, and Anthony Uhlmann, trans. by Martin Wilson (Leiden: Brill, 2006), p. 330, original emphasis.

⁷ Geulincx, p. 331.

⁸ Samuel Beckett, 'Scepticism' (Fols 122-23), 10967 [Philosophy Notes], Beckett International Foundation, Reading University Library, (photocopy of original held at Trinity College Dublin, ref: IE TCD MSS 10962-10971).

moves from close attention to the individual to a world view which situates the individual in relation to overriding metaphysical or dogmatic claims.

This idea surfaces again in Beckett's philosophy notes, in a section from Windelband's chapter, 'The Philosophy of the Middle Ages'. Here, Beckett is transcribing a debate which revolved around the dispute in 'psychic life [whether] the dependence of the will upon ideas, or of ideas upon the will [is the greater]'.⁹ He notes that the '[controversy] was at first purely psychological', but moves in to the 'metaphysical domain' when it was determined that 'freedom was the point in dispute [...] both parties [...] defend 'freedom' in the interests of responsibility'.¹⁰ Beckett's notes pick out the key changes in this argument, but Windelband's original passage from *A History of Philosophy* is worth returning to for the subtleties of the argument. Windelband suggests that the question – of whether the will is dependent on ideas or ideas upon the will – was in reality a fruitless debate. Rather than focussing on the 'treatment of psychology that concerned itself especially with the history of mental development', the argument frequently transferred from this specific question to 'the ground of dialectic or to the metaphysical domain'. Because of this, the psychological argument was undeveloped and subordinated to the distractions of these more abstract debates:

This latter transfer occurred principally in consequence of the fact that the conception of *freedom*, which always involves ethical and religious questions, was looked upon as the point in controversy.¹¹

For Windelband, it is clear that the argument about the primacy of will or idea is secondary to an intellectual-historical question about the tensions between the approaches of psychological and metaphysical investigation. When the argument widens to include the concept of 'freedom', it suddenly becomes encumbered with metaphysical baggage which prevents the development of a purely psychological line of questioning. This is, broadly, about the tensions between phenomenological and metaphysical approaches, insofar as

⁹ Samuel Beckett, 'Primacy of Will or of Intellect' (Fols 167-68v), 10967 [Philosophy Notes], Beckett International Foundation, Reading University Library, (photocopy of original held at Trinity College Dublin, ref: IE TCD MSS 10962-10971).

¹⁰ Beckett, 'Primacy of Will or of Intellect', original emphasis.

¹¹ W. Windelband, *A History of Philosophy*, trans. by James Hayden Tufts, 2nd ed. rev. and enl. (New York, NY: The Macmillan Company, 1923), p. 329, original emphasis. Beckett's notes can be expanded using the original because they largely consist of transcriptions directly from Windelband.

psychological questions are rooted in experience, and metaphysics operates beyond experience.

Cartesian questions that have traditionally burdened readings of Beckett have risked reducing the pluralism of the questioning attitude in his work to a single metaphysical conceit.¹² Even when not focussing directly on the question of Cartesianism, claims such as Hugh Kenner's that Beckett's comedy resides in 'the process of the brain struggling with ideas'; 'prior to action and more fundamental than language', reiterate a particular mentalised hierarchy of thought feeding into action.¹³ This model prioritises the mental over the material. Further, as Ulrika Maude has suggested, dominant poststructuralist readings that followed reiterated such mentalese in their emphasis on the 'discursively produced body'.¹⁴ A reignited interest in historicising Beckett's work has attempted to move away from rigid metaphysical readings by placing him into an intellectual-historical context in which Cartesianism was assaulted on various fronts; whether through

¹² Cartesian Beckett criticism has been much practiced since the 1960s. Hugh Kenner's study remains a consistent touchstone for this variety of approach: Hugh Kenner, *Samuel Beckett: A Critical Study* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1968); the claim that Descartes underlies Beckett's fiction has been much repeated, often without nuance or philosophical detail. John Fletcher's criticism is typical in this regard: 'In all his writing [...] Beckett advances a version of Cartesianism, the belief that mind and the body are quite distinct, the one thought, the other extension, their interaction a mystery which it is not worth trying to fathom': John Fletcher, *The Novels of Samuel Beckett* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1964), p. 36; In addition, the assertion that 'there is no question that Descartes' initial rejection of external reality and his views on the dualism of mind and body serve as underlying inspirations for much of Beckett's works' is advanced in: Raymond Federman, *Journey to Chaos: Samuel Beckett's Early Fiction* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1965), p. 75; Similarly, Michael Robinson suggests that '[Descartes is] Beckett's recurrent preoccupation' in: Michael Robinson, *The Long Sonata of the Dead: A Study of Samuel Beckett* (London: Rupert Hart-Davis, 1969), p. 86; Lawrence Harvey refers to Beckett's 'lasting espousal of a generally dualistic point of view, both in his life and writing': Lawrence E. Harvey, *Samuel Beckett: Poet and Critic* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1970), p. 204; The suggestion that 'influence of Descartes on Beckett is obvious and pervasive' is repeated in: David H. Hesla, *The Shape of Chaos: An Interpretation of the Art of Samuel Beckett* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1971), p. 14; Hans Joachim-Schulz claims that Beckett's novels encode a 'partial re-enactment of the Cartesian "story"': Hans-Joachim Schulz, *This Hell of Stories: A Hegelian Approach to the Novels of Samuel Beckett* (Paris: Mouton, 1973), p. 31; Similar material is treated by John Pilling, though with additional emphases on Geulincx: John Pilling, *Samuel Beckett* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1976), p. 113; The assertion that '*Cogito ergo sum* [...] is implicit in much of his work' is advanced in: Vivian Mercier, *Beckett/Beckett* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1977), p. 163; Likewise, Charles Lyons gives 'Descartes' doubts about the accuracy of the concept of external reality' a central place in Beckett's work through 'the image of a mind, alienated from its body': Charles R. Lyons, *Samuel Beckett* (London: Macmillan, 1983), p. 4; Later models have sought to widen the field of influence. Rubin Rabinovitz notes the relation between Descartes and Beckett, but argues that Schopenhauer and Berkeley are more closely aligned to Beckettian scepticism: Rubin Rabinovitz, 'The Self Contained: Beckett's Fiction in the 1960s', in *Beckett's Later Fiction and Drama*, ed. by James Acheson and Kateryna Arthur (London: Macmillan, 1987), pp. 50–64 (p. 56); More recently, Anthony Cordingley has suggested that there is 'a purported dualism at the core of [How It Is]', which is linked to the rationalist collapse between thought and speech, as manifest in 'the perfect language of Descartes' immaterial mind': Anthony Cordingley, 'Beckett and "L'Ordre Naturel": The Universal Grammar of *Comment c'est/How It Is*', *Samuel Beckett Today / Aujourd'hui*, 18 (2007), 185–99 (pp. 186–7).

¹³ Kenner, p. 16.

¹⁴ Maude, p. 2.

psychology, phenomenology, or subjectivist ethics.¹⁵ Here I aim to focus on agency in Beckett's *How It Is* as a way of explicating those features of Beckett's prose which I believe to have fuelled the original Cartesian approaches, though through a lens which shows the problems to be more complex than a simple mind-body split. Questions of agency and introspective knowledge of action play a key role in this as contemporary philosophy and psychology have done much to complicate how we conceptualise the dynamics of feedback and control between mind and body.

Current work in the philosophy and psychology of agency can be seen as part of an ongoing debate which engages with similar questions – control, introspection, and behavioural interpretation – which also arose in the work of the early twentieth century which was contemporary to, and known by, Beckett. The broad debate has been inflected by Cartesian questions throughout its history, and current theory offers a broad theoretical base which can both help to elucidate the Cartesian legacy and also provide a heuristic strategy that is more equipped to bring out the nuance of Beckett's prose. In this latter role, it is important to recognise the congruities between current debates and the work that was contemporary to Beckett. Agency has a long philosophical history that has ranged through myriad disciplines. The theorists I utilise are inheritors and contemporary interpreters of this legacy, whose answers respond to the same puzzles, often interacting with Cartesian questions through explicit discussion, or implicit philosophical or experimental methodological bias.

In Beckett's lifetime, philosophical and psychological approaches to mind produced a number of arguments which can be read as direct reactions to the Cartesian legacy. In line with this, I will read Beckett's apparent dualism as an explorative part of a complex picture of philosophical, psychological, and neurophysiological questioning, rather than a distinct metaphysical claim. In the first half of the twentieth century, the mind-body problem found a range of attention in burgeoning disciplines. In psychology, a notable reaction was behaviourism, which, by focussing on a materialist understanding of mind and action, posed a direct challenge to dualism; if 'the ultimate explanation of behaviour [is] physical and chemical', then the explanatory gap between mind and body can be

¹⁵ Maude; Laura Salisbury, *Samuel Beckett: Laughing Matters, Comic Timing* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2012); Steven Connor, 'Beckett and Sartre: The Nauseous Character of All Flesh', in *Beckett and Phenomenology*, ed. by Ulrika Maude and Matthew Feldman (London: Continuum, 2009), pp. 56–76.

circumvented.¹⁶ Although some proponents, like William McDougall, did not reject mental language and introspective methods entirely, more radical behaviourism ‘sought to expunge every mentalistic concept, whether limited to behavioural description or not, from the language of psychology’.¹⁷ This meant that ‘explanations of behaviour had to be formulated in terms of sensory stimuli and behavioural conditioning (on the input side), and overt behavioural response (on the output side)’.¹⁸

Beckett read, and transcribed portions from, R.S. Woodworth’s *Contemporary Schools of Psychology* in the thirties.¹⁹ As a reaction to earlier structural psychologies, behaviourism distinguished itself through an entirely different methodology. Rather than the method of trained introspection favoured by earlier schools, the behaviourist:

[Wanted] to deal with tangibles, visibles, audible – things or happenings that he could point out to a fellow-observer as the chemist points at the contents of a test tube. [...] Introspectionists have claimed to observe processes of an entirely different order, not conceivably observable by any refinement of physical instrumentation; but this claim cannot be allowed by the behaviourist.²⁰

Such materialist emphasis found precedent in the neurophysiological, psychological, and biological research of the early twentieth century. This work was beginning to recognise the complexity of the nervous system, both as ‘integrative’ and ‘inborn’ by pioneers such as Charles Scott Sherrington in his *The Integrative Action of the Nervous System* (1906), and as environmentally conditioned, as championed by Ivan Sechenov (1829-1905) and Ivan Pavlov (1849-1936).²¹ Pavlovian psychology, in its reliance on a unitary reductionist explanation for behaviour, was particularly important to the development of an American behaviourist school.²² This reductionism is the binary model of stimulation and response.

¹⁶ Gary Hatfield, ‘Psychology, Philosophy, and Cognitive Science: Reflections on the History and Philosophy of Experimental Psychology’, *Mind and Language*, 17 (2002), 207–32 (p. 214).

¹⁷ Hatfield, p. 214.

¹⁸ Evan Thompson, *Mind in Life: Biology, Phenomenology, and the Sciences of Mind* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007), p. 4.

¹⁹ ‘In the course of his therapy, Beckett also read widely on the subject of psychology and psychoanalysis. R. S. Woodworth’s *Contemporary Schools of Psychology*, provided him with the general framework he needed [...] In it, he read about Behaviourism, Gestalt Psychology, Freud, Jung, Adler and McDougall’. James Knowlson, *Damned to Fame: The Life of Samuel Beckett* (London: Bloomsbury, 1996), p. 177.

²⁰ Robert S. Woodworth, *Contemporary Schools of Psychology*, [8th ed.] (London: Methuen, 1963), p. 75.

²¹ Roy Porter, *The Greatest Benefit to Mankind: A Medical History of Humanity from Antiquity to the Present* (London: Fontana Press, 1999), pp. 543–4.

²² Ralph J. Greenspan and Bernard J. Baars, ‘Consciousness Eclipsed: Jacques Loeb, Ivan P. Pavlov, and the Rise of Reductionistic Biology after 1900’, *Consciousness and Cognition*, 14 (2005), 219–30 (pp. 224–5).

Beckett's 'Psychology Notes' from the 1930s show him engaging, not only with the specific content of Woodworth's primer, but with the methodological questions it poses:

Imageless Thought Controversy: the parting of the ways in modern psychological theory. Existentialism arose out of reaction against it, Behaviourism [sic] reacted by rejecting introspection altogether, Gestalt Psychology by objecting to introspection as an instrument of analysis & by proposing to abandon mental chemistry altogether, sensory elements & thought elements alike.²³

Feldman notes that elsewhere in his transcriptions Beckett shows a stronger tendency towards the introspective method ('Introspection is subjective observation'²⁴), which was 'certainly closer to [his] heart' than the aspirational objectivity of behaviourism and similar movements.²⁵ Although the introspective approach might fit better with Beckett's temperament, the methodological puzzle that behaviourism and the other materialist schools pose still holds productive ways of looking at Beckett's texts. Not only is this theoretically relevant to approaching the introspective trends in the writings, but a focus on the methodology of introspection also places Beckett in a long, ongoing interdisciplinary dialogue. Although Feldman suggests that Beckett's psychology notes '[as] a survey of research on unconscious, repressed or otherwise unrecovered events [...] evoke the Leibnizian inception of psychology as an outgrowth of earlier consciousness philosophy',²⁶ it is also the case that the psychological advances in the early part of the twentieth century fed *back* into philosophy, and created a way of philosophical questioning which is influenced by the empirical rigour of psychology. Not least, materialist approaches to the study of mind found evidential support in the results of psychology.

One early philosophical inheritor of the materialist tendency was Gilbert Ryle, who takes psychological advances as a jumping-point to demolish the lingering philosophical bugbear of Cartesian dualism. In *The Concept of Mind*, the covertly dogmatic Cartesian legacy is labelled 'The Official Doctrine'. The dualism underpinning The Official Doctrine is based on the difference between bodies and minds. Bodies are both 'in space and are subject to the mechanical laws which govern all other bodies in space', and observable

²³ TCD MS10971/7/7, quoted in: Matthew Feldman, *Beckett's Books: A Cultural History of Samuel Beckett's 'Interwar Notes'* (New York, NY: Continuum, 2006), pp. 104–5.

²⁴ TCD MS10971/7/7, quoted in: Feldman, p. 104.

²⁵ Feldman, p. 104.

²⁶ Feldman, p. 102.

insofar as '[bodily] processes and states can be inspected by external observers'. In contrast, 'the workings of one mind are not witnessable by other observers; its career is private'. This is tied up with further assumptions about the primacy of the mind; that 'what the mind wills, the legs, arms and the tongue execute', that 'a person must be directly and authentically seized of the present state and workings of his own mind', and is 'also generally supposed to be able to exercise from time to time a special kind of perception, namely inner perception, or introspection'.²⁷

Ryle's clearest, and most cutting, criticism, is reserved for the concepts of volition and the will, which he holds up as paradigms of misleading theory: exemplars of 'the dogma that a mind is a secondary field of special causes'. For Ryle, the concept of volition violates both the common-sense way in which we describe our actions, and the way in which the mind should be described in theory. From a theoretical perspective, the term 'volition' suggests a 'para-mechanical theory of the mind', in which 'mental-thrusts, which are not movements of matter in space, can cause muscles to contract'. Ryle rejects the common view of volitions, which he describes thus:

I think of some state of affairs which I wish to come into existence in the physical world, but, as my thinking and wishing are unexecutive, they require the mediation of a further executive mental process. So I perform a volition which somehow puts my muscles into action. Only when a bodily movement has issued from such a volition can I merit praise or blame for what my hand or tongue has done.

The term 'volition' seems to be a *post hoc* invention, devised to bridge the gap that arises when mental processes are distinguished in type from bodily movements. Ryle argues that this distinction is false and that volition confuses ready concepts of experiential psychology, such as voluntariness, by adding theoretical claims that lack explanatory substance.²⁸

Although Ryle was an inheritor as well as a proponent of materialism, the cluster of dualistic features that he outlines is still present in academic psychology and philosophy, though now entrenched in interdisciplinary complexity. The *MIT Encyclopaedia of the Cognitive Sciences* outlines the mind-body problem as revolving around two poles: the

²⁷ Gilbert Ryle, *The Concept of Mind* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 2000), pp. 13–16.

²⁸ Ryle, pp. 62–3.

first problem is ‘the apparent causal interaction of mind and body’; the second concerns ‘the distinctive features of consciousness’.²⁹ The Cartesian form of dualism maintains that there is a difference in substance between ‘individual minds and souls’ and the body. Even if this is granted, it is unclear how mind and body can be disentangled, as, though our ‘thought and intentions seem to make our bodies move’, our ‘mental states often seem to be caused by events in the world external to our minds’.³⁰ As I have described above, materialist views hold that physical actions are produced by physical events in the brain. However, this does not seem to tally with a folk experience of mental causation and other aspects of particularly mental experience, such as consciousness. What emerges, then, is contention over the relative entanglement of mind and body as we recognise it through both experimentation and experience.

Self-knowledge provides a particular manifestation of the mind-body problem, as the traditional concept of Cartesian mentalism is closely tied to the privileged status of introspective self-knowledge. In this view, as defined, again, by *MITECS*, Cartesianism ‘treated the mind as fully transparent and open in all its significant properties to a faculty of conscious introspection or reflection’.³¹ Significant work has been done to dismantle this view by supplying evidence of innumerable bodily, as well as mental, forms of awareness that feed into our sense of autonomy. Some of this has taken a negative direction by identifying distinct non-conscious processes that are unavailable to introspection, and the subsequent unreliability of self-reporting. Other approaches have utilised the evidence of neurological anomalies, such as Anarchic Hand Syndrome, as a way of increasing the taxonomic accuracy of processes involved in agency.³² These fine-grained theoretical distinctions are played out against the default phenomenology of autonomous agency which is controlled by and transparent to the agent. As with consciousness in general, it is widely thought that the first-person experience of self-knowledge is not captured by theoretical or mechanistic description. Richard Moran makes this point as follows:

²⁹ Tim Crane, ‘Mind-Body Problem’, ed. by Robert A. Wilson and Frank C. Keil, *The MIT Encyclopaedia of the Cognitive Sciences* (London: MIT Press, 2001), pp. 546–48 (p. 547).

³⁰ Crane, p. 547.

³¹ Robert van Gulick, ‘Self-Knowledge’, ed. by Robert A. Wilson and Frank C. Keil, *The MIT Encyclopaedia of the Cognitive Sciences* (London: MIT Press, 2001), pp. 735–36 (p. 736).

³² Anthony Marcel, ‘Sense of Agency: Awareness and Ownership of Action’, in *Agency and Self-Awareness: Issues in Philosophy and Psychology*, ed. by Johannes Roessler and Naomi Eilan (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2003), pp. 48–93.

[T]he object of first-person awareness (on *any* account of it) is not all of psychological life, but primarily the state of mind identified under the categories of what is sometimes called ‘folk-psychology’: the hopes and fears, pains and experiences we relate to each other in daily life, and not states or processes defined either neurologically or computationally.³³

Although the object of first-person awareness is somewhat limited, Moran also recognises the fundamentally embodied experience that it entails. The first-person experience does not simply consist of introspective folk-psychology; ‘there are in fact several aspects of one’s relation to oneself as an agent which have been plausibly seen as involving awareness that is not based either on behavioural inference or any perceptual presentation’.³⁴ These include a person’s common awareness of ‘his own basic movements and bodily position’, which he knows ‘without having to observe anything, internally or externally’,³⁵ a sense that is termed ‘proprioception’ by psychologists.³⁶ Theorists like Moran suggest that it is not simply that psychology has not located the specific processes that give us first-person experience, but that there is a sense in which the phenomenology of first-person knowledge and agency is a special kind of perception that cannot be captured by experimental means.

These complexities arise because it is apparent that there are diverse ways in which we understand ourselves, that involve awareness of both our mental and physical states. Furthermore, our actions are not isolated events, but are set within our lives. Naomi Eilan and Johannes Roessler describe this problem technically as one of ‘immunity to error through misidentification’ according to which special introspective awareness means that we cannot misidentify our actions as our own.³⁷ This assigns a special quality to introspective awareness which distinguishes it from other forms of perception. While we may wrongly identify an object, or incorrectly interpret the action of another, the ‘immunity to error through misidentification’ means that if we understand an action as our

³³ Richard Moran, *Authority and Estrangement: An Essay on Self-Knowledge* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2001), p. 7, original emphasis.

³⁴ Moran, p. 19.

³⁵ Moran, p. 19.

³⁶ Timothy D. Wilson, *Strangers to Ourselves: Discovering the Adaptive Unconscious* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2002), p. 19; for an examination of life without proprioception, see: Jonathan Cole, *Pride and a Daily Marathon* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1995).

³⁷ Naomi Eilan and Johannes Roessler, ‘Agency and Self-Awareness: Mechanisms and Epistemology’, in *Agency and Self-Awareness: Issues in Philosophy and Psychology*, ed. by Johannes Roessler and Naomi Eilan (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2003), pp. 1–47 (p. 35).

own, then that action could not have been the action of another individual. In other words, there is a specific phenomenology of acting which is intertwined with the knowledge of the production of action. This type of understanding moves away from a perceptual model of introspection through which the agent is somehow observing his own actions, a sense which is suggested by Beckett's understanding of introspection in his 1949 to Duthuit. Here, introspection is a relation of 'self to self', a model in which one 'self' is able to dissociate itself from another 'self' in a perceptual relation.³⁸ This 'self to self' model is rejected by Sidney Shoemaker when he argues that, when we introspect, we do not perceive a self because 'there can be no such thing as picking out a self and distinguishing it from other selves'.³⁹ In addition, 'there can be no such thing as picking out a self and distinguishing it from other perceived things, of any sort whatever, by its perceived properties'.⁴⁰ Further, it seems to follow from this assertion that 'there is no such thing as introspective misidentification of non-selves with selves'.⁴¹ This formulation is applicable to action, but, as Eilan and Roessler suggest, it also seems to apply 'equally to knowledge of our own experiences, thoughts, plans, memories, and so forth'.⁴² Even granting the specialness of introspective knowledge, there is still a twofold challenge with respect to the link between introspection and action; both to characterise this direct knowledge of action, and to describe how our knowledge of action relates to other mental states.

Despite the validity of common-sense phenomenology and its more intricate supporting arguments, there is often a sense that challenges to this position emerge from an insecurity in our self-experience. At least it is certainly the case that positions such as those outlined above, which attempt to maintain the credence of first-person knowledge, are working against sceptical refutations which collapse the nuance of experience under the weight of absolute claims. Even without going to the extremes of scepticism, philosophical reasoning often attempts to intercede in order to make anomalous experiences – like Anarchic Hand Syndrome, or even the disparity between introspective knowledge and third-person knowledge – cohere with other aspects of our understanding. Slippage creates questions, and regarding our relation to our own actions there are four key terms which mark the interplay between these questions. These are knowledge, control, description and

³⁸ Beckett, 'Letter to Georges Duthuit, 9-10 March 1949', pp. 18–19.

³⁹ Sidney Shoemaker, 'Introspection and the Self', in *Self Knowledge*, ed. by Quassim Cassam (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), pp. 118–39 (p. 127).

⁴⁰ Shoemaker, p. 127.

⁴¹ Shoemaker, p. 127.

⁴² Eilan and Roessler, p. 35.

interpretation. Epistemological problems concerning action run from Greek sceptical responses through problems of freedom and determinism as interpreted by Geulincx and Descartes. These dovetail with issues of control, as questions of freedom are essentially focussed on the level of agential involvement in an action. Experimental work picks up this thread, and the psychological expansion of the field of conditioned reflex, as well as the description of aberrant neurological conditions, is in dialogue with the same problem. Knowledge of action encompasses the interpretation of both our own actions, through neurological and introspective means, and the comprehension of the actions of others. Here arise additional questions as there is not direct symmetry between self-understanding and the understanding of others. As my discussion of folk psychology in Chapter One suggests, there is significant disagreement about how much crossover there is between introspection and communication. This cluster of problems makes it clear that there is not a single approach to 'action' as a philosophical concept, but that it is refracted through a number of intersecting problems which appear across several disciplines. Because my focus is literary action, which necessarily centres upon the interpretive relation between reader and text, the communicatory aspect of action, and the mechanisms of action interpretation are paramount. What the following analysis aims to show is how Beckett's textual method complicates the communicatory relationship by incorporating a number of the interactive problems of action; those which stretch across knowledge, control, description and interpretation.

Beckett and Abstraction

Action is not self-contained, but in the world. When we act, we do so in a social structure, and our actions are mediated by and directed toward the end of comprehension by other agents. They are enmeshed with the actions of others, and subject to norms which regulate them. The communicative role of action is central to a comment which Sophie Ratcliffe makes in passing. With reference to the literary chess game in Beckett's early play, *Eleuthéria*, Ratcliffe points to the way in which the 'intentional tone' becomes a key point of misinterpretation, and consequently becomes a 'failed transmission of meaning', between characters.⁴³ Although she does not pursue the point in this way, it seems that Ratcliffe here is alluding to the structures that surround intentional action and give them their informational content. When, in *Eleuthéria*, the 'Spectator' steps onto the stage, and

⁴³ Sophie Ratcliffe, p. 183.

attempts to explain his frustration with the action of the play, the miscommunication is working in both directions:

Spectator: [...] How can I explain it? Do you play chess? No. Doesn't matter. It's like when you're watching a game of chess between two fifth-rate players. For three quarters of an hour neither of them has made a move, they're sitting there like a couple of morons, yawning over the chess board, and you're there too [...] rooted to the spot, disgusted, bored, tired, marvelling at so much stupidity. Until the moment when you can't stand it any longer. So you tell them, but do this, do this, what are you waiting for? [...] It's unforgivable, it's against all the most elementary rules of polite behaviour [...] but you can't help yourself [...] Do you follow me?

Glazier: No. We aren't playing chess.⁴⁴

Here, it is not only that 'one [character] is speaking of an imaginary game of chess, the other, of a real one', but that under the surface misunderstanding, there is the content of the metaphor, the Spectator's inability to understand the action on stage. This is similar to saying that the Spectator is unable to frame the action on stage within any intentional model which would make it comprehensible. His allusion to a chess game allows him to articulate his frustration at not being able to understand the determinants of the Glazier's actions by supplementing them with an ideal of interpretable action; the moves of a game which are subject to the shared rationality condition inherent in explicit rules. When the Glazier is unable to understand the quality of the Spectator's intervention, it is not just an inability to grasp the substance of the metaphor, but also an inability to understand the reason for the Spectator's complaint. The Glazier, not unfairly, seems unable to see his own actions as inexplicable. Misinterpretation is tied to self-knowledge; with the Glazier, introspective knowledge of action is divisible from the communicative intention of action. However, the two are also entangled.

Communicative relations that are based in agency, rather than language, can exist within the storyworld between characters. Hence, in *Malone Dies*, 'passion' can mark a face, and

⁴⁴ Samuel Beckett, *Eleuthéria*, trans. by Barbara Wright (London: Faber and Faber, 1996), pp. 133–4.

‘action too possibly’.⁴⁵ Here, communication between characters is non-verbal, as it is action rather than explanation that carries the message. Similarly, *The Unnamable* can describe the necessary postures for a tortured disposition:

Let him move, try and move, that’s all they ask, for the moment. No matter where he goes, being at the centre, he will go towards them. So he is at the centre, there is a clue of the highest interest, it matters little to what. They look, to see if he has stirred. He is nothing but a shapeless heap, without a face capable of reflecting the niceties of a torment, but the disposition of which, its greater or lesser degree of crouch and huddledness, is no doubt expressive, for specialists, and enable them to assess the chances of its suddenly making a bound, or dragging its coils faintly away, as if stricken to death.⁴⁶

In the above examples, the relationships are contained within the fiction; the communicative action is between two or more agents within the storyworld. Moments like this, between storyworld agents, are set within a pervasive focus on the textual medium through which the narrator and reader communicate. This relationship poses its own distinct set of problems, especially when the texts supplant interactive for introspective action.

The interaction between reader and text is frequently alluded to in Beckett criticism, and often through the elusive claims that the texts perform one or several simultaneous types of abstraction. Ewa Płonowska Ziarek dismisses readings of *How It Is* which have focussed on the abstraction of the ‘paradigms of self-expression or self-referential language’.⁴⁷ In doing so, she moves away from analyses which foreground the introspective elements of Beckett’s later prose. In response, she regards the text as ‘a violent clash between the signification of alterity and the rationality inherent in communication, between the shock of otherness and absorption of this shock within a discursive community’.⁴⁸ Ziarek stops short of examining the reader’s role in this ‘communication’. Instead, she seems to imply

⁴⁵ Samuel Beckett, ‘Malone Dies’, in *Trilogy: Molloy, Malone Dies, The Unnamable* (London: Calder Publications, 1994), pp. 179–292 (p. 228).

⁴⁶ Samuel Beckett, ‘The Unnamable’, in *Trilogy: Molloy, Malone Dies, The Unnamable* (London: Calder Publications, 1994), pp. 293–418 (pp. 359–60).

⁴⁷ Ewa Płonowska Ziarek, *The Rhetoric of Failure: Deconstruction of Skepticism, Reinvention of Modernism* (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 1996), p. 171.

⁴⁸ Ziarek, p. 171.

greater significance – apparently a quasi-pedagogical intent – behind the relationship between the storyworld figures in the novel:

We are confronted here with quite a different sense of invention – with the invention of the other as a complement of the self. Coextensive with an obliteration of alterity, this invention is presented in the text as both a condition and an achievement of a dialogue. Beckett's relentless, almost vicious, emphasis on the cruelty of the linguistic exchange dramatizes the fact that what are usually taken as the necessary conditions of intersubjective communication – reciprocity, the symmetrical relationship between the speakers [...] [are] in fact violently produced in the course of linguistic exchange. Communicative reason is not divorced from the power of invention; on the contrary, it violently produces the necessary conditions for its success. Intertwined with the effort to overcome the opacity of the other, the violence of dialogue brings the other into the light of comprehension.⁴⁹

Wolfgang Iser remarks on the same features of Beckett's texts, but moves from an analysis of 'self-referential language' to claims about the response that this language evokes in the reader. Referring to Molloy's claims against reference, that for all of the 'figures' of expression, 'what really happened was quite different',⁵⁰ Iser suggests that the text is focussed around 'questions posed by a consciously reflecting mind which seeks to uncover the presuppositions that condition a statement'.⁵¹ These conditions, he suggests are shown to be inadequate as a description, a 'barely tenable version of the facts it attempts to convey'.⁵² This realisation, Iser suggests, is part of a general sceptical turn which infects the narratorial voice, moving from the perception and description of the world to the conditions of perception themselves:

[A] world perceived only in terms of phenomena is just as much a product of the conscious mind as one that is deliberately given a specific form. As both perception and interpretation of phenomena are qualified equally as offshoots of the conscious mind, the reality perceived must in itself clearly be totally devoid of any meaning

⁴⁹ Ziarek, p. 181.

⁵⁰ Samuel Beckett, 'Molloy', in *Trilogy: Molloy, Malone Dies, The Unnamable* (London: Calder Publications, 1994), pp. 7–178 (p. 88).

⁵¹ Wolfgang Iser, *The Implied Reader: Patterns of Communication in Prose Fiction From Bunyan to Beckett* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1974), p. 165.

⁵² Iser, p. 165.

of its own. Thus the conscious mind turns its attention away from the interpretation of things and onto its own actual processes of interpretation.⁵³

From this position, Iser also reveals a pedagogical turn, which moves from the way in which Beckett stages 'interpretation' as a thematic concern to the effect that this has on the reader. If the text operates to 'resist all attempts at total comprehension', and 'once the reader becomes conscious' of the presuppositions which underlie his attempts at comprehension, 'he will find the very foundations of his knowledge beginning to shift beneath his feet'.⁵⁴ It is not clear from Iser's analysis exactly what the 'foundations' of the reader's knowledge are, but he appears to be referring to the assumptions made when approaching a literary text. In even more obscure terms, Jay Bernstein remarks on the 'cognitive significance' which emerges from the 'incomprehensibility' of Beckett's work. He seems to suggest that misrecognition or comprehensive difficulty at the level of the text can give way to a 'moment of non-discursive cognition', though he doesn't describe this further.⁵⁵ Pascale Casanova is more explicit about what literary conventions are subverted through Beckett's exercise of textual abstraction:

Beckett attacks the 'outdated conventions' of literature on all fronts. He progressively jettisons from his texts all external elements that might still attach them to the literary tradition. From *The Unnamable*, which (as is clear) is a founding text for many reasons, he explicitly challenges temporal and spatial categories, historically posited as conditions of possibility of literary creation and as bases of the 'reality effect' [...] a way of challenging the habitual preliminaries of ordinary literature that are place, time and action embodied by characters [...]. This elimination will take the form of the progressive disappearance of characters, but also of virtually complete abolition of punctuation, setting, narrative time, narration itself, and so forth.⁵⁶

⁵³ Iser, pp. 166–7.

⁵⁴ Iser, pp. 176–7.

⁵⁵ Jay M. Bernstein, *The Fate of Art: Aesthetic Alienation from Kant to Derrida and Adorno* (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1992), p. 250.

⁵⁶ Pascale Casanova, *Samuel Beckett: Anatomy of a Literary Revolution*, trans. by Gregory Elliott (London: Verso, 2006), p. 90.

It is clear that character lies at the heart of Casanova's analysis. In this respect, she comes close to describing Beckett as enacting what others have called 'unnatural narrative'.⁵⁷ The 'habitual preliminaries' which usually condition the reader's efforts – those of time, narrative, action and setting – are clustered around the idea of a character as the agent and focus of a text. As part of this project, Casanova suggests that the endpoint of Beckett's abstracting method is a 'de-psychologization' of the text:

[As] Beckett seeks to put an end to the illusion of identification and psychological presuppositions that ground literary attachment, these moral categories, which readers invest in the text solely on account of the psychologizing habits instilled by the usual cult of literature.⁵⁸

In line with her formalist sympathies, Casanova suggests that 'moral categories' only come into play when the text allows for a psychologising interpretation. Because Beckett rejects psychologising, he also rejects literary ethics. Although Casanova has a methodical approach to cataloguing the abstraction of literary expectations, she does not spend time describing what constitutes the original readerly impulse beyond suggesting the habitual will to 'psychologise' texts, and the link between this and characterisation. Beckett himself, from his 1937 'German Diary', helps to clarify the link to some extent:

I am not interested in a 'unification' of the historical chaos any more than I am in the 'clarification' of the individual chaos, and still less in the anthropomorphisation of the inhuman necessities that provoke the chaos. What I want is the straws, flotsam, etc., names, dates, births and deaths, because that is all I can know [...] Rationalism is the last form of animism. Whereas the pure incoherence of times and men and places is at least amusing.⁵⁹

Here, the 'rationalism' that Beckett rebels against infects both 'historical' and 'individual' chaos. In 'anthropomorphisation', he seems to be referring to the will to impose a structure on events beyond the 'incoherence of times and men and places'. In this respect, the rationalisation at work seems to be the imposition of some psychological structure.

⁵⁷ Here I am assigning 'unnatural' status to narratives that reject the mimetic 'focus on a human or human-like being, be it a fully-fledged person or merely a voice' and the drive of 'one or several minds experiencing change over time in a real-world-like setting' Jan Alber and others, 'Unnatural Narratives, Unnatural Narratology: Beyond Mimetic Models', *Narrative*, 18 (2010), 113–36 (p. 114).

⁵⁸ Casanova, p. 95.

⁵⁹ Quoted in: Knowlson, p. 244.

‘Anthropomorphisation’ in this sense appears to be a humanising of ‘inhuman necessities’; apparently the events in which the ‘individual’ participates. To make these ‘inhuman necessities’ mean something is to impose a mentalising structure on events, connecting times and places through an agent with the aim of making them cohere. In this respect, a rationalising impulse appears to be similar to the psychologising habit of reading. In both of these structures, the agent – or the imposition of agency – is crucial as a focus of the textual action.

What emerges from these arguments is a concern, more or less explicit, with the way in which a reader approaches the text. For Beckett to abstract from literary convention, and for this to have an effect on the way in which he is read, the reader must expect certain things and harbour particular heuristic strategies when they read. This, as Casanova suggests, is particularly enmeshed with the ways in which character is constructed in a text. As I suggested in Chapter One, the interpretation of character might be elucidated with an emphasis on how we approach intentional action in our everyday lives. At least, authors seem to capitalise on folk notions of what it is to act intentionally in the way in which they produce characters. The inward turn in Beckett’s writing – what Iser recognises as a focus on the ‘processes of interpretation’ – is also a turn towards questions of action and agency. This appears paradoxical, but only because of the textual assumptions involved in the word ‘interpretation’. Interpretation in this case can also mean self-interpretation, and the introspective focus of an agent attempting to understand their own actions within the phenomenology of their agency. However, as I have highlighted above, aberrant neurological processes, unconscious control of higher-order mechanisms, and philosophical scepticism all disrupt the close alignment between action and agential control. The philosophical treatment of these questions can help to elucidate what structures are under discussion in the description of agency. If the everyday construction of agency is closely tied to the construction of fictional characters, then it follows that the philosophical treatment of self-awareness can illuminate what structures are at work in characterisation. As an extra point of contact, the way in which philosophical argument deconstructs the concept of agency has uncanny resonance with Beckett’s examinations. In turn, this crossover reveals the way in which Beckett abstracts his characters.

Self-Knowledge and Scepticism

The cluster of problems relating to self-knowledge, as outlined above, seem particularly pertinent to Beckett's *How It Is*. This is not just because Beckett's readings seem to show a direct interest in problems of cognition and action, but because the narrative involutions of his text deserve direct analysis as explorations of the explanatory gap between mind and body. In *How It Is*, Beckett seems to be capitalising on a dualistic model. However, this does not appear to be a separation that entails transparent self-consciousness, as it does in the Cartesian model. Instead, it seems to poise the fallibility of self-knowledge against the expectation of introspective access; dualism appears as the default position, and is overturned and complicated by the prosaic, epistemic, and psychological machinations of the text. *How It Is* opens as follows:

how it was I quote before Pim with Pim after Pim how it is three parts I say it as I hear it

voice once without quaqu on all sides then in me when the panting stops tell me again finish telling me invocation

past moments old dreams back again or fresh like those that pass or things things always and memories I say them as I hear them murmur them in the mud⁶⁰

The protagonist's voice repeatedly self-qualifies, moving from the deferral of 'I quote' to the mock-defence, 'I say it as I hear it'. The second passage takes the passage of speech, 'voice once', as first external then internal; 'in me'. This seems to reverse action and cognition, so that the protagonist first speaks and then thinks. However, this is a tentative conclusion which is ridiculed by the 'invocation', 'tell me again finish telling me', which pushes this already counterintuitive interpretation to untenability by hyperbolising the narrator's ability to talk to himself. The third passage repeats the reversal of the first passage in the refrain 'I say them as I hear them', though here the cognitive shift that it might signify is less clearly defined. Instead, the narrator's speech is returned to a framework which entangles memory and narration. Although this link appears simpler than the oblique, or even arbitrary, distinctions between internal and external 'voice' above, the alignment of memory and action tentatively distinguishes a cluster of given

⁶⁰ Samuel Beckett, *How It Is* (London: Calder Publications, 1996), p. 7.

introspective attitudes that are set apart from the confusions of perception and knowledge. Because the idea of ‘old dreams’ returning has a figurative aspect, ‘I say them as I hear them’ can be taken less literally in this context, and refer simply to the mental experience of recall. The memories surface in the mind and are murmured, both reestablishing a mental-physical chain of causation, and returning the speaker to apparently safe self-knowledge. The entanglement of memory in the narration means that when a third-person position is adopted, it is not always clear if it refers to a retrospective, and hence temporally-external, self-view, or a present-tense exteriorised self-view. The distinction here is not arbitrary, but seems to refer implicitly to different modes of self-knowledge; ‘special’ introspective knowledge, or quasi-exteriorised self-perception, which further point to academic vacillations over the materialist or empiricist rewritings of automatic self-knowledge.

Temporal slippages in the narration, which are rooted in the autodiegetic retrospective narration, help to merge these two concepts, though an attempt at total disambiguation would simplify the cognitive characterisation at play. The text begins by mapping the complications of the mental-physical divide through the cyclical action of thought-speech-sense-thought. Quickly, though, this pattern comes to define the narrator’s relationship to his own body on a larger scale. At points, the sensory observation of his own body becomes the means for comprehending his own mental processes, establishing a pattern that seems either to signal a reverse dualism, a materialist approach to understanding himself without special introspection, or a cognitive spectrum between non-conscious and conscious action, in which he is distinguishing different types of action based on its level of automatism and concurrent distance from his conscious awareness of control. The protagonist observes his body for insights into his mental states, making the process of description one of interpretation:

ten yards fifteen yards semi-side left right leg right arm push pull flat on face
imprecations no sound semi-side right left leg left arm push pull flat on face
imprecations no sound not an iota to be changed in this description⁶¹

The mechanised description of action charts dissociation between the narratorial voice and its body. As seems to be implicit in the ‘description’ of action, the narration does not

⁶¹ *How It Is*, p. 45.

simply chart this sense of estrangement; the reflection that is inherent in narration is itself part of this estrangement. The reflective split is also written into a temporal disjunct between the passages in which action is narrated in the present tense, and other passages in which the tripartite structure of the text, and hence the retrospective character of the narration, is directly addressed:

and if ever mute laugh I wake forthwith catastrophe Pim and end of part one
leaving only part two leaving only part three and last⁶²

The reflective dissociation between the thinking mind and the acting body is also played out in the repetitive structure of the actions. These repetitions are textual, but seem to emerge as a way of accurately describing the repetitions of the narrator's body; 'not an iota to be changed in this description' is both a claim to accuracy – the claim that the description should be believed despite its repetitions – and indicative of the effort that goes into describing. Another example of this occurs soon after, though in this instance the distinctions between thinking, acting, and describing, are more pronounced:

I close my eyes the same old two and see me head up rick in the neck hand tense in
the mud something wrong there breath caught it lasts I last like that a moment until
the quiver of the lower face signifying I am saying have succeeded in saying
something to myself⁶³

The description comes after the action. However, in this case, the description is also the thought itself, and the narrator is finding out about himself by reading his own actions at a remove. The final phrase, 'I am saying have succeeded in saying something to myself', would look like the start of an intentionality loop, in which the agent comes to understand and eventually own his own actions through self-observation. However, this loop is not constructive; the ability to say 'have succeeded in saying something to myself' is predicated on 'I am saying', and 'I am saying' is equally validated by the retrospective intentions that are implied by 'have succeeded in saying something to myself'. Rather than settling with this minimum of logician's self-knowledge, the text moves on with an acknowledgement of reality: 'what can one say to oneself possibly say at such a time'.⁶⁴

⁶² *How It Is*, p. 36.

⁶³ *How It Is*, p. 48.

⁶⁴ *How It Is*, p. 48.

Throughout the text, these studies of agency are intimately connected to questions of epistemology. At the close of the text, this connection becomes most explicit, when the splitting scepticism that infects the narrator's self-knowledge expands to the brink of larger questions about knowledge per se. The turning point occurs when the text moves from the repetitive questioning that characterises the narrator's relationship to himself and his voice, to a disaffirmation of this questioning strategy in general:

in the familiar form of question I am said to ask myself and answers I am said to give myself however unlikely that may appear last scraps very last when the panting stops last murmurs very last however unlikely that may appear

if all that all that yes if all that is not how shall I say no answer if all that is not false yes⁶⁵

This logic is twisted into a negative affirmation that moves from textual certainty to a jumble of propositional and conditional claims, through which denial asserts itself with wavering certainty, and with unclear reach. 'All that' is unspecific enough to refer to the whole of the preceding text, the 'familiar form' of self-questioning that has been throughout the text, or to a hidden, but specific, meaning of the 'familiar form of question' as it appears just in that preceding passage. Even the weakest of these claims is bolstered by more strident statements elsewhere in the text:

you may say yes and you may say no it depends on what you hear

it's no I'm sorry no one here knows anyone either personally or otherwise it's the no that turns up I murmur it

and no again I'm sorry again no one here knows himself it's the place without knowledge whence no doubt its peerlessness⁶⁶

Here, the focus is still on wavering self-knowledge, rather than knowledge per se. However, the explicit sceptical claim does eventually come:

⁶⁵ *How It Is*, p. 157.

⁶⁶ *How It Is*, p. 134.

all these calculations yes explanations yes the whole story from beginning to end
yes completely false yes

that wasn't how it was no not at all no how then no answer how was it then no
answer HOW WAS IT screams good⁶⁷

Even in these consecutive passages, the view shifts between the rejection of textual veracity from an apparent position of textual authority, to a vexed unbalancing of that authority. However, there is a basic asymmetry in both of these positions; in the first, the narrator has knowledge that we do not have, in the second, the narrator does not have this knowledge, but implies his authority to recognise that knowledge if he did have it. From the position of the narrator this is an uncertain sceptical claim because he recognises the possibility of knowledge.⁶⁸ From the position of the reader, however, this is an absolute sceptical possibility insofar as we cannot validate the ability of the narrator to recognise or explain the truth, nor can we imagine what would constitute the truth. The distinction, then, is one between (the possibility) of introspective self-knowledge, and (the impossibility) of knowledge of other minds. When framed as a general problem of the text, the narrator's epistemological complexes regarding his own narrative have to be seen as contiguous with his slippery grasp on his own actions and sense of agency. This sceptical reflection is a magnification of the previous agential problems encountered in the text; the narrator does not just not know his movements, but is also unable to interpret them, or to remember how he originally interpreted them.

Knowledge and agency are not often treated as part of a single problem. Rather, the analytic approach has generally rooted epistemology in the perceptive relationship between an agent and an object. Conversely, the question of action is usually focussed around an analysis of the conditions needed for free action which find coherence between metaphysical logic and the agentive experience. The separation of knowledge and action in this way has produced two distinct methods of enquiry. Moving away from Beckett for a moment, it is worth recognising how the link between the two has been treated by two philosophers who have approached the parallel; Arthur C. Danto and Robert Nozick. Both of these accounts recognise the similar, though asymmetrical, structures of the problems of knowledge and action; one problem appears to reverse the conditions of the other. For

⁶⁷ *How It Is*, p. 158.

⁶⁸ Although this itself is a feature of scepticism.

Nozick, the issue is one of causality and the relation between the individual and external conditions:

[Where] it does hold, when a belief is caused appropriately by the fact, that connection appears desirable and plausibly is held to constitute knowledge.

In contrast, we strongly feel that the causal determination of action threatens responsibility and is undesirable. It is puzzling that what is desirable for belief, perhaps even necessary for knowledge, is threatening for action.⁶⁹

For Danto, the distinction seems to operate under similar assumptions. His distinction between knowledge and action takes the form of abstraction, in his stylised and bizarrely gendered archetypes of ‘the man of action and the man of thought’.⁷⁰ Though a contrivance, this separation points to an important logical distinction between action as that which produces truth, and knowledge as that which interprets truth:

If the world is a *fait accompli*, our sole option is to interpret it correctly, to find out what is the case. If we can change the world, however, it is not a *fait accompli*, and to attempt merely to interpret it is foredoomed to failure. We can only know the truth when it has been made.⁷¹

What we might take from Danto’s opposition of knowledge and action is the idea that they represent different responses to the world, and that those responses are in balance. Retreating from action in order to understand the world is untenable, just as action without understanding is self-limiting. These separate claims might be consolidated as a representation of the complex balance between knowing and not-knowing *in action*. If the demand was for complete knowledge, we would never act. But, as in the psychological literature, this also means that we cannot know completely, and cannot know our actions completely. With circularity, though perhaps more clarity, the logical distinction between action and knowledge points back to the difficulty of characterising the balance between the incompleteness of knowledge and the simultaneous apparent transparency of action.

⁶⁹ Robert Nozick, *Philosophical Explanations* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1981), pp. 170–1.

⁷⁰ Arthur C. Danto, *Analytical Philosophy of Action* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1973), p. 16.

⁷¹ Danto, p. 16.

The poles of action and knowledge explicitly distinguish what is already present in *How It Is* in the vacillations between the acting subject and the thinking subject; the collapse of both, or the resuscitation of one without the other:

Did he think did we think just enough to speak enough to hear not even comma a mouth an ear sly old pair glued together take away the rest put them in a jar there to end if it has an end the monologue⁷²

This passage pursues the progress from thinking, to speaking and hearing. It then voices the possibility of removing thought from this loop, and directly linking action and sensation with ‘a mouth an ear sly old pair glued together’. The term ‘monologue’ ironically reflects on this possibility by reaffirming the common-sense link between thought and speech.

At the close of the text, where these theoretical musings are more explicitly rooted to the experience of interpretation, the split between action and knowledge is set up as logical choice for the reader. The reflective complication – ‘all these calculations yes explanations yes the whole story from beginning to end yes completely false yes’ – is both a sceptical challenge to disambiguate the text, and a claim that is rooted in indissoluble ambiguity. Insofar as it is a reflective challenge, a reading that attempts logical clarity might return to the preceding claims of the text in order to balance the apparently competing demands of action and knowledge. One reading might reject the epistemological claims of the narrative, and in doing so also reject the dismantlement of action that constitutes such a large part of the text. Alternately, the rejection of action might be maintained in parallel with faith in the narratorial voice, prioritising memory and word, like Danto’s ‘thinking man’.

Returning to the text (or to life) provides a messier answer:

before Pim long before with Pim vast tracts of time kinds of thoughts same family
divers doubts emotions too yes emotions some with tears yes tears motions too and

⁷² *How It Is*, p. 87.

movements both parts and whole as when he sets out to seek out all of him sets out to seek out the true home⁷³

Here, from the beginning of Part 3, doubt appears, not as a distinct condition that infects the text univocally, but as a flexible element of cognition that alternately shapes and is shaped by the demands of embodied action. Knowledge, emotion, action, desire and intention, here, might be subject to ‘divers doubts’, but they are also elements of a minimum narrative, to ‘seek out the true home’. This is the apparent goal of the protagonists, but receives no further explanation. As such, it appears to simply capitalise on the readerly assumption that the ‘true home’ is the appropriate goal for a search. When this is reflected back against the stronger sceptical claim at the close of the text, it is hard to maintain the strong thesis as a distinct and distinctly powerful revisionary demand, as it is implicated as part of a text that has continuously demanded practices of revision and plastic comprehension from its readers. Viewed as part of the text, rather than as a reflection on the truth-value of the text, the final pages are better read as integrated, rather than destructive, scepticism.

It should be emphasised that this position is maintained within the textual format. Beckett’s use of philosophical scepticism is not necessarily a way of reflecting on the world and the state of knowledge per se, but rather as a tool for abstracting the structures of knowledge within fiction that a reader usually relies upon to understand the narrative and the storyworld in which it is embedded. Stanley Cavell’s two stage process of scepticism seems particularly suited to the form of epistemological uncertainty as it is embedded in literature. The first process recognises the value of destructive questioning as a way of tying our experience of the world to our self-knowledge:

[Scepticism] presses the aim of reason itself, to know objectively without stint; to penetrate reality itself. It insinuates that there are grounds for doubt that there is no good reason – no intellectually respectable reason – we do not ordinarily raise. It throws us back upon ourselves, to assess ourselves as knowers.⁷⁴

⁷³ *How It Is*, p. 111.

⁷⁴ Stanley Cavell, *The Claim of Reason: Wittgenstein, Skepticism, Morality, and Tragedy* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1979), p. 431.

Although the value of this mode of questioning in the real world has been directly contested⁷⁵ the claim transfers neatly to the reader's experience if the assessment of 'ourselves as knowers' becomes the assessment of our relation to the claims which are put forward by a literary text. Texts play on the position of the reader to assess the information released through narration. *How It Is* is an extreme example of this. The second move that Cavell makes is also relevant to the literary context. He suggests that the introspective turn that scepticism produces also entails recognition that the demands of this position cannot be met, that we are incapable of meeting them:

In the grip of its insight, we should be grateful for whatever consolation can be derived from the interpretation of ourselves that skepticism thereupon provides us with: we know "for practical purposes"⁷⁶

Rather than making claims about the way in which philosophy interacts with the way in which we live our lives, Cavell's second claim can be utilised as a way of thinking about the way in which a reader balances the epistemologically unsecure claims of the text with the pragmatics of reading. It might be the case that a reading of *How It Is* can only be constructed from a number of abstract scenes, but this occurs as part of a narrative approach that moves through the text, attempting to piece together the sense and structure of what the book is saying. This latter approach is not entirely blocked, but courted at points. This is evident in the balance in the narration between points – like the projected journey to 'seek out the true home' – which develop graspable narrative concepts, and the sceptical refutations, which attempt to undermine these concepts. The two together – abstraction and convention – are not simply in conflict, but are part of an experimental technique in which abstraction works in relation to specific features of literary writing. In the case of the scepticism outlined here, the literary feature at issue is the way in which the narrator makes truth claims for the purposes of narrative development.

The sceptical position in *How It Is*, then, appears not to be designed as a way of reflecting a philosophical problem back onto the world. However, the philosophical models still have relevance in relation to Beckett's text as tools for recognising the performance of abstraction. The above claims about scepticism within *How It Is* emphasise the way in

⁷⁵ See: Richard Rorty, 'From Epistemology to Romance: Cavell on Skepticism', *Review of Metaphysics*, 33 (1981), 759–74.

⁷⁶ Stanley Cavell, p. 431.

which the narration undermines the truth of its claims; the problem of agency in the text collapsed into a reading of narrative truth. However, just as the ‘divers doubts’ of the narrator are subordinated to its ‘movements’, the sceptical claims of the narrative should be read, not as an autonomous feature of the narration, but as part of the wider context of agency. The abstractions of narrative truth are part of the broader abstraction of character. Further, the two are often inextricable as the problem of readerly interpretation is not confined to the details of retrospective narration, but to the nature of the way in which the narrator narrates himself. In this respect, the introspective details of the text that I outlined above are not just philosophical problems of introspection filtered through a character, but are readerly problems about how to interpret a character constructed from such insights.

Agency and Abstraction

If Beckett is enacting an abstraction of character, then it must be conducted against a norm of characterisation which is mirrored by a norm of character interpretation. As I discussed in Chapter One, some critics have suggested that the reader’s attitude toward fictional characters is folk psychological. In the strong version of this model, which I argued against, the folk psychological attitude towards characters consists of understanding character intention through the inference of beliefs and desires. I rejected the idea that the inference of beliefs and desires was a natural state of narrative comprehension, but retained the idea that we read characters according to intentional frameworks. In this, I am in accord with Paisley Livingston, who, without making specific folk psychological claims, suggests the following:

There is good reason to believe that in all discourses where there is any form of psychological verisimilitude [...], making sense of the discourse requires, at the very least, that the reader take some fairly long detours through an understanding of what the characters are doing *qua* intentional agents (albeit fictional ones).⁷⁷

Because the literariness of the text regulates the way in which information is delivered, reading the intentions of characters is always subject to technical caveats. However, it seems right to suggest that characters, insofar as their construction generally adheres to norms of psychological expression, are subject to at least minimal folk psychological claims. These might not be claims regarding universal structures through which characters

⁷⁷ Livingston, p. 9.

are understood, but rather the softer suggestion that: when we read, we are ready to read for motives and intentions. This claim is not necessarily opposed to more expansive claims about the reactive,⁷⁸ simulative,⁷⁹ or ‘co-cogniz[ing]’ attitudes which might be involved when we encounter ‘trains of thought assigned to dramatis personae’.⁸⁰ However, as a minimal claim, it points to a defensible normative attitude which conditions the relationship between reader and character.

Even if this attitude does not make broad claims about folk psychological textual comprehension, some elements of FP theory can be used to elucidate its workings. Even a minimal concept of intentional agency works within norms of rationality. This idea of rationality doesn’t have to make a strong claim, but can simply refer to a moderated holism,⁸¹ which interprets an action within a network of individual and social norms of action. This also implies a coherence principle insofar as the interpretation attempts to match the inference with this surrounding framework. Adam Morton describes this as follows:

[A] large part of the gap [of behavioural interpretation] is also filled by restricting the choice of possible actions. Given the situation of the person and others they are interacting with, you consider only actions that your folk psychology tells you someone with that kind of motive in that kind of (social) situation would consider. You use normal solutions to contain holism; individual rationality leads to predictions only within the social bounds on intelligibility.⁸²

The coherence principle, though this further link is only implied in Morton’s description, suggests that a successful interpretation needs the agent under scrutiny to ‘[behave] appropriately given [their] needs and purposes, i.e. rationally’.⁸³

⁷⁸ Matthew Ratcliffe, p. 387.

⁷⁹ Currie.

⁸⁰ Daniel D. Hutto, ‘The Narrative Practice Hypothesis: Clarifications and Implications’, *Philosophical Explorations*, 11 (2008), 175–92 (p. 182).

⁸¹ ‘[T]he doctrine that only whole languages or whole theories or whole belief systems really have meanings, so that the meanings of smaller units – words, sentences, hypotheses, predictions, discourses, dialogues, texts, thoughts, and the like – are merely derivative.’ In relation to desire/belief systems, this suggests that a single desire/belief pairing is given meaning by its relation to the totality of the agent’s desires and beliefs. See: Jerry A. Fodor and Ernest Lepore, *Holism: A Shopper’s Guide* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1993), p. x.

⁸² Adam Morton, ‘Folk Psychology Is Not a Predictive Device’, *Mind*, 105 (1996), 119–37 (p. 129).

⁸³ Joëlle Proust, ‘Intentionality and Evolution’, *Behavioural Processes*, 35 (1996), 275–86 (p. 280).

How It Is works against this framework in a number of ways. Even if parts of the text appear to suggest a kind of quest narrative, this information is not developed in a way which is suggestive of the agent's relation to this quest; his motives, and the assumption that the quest is fulfilling – in the language of philosophy – his 'needs and purposes'. This has clear echoes of the planning structures explored in Chapter One. Again, it is the goal structure of the character which is the intentionalist device. Here though, a clear plan is omitted:

assuming one prefers the order here proposed namely one the journey two the couple three the abandon to that to those to be obtained by starting with the abandon and ending with the journey by way of the couple or by starting with the couple and ending with the

with the couple

by way of the abandon

or of the journey⁸⁴

Insofar as the motive, in the interpretive schema, is supposed to give meaning about the agent's course of action, it should be embedded within a broader social framework. This, of course, is also eroded in *How It Is*, as the setting, 'in the dark the mud',⁸⁵ does not appear to interact with the action in a way which describes the action. In addition, the regulative dimension of the character's action – what apparently endorses the motives of the narrator – is not itself transparent:

a sack no doing without a sack without food when you journey as we have seen should have seen part one no doing without them it's regulated thus we're regulated thus⁸⁶

Like the projected end, 'the true home', here the journeying structure is invoked to justify sub-actions which fall under the main goal. Carrying a sack of food is not just a pragmatic action, but is parodied in its relation to the overall goal-structure of the text. Rather than being a rational or pragmatic choice, the carrying of food is 'regulated'. Here the social

⁸⁴ *How It Is*, p. 126.

⁸⁵ *How It Is*, p. 121.

⁸⁶ *How It Is*, p. 120.

regulations of planning, goals, and transparent action, are parodied in their elevation to structured regulations of the storyworld. This textual misdirection suggests structure and regulation, and in doing so suggests transparency. Transparency in this context would be mimetic clarity or storyworld explanation, which would justify the structures within which action takes place, and therefore the actions themselves. This is withheld. The structure of rationalisation between goal and action is suggested, and then occluded by the lack of substance and explanation behind the ‘regulations’.

This shifting framework limits the effectiveness of a mentalising reading which might attempt to characterise the interpretation of the narrator as distinct from the setting within which he operates. In the real world, because mindreading is based on regulative norms of behaviour within specific frames of social convention, behaviour which is not explainable according to these means might be viewed as irrational:

We can [...] show considerable interpretative ingenuity when called upon to do so; and this may require drawing upon fairly generalized knowledge about the psychological springs of human behaviour in addition to whatever particular knowledge we may have of individual peculiarities. [...] [However], if these moments become too frequent, we abandon our interpretive efforts altogether, adopting an ‘objective’ stance towards those who seem generally unresponsive to folk psychological norms. We judge such individuals to be: ‘eccentric’, ‘irrational’, ‘disordered’, ‘mad’, ‘compelled’, ‘discursively unreachable.’⁸⁷

This description is not entirely transferable. Because the structure of the storyworld is not graspable, the norms which might frame the narrator’s action are not there; the setting is not stable enough to characterise the narrator as simply transgressing normative codes of action. The narrative borders on irrationality by consistently eluding the comprehension of the reader who is constantly attempting to build narrative sense out of discrete actions and descriptions. Beckett courts the effort of comprehension by having the action of the text support itself through references to structures which are external to the characters. This movement is self-referential as it consistently works within the paradigm tension between abstraction and readerly interpretation:

⁸⁷ McGeer, ‘The Regulative Dimension of Folk Psychology’, p. 149.

at the instant Pim leaves me and goes towards the other Bem leaves the other and comes towards me I place myself at my point of view migration of slime-worms then or tailed latrinal scissiparous frenzy days of great gaiety

[...]

or it said in reality now Bem now Bom through carelessness or inadvertence not realizing that it varied I personify it it personifies itself⁸⁸

Here the narrator moves between the self-mentalising ‘point of view’, which is then qualified by the descriptive allusion to the abstract (in this context, synonymous with non-mentalised) ‘slime-worms’, or the bacterial ‘latrinal scissiparous’. The language then turns back against these abstractions with the claim, mentalising in both its emotive and retrospective character, of ‘frenzy days of great gaiety’. Later on that page, the inability to distinguish between ‘Bem now Bom’ points to the structural obliquities of the darkened storyworld. However, these are mitigated by the individuating claim that ‘I personify it’. ‘[I]t personifies itself’, instead of admitting symmetry between the interlocutors, keeps the personification of the narrator closed. In doing so, it ironises the reader’s personification of the characters, and dialogues with the other points of more explicit introspective abstraction, as described above.

The personification of the narrator’s interlocutors is part of a broader dynamic between characters which foregrounds and obscures the communicatory relationship. The sadistic dynamic between the narrator and Pim is introduced as a communicatory tool:

my part who but for me he would never Pim we’re talking of Pim never be but for me anything but a dumb limp lump flat for ever in the mud but I’ll quicken him you wait and see and how I can efface myself behind my creature when the fit takes me now my nails.⁸⁹

At this point, the communicative intention is clear. The narrator sets to work on Pim with his nails because he attempts to enliven him and elicit a bodily response that can be read. Without the nails, Pim would be a ‘dumb limp lump’, uncommunicative both in voice and

⁸⁸ *How It Is*, p. 122.

⁸⁹ *How It Is*, p. 58.

body. Beckett builds on the minimal response elicited by the narrator's nails to produce the sparse conditions needed to invite psycho-narrative readings:

in the dark the mud my head against his my side glued to his my right arm round
his shoulders his cries have ceased we lie thus a good moment they are good
moments

how long thus without motion or sound of any kind were it but of breath vast
stretch of time under my arm now and then a deeper breath heaves him lowly up
leaves him at last sets him slowly down others would say a sigh⁹⁰

Mentalising and narrative practices seem separable by virtue of narrative lack. Psychological reading is invited as a way of filling in the gaps and supplementing the lack of action. This seems to be courted by the narration, which interposes language of potential emotional significance: 'good moments' and an accompanying 'sigh'. These vague communications are recognised by the narrator, who both acknowledges them and deflates their significance. The sigh is what '*others* would say a sigh'⁹¹ and their dysfunctional relationship is set against what the narrator seems to recognise as a norm of meaningful body language:

thus our life in common we begin it thus I do not say it is not said as others at the
end of theirs clinging almost to each other I never saw any it seems never any such
but even beasts observe each other I saw some once it seems and they observing
each other let him understand who has a wish to I have none⁹²

The above excerpts intermittently interact with communicatory processes; these appear as direct (though possibly violent) actions, actions which are associated with specific mental states (such as sighing), and the act of action interpretation itself ('even beasts observe each other'). By touching on these mechanisms, the text directly engages with the idea that character interpretation is psychologised, and stages this psychologisation through the way in which the characters interact. Like the areas of *How It Is* which stage interpretive obstacles through a focus on single character introspection, the communicatory passages

⁹⁰ *How It Is*, pp. 60–1.

⁹¹ *How It Is*, p. 61, my emphasis.

⁹² *How It Is*, p. 61.

are also complicated by an excess of material detail. Here, the narrator is subject to familiar problems of self-interpretation:

then of a sudden like all that starts starts again no knowing set forth forth again ten yard fifteen yards right leg right arm push pull a few images patches of blue a few words no sound cling to species a few sardines yawn of mud burst the sack drivell on drone on in a word the old road⁹³

Set when the (broadly) communicatory relationship has been established with Pim, now the narrator's lack of bodily coherence does not only feed into his self-description, but interacts with the way in which communication itself is understood in the text. Abstracting the narrator's understanding of his own movements has corollary effects on the way in which we understand his communications with Pim, insofar as there is dissonance between the idea that an agent can have communicatory intentions and comprehend the actions of others without access to his own mental states. The play between psychologisation and abstraction is also paralleled in the journeys, which both go 'nowhere' but also need 'correction', and the relationships which are simultaneously symbolic and meaningless. When another agent is found, 'cleave to him give him a name train him up bloody him all over with Roman capitals gorge on his fables'.⁹⁴ Although 'give him a name train him up' doesn't necessarily imply a mentalising attitude, it is hard to reconcile an entirely schematic image of the interlocutor with the idea that he is able to recount fables. As I have emphasised throughout this section, stories tend to be structured and interpreted by mentalising attitudes towards characters. If this is the case, then the idea of telling a story itself implies some psychologising ability which reflects the psychological capabilities of the story-teller himself. Further reflection on the capacities of other characters in the storyworld comes from the structural conditions of the narrator's journeys. The communicative situation, though in this case imposed by the narrator upon his victim, is revealed elsewhere to be a repeating pattern of 'unwitting [...] justice' in which couples are grouped and disbanded with varying dynamics of control and submission:

⁹³ *How It Is*, p. 68.

⁹⁴ *How It Is*, pp. 68–9.

that he was necessarily that ancient other whom it said I had suffered then forsaken to go towards Pim as Pim me suffered then forsaken to go towards his other⁹⁵

In this way, the narrator's communications are not individual, but are the implied conditions of the storyworld in general. Because of this, the intentional nature of his actions becomes particularly important as anecdotal evidence for the mental capacities of the other inhabitants of the mud. The attitudes expressed by the narrator through his relationship are reflexive insofar as his use of the Roman capitals appears to be symbolic – either as capital letters, or in their other symbolic use as numerals – of an underlying code which the markings represent. The narrator's use of this code suggests that he does not only act, but because his marks are symbolic, he acts for reasons. The use of symbols implies that there are intentions behind the actions. In addition, the very act of narration gives the events a specific intentional quality insofar as we assume that the narrator recounts his own actions because those actions are largely intentional. It is part of the communicatory quality of self-description that the content of action-descriptions relates to intentional structures. Without this, action-descriptions would not describe a mental framework of reasons, and as such would be largely content-free in relation to a specific agent.⁹⁶ Because of the structural 'justice' of the storyworld, there is a suggestion that the narrator's mental capabilities are the same as those of his interlocutors, even if this isn't explicit in the events he describes.

This idea is manifest at points in the narrator's use of mentalising discourse in his descriptions of the other characters. While some passages, as above, suggest a mechanised approach, others are distinctly psychologising:

but this man is no fool he must say to himself I would if I were he what does he require of me or better still what is required of me that I am tormented thus and the answer sparsim little by vast tracts of time

not that I should cry that is evident since when I do I am punished instanter

⁹⁵ *How It Is*, p. 123.

⁹⁶ Here I am referring to a distinction in philosophical discussions of intention, which notes that 'intention' is used both to describe both mental and physical events: 'We use the concept of intention to characterise both our actions and our minds. You believe [...] that I have intentionally written this sentence and that I have written it with the intention of illustrating a certain distinction.' Michael Bratman, 'What Is Intention?', in *Intentions in Communication*, ed. by Philip R. Cohen, Jerry L. Morgan, and Martha E. Pollack (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1990), pp. 15–32 (p. 16), original emphasis.

sadism pure and simple no since I may not cry⁹⁷

Here again, the text's experimentalism appears through the play between behaviour described as intentional and claims of meaninglessness. Like the passages analysed above, the narrator again seems to be describing his method of training the other agent, as the content of this ventriloquizing passage describes a punishment-based learning curve. The different quality of this passage, in comparison to the earlier schematic descriptions, is that here the method of training is founded upon the premise that the other agent can reason. Because of this, the learned behaviour does not come about simply through stimulus and response, but is reasoned action in reply to a situation in which he is unable to have an active part. The victim cannot respond in a way that interacts with the narrator's reasons because the motives themselves are unclear; it is 'sadism pure and simple'. At this point, the abstracting technique appears through the mentalising discourse refracted through the narration. This stages the victim's interpretive efforts – which emerge from an assumption that motives and intentions reinforce actions – against the narrator's obscuration of his actions through the removal of intentional structures.

Intention in Beckett has been sparsely commented upon in Beckett studies, though Maude briefly utilises Maurice Merleau-Ponty's definition of the concept. Merleau-Ponty suggests that action can be 'purposive without the agent entertaining a purpose', a definition which contrasts with the philosophers used in this and the previous chapter who largely tie intention to a kind of mentalising attitude toward action.⁹⁸ Despite this difference, in Maude's application of Merleau-Ponty's version of intention to Beckett, she seems to touch upon similar themes to those addressed above: '[in] Beckett [...] the concept of intentionality is problematized. Things may appeal to the characters, but seldom in their expected sense'.⁹⁹ Rather than adhering to plans, Beckett's characters apparently do things 'for no apparent reason at all'.¹⁰⁰ This, Maude suggests, is particularly evident in the journeys of Beckett's characters, which appear to take the form of a quest, but conclude with no clear goal:

The quest, deprived of a reachable goal, becomes devoid of meaning, destructive even, ultimately producing only physical deterioration; to go somewhere in these

⁹⁷ *How It Is*, pp. 69–70.

⁹⁸ Quoted in: Maude, p. 85.

⁹⁹ Maude, p. 86.

¹⁰⁰ Maude, p. 86.

quests is always to end up somewhere else than planned [...] Intentionality and teleology are interrogated, frustrated and ultimately toyed with.¹⁰¹

In this line of argument, Maude suggests that Beckett writes a kind of ‘*negative intentionality*’ in which character movements are better described as ‘spontaneous impulse’ than directional because ‘[instead] of moving towards objects, Beckett’s characters as often as not move away from them’.¹⁰²

Although Maude correctly notes the textual situations in which intentionality is present, her claim of ‘negative intentionality’ moves the discussion away from the important textual role that intention and action play in their common-sense link to mental states. Psychologising discourse, through reasons, intentions, desires and other descriptive motivational states, is vital to the way in which textual action is understood in relation to characters. As such, it has a particular role in the construction of character. As I have tried to make clear above, Beckett obscures these forms of discourse. It is important to note that he does not erase mental description, both in introspection and second-person interpretation. Rather, he untethers psychological descriptions from each other, creating coherence problems between different pictures of motivation which might be built up by the reader. In addition, he obscures the link between character and mental process. This occurs most distinctly in episodes in which the descriptions of bodily processes are exteriorised, because of the implicit rejection of introspective immediacy that this suggests. This has ramifications for the way in which action is understood in the text, because (at the points at which it is in play) it effectively severs action from an agent. In this way, introspective obscuration becomes an interpretive problem by suggesting that actions are not sources of evidential knowledge through which character can be constructed in the text. This claim appears again through the second-person interactions of the narrator, especially through the sadistic quasi-communications that occur between characters. At this point, action is not only subject to self-scrutiny, but becomes a question both of second-person interpretation and nested intentionality; how the narrator interprets the way in which he suspects his victim to understand his actions.

Psychologising discourse is both deeply embedded in the structure of the text, and disrupted in order to obscure its role in the facilitation of character formation. What

¹⁰¹ Maude, p. 87.

¹⁰² Maude, p. 91, original emphasis.

emerges from these distinct points of disruption is a broad picture of the way in which psychologising discourse is commonly attached to character construction. If Beckett's textual disruptions occur across episodes of self-description, second-person description, communication, action, knowledge, planning and goal achievement and attribution, then it becomes clear that psychologising discourse – the 'anthropomorphisation' that Beckett rails against – commonly ties these concepts and anchors them in character and narrative. Severing the ties between each concept while maintaining distinct elements of mentalising description creates play between interpretive effort and frustration which, I have suggested, is crucial to the way in which *How It Is* produces abstraction. The movements of *How It Is* do not operate as a coherent group of features, but pick up and disrupt broad elements of what we understand as agency. By appealing to and subverting a folk sense of the connections between action, introspection, communication and intention, Beckett is picking up on issues of selfhood which have been the questions of philosophical and psychological work through Descartes to contemporary experimentalism. The theoretical approach to agency attempts to tie our experience of agency to investigative insights in a coherent picture. Beckett capitalises on the same conceptions, but utilises them for a very different end.

Chapter Three

Judgment and Agency: Vladimir Nabokov

In the previous chapter, I described how Beckett's writing reacts to the construction of character psychology in the novel. I suggested that his experimentalism can be seen as a specific attack on various forms of agency as they appear in the textual format, disrupting norms of coherence that often follow on from establishing characters within transparent frameworks of action and communication. Insofar as Beckett obscures the mechanisms of agency which build character, his experimentalism can be seen as anti-psychological. Alfred Appel took up a similar topic in his 1967 interview with Vladimir Nabokov. When asked if he thought that 'Robbe-Grillet's novels are as free of "psychology" as he claims',¹ his interviewee suggested the following:

Robbe-Grillet's claims are preposterous. Those manifestos die with the dadas. His fiction is magnificently poetical and original, and the shifts of levels, the interpenetration of successive impressions and so forth belong of course to psychology – psychology at its best.²

Here, Nabokov seems covertly to maintain a stance in favour of 'psychology at its best' through his praise of Robbe-Grillet. Through this phrase, he seems to be suggesting that impressions and descriptions in literature can give a sense of how minds work. This is clearly not opposed to literary experimentation, because the 'shifts of levels' and the 'interpenetration of successive impressions' belong both to the poetic features of text and to the psychological merits of the work, as Nabokov reports them. Brian Boyd, in his characterisation of Nabokov as a psychological author clearly regards the comments on Robbe-Grillet's textual psychologies as self-reflexive. Building the picture of Nabokov's

¹ Appel builds an image of Robbe-Grillet rejecting literary psychology entirely. However, recourse to Robbe-Grillet's writing suggests that he directly rejects, not literary psychology per se, but rather the reductive thematisation of psychology, among other 'meanings', pursued in the novels which he attacks: 'And so we should try to construct a solidier, more immediate world to take the place of this universe of "meanings" (psychological, social, functional meanings). So that the first impact of objects and gestures should be that of their presence, and that this presence should then continue to dominate, taking precedence over any explanatory theory which would attempt to imprison them in some system of reference'. Alain Robbe-Grillet, 'Towards a New Novel', in *Snapshots and Towards a New Novel*, trans. by Barbara Wright (London: Calder and Boyars, 1965), pp. 41–161 (p. 54).

² Alfred Appel Jr. and Vladimir Nabokov, 'An Interview with Vladimir Nabokov', *Wisconsin Studies in Contemporary Literature*, 8 (1967), 127–52 (pp. 141–2).

psychological modes of description, Boyd aligns literary psychology with the imaginative construction of fictional minds. These, he suggests, can act both as triggers and exemplars:

Literature aims to understand human minds only to the degree it seeks to move human minds. It may move readers' minds, in part, by showing with new accuracy or vividness, or at least with fresh particulars, how fictional minds move, and by showing in new ways how freely readers' minds can move, given the right prompts.³

Boyd's comments imply a reactive relationship between 'reader's minds' and 'fictional minds', as if there must be a broad way in which fictional minds are understood, even if this process is dynamic enough to be elaborated upon by the 'new accuracy or vividness' that a particular author might bring to their fictive personalities. In this way, Boyd's comments might be read in line with the idea developed in earlier chapters of the normative elements of our interaction with fiction.

This description notwithstanding, there are still points which qualify the idea of Nabokov's engagement with fictional psychology. For Alfred Appel, for example, the detachment of the Nabokovian narrator creates distance between the reader and the characters in the text. In this way, Appel suggests that the way in which characters are portrayed, the psychology of the characters, is subject to the style of narration. Nabokov's stylised textual comedy is a way of creating this distance:

By parodying the reader's complete, self-indulgent identification with a character, which in its mindlessness limits consciousness, Nabokov is able to create the detachment necessary for a multi-form, spatial view of his novels.⁴

The qualification that Appel is aiming at does not suggest that Nabokov rejects literary psychology. Instead, the rejection of a complete 'identification' between reader and character suggests a self-aware approach to characterisation which qualifies, rather than removes, the psychological access to literary minds. In his dispute with Edmund Wilson

³ Brian Boyd, 'Nabokov as Psychologist: Routes for Exploration', in *Revising Nabokov Revising: Proceedings of the International Nabokov Conference in Kyoto*, ed. by Mitsuyoshi Numano and Tadashi Wakashima (Kyoto: The Nabokov Society of Japan, 2010), pp. 145–54 (p. 153).

⁴ Alfred Appel Jr., 'Nabokov's Puppet Show', in *The Single Voice*, ed. by Jerome Charyn (London: Macmillan, 1969), pp. 76–95 (p. 94).

over *Eugene Onegin*, Nabokov can be seen evidencing a position of this kind. Attacking Wilson, Nabokov articulates a stance toward character interpretation:

Had he read my commentary with more attention he would have seen that I do not believe in *any* kind of ‘interpretation’ so that his or my ‘interpretation’ can be neither a failure nor a success. In other words, I do not believe in the old-fashioned, naïve, and musty method of human-interest criticism championed by Mr. Wilson that consists of removing the characters from an author’s imaginary world to the imaginary, but generally far less plausible, world of the critic who then proceeds to examine these displaced characters as if they were ‘real people.’⁵

Here, Nabokov is not disputing characterisation, or even the idea of character psychology. Instead, his ire is directed specifically at a kind of criticism which seeks to remove characters from the fabric of the literary artifice, and then interpret them as autonomous objects, or as objects within a setting determined by the critic. In this, there is a qualification of character psychology. Taken with his comments on Robbe-Grillet, Nabokov can be seen to recognise the link between characterisation and psychology, but only insofar as characterisation per se must take part within the context of a fictional work. Character psychology too, then, is deeply embedded in the structure through which it is articulated. Layered into these qualifications remains the idea of a ‘psychology’ insofar as the character still needs to reflect the norms and experiences through which we experience the mind. In his rejection of the ‘real people’ view of the novel, he is not dismissing the idea that character construction can reflect insights into the mind, but rather the critic who tries to impose these insights after first dissociating the character from their artistic context within the text.

This chapter focuses on Nabokov’s novel *Pale Fire*, a text with particularly prominent formal features. Because of this, the responses to *Pale Fire* have often avoided fielding questions of character psychology through commentary on the overt structural features of the novel. Boyd, in his biography of Nabokov, goes to some length to explain how the psychological elements of *Pale Fire* are deeply connected to the structural relations between the characters. A refractive characterisation develops Kinbote and John Shade through their own textual artefacts – Kinbote’s Introduction and Commentary, and Shade’s

⁵ Vladimir Nabokov, ‘Reply to My Critics’, in *Nabokov’s Congeries*, ed. by Page Stegner (New York, NY: Viking Press, 1968), pp. 300–324 (p. 321), original emphasis.

poem, 'Pale Fire' – and through the anecdotal evidence which emerges in the play between them. For Boyd, the deep structural artifice of the novel does not detract from its being a picture of character psychology, but builds it up. Boyd's analysis of the novel draws heavily on mentalising language to explain the dichotomy set up between the central protagonists, Shade and Kinbote:

Kinbote's commentary yields to the lurch of his obsessions, and ranges from comic self-satisfaction [...] to helpless panic [...]. Nabokov contrasts Shade's self-control and Kinbote's emotional riots, Shade's love for Sybil and Kinbote's desperate loneliness, Shade's kindness and sensitivity and Kinbote's crazy selfishness. Shade embodies the imagination at its best [...]; Kinbote's deranged mind represents the imagination not as escapee but as jailer, herding everything he sees into the dungeon of his own crazy ego.⁶

The ideas of formalist intricacies and psychological nuance, then, appear to be reconcilable. There is a strong critical tradition of viewing Nabokov as a game-playing formalist, especially in responses to *Pale Fire*. Since Mary McCarthy's 'Bolt from the Blue', emphasis has been laid on game-like interactions in the structure of the novel; the symmetries and doublings which mimic the moves on a chess board:

Chess is the perfect mirror-game, with the pieces drawn up confronting each other as in a looking-glass; moreover, castle, knight, and bishops have their twins as well as their opposite numbers.⁷

The formal intricacies of Nabokov's writing have often been echoed by a critical response with a strong aestheticist leaning. Despite this common approach, there have always been readings which have attempted to reconcile the formal elements of Nabokov's work with broadly humanist concerns. Even in McCarthy's early response, she suggestively picks out the 'moral truth' that is embedded within the novel's games. Similarly, Robert Alter suggests a trajectory in which Nabokov's development of formal play, the 'artful designs in words', is paralleled by an increasingly 'poignant intensity of life' in the characters.⁸

⁶ Brian Boyd, *Vladimir Nabokov: The American Years* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1991), p. 435.

⁷ Mary McCarthy, 'A Bolt from the Blue', in *The Writing on the Wall and other Literary Essays* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1970), pp. 15–35 (p. 22).

⁸ Robert Alter, *Partial Magic: The Novel as a Self-Conscious Genre* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1975), p. 183.

Responding to what she viewed as a critical over-emphasis on Nabokov's aestheticism, Ellen Pifer's *Nabokov and the Novel* expands at book-length the vital interaction between the formalist structures of his novels and the ethical, humanist, and psychological elements which are embedded within those structures.⁹ More recently, Thomas Karshan has adeptly shown how Nabokov's close interpretation of, and allusions to, the history of literary play provides layers of moral meaning in the characterisations of John Shade and Charles Kinbote in *Pale Fire*.¹⁰

This chapter will explore Nabokov's engagement with character psychology and its link with ethics in *Pale Fire*. I do this through three sections which explore the characters of Kinbote, Jack Grey and John Shade. These analyses have slightly different theoretical foci, but are all concerned with the ways in which Nabokov portrays the embedding of agency and action within normative structures of morality and judgment. The section on Kinbote takes the form of a long exegesis of a specific episode in the novel in which Kinbote puts forward the contentious claim that he attempted to block John Shade's body from the bullet that killed him. The actual substance of the claim is not what is contentious, but rather the investment and emphasis that Kinbote puts on his act of failed heroism. This act has structural significance, because, as I will explore in detail below, the claim of heroism directly contradicts Kinbote's underlying Zembla narrative. In relation to the representation of agency, Kinbote's heroism has two threads of interest. Firstly, Kinbote uses the language of moral-value to frame his action. Morality is closely tied to intentionality insofar as judgment and responsibility is usually apportioned on condition of an agent acting voluntarily. This presents a separate problem of interpretation for Kinbote's narrative because his heroism relies on a reading of his actions as spontaneous, a condition which is theoretically problematic in action theory. To explore the different factors and complications involved in Kinbote's claim of heroism, I spend much of this section moving between different ways in which the interaction between morality and intention has been theorised. This begins with a discussion of the structural condition of the Principle of Alternate Possibilities and its role within action theory. From here, I move to philosophical attempts to describe intentionality within spontaneous action. These structural approaches give way to theories which have attempted to approach intention *through* morality, rather than as a precondition of morality. To illustrate this, I explore P.F.

⁹ Ellen Pifer, *Nabokov and the Novel* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1980).

¹⁰ Thomas Karshan, 'Pale Fire and the Genre of the Literary Game', in *Vladimir Nabokov and the Art of Play* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), pp. 195–232.

Strawson's notion of reactive attitudes, and Bernard Spencer's moral luck. It is through this systematic approach that I hope to elucidate the processes and structures which are at work in Kinbote's claim. Through this I make clear the deep embedding of Kinbote's self-representation in structures of agency.

The exploration of Kinbote's heroism is a way of describing the ways in which Nabokov evokes an overbearing and subtly transgressive character portrait. This is in strong contrast with his portrayal of the assassin Jack Grey, which is the focus of the second part of this chapter. Here I build on the idea developed in Chapters One and Two, that readers approach fiction attempting to fulfil a set of broad coherence norms in relation to characterisation and in particular, the way in which actions are connected to the inference of motives. This approach aligns coherence and intention, which means that non-intentional, sub-agential, or radically transgressive actions require different modes of literary portrayal. I explore the formal devices which Nabokov uses to present Jack Grey as a kind of non-agent, and its link with his portrayal of Kinbote. The final section of this chapter focuses on Nabokov's portrayal of John Shade. Like Kinbote, Shade adopts the structures of morality as a way of positively coding his self-description. Whereas Kinbote's moral agency is focussed around a specific action – a distinct physical event – Shade operates within the broader agential concepts of loss and control. These emerge through his poem in relation to the death of his daughter, and the idea of poetic control becomes a way of reframing his agency. I explore the similarities in structure between Shade's ideas of aesthetic control, and the way in which morality is often framed by philosophers. Both of these models rely on the idea that a personal action is validated through its congruence with a framework of value. However, while a moral framework operates as a set of external conditions, Shade's personal value system relies upon a circular process of self-validation. I explore this difference as a representation of the relation between action and autonomy in the book.

Kinbote's Models of Agency

As I have suggested in earlier chapters, the constitution of agency occurs, in part, through an understanding of how behaviour relates to thought structures. Nabokov's *Pale Fire* brings a different emphasis to this discussion by raising questions of how moral judgment relates to agency, both through the ways in which judgment is implicit in some character actions, and how Nabokov uses specific characterisations within the novel to explore the

idea of morality as an aspect of the way in which actions and agency are understood, interpreted and reinterpreted by agents. This is the case both for first- and third-person understanding, characters interpreting themselves and characters interpreting each other. These broader philosophical problems are also closely entwined with the formal elements of the book, and act in tandem with Nabokov's stylistic demands. Through the relationship of Kinbote and John Shade, in particular, Nabokov largely constructs a picture of the accretion of minor interpersonal transgressions; not moral issues as such, but social misfires and invasions of privacy. However, late in the novel – in the last moments of Shade's life – Nabokov creates an intricacy of characterisation and formal bravura which offers a dissection of how agency is related to moral judgment. At this point, there is a potentially clear ethical position at stake because, in his recollections, Kinbote claims to have attempted, in an act of heroism, to bodily shield John Shade from the bullets that kill him.

This event happens towards the end of *Pale Fire*, at which point Nabokov presents the reader with an unsolvable problem. This riddle does not appear to be just another one of the intra-referential games that structure the book, but concerns a specific point at which Kinbote's story seems to break down in his telling of it. Immediately following the completion of the poem 'Pale Fire', John Shade is invited by Kinbote to share his finished work over 'half a gallon of Tokay' at the Goldsworth house, which Kinbote rents.¹¹ Crossing the road between their homes, Shade and Kinbote notice a caller at the Goldsworths' house whom Kinbote first believes to be a door-knocking evangelical, but who is actually Gradus, the man that Kinbote (a disguised king, of course) claims has come to assassinate him. This case of misidentification provides the first of the equivocations which characterize the scene. Kinbote starts towards the caller and is ahead of Shade when Gradus opens fire. This spatial positioning leads to the main complication in the scene: whether Kinbote shields, or does not shield, John Shade from Gradus's bullets. Kinbote gives a dramatic account:

His first bullet ripped a sleeve button off my black blazer, another sang past my ear. It is piffle to assert that he aimed not at me (whom he had just seen in the library – let us be consistent, gentlemen, ours is a rational world after all), but at the gray-locked gentleman behind me. [...] I instinctively backed, bellowing and

¹¹ Vladimir Nabokov, *Pale Fire* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1962), p. 288.

spreading my great strong arms [...] in an effort to halt the advancing madman and shield John, whom I feared he might, quite accidentally, hit ¹²

Kinbote also includes reports from his gardener and from Sybil Shade. The gardener was a witness, but Sybil arrives at the scene after the main events have played out:

Shade's widow found herself so deeply affected by the idea of my having "thrown myself" between the gunman and his target that during a scene I shall never forget, she cried out, stroking my hands: "There are things for which no recompense in this world or another is great enough".¹³

We have the distinct sense that Kinbote has misreported Sybil's words and gestures. There is an uncomfortable dissonance in the way the grieving widow apparently cries out *and* strokes Kinbote's hand, which is compounded by the deeply ambiguous use of the word 'recompense'. The positive context in which Kinbote uses the word seems to assume that Sybil wants to compensate him for his efforts, but this works against the more common usage of recompense as atonement for wrongdoing. In the latter, more likely, usage Sybil might be damning either Kinbote or Shade's killer. However, in the context in which Kinbote places Sybil's statement, she is ostensibly testifying to his goodness, and this bolsters his own claim that he spread his arms in order to 'halt the advancing madman and shield John'.¹⁴ The question of Kinbote's heroism seems inconsequential at first, but Sybil's possible contestation places his intentions directly under critical focus.

The gardener's report, the only witness account of events, provides the clearest insight into the equivocation, as it juxtaposes two vitally related phenomena:

My good gardener, when enthusiastically relating to everybody what he had seen, certainly erred in several respects – not so much perhaps in his exaggerated account of my "heroism" as in the assumption that Shade had been deliberately aimed at ¹⁵

Mediated by Kinbote, the uneasy entanglement of his 'heroism' and the 'assumption that Shade had been deliberately aimed at' becomes clear: Kinbote's heroism is not separate from, but actually predicated on the idea that the gunman was aiming at John Shade.

¹² *Pale Fire*, p. 294.

¹³ *Pale Fire*, p. 298.

¹⁴ *Pale Fire*, p. 298.

¹⁵ *Pale Fire*, p. 298.

Without that, the claim becomes untenable; Kinbote could not have tried to shield Shade had he not thought that Shade was under fire. This has larger ramifications for our understanding of Kinbote because the will to shield Shade seems entirely at odds with his professed claim to Zemblan heritage. Kinbote could only step into the line of fire if he thought that Shade was the target, and if Kinbote believed Shade to be the target then he could not, in the moment of attack, have thought himself an ex-king worthy of assassination.

This event is just one of many points in *Pale Fire* at which we see cracks in Kinbote's Zembla-narrative. More interestingly, the scene offers an opportunity to analyse the fabrication by focussing on the ways in which Nabokov presents Kinbote's intentional states. The action matrix is incommensurable, which means that both Kinbote's action, and the reasons we might suggest for his action, are suspended and reduced to conjecture. The scene is equivocal because there is not a clear trajectory between reasons for action, and the action itself. The story that Kinbote presents produces a mismatch between the motives that we might expect of the King of Zembla, and the actions of an unexpectedly heroic émigré academic. Because of the equivocations between motive, action, and report, the scene is amenable to testing against philosophical models, the use of which can clarify the relevancy of different readings of Kinbote's intentional states. More pertinently, it raises the question as to how our judgement of Kinbote is related to the way in which we read his intentions.

Kinbote's action takes the reader to a consideration of choice in the novel; we are led to question the distinction between Kinbote's spontaneous action under Gradus's fire, and his reimagining of these actions in retrospect. The gulf is between what Thomas Nagel terms the internal and external standpoints.¹⁶ The internal view is the phenomenological perspective from inside the acting agent, and the external view is the self-reflective gaze that weighs the actions of the self and demands control of them. There is a conflict here, Nagel notes, between the agent and the ever-questioning external view which destabilizes the reasons for action. Kinbote's re-imagining of the scene in his commentary has a dual role. It needs to suggest the element of choice that he felt at the point of choosing to shield John Shade. This is vital for the sense that Kinbote was acting out of choice. However, the retrospective viewpoint suggests that Kinbote's narrative is also subject to the doubts and

¹⁶ Nagel, *View*, p. 110.

vagaries that emerge through scrutiny of past action; the possible uncertainty about how or why he did act as he did. These questions become especially pertinent in relation to Kinbote's heroism, because of the tenuousness of the narrative itself, and the slippery nature of the action in question. To try and explain the different processes and questions that are at work in Kinbote's claim, I move to a series of theoretical positions which aim to show what factors are at play, both in the self-interpretation and observation of agency.

The Principle of Alternate Possibilities (PAP) is a staple of action theory. Its intuitive power attempts to capture the feeling of choice that appears to drive our feeling of agency. William James summarises the intuition, and problem, involved in the principle:

[D]ecisions, for him who makes them, are altogether peculiar psychic facts. Self-luminous and self-justifying at the living moment at which they occur, they appeal to no outside moment to put its stamp upon them or make them continuous with the rest of nature. Themselves it is rather who seem to make nature continuous; and in their strange and intense function of granting consent to one possibility and withholding it from another, to transform an equivocal and double future into an inalterable and simple past.¹⁷

The choice, at the moment of making it, regards a future that is 'equivocal and double', but once the act is done, what was open becomes a finalized past. At this point, Nagel's external perspective becomes operative. While the internal perspective is content with experiencing action 'as part of the course of events in a world', the external view aims to isolate the distinct feature of autonomy that the agent gave to the action.¹⁸ According to Nagel, the external perspective seeks an impossible 'explanation [...] which is complete in itself and renders illegitimate all further requests for explanation of [our] action as an event in the world'.¹⁹ Even if we base our motives for action on an objective rationale, the external view can still reduce our reasons to an infinite regress. The desire of the external position, Nagel suggests, is insatiable:

However much harmony with an objective view we may achieve in action, we can always undermine the sense of our own autonomy by reflecting that the chain of

¹⁷ William James, 'The Dilemma of Determinism', in *The Will to Believe* (New York, NY: Dover Publications, 1956), pp. 145–83 (p. 158).

¹⁸ Nagel, *View*, p. 113.

¹⁹ Nagel, *View*, p. 117.

explanation or absence of explanation for this harmony can be pursued till it leads outside our lives.²⁰

The sense that we have alternate possibilities can be seen as a corollary to Nagel's impossible position. The same external view that might seek reasons for our actions appears very similar to the view that probes the choices that were available when acting. Attempting to solidify one's reasons for acting is to assert agential control in a way that also regards the roads not taken. PAP is a connective feature between the phenomenology of action, and the retrospective questioning which situates any act within a web of possible acts.

The slippage between the action and a retrospective view of the action means that, when analyzing *Pale Fire*, two distinct questions need to be considered: why did Kinbote act in the way he did? And, why does he narrate the action in the way he does? The first of these questions is impossible to answer, because our information is entirely focalized through Kinbote's narration. However, taking it into account as a question is still necessary, both in order to distinguish what is at stake in his narration and in order to measure his actions in the death scene against his actions at other moments in an attempt to form a coherent storyworld. Noting the position of PAP within the scene gives some sense of how, when we read for action we are also reading for choice. This quickly becomes a moral question. PAP is not just a way of characterising the feeling of choice. In philosophical arguments, PAP has long been established as a necessary condition for moral responsibility.

Peter van Inwagen suggests that, when we claim that an agent could have done otherwise, we are also claiming that 'a necessary condition for holding an agent responsible for an act is believing that the agent *could have* refrained from performing that act'.²¹ In addition, PAP, as a way of divining moral judgement, is intuitively compelling because it focuses on the idea of free action in its difference from restriction and coercion. Although this focus makes PAP essential in various approaches to the free will problem, the theory is not uncontested.²² The idea of alternate possibilities comes to the fore in Shade's death scene

²⁰ Nagel, *View*, p. 136.

²¹ Peter van Inwagen, 'The Incompatibility of Free Will and Determinism', *Philosophical Studies*, 27 (1975), 185–99 (p. 189), original emphasis.

²² The validity of PAP was called into question through counterexample in: Frankfurt, 'Alternate Possibilities and Moral Responsibility'. Frankfurt's opposition to PAP responds to what he views as a philosophical platitude that moral responsibility is dependent on the freedom to do otherwise. This paper brought the topic into critical focus and began the modern debate on the Principle of Alternate Possibilities.

because coercion and choice are combined; Kinbote still seems to make an active choice, even under fire in the moment. Because he takes the heroic route, there is a sense that he could have done otherwise; the easier route would have been to cower from the bullets, and his resistance to this coerced action appears to be an active display of agency. His actions strain against the compelling force of Gradus and are heroic for that reason, so the account of his behaviour that he sets up – and wishes to be judged by – is intimately related to the intuitive moral force of alternate possibilities. PAP, then, helps to broadly clarify the positive image of moral agency that Kinbote is attempting to present.

Although this probing helps with a general characterization of Kinbote, further investigation reveals how Nabokov produces the scene to render hunting for intentions fruitless. If Kinbote *did* shield John Shade, his reasons for doing so are unclear, which is part of the problem. The scant suggestions of purpose behind Kinbote's heroism direct us not towards his great love for Shade, but towards his fanaticism about the poem. An odd atmosphere in the scene arises from the disparity between Kinbote's love of the poem and his offhand treatment of Shade's corpse. An 'inward leap of exultation' accompanies Kinbote's capture of 'the large envelope' that holds the finished poem, and in the death scene, any short moments of good feeling towards Shade are clouded in metaphysical triteness:

I felt – I still feel – John's hand fumbling at mine, seeking my fingertips, finding them, only to abandon them at once as if passing to me, in a sublime relay race, the baton of life.²³

Other moments just convey a peculiar callousness: Kinbote 'dialed 11111 and returned with a glass of water to the scene of the carnage', at a point when Shade was already dead on the ground. Reflecting on Shade lying 'prone on the ground with a red spot on his white shirt', Kinbote writes: 'I still hoped he had not been killed'.²⁴ This statement is incongruously obvious as Kinbote's friendship with Shade is emphasised in much of his commentary. Assuming that friendship involves mutual good feeling, we might safely conjecture that Kinbote would never hope that Shade *had* been killed.

²³ *Pale Fire*, p. 294.

²⁴ *Pale Fire*, p. 295.

If Kinbote did act in the heroic way that he claims, then the motives that might be readily inferred, such as his love for Shade, are peculiarly buried by his own narrative of the event. Despite this incongruity, the act remains possible, though not automatically plausible, because nothing in the novel makes it impossible. The absence of continuity between character and action then forces us to read the action as spontaneous, which in turn raises further problems in the search for intention. Reading intention into spontaneous actions is especially difficult because they are not as closely wedded to extended and end-directed intentional structures. The obvious repercussion of such a reading strategy is that we might be led to structure an interpretation around inferences that are based on conjecture about characters' sub-intentional states. This approach seems especially open to abuse, and calls to mind Michael Wood's warning that reading *Pale Fire* by 'tagging what we think is real and using it as an explanation for the rest' is largely unhelpful.²⁵ The shifting levels of truth, the interpenetration of Kinbote's real- and fantasy-worlds, and their interplay with Shade's poem mean that there simply is not enough evidence available in the text to form a stable and coherent 'real' world which stands in contrast with a 'false' world. Appropriate caution notwithstanding, a turn to phenomenological forms of action theory can at least help to explore the fringes of agency that Kinbote's heroism takes us to.

Spontaneous action provides an interesting counterexample to the philosophical emphasis on the structural norms of agency. This is the case both because spontaneous actions are often intentional (both in the way they are interpreted by the agent, and in the way other agents respond to them), and because they appear to fall outside a clear theoretical model of intention. John Searle notes this form of intentionality as occurring 'in action'; the intention occurs through the very action as it is being carried out, which one can '[perform] quite spontaneously without forming consciously or unconsciously any prior intention to do those things'.²⁶ Carl Ginet also suggests that 'a voluntary exertion could occur [...] quite spontaneously, without being preceded by any distinct state of desiring or intending', and 'it would still be an action'.²⁷ Here the 'distinct state' is an internal sense of making a decision to act, and as such, it is a loose experiential measure of agency. Similarly, Michael Bratman has an example for this same phenomenon:

²⁵ Michael Wood, *The Magician's Doubts: Nabokov and the Risks of Fiction* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1994), p. 179.

²⁶ Searle, p. 52.

²⁷ Carl Ginet, *On Action* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), p. 9.

Are there cases of spontaneous activity that, while plausibly classified as intentional, do not involve anything reasonably identifiable as an intention to act? If you unexpectedly throw a ball to me I might reach up and catch it. I catch it intentionally, but perhaps my catching it involves no intention to do something.²⁸

The problem with these cases is the way in which they interact with the usual way of theorising intention within the analytic tradition. If intention is usually thought to precede an action, then the idea of an intentional action which can occur without forethought proves a challenge to the orthodoxy. There is confusion here as to the quality that a spontaneous action should have. Elsewhere, Bratman offers two responses to the problem, neither of which seems to capture the sense of intention that we have in mind in the characterisation of spontaneous action. Bratman's first response is to suggest that spontaneous action is simply not intentional in the way in which we usually use the term. This evades the need to unify a broad definition of intention (in Bratman's case, intention as a function within planning structures), with the immediacy of spontaneous action. Bratman's second response is to suggest that a spontaneous action might find some unification with a broad definition of intention if it is thought to represent a 'long-standing personal policy'.²⁹ In this move, Bratman is attempting to suggest that broad planning structures can embed intentions in such a way that actions can occur in line with a general policy, though not in a way which suggests full conscious intention during a very compressed moment of action.

Bratman's position can be read in broad congruence with other philosophers who have emphasised the possibility of moral action that occurs outside a distinct moment of choice. In this, these theorists are rejecting the dominance of PAP models in theories of moral attribution. Richard Holton recognises that, although there are situations in which an agent quite explicitly needs to make a choice, there are also numerous situations in which 'agents frequently just know what to do; they do not need to make a choice'.³⁰ Daniel Dennett makes similar claims. In moral philosophy, he notes, 'the decisions that "might go either way," are not the only, or even the most frequent, sorts of decisions for which we hold people responsible'.³¹ In many cases the agent has trained themselves to automatically act

²⁸ Bratman, 'Two Faces of Intention', p. 395, note 26.

²⁹ Bratman, *Intention*, p. 126.

³⁰ Richard Holton, *Willing, Wanting, Waiting* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), p. 53.

³¹ Daniel C. Dennett, *Elbow Room* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984), p. 135.

in certain circumstances. In these cases, they are voluntarily unable to do otherwise. These approaches make room for the idea that there are cases that are deeply rooted in habit, training, or personal commitment in which action is not a matter of choice, but is still representative of the agent; a coherence between a specific (possibly non-conscious) action and a general (conscious) commitment to acting in that way. This is germane to the notion of spontaneous action, because it represents a type of agency which occurs so quickly that there is no distinct moment of choice or intention.

Different approaches, such as that of Thomas Metzinger, avoid tying the term ‘intention’ to the case of spontaneous action. Metzinger avoids this by moving to the less theory-laden terminology of ‘agency’. Here, he structures his argument using a broadly phenomenological approach: ‘Imagine snatching a child away from a fastly approaching car. We have a full-blown experience of agency, but no subjective experience of any preceding volitional process’.³² From this, Metzinger suggests that the phenomenology of volition and the phenomenology of agency are separate and can operate in isolation. Despite this useful separation, the task still remains to characterise what is meant by ‘agency’ in this context, and how this relates to the way in which this kind of agency is interpreted. One important point which Metzinger does emphasise is the phenomenological evidence for agency. Here, the theoretical puzzle he extracts concerns the slippage between the way in which we feel we have acted, and the theoretical framework that exists to characterise this kind of action. The feeling of agency suggests that we feel that spontaneous action can be intentional, even if theoretical renderings of this sense are problematic. He draws on the phenomenology of agency to suggest that the theory of action alone is insufficient on this question.

Other theorists have responded to this slippage. One seminal response is P.F. Strawson’s ‘Freedom and Resentment’. Strawson reframes the question of responsibility, moving it away from theoretical posturing (in this case metaphysical arguments regarding free will and determinism), and toward an ethical viewpoint drawn from what he suggests is a broad phenomenology of judgement and agency. Strawson sketches two responses to the problem of free will, one ‘optimist’ and the other ‘pessimist’ about the concept of determinism. These responses focus on the way in which moral responsibility interacts

³² Thomas Metzinger, ‘Conscious Volition and Mental Representation: Toward a More Fine-Grained Analysis’, in *Disorders of Volition*, ed. by Natalie Sebanz and Wolfgang Prinz (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2006), pp. 19–48 (p. 25).

with determinism; whether (for the optimist), moral responsibility is compatible with determinism, or (for the pessimist) the possibility that moral responsibility is not compatible with determinism. The response in both of these cases is broadly freedom-centred, insofar as they begin from the premise of freedom. For the optimist, the ‘facts as we know them’ includes the existence of ‘freedom’ as ‘the identification of the will with the act’.³³ The pessimist might concede this fact, but still suggest that this variety of freedom is not compatible, does not provide ‘the right *sort* of basis’ for the assignment of praise and blame as we commonly understand it.³⁴ The optimist’s conception of freedom might allow an altered conception of responsibility, but not the one that we commonly take to be the case, i.e. responsible action is only responsible if it is the product of an agent who self-determined that action; not one whose actions have been determined before he plays them out. In this debate, the argument begins with the idea of freedom, and attempts to develop a model of responsibility that fits the conditions that this idea permits. The pessimist suggests that the only model of freedom that would allow for a satisfactory idea of responsibility is one that is incompatible with determinism.

Rather than analysing the structural or logical conditions of freedom, Strawson tries to capture what sense of freedom is in use when we talk about the assignment of moral judgment. This, he suggests, can be found in our ‘reactive attitudes’.³⁵ These include ‘resentment and gratitude’ and a ‘whole continuum of reactive attitude and feeling stretching on both sides of these’.³⁶ Such attitudes occur in personal response to other agents’ actions, but are subject to wide variation and intensity in relation to the way in which we understand the link between the action, the agent’s intentions, and general external conditions which might mitigate blame. These personal reactive attitudes are also the basis for broader, third-person, moral codes insofar as they are ‘generalized or vicarious analogues’ of the second-person form.³⁷ In addition, just as the personal reactive attitudes can be abstracted to vicarious forms, they can also turn inward as ‘self-reactive attitudes associated with demands on oneself for others’.³⁸ Strawson suggests that ‘all these types of attitude alike have common roots in our human nature and our membership

³³ P. F. Strawson, ‘Freedom and Resentment’, in *Freedom and Resentment and Other Essays* (London: Routledge, 2008), pp. 1–28 (p. 4).

³⁴ Strawson, p. 4, original emphasis.

³⁵ Strawson, p. 6.

³⁶ Strawson, p. 7.

³⁷ Strawson, p. 15.

³⁸ Strawson, p. 16.

of human communities³⁹ and as such develop a framework of what Bratman terms a ‘naturalistic social psychology’.⁴⁰

Because the reactive attitudes, in all forms, ‘involve, or express, a certain sort of demand for inter-personal regard’, this creates a norm of interaction which can be transgressed.⁴¹ The general attitude toward other agents is one which recognises their moral responsibility; this is the reactive attitude. The opposite of this would be the situation in which an individual is judged not to be a full member of the moral community, an agent ‘whose behaviour, or as part of whose behaviour, is unintelligible to us, perhaps even to him, in terms of conscious purposes, and intelligible only in terms of unconscious purposes’.⁴² This kind of agent is better understood, Strawson suggests, not through reactive attitudes, but through an objective stance. His concluding position is that attention to the ‘range of attitudes’ present in moral talk give some sense of the richness of what we speak of when ‘we speak of desert, responsibility, guilt, condemnation, and justice’. These attitudes resist the kind of schematisation that is needed in reconciliation with determinism, or the rejection which is encountered in the strong determinist position. Instead, a ‘surrender of [...] metaphysics’ appears the appropriate response to the common moral attitudes which resist schematic or rational demands.⁴³

Strawson’s prioritisation of the moral reactive attitude puts the question of spontaneous action in a different light. The above theorists all attempt to align the traditional concept of intention – referring to the idea that a specific mental state precedes a correlating action – with the idea of spontaneous intentional action which is somehow without this special mental precedent, or which frames intention differently. A Strawsonian approach might move away from attempting to align these within a single description of intention as a mental state with a specific relationship to an action. Instead, an intentional action might be better characterised by its relation to the reactive attitudes which it produces. This is the position of Joshua Knobe and Arudra Burra, whose experimental work attempts to picture intentionality through its interactive relationship with attribution of responsibility:

³⁹ Strawson, p. 17.

⁴⁰ Michael Bratman, ‘Responsibility and Planning’, in *Faces of Intention: Selected Essays on Intention and Agency* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), pp. 165–84 (p. 172).

⁴¹ Strawson, p. 17.

⁴² Strawson, p. 18.

⁴³ Strawson, p. 24.

Perhaps the concept of acting intentionally is radically unlike the concept of intention. We said above that the concept of intention functions to facilitate predictions of behaviour. But perhaps the concept of acting intentionally does not work like that; perhaps it should be understood primarily as a tool for making judgments about whether people deserve moral praise or blame for their behaviour.⁴⁴

Working specifically with the idea of spontaneous action, Bratman touches on similar content when he notes that spontaneous actions can be the expression of ‘responsible agency’ even if they occur outside the planning frameworks which often embed actions in relation to broader goals:

In a moment of pique I slap you. I do this intentionally but spontaneously. My slapping you is not explicitly embedded by me into a larger plan of mine. In slapping you I do not exercise any special capacities for planning. Yet you would resent me, and I should feel guilty and shamed. This was not, after all, a nervous tic, or an epileptic seizure.⁴⁵

Here, he shifts focus of the problem away from the way in which spontaneous actions should be structured within a specific theory of intention, and moves the attention instead to the way in which spontaneous actions are recognised as events which are still subject to judgments of moral responsibility. Although he does not follow this line of argument, Bratman seems to imply that our reactive attitudes (in this example, resentment) to a spontaneous action – such as his slap – validate the characterisation of the action as intentional, or at least, as he qualifies elsewhere, ‘under the agent’s voluntary control and [...] purposive’.⁴⁶ In addition, the agent themselves has a specific reaction toward their own action, one of guilt and shame, which also seems to warrant the tie between the agent and their action through the language of intentionality.

This framework points to further conditions to be taken into account when attempting to decipher the moral attributions that Nabokov is playing on in this scene. The argument drawn from ‘Freedom and Resentment’ suggests that intentionality can be attributed, not

⁴⁴ Joshua Knobe and Arudra Burra, ‘The Folk Concepts of Intention and Intentional Action: A Cross-Cultural Study’, *Journal of Cognition and Culture*, 6 (2006), 113–32 (p. 114).

⁴⁵ Bratman, ‘Responsibility and Planning’, p. 169.

⁴⁶ Bratman, *Intention*, p. 126, he adds a sense that the action in this case is ‘not intentional’ though ‘not unintentional’.

just based on the theoretical embedding of an action, but from the reactive attitudes that an action incites. This seems adequate to characterise a spontaneous action as praise or blameworthy because in many cases it seems to be the outcome, rather than the distinct state of premeditation, volition, or planning intention, that is taken into account. However, in the case of Kinbote, this argument becomes more complex. In the assessment of Kinbote's action, it is clear that the spontaneity of the action and its intentional quality are not even the main foci of moral assessment; they are relevant only insofar as Kinbote is drawing heavily on the idea of intentionality to position his heroic narrative. For the reader, the effectiveness of Kinbote's action would have been the clearest indication of his heroism. However, because he fails to shield John Shade, Kinbote is attempting to promote a positive moral assessment of himself, despite the fact that his actions – no matter how they were intended – were not causally effective.

In this, there is recognition that moral assessment involves two separate elements of judgment; both the agent's *intentions* and the *causal* efficacy of their actions are taken into account. This distinction becomes salient at points at which these separate considerations are not aligned. A key strand of moral philosophy that has brought this disjunct to attention is the area of moral luck. Moral luck recognises the difference in moral assessment between actions which have the same intentional content, but different causal outcomes. Fiery Cushman's example of this is as follows:

On a snowy January Sunday, Hal and Peter watch football and share beers at a local bar. Both drive away intoxicated, and both lose control of their cars on the slick roads. Hal collides with a neighbour's tree, but Peter collides with a young girl playing in the snow. In the state of Massachusetts, Hal can expect a \$250 fine for driving under the influence of alcohol. Peter faces a minimum of 2.5 years in prison – and up to 15 years – for vehicular manslaughter.⁴⁷

In experimental work which has sought to characterise cases like this, Cushman suggests that there is a distinction between the 'wrongness' and 'blameworthiness' of an action. Because the intentional content of both Hal and Peter's cases appears to be the same, there seems to be a tendency to view both actions as equally wrong. However, because they have very different causal outcomes, we tend to recognise a difference in blameworthiness

⁴⁷ Fiery Cushman, 'Crime and Punishment: Distinguishing the Roles of Causal and Intentional Analyses in Moral Judgment', *Cognition*, 108 (2008), 353–80 (p. 354).

between the actions. Because of this, differential punishment is warranted. This despite the background intuition – here articulated by Nagel – that intentional content is the key to attributing blame:

Prior to reflection it is intuitively plausible that people cannot be morally assessed for what is not their fault, or for what is due to factors beyond their control.⁴⁸

Bernard Williams, like Strawson, moves toward an assessment of reactive attitudes rather than attempting to overly schematise the relationship between intentional and causal content. Williams explains that the common-sense way in which we link responsibility and voluntary action is not as a tight link, but dependent on circumstance, other causes, and effects that exceed the agent's control. Regret is a fluid concept that negotiates the way in which we recognise the extent of our agency, even when the outcome does not align with our intentions. When the things we do turn out wrong, regret is no longer the regret of a spectator, but an 'agent's regret':

[Regret] moves back to the moment of deliberation and actions, and you regret acting as you did. This still need not imply that you deliberated carelessly; you may have deliberated as well as you could, but you still deeply regret that that was how the deliberation went, and that this was what you did [...] it is the nature of action that such regrets cannot be eliminated, that one's life could not be partitioned into some things that one does intentionally and other things that merely happen to one.⁴⁹

Although agent-regret pertains primarily to first-person feeling about one's own actions, Williams expands the notion to cover third-person attribution of blame as well. Again, this is another similarity to Strawson's concept of the three 'humanly connected' reactive attitudes. As Williams notes, it seems natural that if 'we have agent-regret about the voluntary and would not readily recognize a life without it', that we also judge others according to what we think the 'degree of such feeling is appropriate' in particular cases.⁵⁰ In this case, then, we have opinions about the correctness of fit between the outcome of an

⁴⁸ Nagel, 'Moral Luck', p. 58.

⁴⁹ Bernard Williams, *Shame and Necessity* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1993), pp. 69–70.

⁵⁰ Bernard Williams, 'Moral Luck', in *Moral Luck*, ed. by Daniel Statman (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 1993), pp. 35–56 (pp. 44–5).

action, the causal and intentional content of the deciding action, and the way in which the agent responds to interplay between these factors.

In the case of Kinbote, several of these complications seem to be in play.⁵¹ Firstly, as I have suggested, there is a strong sense in which Kinbote is capitalising on the notion of intentionality in his description of events. The heroic narrative is based upon the idea that Kinbote should be praiseworthy based upon what he tried to do, what he intended to do, despite the fact that, in the case of shielding John Shade, these intentions were ineffective. The case of moral luck has shown that a distinction can be drawn between the intentional and the causal content of actions. Although moral responsibility often focuses on the intentional content of actions, in cases of moral luck, there is a switch of emphasis to the causal factors of an action. In the case of Kinbote this is salient because he is clearly pursuing his hero narrative against the prevailing sense that he does not entirely deserve praise for his actions because they were ineffective. The theories of agency explored above predominantly elucidate the way in which Kinbote frames his heroism within common-sense networks of action and morality. Both reactive attitudes and moral luck are important for the elucidation of these networks insofar as they open up the theoretical discussion of agency to include the ways in which moral responses are legitimate clues as to the way in which agency works.

Although these frameworks help to elucidate the norms that Kinbote is attempting to capitalise upon, they are unreliable as direct exegetic tools. Scrutiny of reactive attitudes towards Kinbote, for instance, becomes circular because this move throws us back into Kinbote's world, and the very structural impasse at the heart of this excursion. Because all of the reported reactions to Shade's death are mediated by Kinbote, the attempt to locate 'true' reactive attitudes among the involutions of the text is largely inconclusive. There are no clear acts in the novel for which Kinbote might come under moral scrutiny. There are certainly no points in which he is clearly morally culpable. In terms of moral reaction in the interaction between Kinbote and other characters, the main clues are in the reactions of the gardener and Sybil Shade, which give oppositional evidence. As far as Kinbote's agent regret might be used as a gauge, again we are drawn to the way in which Kinbote narrates his own deeply equivocal responses to John Shade after his death.

⁵¹ There is a tragic biographical echo in the luck and accident of Shade's death. Nabokov's father was also killed by an assassin with a different target. For an explanation of this event, see: Brian Boyd, *Vladimir Nabokov: The Russian Years* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1990), pp. 190–193.

The failure of these interpretive positions to bring out a clear interpretation turns us towards the easy coherence that might be achieved by treating Kinbote, not as a rational agent, but as irrational and imbalanced and therefore not subject to the same norms as others. By claiming that Kinbote is an ‘imbalanced egoist’ with a mind like a ‘crazy carousel’, the moral quality of Kinbote’s responses during the death scene can be elided in favour of his dominating textual presence.⁵² This is certainly the response that the text tends the reader towards; as Vladimir Alexandrov suggests, any “realistic” reading of Kinbote’s story is counterbalanced by the sheer weight of Kinbote’s version’.⁵³ A simple interpretation of madness seems directly contradicted by the complexity of the structures through which Kinbote asks to be judged. Even if there is not a distinct sense in which his actions can be explained, Kinbote negotiates intricate levels of judgment and agency in his self-projected claims of heroism. The moral complexities of Kinbote’s narrative at this point in the novel are on the fringes of how we interpret the link between intentionality and judgment. His heroism requires substantial demystification as a claim about the effectiveness of intention and agency. The slippage in judgment seems to be what Kinbote is capitalising upon to form his tenuous claims, though elaboration on these themes reveals an important moral background to Shade’s death scene. Because the scene is positioned around a structural conceit that is echoed throughout Kinbote’s narrative, this reading adds a distinct sense in which the structural aspects of the novel are deeply interwoven with moral attitudes and reactions, even if these cannot be made explicit because of the involutions of the text. Kinbote’s hero narrative draws attention, not only to the ways in which we are ready to see him as a moral agent, but more directly to the way in which his fantasy is in tension with his vision of himself as a moral agent.

Jack Grey’s Non-Agency

Just as Nabokov uses the complexities of Kinbote’s narrative to raise complex questions of agency, the commentary is also utilised as a structural device to create differentiated levels of agency among other characters. In particular, Jack Grey has a specific agential role which is created by the way in which his narrative is revealed through Kinbote’s account of Gradus. Jack Grey and Gradus are characters which emerge from the same figure, through slightly different narrative accounts. Gradus appears as a figure within Kinbote’s

⁵² Brian Boyd, *Nabokov’s Pale Fire: The Magic of Artistic Discovery* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1999), p. 24.

⁵³ Vladimir E. Alexandrov, *Nabokov’s Otherworld* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1991), p. 191.

Zembla narrative, an assassin who has been given the task of killing the exiled King Charles (Kinbote himself). The counter-narrative that emerges is of Jack Grey, ‘escapee from an asylum, who mistook Shade for the man who sent him there’, i.e. Judge Goldsworth, the owner of the property that Kinbote rents.⁵⁴

In Kinbote’s narrative, Gradus appears both as a narrative tool, and as an ideological foil to Kinbote’s self-description. In this dual role, the descriptions of Gradus in relation to their intentional content are prominent. Kinbote takes pains to emphasise the simplicity of Gradus’s character, which he attempts to do by describing him in a range of mechanistic guises. Although he admits that Gradus ‘could read, write and reckon’ and was ‘endowed with a modicum of self-awareness’, ‘some duration consciousness, and a good memory for faces, names, dates and the like’, he disregards him ‘morally’ and ‘spiritually’.⁵⁵ This latter classification becomes prominent as Kinbote slides from isolating Gradus’s moral failings to declassifying him entirely and rendering him a ‘clockwork man’ whose ‘inward movements’ are produced by ‘mere springs and coils’,⁵⁶ and an ‘automatic man’, a ‘half-man who [is] also half mad’.⁵⁷ This name calling just might, as Boyd suggests, ‘[minimize] Gradus’s humanity, freedom, and dignity’, but more interestingly, Gradus’s automaticity is used to raise some questions about moral responsibility. Kinbote’s characterisation of Gradus is flexible insofar as it appears to oscillate between suggestions of full (if spiritually impoverished) agency and hyperbolic denial of such personhood. The other story of Jack Grey, which underlies Kinbote’s characterisation of Gradus, seems to explain this to some extent as Grey’s institutionalised madness appears to allow Kinbote to archly describe Gradus as mad with ideology; there is slippage between the two concepts, Kinbote’s story seems to imply, because they both show an absence of reflective action.

Through Gradus’s ideological madness, Kinbote is drawing upon a folk notion of madness as somehow removed from a full concept of agency. The folk understanding of this imagines agency as consisting of willed actions rather than simply bodily events. These bodily events are not decisions, but desires which are unreflectively put into action. A recent tradition in action and free will theory has drawn on this conception to suggest that willed actions are broadly distinct from simple desires and wants insofar as they exist

⁵⁴ *Pale Fire*, p. 299.

⁵⁵ *Pale Fire*, p. 278.

⁵⁶ *Pale Fire*, p. 152.

⁵⁷ *Pale Fire*, p. 279.

because of an extra input from the agent; an endorsement which claims ownership over a course of action. This category suggests that there are those, including the mad, who are more causally determined than those who can rationally assess and act upon their conative states. This distinction, between agency and non-agency, has been frequently drawn upon in the philosophical literature as a way of attempting to describe the purported conditions for autonomy. Frankfurt, among others, formulates his arguments for willed volition against the distinct category of ‘wanton’ madness, where the individual has diminished rational control over the desires that arise in them. Because these desires appear to be rooted within a conception of causal determinism, if the individual follows these desires without actively endorsing them, then they are, to a greater extent than a willing agent, controlled by mechanistic forces. For Frankfurt, an individual only meets the ‘concept of a person’ if they are capable of ‘reflective self-evaluation’; the evaluation of their own desires.⁵⁸ In his narratological assessment of fictional action, Lubomír Doležel takes this distinction between agency and non-agency to a radical extreme by suggesting that ‘[insane] behaviour is semantically identical to nature events. When intentionality disintegrates, nature force takes over.’⁵⁹

By drawing on the language of automaticity to describe Gradus, Kinbote seems to be using this line of argument. The construction of Gradus from the ‘criminally insane’ Jack Grey adds an extra level of complexity to the issue. Even if a clear distinction between agency and non-agency were legitimate, Jack Grey’s actions may qualify as non-autonomous, while Gradus’s certainly would not. Kinbote attaches elements of Grey’s story to Gradus for rhetorical effect, but it becomes clear that this characterisation is little more than superficial. The slippage from Grey to Gradus that Kinbote attempts to effect is problematized by the distinction between agency and non-agency. There are further theoretical ramifications for the distinction between agency and non-agency as the way in which autonomy is conceptualised is linked to the way in which we assign moral responsibility. As Daniel Dennett suggests, ideas of non-autonomy produce recognised categories which fall short of the ideal of moral agency, and demand adjusted forms of moral judgment. These may be circumstantial facts of ‘diminished responsibility’, more distinct models of ‘exculpating pathology’, or simply an assessment of an individual as entirely outside normative expectations of autonomy, and as such, ‘not responsible at

⁵⁸ Harry Frankfurt, ‘Freedom of the Will and the Concept of a Person’, *Journal of Philosophy*, Vol. 68, No. 1 (1971), 5-20 (p.7).

⁵⁹ Doležel, p. 72.

all'.⁶⁰ The link between agency and moral judgment gives the reader further clues about how to assess agency within *Pale Fire* as it relates to Grey or Gradus, as he is subject to a number of moral judgments from other characters within the text.

In his creation of Gradus, Kinbote is attempting to create an aetiology that can logically conclude in the act of murder. The characterisation of Gradus as an 'automatic man' is altered slightly to accommodate a distinct moral judgment. Although, as Kinbote notes, 'no amount of motive hunting and rational inquiry can ever *really* explain why anybody is capable of destroying a fellow creature',⁶¹ he does attempt to provide a framework which attributes clear intention to the killer, both as an individual and as a functioning part of a social group:

Gradus would not have killed anybody had he not derived pleasure not only from the imagined act [...] but also from having been given an important, responsible assignment (which happened to require he should kill) by a group of people sharing his notion of justice, but he would not have taken that job if in killing he had not found something like that rather disgusting anticomedoist's little thrill.⁶²

The creation of Gradus obliges Kinbote, to some extent, to try to explain the actions of a murderer through 'motive hunting and rational enquiry'. In this project, the narrative shifts between different models of agency, from non-agential automaticity, to a clear assignment of moral responsibility. In the development of Gradus's narrative, Kinbote is reverting to what Noël Carroll describes as a readerly impulse, insofar as he constructs a motivational story using the known actions as fixed points of reference. In narrative texts, Carroll suggests, action largely occurs through indicative representations which prompt questions about why those involved in the acted in the ways that they did: 'We ask these questions in virtue of certain background beliefs and presuppositions we already hold about the nature of [events]—that they involve agents—and about agents—that they have motives'.⁶³ Kinbote's adoption of this, and the overwhelming nature of his reading, has significant structural ramifications for the way in which Nabokov is able to represent Jack Grey. Carroll's assessment suggests that indicative representations automatically invite motive hunting, which further implies that character action is automatically assumed to be

⁶⁰ Dennett, *Elbow Room*, p. 157.

⁶¹ *Pale Fire*, p. 279, original emphasis.

⁶² *Pale Fire*, p. 279.

⁶³ Carroll, p. 8.

intentional and subject to norms of intentional action. This has repercussions for the representation of actions which are not subject to the same norms; exculpating pathologies and other non-autonomous models. By obscuring Jack Grey's narrative with Kinbote's Gradus, Nabokov seems to overcome this interpretative reflex. Because Grey's narrative emerges only through the cracks in Kinbote's story, the actions themselves are allowed to remain simple, the narrative very sparse, and without specific narratorial comment.

There are two main sources for Grey's characterisation. The frame of the sparse revenge narrative emerges through slips in Kinbote's narration, and creates an inferred structure which takes Grey from incarceration to the accidental murder of John Shade; Grey intended to kill Judge Goldsworth, the man who put him away. This sparse narrative is bolstered by the interactions between Grey and the other characters following Shade's death. The gardener disarms Grey by hitting him with a shovel, but afterwards he smokes with him and shares a glass of water and the policeman benignly says 'Come along, Jack, we'll put something on that head of yours'.⁶⁴ Kinbote himself seems unmoved by the killer. He finds him a glass of water, and places it 'near a flowerpot beside the porch steps' where Grey sits with the gardener.⁶⁵ From his narrativising position Kinbote even feels affronted by Grey's new harmlessness:

[Grey], either because he was in pain, or because he had decided to play a new role, ignored me completely as if I were a stone king on a stone charger.⁶⁶

These details build a picture of Grey as unthreatening. This suggests that when Shade died, Grey's revenge appeared to be fulfilled and his violence terminated. The suggestion of fulfilment suggests behavioural simplicity, and this is corroborated by the way in which other characters act toward Grey as if he were harmless. This end-directed narrative is very simple and suggests that Grey is rationalised, not as an agent, but as an individual who is subject to different, apparently exculpatory, standards of judgment. By building Grey in this way, through clues of fact and diegetic reactive attitudes, Nabokov is able to portray a type of character whose actions are not specifically intentional, who may not be described as entirely autonomous, and who is not subject to norms of moral judgment that are associated with self-reflective action. The emergence of Grey through Kinbote's Gradus

⁶⁴ *Pale Fire*, p. 295.

⁶⁵ *Pale Fire*, p. 295.

⁶⁶ *Pale Fire*, p. 295.

makes this kind of characterisation possible by subverting the ‘question formation’ which Carroll suggests is a ‘natural thought process’ and which broadly assumes a direct association between action and intentionality.⁶⁷ In the previous chapters, I explored the idea that readers approach a text with a psychologising attitude. This finds some crossover with theories about behavioural interpretation in everyday life, because it seems very plausible to suggest that character intentions are understood in part through our assumptions about how individuals act in certain situations, a calculation which is moderated with our experience of social norms, individual rationality, and circumstantial knowledge which limits the number of expected choices that an agent can make. In this situation, the norms relate to predictability, and agents which stray too far from the expectations of their interpreters are often deemed inexplicable. Grey does not appear to act in the way we would expect a fully autonomous agent to act, and in order to portray this within the novel, Nabokov utilises the formal features of the text to escape some of the narratorial demands that might be provoked by the psychologising reader.

John Shade’s Self-Validation

These examples of judgment within the storyworld of *Pale Fire* point to the ways in which Nabokov utilises the reactive attitudes as clues for the narrative placement and status of Kinbote and Gradus. These clues are intimately linked to how agency is conceived in relation to these characters because, as explored by Strawson, the reactive attitudes are closely tied to how an agent and their actions are viewed, and whether their input into an action-event is seen to be sufficient to implicate them morally. A slight change of focus on the question of the relation between action and ethics suggests that Nabokov also uses broader strokes in his characterisations. Just as Kinbote’s narrative reveals his complex reaction to representing his own actions, John Shade’s poem ‘Pale Fire’ also develops clear questions surrounding the uncertainty of interpreting one’s own agency at a remove.

Kinbote’s narrative is related to questions of agency because its retrospective view point allows its author to reframe his own actions. This seems to resonate with Nagel’s distinction between internal and external view-points, insofar as the retrospective view allows Kinbote to implicate himself more generally, both in the text and in his purported closeness to John Shade. This seems to be a way of escaping the scepticism of the external

⁶⁷ Carroll, p. 8.

view, because he effectively invents a separate storyworld in which his agency and the trajectory of his actions are not subject to the same sceptical regressions which damage more rooted claims to subjective autonomy. Here, scepticism occurs in Nagel's use of the term in his picture of the 'external-perspective', the doubt which he suggests is inherent in self-perception which questions the roots and reasons for why one acts. Nagel's suggestion is that the agent wants to endorse his actions, and to know that they were the correct actions to have taken. Because there are no reasons internal to the agent which are able to verify the correctness of his actions, an objective viewpoint is sought to reframe the action in an attempt to verify its origin in the agent. As Nagel suggests, however, the objective scrutiny of one's actions often lead out of the agent, and increasingly embed the action in the world. Through the Zembra narrative, Kinbote appears to bypass these concerns by creating delusional actions which are separate from the external world, and immune from its questions. It is at points of slippage – such as Shade's death scene – at which Kinbote's story reveals an agency beneath, which is more clearly embedded and determined within the external (story)world. This way of reading Kinbote's agency is particularly pertinent in relation to Shade's poem, in which Shade also appears to be framing his own agency according to a distinction between internal and external viewpoints.

The complexities in Shade's character arise, as is the case with Kinbote, from the retrospective and autobiographical narrative that he puts forward in the poem. Again, the autobiographical narrative is used as a way of conveying agency because it is a reflective mode. Richard Freadman suggests that because autobiography is introspective and retrospective, it is uniquely qualified for representing the will:

Texts of this kind have the ability to *envisage the psyche* in certain ways; and that these ways represent actual or possible modes of being in the world. Such narratives make culturally available for our consideration complex conceptions of what it means to have a mind and a self and a will.⁶⁸

I take this point to be broadly true in Shade's case, where his poem 'Pale Fire' does not only offer a way of reflecting on his life and the event of his daughter's death. My focus is the way in which Shade frames the poetic form as an attempt to draw past events into a coherent pattern. For Shade, the place of artistic intention is to retrospectively endow

⁶⁸ Richard Freadman, *Threads of Life: Autobiography and the Will* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2001), p. 38, original emphasis.

meaning on actions and their consequences. The tone and pattern expressed by Shade's poem is elegiac insofar as it stages a reflection of the death of an individual through a sequence of mourning. In Peter Sacks' terminology: 'the basic passage through grief or darkness to consolation and renewal'.⁶⁹

Sacks makes the forceful claim that mourning, and particularly the form of mourning constructed through elegy, is a kind of action; an active involvement of the mourner with both the 'language of elegy' and 'the experience of loss'.⁷⁰ By adopting Sacks' broader conception of action, clear crossovers appear between Shade's poetic work and his active part in the process of mourning his daughter. At points these are distinct, as Nabokov draws frequently on language of agency and the will throughout 'Pale Fire' in his description of the interaction between versification and mourning. This is generally conducted in an attempt to describe the balance between control and loss of control, both within the world and in its reflection in the work of poetic process. In this way, the poem can be seen to interact with the concept of action as I have been using it elsewhere in this thesis; as the product of autonomous agency, subject to self-reflection, and embedded in norms of interpretation and moral judgment. The artistic work of John Shade is not separate from, but closely entangled with, more prosaic forms of action.

Much of Canto Two of 'Pale Fire' is concerned with Hazel's suicide, the narrative taking a broadly chronological approach which terminates at her death and the immediate reactions to it. Describing Hazel's life, the canto dwells on the ways in which Shade and his wife interacted with their child, specifically with regard to the loss of control felt towards the circumstantial factors which appeared to impinge on her happiness. First among these is Hazel's appearance, which takes after the 'uncouth' John Shade:⁷¹

She might have been you, me, or some quaint blend:
Nature chose me so as to wrench and rend
Your heart and mine. At first we'd smile and say:
'All little girls are plump' or 'Jim McVey
(The family oculist) will cure that slight
Squint in no time.' And later: 'She'll be quite

⁶⁹ Peter M. Sacks, *The English Elegy: Studies in the Genre from Spenser to Yeats* (London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1987), p. 20.

⁷⁰ Sacks, p. 1.

⁷¹ *Pale Fire*, p. 43.

Pretty, you know'; and, trying to assuage
 The swelling torment: 'That's the awkward age.'
 'She should take riding lessons,' you would say
 (Your eyes and mine not meeting). 'She should play
 Tennis, or badminton. Less starch, more fruit!
 She may not be a beauty, but she's cute.'⁷²

The weak cliché that ends this passage appears as the last resort of a series of failed attempts to control the situation. From oculist intervention to the prescription of exercise and dietary plans, parental torment is developed through their unhappiness on Hazel's behalf, the impotence of their interventions, and their unsuccessful attempts to assuage the growing sense that their daughter's unattractiveness counts against her. Michael Wood suggests that these lines betray the Shades. John and Sibyl 'cannot keep their pity out of their love; keep it, their language suggests, from swamping their love'.⁷³ Hazel is not beautiful, and because of this, her parents find it hard to come up with a plausible and happy future for her. They find themselves excusing her rather than accepting her: 'Virgins have written some *resplendent* books./ Lovemaking is not everything. Good looks/ Are not *that* indispensable!'⁷⁴ In this context, pity is a trope of control; it betrays the Shades' sense that Hazel is defenceless and that her misfortune exceeds their ability to guide her. At the point of being told about Hazel's death, the text restages their parental failings with a rare admission of poetic failure: 'a patrol car on our bumpy road/Came to a crunching stop. Retake, retake!'⁷⁵ The representational ability of the poem collapses under the psychological weight of the content, or in Sacks' terminology, Shade's call responds to the disconnection of feeling between Hazel's death and the 'fabric of language' through which he mediates it.⁷⁶

Hazel's inherited ungainliness establishes a direct comparison with her father. However, while Hazel is portrayed by Shade as somehow embedded in the misfortunes of her appearance, he represents himself as directly transcending those same limitations. Shade's physicality is intimately tied to his conceptualisation of the world around him. This broadly rests on a close association with the natural world:

⁷² *Pale Fire*, pp. 43–4.

⁷³ Wood, p. 195.

⁷⁴ *Pale Fire*, p. 44, original emphasis.

⁷⁵ *Pale Fire*, p. 50.

⁷⁶ Sacks, p. 18.

My God died young. Theolatriy I found
Degrading, and its premises, unsound.
No free man needs a God; but was I free?
How fully I felt nature glued to me
And how my childish palate loved the taste
Half-fish, half-honey, of that golden paste!⁷⁷

Even if Shade rejects God, this passage suggests that this does not necessarily grant him extra freedom; materially and metaphysically Shade's claim is still that 'we are most artistically caged' in the world.⁷⁸ This is both a general claim, and one which is closely tied to his physical shortcomings:

I walked at my own risk: whipped by bough,
Tripped by the stump. Asthmatic, lame and fat,
I never bounced a ball or swung a bat.⁷⁹

Here, the metaphysical question of freedom within the world becomes acutely material, as Shade is physically limited, a 'cloutish freak'.⁸⁰ The material and metaphysical remain closely aligned through Shade's emphasis on his observational and poetical abilities as a way of circumventing his limitations; his 'five senses (one unique)'.⁸¹ Here he treads a line between agency and passivity. Part of the easy bond between Shade and the natural world is his photographic memory, an ability which is framed explicitly as intentional action:

My eyes were such that literally they
Took photographs. Whenever I'd permit,
Or, with a silent shiver, order it⁸²

Elsewhere, the content of this poetic sense is less clearly within Shade's control, though he describes it in the language of agency:

[...] I'd duplicate
Myself, my lamp, an apple on a plate:

⁷⁷ *Pale Fire*, p. 36.

⁷⁸ *Pale Fire*, p. 37.

⁷⁹ *Pale Fire*, p. 37.

⁸⁰ *Pale Fire*, p. 37.

⁸¹ *Pale Fire*, p. 37.

⁸² *Pale Fire*, p. 34.

Uncurtaining the night, I'd let dark glass
Hang all the furniture above the grass⁸³

Here, Shade's gifts uniquely dovetail with the idea that we are 'most artistically caged' within the universe. The mnemonic and observational delights, though themselves poised between intention and intuition, stage an interaction with the world which allows the poet some small control within the framework of natural fact. The reflection of 'all the furniture' is not within Shade's control, but his imaginative projection seizes the image as a token of his artistic intentionality. At these points in the poem, in which Shade is describing his own abilities, the heroic couplets have a particular defiance, whether through the implicit rejection of his disability in the rhyme between 'lame and fat' and 'swung a bat', or the explicit control of the rhyme between 'I'd permit' and 'order it'. This defiant tone is less present in the sections which describe Hazel, where, for example, the jocular rhyme of 'more fruit!' and 'she's cute' adds a slightly mocking inflection to his daughter's teenage woes.

In his self-description of how he composes poetry, Shade explicitly explores the balance between intentional input and passivity. The interconnection of the poet's '[two] methods of composing' illustrate this distinct split between controlled action and non-conscious intuition. The methods are described as: 'A, the kind/Which goes on solely in the poet's mind' and 'B,/The other kind, much more decorous, when/He's in his study writing with a pen'.⁸⁴ There is a split here between intentional and non-intentional action: 'In method B the hand supports the thought,/The abstract battle is concretely fought'.⁸⁵ However:

[...] method A is agony! The brain
Is soon enclosed in a steel cap of pain.
A muse in overalls directs the drill
Which grinds and which no effort of the will
Can interrupt, while the automaton
Is taking off what he has just put on
Or walking briskly to the corner store

⁸³ *Pale Fire*, p. 33.

⁸⁴ *Pale Fire*, p. 64.

⁸⁵ *Pale Fire*, p. 64.

To buy the paper he has read before.⁸⁶

The distinction is clear between the ‘decorous’, conscious poetic work of method B, and the unconscious, intuitive work of method A. The absence of will, and the self-reduction to an ‘automaton’, pre-empts Kinbote’s invention of Gradus, the ‘automatic man’. However, the clear contextual distinction between these automatisms suggests the importance of how freedom is conceived within the narrative. Shade’s automatism is the acceptable entrenchment of the will in the intuitions of the artistic process; Gradus’s automatism is framed as an ideological flaw which represents an intrusion on Gradus’ will. In both cases, the rhetorical use of the automatic trope is distinct.

In Sack’s schema, the elegy offers a transitional act of mourning. This is partly acted out through the mourner’s ‘self-privileging [...] motion’, through which they attempt to ‘[ensure] a sense of progress’ which distances the living from the event of death.⁸⁷ In the case of ‘Pale Fire’, there is a clear transitional stage in which Shade describes how his mourning draws him to investigate the idea of an afterlife, as a response both to Hazel’s death and to his own relation to death. Shade’s initial response is to move to a more oblique metaphysical focus. Canto Three begins with the Shades attending the ‘I.P.H., a lay/Institute (I) of Preparation (P)/For the Hereafter (H)’, which we assume follows on from grieving Hazel.⁸⁸ This becomes clearer when, in a clarification of form of the preparation the I.P.H. practices, Shade rejects the idea of communicating with the dead:

[...] And when we lost our child
I knew there would be nothing: no self-styled
Spirit would touch a keyboard of dry wood
To rap out her pet name; no phantom would
Rise gracefully to welcome you and me
In the dark garden, near the shagbark tree.⁸⁹

This becomes transitional as time passes. The elegiac mode is clear as Shade explicitly connects his mourning to his occupation:

⁸⁶ *Pale Fire*, pp. 64–5.

⁸⁷ Sacks, p. 19.

⁸⁸ *Pale Fire*, p. 52.

⁸⁹ *Pale Fire*, p. 57.

It is the writer's grief. It is the wild
March wind. It is the father with his child.
Later came minutes, hours, whole days at last,
When she'd be absent from our thoughts [...]⁹⁰

From here, the poem moves away from Hazel and turns inward, at which point Shade's daughter seems to become ancillary to his metaphysical investigations. The key transition occurs when he recounts his experience of a heart attack, though this is a continuation of an early episode in the poem. For Shade, a sense of the metaphysical emerged as a young child. Again, this is closely related to his encumbered physicality, as the divine insight emerges through a fit:

There was a sudden sunburst in my head.
And then black night. That blackness was sublime.
I felt distributed through space and time:
One foot upon a mountaintop, one hand
Under the pebbles of a panting strand,
One ear in Italy, one eye in Spain,
In caves, my blood, and in the stars, my brain.
There were dull throbs in my Triassic; green
Optical spots in Upper Pleistocene,
An icy shiver down my Age of Stone,
And all tomorrows in my funnybone.⁹¹

Although a doctor pronounces the fit 'growing pains', Shade admits their formative role in his later development: 'The wonder lingers and the shame remains' because the intrigues of the experience are tainted by the loss of control inherent in them. In a reassertion of the automaton theme, the young Shade is watching a 'clockwork toy'⁹² when he fits, which reflects both the sense that he has lost control, and refracts Kinbote's description of Gradus in the commentary as a 'clockwork man'.⁹³ Shade's fit initiates him into mortality, fixing 'A thread of subtle pain,/Tugged at by playful death'.⁹⁴ However, it is clear that the

⁹⁰ *Pale Fire*, pp. 57–8.

⁹¹ *Pale Fire*, p. 38.

⁹² *Pale Fire*, p. 38.

⁹³ *Pale Fire*, p. 152.

⁹⁴ *Pale Fire*, p. 38.

encounter with death provokes a response which aims to distance, rather than invite the possibility. This becomes pertinent in the heart attack episode in Canto Three, where there is a return to direct metaphysical experience:

A sun of rubber was convulsed and set;
And blood-black nothingness began to spin
A system of cells interlinked within

Cells interlinked within cells interlinked
Within one stem. And dreadfully distinct
Against the dark, a tall white fountain played.⁹⁵

The 'white fountain' is taken as a sign of an afterlife, though its specific meaning as a symbol is deliberately obscure. Its meaning 'Could be grasped only by whoever dwelt/In the strange world' which Shade has witnessed.⁹⁶ Despite the symbolic obscurity, Shade is certain that the vision confirms a particular 'truth': 'It had the tone,/The quiddity and quaintness of its own/Reality'.⁹⁷

In pursuit of this truth, Shade seeks external, semi-empirical, corroboration by interviewing someone else who 'had seen [a fountain] "beyond the veil"'.⁹⁸ Her vision of a fountain, it turns out, was actually a vision of a mountain, which invites Shade's substitution of his hopes for objective fact for a reinvestment in personal truth. This gives rise to what Wood calls Nabokov's 'theology for sceptics'; a schema through which the coincidence of the fountain/mountain mix-up is given precedence over the earlier hope for verification.⁹⁹ In this shift, Shade does not give up the idea of an external view – a metaphysical structure which is distinct and separate from himself – but simply removes the necessity that this structure be verified by anyone else. In this sense, the shift operates a renewed inward turn through which Shade develops the claim that he is able to maintain belief in a metaphysical 'web of sense' which solely relies on his own artistic instantiation of 'correlated pattern'. This is enough to give him 'faint hope' in an external position.¹⁰⁰ This renewed faith moves to the more discreet interplay between control and passivity that

⁹⁵ *Pale Fire*, p. 59.

⁹⁶ *Pale Fire*, p. 59.

⁹⁷ *Pale Fire*, p. 60.

⁹⁸ *Pale Fire*, p. 62.

⁹⁹ Wood, p. 190.

¹⁰⁰ *Pale Fire*, p. 63.

is inherent in Shade's versification, and retreats from the more visceral impotence that his encounters with death occasion.

The elegiac expression of mourning for Hazel is refigured by Shade's recognition of this structured external view. His emphasis on coincidence and its corroboration in his poetry establishes a semi-verifiable framework for his actions which take them beyond immediate materialism. This framework is subject to the minimal normative demands that Shade recognises; the recognition, through his observation, of pattern in the external world, and the restatement of this pattern in poetry. This is largely subjective, but also constrained by the norms of versification:

And if my private universe scans right,
So does the verse of galaxies divine
Which I suspect is an iambic line.
I'm reasonably sure that we survive
And that my darling somewhere is alive¹⁰¹

Shade's self-manufactured 'private universe', as structured by the poetic form, becomes the quasi-objective proof for his observations, which then allows him a framework on which to structure a consolatory metaphysics of the afterlife. Far from a 'reluctant resubmission to the constraints of language', it appears that Shade's work of mourning is not stifled by the conventions of his medium, but stabilised by them.¹⁰² Here, in line with Sacks' assessment of the genre, Shade's elegiac work becomes prominently consolatory in its move from the impotence of Canto Two ('Retake, retake!'), to a more harmonious resolution. It is important that Shade's resolution is initially a personal one: 'I feel I understand/Existence, or at least a minute part/Of my existence'.¹⁰³ This security becomes a broader universal claim 'that we survive', and eventually returns to the specificity of Hazel's case, the original object of mourning: 'that my darling somewhere is alive'.¹⁰⁴ Sacks notes the 'veil of words' that emerges in elegy,¹⁰⁵ which serve to distance the poet

¹⁰¹ *Pale Fire*, p. 69.

¹⁰² Sacks, p. xiii.

¹⁰³ *Pale Fire*, pp. 68–9.

¹⁰⁴ *Pale Fire*, p. 69.

¹⁰⁵ Sacks, p. 9.

from death and from the subject of the verse: the ‘consoling construction of a fictional identity not only for the dead but for himself as well’.¹⁰⁶

Shade’s ‘faint hope’ is, as Wood points out, full of holes. Firstly, it is a weak position, ‘a perspective, a reading, which can scarcely lead either to hope or to despair’.¹⁰⁷ It is also a position that emptily endorses the coherence of pattern that ignores the possibility of *bad* pattern, in nature and in human activity, observations that are not appealing but unsettling. In particular, Shade’s faint hope does not seem to centre directly on Hazel, but is only sustained when his daughter’s death is occluded by a more focussed inward turn. Although Wood seems correct in finding Shade’s position unconvincing, the way in which the ‘faint hope’ is constructed accords with broader discussions of agency which are also present in Kinbote’s narrative. If Kinbote’s commentary, which restages his agency within a fantasy, is read as a subversion of agent-doubt, it offers a clear corollary to Shade’s self-verifying external view. These two responses explore questions about the limits of agency, and the ways in which a desire for concrete agency can verge on delusion.

As I explored above, Nagel describes the experience of agency through the contrast between the internal and external perspectives. The internal view is from inside action, while the external reflects on the reach, motives and originality of the action, a reflective position which, Nagel suggests, can lead to a sceptical regress which disconnects the action from the agent and places it on the determinist sequence within which the action is embedded. One solution which Nagel offers as a way of stopping the regressive quest for antecedent reasons is ethics:

Values are judgements from a standpoint external to ourselves about how to be and how to live. Because they are accepted from an impersonal standpoint, they apply not only to the point of view of the particular person I happen to be, but generally.¹⁰⁸

By aligning ourselves with a value judgement, we align ourselves with something that is outside ourselves and the questioning external self cannot ask any more; the buck stops with an objectively validated action because it ‘supplies an alternative to pure observation

¹⁰⁶ Sacks, p. 10.

¹⁰⁷ Wood, p. 191.

¹⁰⁸ Nagel, *View*, p. 135.

of ourselves from outside'.¹⁰⁹ In this line of argument, some philosophers, such as Gary Watson, have proposed the question-stopping quality of value judgements as a solution to the free will problem.¹¹⁰ Nagel remains unconvinced by this, and instead suggests that ethics provides a fragile harmony between an objective position and the acting self that might delay, but cannot ultimately put off doubts that are raised by the external view. Nagel dismisses the idea of a definite solution to this problem, and his offerings are intended more as attempts at reconciling 'the objective standpoint and the inner perspective of agency which reduces the radical detachment produced by initial contemplation of ourselves as creature in the world'. Finding ways to root ourselves in action reduces 'the degree to which the objective self must think of itself as an impotent spectator, and to that extent it confers a kind of freedom.'¹¹¹

Nagel's comments resonate with Shade's theory of art, and offer a clarification of what I have been terming Shade's 'external perspective'. The epiphany occurs when he recognises that the tie between his internal life can be correlated with (what he regards as) objective fact:

But all at once it dawned on me that *this*
Was the real point, the contrapuntal theme;
Just this: not text, but texture; not the dream
But topsy-turvical coincidence,
Not flimsy nonsense, but a web of sense.
Yes! It sufficed that I in life could find
Some kind of link-and-bobolink, some kind
Of correlated pattern in the game,
Plexed artistry, and something of the same
Pleasure in it as they who played it found.¹¹²

The invented 'they' are straw men behind the scenes of nature, placed there by Shade as correlates to his will. He seems to be reaching – through this self-constructed framework – toward something similar to what Nagel suggests is possible through ethics; a harmony between the acting self and the objective facts of determinism. This is Shade's conceit, and

¹⁰⁹ Nagel, *View*, p. 136.

¹¹⁰ Gary Watson, 'Free Agency'.

¹¹¹ Nagel, *View*, p. 126.

¹¹² *Pale Fire*, pp. 62–3, original emphasis.

through it he seems to attempt an escape into aesthetics through which he can block self-questioning doubt through a validation of his action. His verse offers enough formal structure for him to claim it as a quasi-objective framework. Because this framework – through his poetry – is invoked to validate his actions and beliefs, he makes himself immune to error. However, because he himself creates his verse and constructs the formal features of the verse, the agency that he is claiming is in fact a tight self-verifying loop.

An action-theoretical perspective reveals several levels at work in *Pale Fire*. The deep interpretative involutions of the commentary function as clues to Kinbote's characterisation. This structural feature also provides a way of characterising Jack Grey in a way which offers an entirely distinct construction of agency, though this is created in parallel with Kinbote's overbearing narration. Through the cracks in Kinbote's commentary, Nabokov is able to escape psychologising narratives to produce a character who typifies non-agency; a structural feat which creates an almost-opposite example of agential writing to the more dominant characterisations in the novel. A more focused exploration of the feeling of agency emerges through Kinbote and Shade, whose narratives continually probe the idea, much explored in the philosophical literature, that autonomous agency is susceptible to doubt when viewed in retrospect. The negotiation of this common ground is observable in both Kinbote's commentary and Shade's poem, though only Shade treats this content with explicit care through his exploration of the link between the act of writing and the tenuousness of one's feeling of autonomy. For Kinbote, this link is never made explicit, and the reader is led to draw conclusions from the style and slippage within his text. The significant moral content of the book occurs through the developments in Kinbote's narrative, as the reader is drawn to consider a series of reactive positions in relation to Kinbote's claims of heroism. Although his claims are unverifiable (though they are, in fact, plausible), the questions which the structural problems of the commentary produce develop a number of links between agency and moral judgment. Though the exegetical power of this evidence is scant, Nabokov leads us to recognise the way in which agency is both self-constructed and mediated through the interpretations of others. Through the emphasis on the relationships within the text, we are drawn to focus on how moral reactions intuitively chart the way in which intentionality is understood, and its relation to other dynamic forces; circumstantial, social and environmental.

Chapter Four

Action and Addiction: Malcolm Lowry

The last chapter focussed on the way in which moral judgment provides an intuitive structure which surrounds the attribution and interpretation of intention. In this chapter, I approach similar questions in relation to Malcolm Lowry's *Under the Volcano*. Rather than approaching specifically moral questions, here I describe how models of addiction and intentionality interact with Lowry's literary project. Theories of addiction provide different models for how we should view the intentional capacities of addicts. There is disagreement over the extent to which addicts have control over their own actions, as some models focus on the way in which addiction to a drug can provide action-motivations which bypass addicts' intentions. This provides a set of theories which diversely model the *agency* of an addict, a capacity which is subject to shifting focus in Lowry's text.

Alcohol is a dominant presence in *Under the Volcano*, though its centrality to a full reading of the novel is somewhat contested. The excessive presence of alcohol defines much of the action in the novel, and the hermeneutic layers of the text, often mediated by the Consul, are in constant interaction with his drunkenness. However, these points are often downplayed in criticism of the text, perhaps because of the risk of over-identifying Malcolm Lowry with his character, the Consul; a temptation founded on their shared alcoholism. As Sue Vice suggests, this has been a mistake in previous studies of Lowry's texts, which were frequently read as 'an extension of his biography'.¹ Andrew John Miller also flags this problem, noting the 'pervasive tendency to substitute gossip about Lowry's alcoholism and sexual dysfunction for critical engagement with the historical and political implications of his writing'.² Sherrill Grace assumes the existence of this bias and in response rejects both the biographical impetus and the biographical facts: 'Because Lowry's obsession with dipsomania is usually overemphasized, *Volcano* is too often described as a novel about drinking'.³ Grace suggests instead that Lowry's 'great theme, for which alcohol is a metaphor, is human isolation and the collapse of Western culture'.⁴ This type of metaphorical expansion deemphasises the sense that the novel exposes or

¹ Sue Vice, 'Introduction', in *Malcolm Lowry Eighty Years On*, ed. by Sue Vice (New York, NY: St. Martin's Press, 1989), pp. 1–7 (p. 1).

² Miller, p. 2.

³ Sherrill Grace, *The Voyage That Never Ends: Malcolm Lowry's Fiction* (Vancouver, BC: University of British Columbia Press, 1982), p. 35.

⁴ Grace, *Voyage*, p. 35.

explains alcoholism, and moves it to the text's symbolic structure. This critical move has been repeated by several other critics. Even Thomas Gilmore, who maintains that drink is at the centre of *Under the Volcano*, depends on the symbolic analogues to Lowry's depiction. For Gilmore, the act of drinking is itself enmeshed in symbolic action insofar as it allows the drinker access to alternate realities: 'sober reality is so intolerably thin that it travesties itself. Intoxication, or hallucination, becomes a way to pierce this buffoonery, to discover important truth and seize its complexity'.⁵ Muriel Bradbrook follows a similar line in her suggestions for metaphoric alcoholism, both in a socio-historical sense that '[the] Consul's drunkenness is like the drunkenness of a world as it reels towards destruction',⁶ and the quasi-psychological claim that Lowry deals with 'the dark forces of the mind for which alcohol is perhaps only a symbol'.⁷ What emerges from these critical attitudes is the willingness to subordinate the alcoholic content of the novel to more general symbolic readings.

To some extent, this reading is solicited by Lowry's statements on the novel. In broad terms, he appears to suggest that drinking is allied with darkness, through which it operates as a general symbol for the darkness of mankind. This also blurs into a complex psychological aetiology more akin to what Bradbrook has in mind. In his letter to Jonathan Cape, Lowry suggests that:

The drunkenness of the Consul is used on one plane to symbolise the universal drunkenness of mankind during the war, or during the period immediately preceding it, which is almost the same thing, and what profundity and final meaning there is in his fate should be seen also in its universal relationship to the ultimate fate of mankind.⁸

This can be allied with Lowry's 1951 'Work in Progress' statement, in which he ties drinking more closely to a general dark psychology. Here, he is not describing the Consul of *Under the Volcano*, but Sigbjørn Wilderness, the protagonist of the later novel, *Dark as the Grave Wherein my Friend is Laid*:

⁵ Thomas B. Gilmore, *Equivocal Spirits: Alcoholism and Drinking in Twentieth-Century Literature* (London: University of North Carolina Press, 1987), pp. 23–4.

⁶ M. C. Bradbrook, *Malcolm Lowry: His Art & Early Life* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1974), p. 62.

⁷ Bradbrook, p. 66.

⁸ Malcolm Lowry, 'Letter to Jonathan Cape, January 1946', in *Sursum Corda! The Collected Letters of Malcolm Lowry, Volume I: 1926-1946*, ed. by Sherrill Grace (London: Jonathan Cape, 1995), pp. 498–535 (p. 506).

[So] far as liquor is concerned, it is [Sigbjørn's] realization later that if it was simply a question of enjoyment on that plane he could take it or leave it, that stops him: for it is the enjoyment of suffering, indeed of the participation in the infinite misery, that is the trouble.⁹

These readings are not necessarily different planes of interpretation, but elements of the same symbolic code. In his Cape letter, Lowry changes the emphasis from the state of drunkenness to the act of drinking itself. In this, the emphasis shifts slightly from the symbolism that can be attached to the drunkard, to the symbols which themselves drive him. In doing so, it moves focus from the abstract state of drunkenness to the actions of the individual drunk, even if the causes of those actions are then abstracted again to form a universal pathology. Lowry invokes William James and Freud to pursue a vision of human psychology as inherently symbolic; driven most clearly by James's thesis in *Varieties of Religious Experience* of universal spiritual need. Lowry's claim that James and Freud 'would certainly agree with me when I say that the agonies of the drunkard find their most poetic analogue in the agonies of the mystic who has abused his powers' is traceable to James's chapter on 'Mysticism' in *Varieties*.¹⁰ Although James does not analyse the alcoholic specifically, he does invest alcohol with a mystical importance:

The sway of alcohol over mankind is unquestionably due to its power to stimulate the mystical faculties of human nature, usually crushed to earth by the cold facts and dry criticisms of the sober hour. Sobriety diminishes, discriminates, and says no; drunkenness expands, unites, and says yes. It is in fact the great exciter of the *Yes* function in man. It brings its votary from the chill periphery of things to the radiant core. It makes him for the moment one with truth. Not through mere perversity do men run after it.¹¹

⁹ Malcolm Lowry, 'The Voyage That Never Ends (Notes Sent to Albert Erskine Re. Work in Progress)', 1951, p. 16, Box 32, Fol. 1, Malcolm Lowry Manuscript Collections, The Library of the University of British Columbia Special Collections Division, 'The Voyage That Never Ends', was the name given by Lowry to his overarching literary project, which collects various pieces of his prose - written and projected - in a distinct order. This plan, as articulated in his 'Work in Progress' statement to Erskine, has *Under the Volcano* as its central piece. *Dark as the Grave Wherein My Friend is Laid* immediately follows *Volcano*; For a full explanation of Lowry's shifting plans for his masterwork, see: Sherrill Grace, 'The Voyage That Never Ends', in *Strange Comfort: Essays on the Work of Malcolm Lowry* (Vancouver, BC: Talonbooks, 2009), pp. 20–37.

¹⁰ Malcolm Lowry, 'Letter to Jonathan Cape', p. 511.

¹¹ William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1982), pp. 386–7.

Lowry's 'poetic analogue' between drunkard and the 'mystic who has abused his powers' is not entirely clear, but it suggests incorrect use. The drunkard overuses alcohol, and in doing so abuses, in James's terms, 'its power to stimulate the mystical faculties of human nature'. This might also be an issue of control, as James is clear about the link between mystical states and the will:

Although the oncoming of mystical states may be facilitated by preliminary voluntary operations, as by fixing the attention, or going through certain bodily performances, or in other ways which manuals of mysticism prescribe; yet when the characteristic sort of consciousness has set in, the mystic feels as if his own will were in abeyance, and indeed sometimes as if he were grasped and held by a superior power. This latter peculiarity connects mystical states with certain definite phenomena of secondary or alternative personality, such as prophetic speech, automatic writing, or the mediumistic trance.¹²

This link provides another level to the symbolism of Lowry's drunk, as his mystical operations become enmeshed with the will; another symbolic code which has a long and distinct tradition in relation to addiction. Lowry's critics have occasionally touched on the will, but largely as a rhetorical addition to an already symbolically loaded interpretation. Tony Bareham suggests that:

[Drink] has so dominated Geoffrey's real will to live that he is now a volunteer for the inferno, travelling on a one-way ticket to his drink-ridden damnation. His entire last day is a downward progress via the drinks he takes, to his inevitable demise. His will is now utterly subservient to the authority of the bottle.¹³

Here, Bareham uses the symbolic aetiology of the drunk's dark psychology, but moderates it slightly to operate within binary strictures. In his version there is a 'real will to live', which is associated with autonomy, and a 'drink-ridden damnation' that emerges from the bottle. The will, then, is damaged and overridden by the 'authority of the bottle'. This draws some distinction between symbolic planes in the novel; drink is separate from 'the inferno' because it is the cause of the Consul's demise. Grace's use of this trope is slightly

¹² James, *Varieties*, p. 381.

¹³ Tony Bareham, 'Lowry and "the Great Figure of Authority"', in *Malcolm Lowry Eighty Years On*, ed. by Sue Vice (New York, NY: St. Martin's Press, 1989), pp. 51–69 (p. 55).

different. Her reading of the ‘real will to live’ is the will to ‘unceasingly strive upwards’.¹⁴ Grace suggests that this will is lost. However, she does not analyse the association between the loss of will and the overt control of ‘the bottle’. Instead, drunkenness and the will are buried allusively within the general symbolism of damnation: ‘it is a story of hellfire, and hellfire, for Lowry, means paralysis of the will’.¹⁵ It is uncertain whether Grace means here that a paralysis of the will comes about through drinking and that this is metaphorically ‘hellfire’, or if hellfire, paralysis of the will, and drinking are operating in a different relation, esoterically and without explicit causation.

These critical opinions, correctly, demand a clear distinction between Lowry’s life and *Under the Volcano*, between his own proclivities and the Consul’s alcoholism. This is necessary, but the latent threat of reductionist readings seems to have prevented critics from touching the way in which alcohol is portrayed in the novel, except through – and as part of – a wider description of the symbolic and linguistic code of the novel. Although an idea of ‘the will’ emerges through some of the critical dialogue, this is generally described within a framework that focuses on the literary, theological, or metaphysical analogues of the concept.¹⁶ Although Lowry’s use of free will clearly interacts with these ideas, the will also has several other alternate and intersecting histories, both in the philosophical literature and in the field of addiction studies. Although there are fine differences between the usages of the terminology in these areas, there is significant overlap in scope and content. The will, in both cases, is part of the broad language of intentionalism, and is used to describe the way in which an agent interacts with an action; the agent who wills their actions has a specific kind of authority and control over them. In this, there is crossover with other descriptions of the will, in the Christian or literary sense. However, here the attempt to isolate a specific intentionalist definition is particularly illuminating. Insofar as Lowry’s Consul – despite his enmeshment in wider symbolism – acts, has a relation to those actions, and commits those actions within a public domain, those actions can be analysed. A philosophical approach can be utilised in order to show how Lowry describes the volitional content of these actions, and their status within an addictive framework. This reading attempts to show the underlying intentional content which supports the novel, and which is only hinted at in a statement like Stephen Spender’s:

¹⁴ Grace, *Voyage*, p. 58.

¹⁵ Grace, *Voyage*, p. 58.

¹⁶ For a detailed description of Lowry’s romantic forebears, see: Camille La Bossière, ‘Of Acedia, Romantic Imagination and Irony Revisited: A Background Note for Readings of *Under the Volcano*’, *College Literature*, 31 (2004), 170–82.

The circle of Purgatory in which the addict moves is one of unreality, in which there is an illusion of choices being made [...] but no real choice exists, for he has decided to be chosen by his addiction.¹⁷

Rather than collapsing the Consul's choices into fatalism, I suggest that the way in which the Consul's choices are described, and the way in which autonomy and addiction interact in these descriptions, give a specific texture to the action of the novel. To elaborate this, I use biographical material to suggest how much knowledge of addiction theory and therapeutics might be assumed on Lowry's part. I position this against occurrences which illuminate the question of alcoholic action within *Under the Volcano*. What emerges is a layer of references and concepts in the novel which refer specifically to theoretical ideas of addiction and action. This becomes a further interpretative plane which interacts with other exegetical invitations – symbolic or otherwise – within *Under the Volcano*.

This alternative reading of *Under the Volcano* can be seen in dialogue with some of Lowry's less explicit statements on his novel. In the preface to the first French edition of *Under the Volcano*, Lowry describes both the allegorical postures of the novel and the separate intention to 'write at last an authentic drunkard's story'.¹⁸ In addition, in his 'Work in Progress' statement, he hints at other operative levels:

It is also true that the realization that one will never get enough, no matter how much one drinks, may make a person stop. However here, as in the *Volcano*, you will be right to suspect that dinking is a symbol for something else, wrong to imagine that I imagine that to the drinker, while drinking, a drink is symbolic of anything else but the next drink.¹⁹

The claims in this statement do not necessarily contradict each other, they suggest planes of interpretation. The oppositions that Lowry sets up in this statement are not mutual exclusions within the text, but a disentanglement of the symbolic and non-symbolic. The final deflating claim of the passage does not necessarily suggest that the phenomenology of the drinker is not present in *Under the Volcano*. If taken with the desire for authenticity expressed in his 'Preface to a Novel', we are pointed towards an 'authentic' anti-

¹⁷ Stephen Spender, 'Introduction', in *Under the Volcano* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1967), pp. vii–xxvi (p. xxv).

¹⁸ Malcolm Lowry, 'Preface to a Novel', in *Under the Volcano: A Casebook*, ed. by Gordon Bowker (London: Macmillan, 1987), pp. 29–35 (p. 36).

¹⁹ Lowry, 'Work in Progress', p. 16.

symbolism which would also need to be present in order to fulfil his ‘drunkard’s story’. In addition to this, the first claim of this passage hints at an experience of addiction which is embedded in the act of drinking; a separate framework within which ‘the will’ is also operational, but which is distinguished from the symbolic web of the novel. Here then, we can distinguish two separate instantiations of the will and its relation to drink; one which is embedded within Lowry’s metaphorical alcoholism, and one which operates as part of Lowry’s phenomenology of alcoholism. In the former, drinking can always mean something else insofar as it is a symbolic act. In the latter, the act of drinking is an action of an agent who is drinking because they want a drink. This is action as the manifestation of a choice in the moment, the elusive sense of first-person agency. However, just as non-addictive actions are difficult to describe ‘in the moment’ without rationalisation or motive-hunting, so too is the phenomenology of addictive-choice entangled in the same wider frameworks of action-comprehension. The phenomenological and metaphorical positions are extricable, either in addiction studies or in *Under the Volcano*. However, the intellectual framework of intentionalism that Lowry touches on deserves specific attention, as do its multiple crossings between the literature of action and the literature on addiction. This is an effort to disentangle these concepts from the symbolic code, before re-entangling them once more later in the chapter. Expansion of the will within this framework reflects insights back onto Lowry’s multi-layered approach, and his use of the intentionality of addiction within this scheme.

Addiction and Intention

Addiction is subject to constant academic misuse; both as the subject of study and as a test-case in tangential debates. There is not a defining model of addiction. Instead, its conceptualisation is tied to a host of other definitional problems. The term ‘compulsion’, for example, is regularly – though contentiously – used in connection to the addict-experience. Compulsion is closely associated with conceptions of freedom insofar as it describes a state in which there appears to be no space for agency. Compulsion denotes action which is controlled by factors which are not intrinsic to the self. Agency is associated with autonomy and control, and this is the sense in which ‘the will’ is often used in the literature; to describe the conscious volitional input of an agent in relation to their actions. What emerges, then, is a clear distinction between the autonomous agent with a will, and the agent who is subject to compulsion, from whom these powers of

control are wrested. Neil Levy offers a clear description of how these terms are often used in relation to addiction:

So devastating are its effects on the will that addicts do not even get into the autonomy ball-park. Addiction does not merely impair autonomy, it is widely felt; instead its effects go much deeper, destroying agency itself.²⁰

The history of addiction literature that Levy is drawing upon is perhaps best encapsulated in the following example from William James, in which addictive compulsion – the craving – is conjured with particular lucidity:

The craving for a drink in real dipsomaniacs, or for opium or chloral in those subjugated, is of a strength of which normal persons can form no conception. ‘Were a keg of rum in one corner of a room and were a cannon constantly discharging balls between me and it, I could not refrain from passing before that cannon in order to get the rum’; ‘If a bottle of brandy stood at one hand and the pit of hell yawned at the other, and I were convinced that I should be pushed in as sure as I took one glass, I could not refrain’: such statements abound in dipsomaniacs’ mouths.²¹

This idea of compulsion, as a state which is out of control, leads free will theorists to frequently make anecdotal use of the addict as a test case for our common-sense notions of what it takes to be ‘free’.²² However, the idea of diminished, or even non-existent, authority results in a further set of conceptual issues. Not only is the idea contentious as a description of the phenomenology of addiction, but it is also problematic within the surrounding legal and medical discourses. As I described in the last chapter, moral responsibility is closely associated with agential control. If addicts are conceptualised as subject to compulsive behaviours which are out of their control, then there is a sense in which they are apparently not morally responsible for their actions. As Gary Watson suggests, this is adopted in different ways according to different medico-ethical interpretations; either as a ‘necessary step to a more humane policy’, or as ‘morally

²⁰ Neil Levy, ‘Autonomy and Addiction’, *Canadian Journal of Philosophy*, 36 (2006), 427–47 (p. 431).

²¹ William James, *Principles of Psychology* (New York, NY: Henry Holt and Company, 1890), p. 543.

²² Patricia S. Greenspan, ‘Behavior Control and Freedom of Action’, *The Philosophical Review*, 87 (1978), 225–40; for a more controversial approach, see Frankfurt’s distinction between ‘willing’ and ‘unwilling’ addicts: Frankfurt, ‘Freedom of the Will and the Concept of a Person’.

evasive – indeed, countertherapeutic’.²³ Aside from the position of compulsion in relation to other theories, Watson notes that the term itself does not even have a fixed meaning. If intrapersonal compulsion is taken non-metaphorically, then – to stay in line with the use of the term in the medico-legal sphere – it should act as a kind of irresistible desire which directly contradicts the desires of the agent, and which they are powerless against.²⁴ To contradict this, Watson directs us to Joel Feinberg:

Strictly speaking no impulse is irresistible; for every case of giving in to a desire [...] it will be true that, if the person had tried harder, he would have resisted it successfully. The psychological situation is never – or hardly ever – like that of the man who hangs from a windowsill by his fingernails until the sheer physical force of gravity rips his nails off and sends him plummeting to the ground.²⁵

If compulsion does not operate as irresistibility, then, as Watson and Levy make clear, addiction cannot be conceptualised according to these codes. As Levy suggests, statistics from within addiction studies corroborate this: drug use is financially sensitive, and intake is often deliberately regulated in order to maintain the efficacy of a hit.²⁶ Here, then, is a discourse related to the problems of conceptualising compulsion, and the way in which desires, autonomy and action relate to the case of the addict. This provides one plane in the debate.

The philosophical and therapeutic approaches to addiction are not always in harmony. Although there may be some interaction between the two, there is also a clear sense in which pragmatism dictates therapeutics more directly. Owen Flanagan, for example, is clear about the debate surrounding addictive volition, but focuses on the way in which ideas of compulsion can be useful, even if they stray from accuracy:

Addicts speak about themselves as if they are and were responsible in all the normal ways other people speak about such matters. Addicts think they are responsible for what they do. However, it has proved useful for addicts to admit

²³ Gary Watson, ‘Disordered Appetites: Addiction, Compulsion and Dependence’, in *Agency and Answerability: Selected Essays* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2004), pp. 59–87 (p. 60).

²⁴ Gary Watson, ‘Disordered Appetites’, p. 62.

²⁵ Joel Feinberg, ‘What Is So Special about Mental Illness?’, in *Doing and Deserving* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1970), pp. 272–92 (pp. 282–83).

²⁶ Levy, ‘Autonomy and Addiction’, p. 432.

that they are *powerless* over __, where __ is the addict's drug of choice or list of [drugs of choice].²⁷

Although Flanagan recognises that addicts generally self-identify as responsible, he also notes the 'performative inconsistency' which characterises much addictive behaviour; the sense that they have oscillating preferences which lead them to act by contrarily renouncing drug use and continuing to take drugs. In this respect, addictive behaviour is subject to a different action pathology from the norm: 'Normally, reasons for action that pass all things considered evaluation find their way onto the motivational circuits as causes. This does not happen normally in cases of addiction'.²⁸ For Flanagan, normal action is in part constituted by considerations of value, while addictive motivation bypasses these value considerations and has undue influence on repeatedly directing action towards a specific end. It is in response to the oscillation in choice – between considered motivation and drug-motivation – that Flanagan recommends the benefit of the addict's self-identifying as non-autonomous in relation to drug use.

Performative inconsistency is central to the medicalised language of addiction control, and is written in to the basic distinctions in response. Although Flanagan's recommendation might be useful in some cases, a finer grained appraisal of the social construction of addiction can offer a better sense of how moral responsibility, autonomy and drug-use are conceptualised in relation to each other within different discourses. The fourfold model developed by Brickman et al.,²⁹ and repeated by Marlatt and Fromme, is particularly useful in its demarcations of these concepts. In this schema, the combinations of two questions with two answers produce four different results. In turn, these correspond to separate models of addiction and responsibility:

(1) Is the individual (addict) considered to be personally responsible for the *development* (etiology) or the addiction problem (yes/no), and (2) is the addict considered the responsible agent for *changing* the problem (yes/no)?³⁰

²⁷ Owen Flanagan, 'What Is It Like to Be an Addict?', in *Addiction and Responsibility*, ed. by Jeffrey Stephen Poland and George Graham (London: MIT Press, 2011), pp. 269–92 (p. 291).

²⁸ Flanagan, p. 291.

²⁹ Philip Brickman and others, 'Models of Helping and Coping', *American Psychologist*, 37 (1982), 368–84.

³⁰ G. Alan Marlatt and Kim Fromme, 'Metaphors for Addiction', in *Visions of Addiction: Major Contemporary Perspectives on Addiction and Alcoholism*, ed. by Stanton Peele (Lexington, MA: Lexington Books, 1988), pp. 1–24 (p. 7), original emphasis.

The separation of these questions makes the mechanisms of social and personal responsibility slightly clearer, and importantly distinguishes the structure of recovery from the original causation involved in the beginning of an addiction. Further, Brickman's schema makes it clear that responses to addiction are conditioned by the way addicts are conceived as agents more or less in control of their own state. The responses point to ways in which the individual addict's self-conception is tied into a feedback loop with the therapeutic style that they encounter. The addict's self-description of responsibility is in part dependent on the conceptions of responsibility conveyed by the therapeutic discourses they come into contact with. Although Brickman's responses are not exhaustive, the divergence that emerges from so few variables makes the discourse and response dynamic particularly striking:

(1) the medical/ disease model, which assumes that the addict is considered free from personal responsibility for the development of the addiction, but that change is impossible unless one submits to some kind of medical treatment program (presumably geared toward the alleviation of the underlying disease); (2) the moral model, which holds that the addict is to blame for becoming addicted (e.g., due to lack of willpower or moral fibre) and that he or she is also to be held responsible for changing or failing to change the addictive behaviour; (3) the so-called enlightenment model, which holds that the addict is to some extent personally responsible for the emergence of the addiction but must give up the notion of personal control in order to change (as in AA, where the alcoholic becomes enlightened to the notion that change is possible only by relinquishing personal control to a 'higher power'); and (4) the compensatory model, which holds that the individual learns to 'compensate' for a problem by assuming active responsibility and self-mastery in the change process but that the individual is not held personally responsible for the problem (e.g., addiction develops as a function of multiple biopsychosocial determinants, and not as a failure in personal will).³¹

What is clear from Brickman's model is the way in which the concept of free will enters the categories of description. The idea of a will is clearest in responses (2) and (3). In the former, it is the responsibility of the addict to use their 'willpower' to break the addiction, and in the latter (as in Flanagan's model) the addict gives up the concept of willpower to a

³¹ Marlatt and Fromme, pp. 7–8.

greater spiritual authority. Models (1) and (4) interact with the concept of willpower by largely avoiding the concept of personal responsibility by emphasising either the biological or social determinants of behaviour. Although these concepts are not neatly partitioned in Malcolm Lowry's work, they are all present. The idea that there is feedback between the therapeutic experience of alcoholism and the conception of addiction allows a reading of Lowry's work which also utilises his biographical material without reductionism, emphasising instead the way that concepts of autonomy and the will feed into *Under the Volcano* through Lowry's use of different addictive discourses.

Lowry's Models of Addiction

The exact details of Lowry's own treatment are unknown. However, biographical evidence suggests that, even if his therapeutic experience was largely unsophisticated, he was aware of several theoretical and medical approaches to addiction. Gordon Bowker, in his biography of Lowry, makes a clear opposition between the standard treatment of 'drying out' and the possibility of a more extensive plan in the form of psychiatric attention. Lowry's first wife, Jan Gabriel appears to have been the first to bring the psychiatric response to alcoholism to Lowry's attention. In 1938, she made repeated attempts to have Lowry admitted to the Menninger Clinic, after reading Karl Menninger's *Man Against Himself*.³² However, her attempts were not successful, and Lowry's treatment remained basic:

On 15 August, [1938], Lowry entered a clinic at La Crescenta for drying-out, something which Jan [thought] would be useless; he had gone through this before, in Moretonhampstead and in Bellevue, and it had never helped him. What he needed was in-depth psychiatric treatment.³³

Had Lowry gone to the Menninger Clinic, he might have been treated with 'confinement, *plus* psychoanalysis, *plus* the proper direction of the increasing capacity for externally directed aggressions'.³⁴ Menninger claims that this broad approach can bring about a cure 'not only of drinking but of the infantilism which accompanies it and the character deformities which produce it', a claim that could not have been said 'of any other

³² Gordon Bowker, *Pursued by Furies: A Life of Malcolm Lowry* (London: HarperCollins, 1993), p. 238.

³³ Bowker, p. 245.

³⁴ Karl Menninger, *Man Against Himself* (London: Harvest Books, 1963), p. 161, original emphasis.

treatment of alcohol addiction at the present time'.³⁵ Although Lowry was never subject to Menninger's treatment, the episode reveals an opposition which is frequently repeated in the history of alcoholism studies between interventionist cures and willpower cures. Although this distinction is not fixed, there does seem to be an ideological difference between the two. The interventionist cure situates alcoholism as a holistic problem which needs to be approached on several fronts. In contrast, the willpower cure demands increased self-control from the patient by providing the minimum conditions for this self-control to occur. Drying-out is the conventional first step. There is clearly an operative distinction between the ways in which each approach apportions individual responsibility, as the willpower cure places almost total responsibility for recovery on the addict.

Despite the differences between them, these treatments also form part of the debate around the 'disease concept' of alcoholism. What both approaches have in common is a more or less explicit refusal to define alcoholism as a disease. In the drying-out process, the purgative approach removes the offending substance and does not treat the ongoing addiction. Conversely, Menninger's approach is explicitly focussed on the addiction, but does not see this as a disease in its own right, but rather as a symptom of another, psychological, disease:

No, the victim of alcohol addiction knows what most of his critics do not know, namely, that alcoholism is not a disease, or at least not the principal disease from which he suffers; furthermore, *he knows that he does not know* the pain or nature of the dreadful pain and fear within him which impel him, blindly, to alcoholic self-destruction.³⁶

Menninger's formulation places the cure in the hands of the therapist who is able to coax the real disease out from under the guise of the alcoholic symptoms even if self-knowledge is latent in the patient. As is apparent in his writing, Lowry seems to have been aware of psychoanalytic approaches to alcoholism other than Menninger's. This is evident in his use of the phrase 'return to the presexual revives the necessity for nutrition' in *Lunar Caustic*, the composition of which began following his stay in Bellevue.³⁷ Although the exact sources of Lowry's psychoanalytic education are not known, the phrase is diagnostically

³⁵ Menninger, p. 161.

³⁶ Menninger, p. 147, original emphasis.

³⁷ Malcolm Lowry, *Lunar Caustic*, ed. by Earl Birney and Margerie Lowry (London: Jonathan Cape, 1968), p. 18.

close to Sándor Radó's 1926 article on 'The Psychic Effects of Intoxicants', one of the first psychoanalytic papers to explicitly treat the subject of addiction. Ralph Crowley, in his early review of the psychoanalytic literature on drug addiction, notes Radó's use of oral eroticism to describe addicts:

How does oral eroticism account for those individuals who do not take drugs by mouth? This is explained by regarding oral eroticism as including not only the mouth region, but also the stomach, intestines, the processes of digestion and absorption, and the diffusion of well being over the whole organism. The latter [Radó] calls alimentary orgasm and compares it to the happy state of the suckling after eating.³⁸

[...]

Radó regards pharmacogenic orgasm as a special instance of alimentary orgasm. Phylogenetically, alimentary orgasm is the original form of pleasure and is bound up with the self-preservative function. In the course of evolution the genital has taken over from the nutrition part of its orgasmic function. In the use of drugs, man recaptures in a more satisfying form the original alimentary orgasm, and eliminates the need for genital satisfaction.³⁹

In Radó's own words, the 'alimentary orgasm represents the original form of orgasmic gratification, and [...], accordingly, the highest pleasure-function of primitive living beings is bound up with their most important self-preservative function'.⁴⁰ The addict's attachment to the 'alimentary orgasm' prevents his sexual development, returning him to a presexual state and eliding nutrition and sexual gratification. Bill Plantagenet of *Lunar Caustic* is supposed to have reaped his psychoanalytic insight from 'a little book'.⁴¹ Even without the original source it is clear that Lowry's phrasing is congruent with the psychoanalytic establishment view. At least in this case, it is clear that Lowry's use of the psychoanalytic phrasing in his literary work is an introduction of a particular discourse into the work. Plantagenet's self-analysing reflects a particular way in which Lowry constructs

³⁸ Ralph Crowley, 'Psychoanalytic Literature on Drug Addiction and Alcoholism', *Psychoanalytic Review*, 26 (1939), 39–54 (p. 41).

³⁹ Crowley, pp. 41–2.

⁴⁰ Sándor Radó, 'The Psychic Effects of Intoxicants: An Attempt to Evolve a Psycho-Analytical Theory of Morbid Cravings', *International Journal of Psycho-Analysis*, 7 (1926), 396–413 (p. 411).

⁴¹ Malcolm Lowry, *Lunar Caustic*, p. 18.

his character reading himself and his addiction in relation to a specific medical discourse. Here, self-scrutiny is a way of representing Plantagenet's interaction with the social construction of his drug use. By setting him within a social discourse, Lowry obliquely introduces connotations of the relationship between the addict and responsibility.

Lowry continued to come into contact with medical conceptions of alcoholism, and by the time he was writing *Under the Volcano*, it is clear that he was well versed in contemporary alcoholism. One letter to Conrad Aiken from 1940 shows Lowry trying to shed the idea of himself as an alcoholic:

As to drink rotting one's honesty, alas, that is true. At one time I felt indeed that more than rotting my honesty it was destroying my identity as well. Many of my troubles, but also many of my wisest decisions, are due to it but I am not, as Parks has suggested, allergic, whatever that means, to it. I have at last gotten wise to it, ceased to tell myself polite little lies about it, forced myself to realize what allowances are made for one when tight, and hence how much one deceives one's self, and have at last put this bogey where it should be, as simply a concomitant of social intercourse.⁴²

The letter is striking both in the way in which Lowry manipulates the language of alcohol and responsibility, and in the way in which this is mixed with a report of Parks' quasi-medical claim that alcoholism is an allergy. The inward-turned rhetoric of the letter provides a hedged admission through which he presents himself slightly ironically. As such, it acts as a mildly self-exculpatory plea; it balances 'troubles' against the 'wisest decisions', concedes to recognising 'what allowances are made for one when tight', intimates responsibility through the suggestion that alcohol implies self-deception, while also skirting this responsibility by defining the problem as 'a concomitant of social intercourse'. Into this shifting picture, the allergy (or any other medical theory, it is implied) is singled out as an absolutist position, and rejected.

Although the allergy concept of alcoholism was never widely adopted by the medical establishment, it was well-known, as E.M Jellinek notes, following 'Toulouse's study in

⁴² Malcolm Lowry, 'Letter to Conrad Aiken, January 1940', in *Sursum Corda! The Collected Letters of Malcolm Lowry, Volume I: 1926-1946*, ed. by Sherrill Grace (London: Jonathan Cape, 1995), p. 277; 'Parks' refers to Benjamin Parks. Parks was Lowry's custodian in L.A., as appointed by Arthur Lowry 'through one of his Liverpool lawyers'. See: Bowker, p. 244.

1896'.⁴³ More significantly, the concept was revived by W.D. Silkworth in 1937, and 'from 1939 on it became widely spread through the book "Alcoholics Anonymous" and members of the fellowship of the same name'.⁴⁴ Predating this letter by a year, it is not unlikely that Parks' terminology was influenced by the A.A. movement and the publication of the first Big Book. Although Jellinek notes that the allergy concept has been used both literally and figuratively, it is clear that in the first edition of *Alcoholics Anonymous*, the concept is used in an overtly literal sense. The 1939 edition begins with 'The Doctor's Opinion', an embedded anonymized letter:⁴⁵

We believe, and so suggested a few years ago, that the action of alcohol on these chronic alcoholics is a manifestation of an allergy; that the phenomenon of craving is limited to this class and never occurs in the average temperate drinker. The allergic types can never safely use alcohol in any form at all.⁴⁶

This is framed by A.A.'s opinion of the doctor's approach:

The doctor's theory that we have an allergy to alcohol interests us. As laymen, our opinion as to its soundness may, of course, mean little. But as ex-alcoholics, we can say that his explanation makes good sense. It explains many things for which we cannot otherwise account.⁴⁷

Later in the book, this becomes explicitly linked with the disease concept:

An illness of this sort – and we have come to believe it an illness – involves those about us in a way no other human sickness can.⁴⁸

Another book of popular psychology, from 1938, also determines the 'allergic' nature of some alcoholics. However, for Strecker and Chambers, this is an explicitly 'psychic allergy', which is vaguely accompanied by an exculpatory ethic:

⁴³ E.M. Jellinek, *The Disease Concept of Alcoholism* (New Haven, CT: College and University Press, 1960), p. 86.

⁴⁴ Jellinek, pp. 86–7.

⁴⁵ Though anonymized in *Alcoholics Anonymous*, later A.A. publications reveal the physician to be Silkworth. See: *Alcoholics Anonymous Comes of Age: A Brief History of the A.A.* (New York, NY: Alcoholics Anonymous World Services Inc., 1993).

⁴⁶ Bill W., *Alcoholics Anonymous: The Original 1939 Edition* (Mineola, NY: Dover Publications, 2011), p. 4.

⁴⁷ Bill W., p. 2.

⁴⁸ Bill W., p. 28.

[It] might be mentioned that there is nothing any more humiliating or disgraceful about having a psychic allergy to alcohol than there is about having a physical allergy, or sensitivity, to fish or strawberries, or any other article of food.⁴⁹

The allergy concept, literal or metaphorical, psychic or physical, plays in to the long-history of drug discourse which attempts to conceptualise the slippery notion of a repeating behaviour which is carried out by an agent who appears to consistently reject the act.⁵⁰ Addiction seems to incorporate both physical and psychological factors, insofar as addicts can recover despite distinct withdrawal symptoms. A theory of addiction must be malleable enough to incorporate both the notion that ‘the addict is not in control of her behaviour’ and the deliberateness with which she ‘purchases, possesses, and consumes her drug’.⁵¹ As explored above, this definitional complexity is compounded by the way in which addictive behaviour fits into more elaborate conceptualisations of addiction and responsibility. If the allergy model above is taken to represent a particular etiology of addiction, then it has repercussions for the way in which both addiction and recovery are conceptualised. This is particularly clear in treatment plans like the A.A., in which an acceptance of the disease model becomes the catalyst for a reliance on spiritual aid, the one-day-at-a-time model, and the addict-for-life ethos.

An understanding of these models becomes particularly useful turning back to Lowry, whose letters show how the attempt to explain addiction can become an entangled justificatory exercise. An exceptional letter from Lowry to his father from 1942 shows him explaining the results of a series of medical examinations, and attempting to pinpoint the effect his heavy drinking might be having on his health:

As you know what was decided was that nothing was wrong with me more or less save liquor and self neglect. There was a dental problem, munificently taken care of. There was a morbid psychological problem too – there still is – but it is one that I am largely solving myself, and too much emphasis – my fault again – was damagingly laid on that. After a certain point, psychological problems are a matter of guts. However, that there was a serious medical problem beyond that of mere

⁴⁹ E. A. Strecker and F. T. Chambers, *Alcohol: One Man's Meat* (New York, NY: Macmillan, 1938), p. 37.

⁵⁰ This is a definition of an unwilling addict. The idea of the willing addict has been used by Frankfurt, but this is beyond my current scope. See: Frankfurt, ‘Freedom of the Will and the Concept of a Person’.

⁵¹ Michael Louis Corrado, ‘Addiction and Responsibility: An Introduction’, *Law and Philosophy*, Vol. 18, No. 6, *Addiction and Responsibility: Part 1* (1999), 579-588 (581).

weak will everyone seemed predisposed to deny, including eventually myself, because the disposal to accept the medical solution seemed part of the morbid state I was half heartedly trying, and being encouraged to shake off [...] To get on – it was decided that I was simply drinking because I couldn't make up my mind to stop – and there is a great element of truth in this – and that that was the cause of my ills.⁵²

This passage steers away from the disease concept, both by emphasising that the physicians were 'predisposed to deny' any medical etiology for his drinking, then by signalling the feedback that this apparently had on the way in which he 'eventually' conceptualised his drinking himself. After abandoning the medical crutch, Lowry's physicians seem firmly to attribute total responsibility to him. Weak-willed, Lowry 'was simply drinking', not because he couldn't stop himself, but because he couldn't make up his mind to stop. Although this seems to make the apportioning of responsibility very clear, Lowry begins the explanation with a pre-emptive caveat: a 'morbid psychological problem' is still persistent. This is dismissed as a reparable 'matter of guts', but here the weak-will thesis holds up less convincingly, and in turn provides a shaky foundation for the later declaration of abstinence by retaining the 'morbid psychological problem' as a phantasmal etiology. The way in which Lowry frames the distinctions between disease and willpower become more complex later in the letter when, after ostensibly abandoning the disease concept, Lowry tells his father what is really wrong with him:

Secondly I had not (nor have had) any venereal disease, nor any liver trouble nor any lasting 'result' of alcoholism in the past, however alcoholic I might have been. Third, I *did* have, what might be worse than all these if not taken in hand immediately, namely a largely *streptococcic* multiple glandular infection, and this I had had not one, not two, not five, but possibly for as long as *ten* years, during part of which time it must have lain dormant. In short I have been, without knowing it, toxic, living in a state of being slowly poisoned and undermined physically and mentally, for the best part of a decade. As I have said drink cannot cause this, though naturally it aggravates it.⁵³

⁵² Malcolm Lowry, 'Letter to Jonathan Cape', pp. 391–2.

⁵³ Malcolm Lowry, 'Letter to Jonathan Cape', p. 394, original emphasis.

Here Lowry is describing, not the medical causes of his drinking, but the physical results of it. Again, responsibility is interwoven in the description, and the ‘multiple glandular infection’ becomes a way of explaining his ills without recourse to alcohol. Although drink ‘aggravates it’, the separation of the infection from his alcoholism allows him to regard himself as not responsible for his ill health; a morally neutral conclusion that reflectively justifies his alcoholism on the basis that it has no lasting physical effects other than those that occur through its combination with infectious circumstances beyond his control.

The ranging obscurantism of the letter mirrors the vagaries of the medical discourse that Lowry is attempting at once to marshal, explain and rhetorically manipulate. This is even written into what appears to be the simplest admission in the letter, that ‘it was decided that I was simply drinking because I couldn’t make up my mind to stop’. This pragmatism doesn’t shed light on the physical, behavioural and social complexities of stopping, but it does point towards the heart of the difficulty in addiction models. As Neil Levy correctly suggests, numerous findings reveal that addiction is not compulsive or irresistible. Instead, addicts frequently act rationally, both in the ways in which they take drugs, and the ways in which they abstain. Because of this, it is hard not to conclude as Levy does:

So why do addicts consume their drugs? The short and only somewhat misleading answer is that they take drugs because they want to. Indeed, there is a very real sense in which they choose to take their drug. [...] It is not compulsion, or coercion; it is, in some sense, volition.⁵⁴

This doesn’t entirely characterise the problem of addiction. As Levy’s slightly qualified ascription of ‘volition’ suggests, there is still an inclination to view addictive action as not-quite as freely executed as non-addictive action, even if all evidence suggests that the term ‘volition’ still correctly applies. This minor caveat notwithstanding, there is certainly a deep sense in which addicts are still thought of as agents. Indeed, much of the tragedy in *Under the Volcano* is dependent upon the conflict between the Consul’s agency – through which he is able to choose what to do and how to do it – and his behaviour which constantly undermines the trust in this agency. The idea that there is a volitional aspect to addiction also appears in *Under the Volcano*, in a remarkable echo of Lowry’s letter to his

⁵⁴ Levy, ‘Autonomy and Addiction’, p. 432, Levy suggests that addicts do experience some infringement of autonomy, but that this occurs through the way in which their choices oscillate sharply and in contradiction. In this way, his model is different from those which suggest a simple dichotomy between autonomy and compulsion.

father. Lowry's phrase is repeated in the words of Dr Guzmán, from whom Hugh buys the Consul's strychnine, and of whom Hugh says:

I tried to persuade him to see Geoff. But he refused to waste time on him. He said simply that so far as he knew there was nothing wrong with Papa and never had been save that he wouldn't make up his mind to stop drinking. That seems plain enough and I dare say it's true.⁵⁵

Here, as in the letter, the phrase becomes immediately entangled with slightly conflicting appraisals of the situation. While Guzmán claims that the Consul 'wouldn't make up his mind to stop drinking', he says this while prescribing him strychnine.⁵⁶ This move itself plays equivocally with the disease concept. Not only does the very act of prescribing seem slightly conflicted, but the choice of drug is also interesting. Strychnine cannot be said to play directly into the disease concept, because its benefits and medical history are simply too confused. It is a thoroughly ambiguous medicine, and it is possible that Lowry chose it for this reason.

Strychnine does not have clear medical uses or benefits. The closeness of its therapeutic and lethal doses led to it falling out of favour with the medical establishment, and its appearance in *Under the Volcano* must have been anachronistic even in the 1930s (though this might also indicate Dr Guzman's out of date medical approaches). Although the benefits of strychnine have been largely rejected for some time, it seems to have been used to treat chronic alcoholism, among other things, in the decades leading up to 1930. In this usage, it seems to have been administered predominantly as a palliative rather than a cure; as a general stimulant and tonic. Pharmacological indexes seem contested on its exact use. A 1906 *Text-Book of Pharmacology* notes that 'Strychnine is said to be of value in chronic alcoholism in lessening the depression which forms one of the chief difficulties in the treatment', which might suggest that it was being used in conjunction with a process of abstinence, or as a general stimulant to counteract the depressive action of alcohol on the

⁵⁵ Malcolm Lowry, *Under the Volcano* (London: Penguin, 2000), p. 121.

⁵⁶ It is not certain if the Consul is drinking a simple dilution of strychnine or a solution which includes other constituents. However, the 'dull red concoction like bad claret' seems to recall one standard strychnine dilution: 'Sulphuric acid containing 1 per cent. of ammonium vanadate gives with strychnine a deep violet-blue colour, changing to a deep purple, and on dilution with water a cherry-red colour is produced which persists for some time.' Pharmaceutical Society of Great Britain, *The British Pharmaceutical Codex* (London: Pharmaceutical Press, 1923), p. 1075.

body.⁵⁷ However, the *British Pharmaceutical Codex* of 1923 notes a range of broad medicinal uses: '[strychnine] is much used as a gastric tonic in dyspepsia, and as a general tonic in convalescence from acute disease; with atropine it is used in dipsomania, hypodermically, and by the mouth'.⁵⁸ Research on strychnine-alcohol antagonism conducted in the 1930s suggests that there was some effort made to formalise the relation between strychnine and alcohol, with specific regard to strychnine as a counteractive stimulant. The results of testing on animals brought back minimal results:

Strychnine reverses the alcohol depression of the higher centres only to a slight degree; it does not effectively abolish ataxia or the loss of postural reflexes induced by large doses of alcohol.⁵⁹

Although the research is largely concentrated on the effect of strychnine as a respiratory stimulant, following alcohol-induced respiratory paralysis, attention to the effect of strychnine on the 'higher centres' suggests that the drug may have been used, not simply as a general stimulant with regard to alcoholism, but perhaps more specifically as a way of counteracting drunkenness. This certainly seems to be how the Consul uses it:

'But my lord, Yvonne, surely you know by this time I can't get drunk however much I drink,' he said almost tragically, taking an abrupt swallow of strychnine. 'Why, do you think I *like* swilling down this awful *nux vomica* or belladonna or whatever it is of Hugh's?'⁶⁰

Although neither the Consul nor Hugh is ever explicit about the benefits of the strychnine solution, it seems to be acting less as a general stimulant than as a method for accelerated drying out:

'I shall sober up.' He returned and poured some more strychnine into the other glass, filling it, then moved the strychnine bottle from the tray into a more

⁵⁷ Arthur R. Cushny, *A Text-Book of Pharmacology and Therapeutics*, 4th ed. (London: Rebman, 1906), p. 205.

⁵⁸ Pharmaceutical Society of Great Britain, p. 1075.

⁵⁹ Harry Gold and Janet Travell, 'Strychnine in Poisoning by Alcohol', *Journal of Pharmacology and Experimental Therapeutics*, 52 (1934), 345–54 (p. 354); See also: Harry Gold and Janet Travell, 'Ethyl Alcohol and Strychnine Antagonism', *The Journal of Pharmacology and Experimental Therapeutics*, 52 (1934), 30–53.

⁶⁰ *Under the Volcano*, p. 90, original emphasis.

prominent position on the parapet. ‘After all I have been out all night: what could one expect?’⁶¹

Here, the strychnine is dispensed in direct relation to the Consul’s self-addressed justifications. Rather than moving to a point of analysing the underlying actions themselves, the Consul is attempting to operate and manipulate the effects of those actions; i.e. how drunk he feels. Despite the ambiguity of the cure, the mentions of strychnine are also frequently accompanied by the most frank insights into alcoholism in the novel. The disease concept is never approached directly in *Under the Volcano*, though the following passage comes closest by casual allusion:

‘I am too sober. I have lost my familiars, my guardian angels. I am straightening out,’ he added, sitting down again opposite the strychnine bottle with his glass. ‘In a sense what happened was a sign of my fidelity, my loyalty; any other man would have spent this last year in a very different manner. At least I have no disease,’ he cried in his heart, the cry seeming to end on a somewhat doubtful note, however.⁶²

In this passage, the slippery concept of alcoholism as a disease and the more direct idea of physical diseases play into one another, the Consul begins by claiming to ‘have no [venereal] disease’, as if citing Lowry’s letter to his father, but ends on a ‘doubtful note’, clearly aware that his year spent drinking might also constitute an illness, but secure in his quasi-moral claim that he didn’t spend ‘last year in a very different manner’ precisely because of his drinking. This small joke is the only appearance of the disease concept in the novel. While Dr Guzmán’s comments directly evoke a willpower thesis of addiction, the strychnine, though ambiguous, points to a more complex phenomenology. As well as apparently counteracting the physical effects of alcohol, the tonic also briefly becomes an alcohol replacement that stands as surrogate in the habits and rituals of the Consul’s daily life. Though this potentially points to a way of understanding the addiction that escapes the absolutist terms of the disease or willpower models, the Consul’s recovery is hampered by what he regards as the counteractive social dominance of the willpower thesis:

But can’t you see you *cabrón* that she is thinking that the first thing you think of after she has arrived home like this is a drink even if it is only a drink of strychnine

⁶¹ *Under the Volcano*, p. 97.

⁶² *Under the Volcano*, p. 97.

the intrusive necessity for which and juxtaposition cancels its innocence so you see you might as well in the face of such hostility might you not start now on the whisky instead of later⁶³

Here he is most concerned with the ‘intrusive necessity’ of the habit. He rejects the strychnine because it replaces the alcohol, and is equally indicative of his dependence as whisky itself. The covert posturing of the willpower thesis underlies this statement, which, in its Manichean dynamic, allows the Consul’s justificatory rhetoric to swing towards drink, as that at least is written into the plain opposition between total abstinence and total sobriety. In this way, the habitual status of the Consul’s drinking only really makes itself known when he attempts to replace the drink with strychnine; the strychnine highlights the habit of his drinking.

Free Will

The idea of free will, as Richard Holton suggests, is not a unified concept.⁶⁴ In the analysis of addiction above, there are distinctions between even the central concepts of freedom as it is used in the moral and phenomenological senses. A phenomenological sense of free will is given by the experience of agency, and when philosophers suggest that addiction infringes on freedom, they are drawing on the idea that addiction infringes on agency. The moral meaning of the term, as described above, draws on the idea that free will captures a sense in which an agent is responsible for their actions. If the agent is not acting according to free will – as might be argued is the case in addiction – then there is a way in which they might not be deemed responsible. Willpower seems to be a further, separable, idea which is also connected but distinct from other categories invoked in the term free will. Willpower might describe an experience of agency, but it is clear from the literature on addiction that it is also used rhetorically to describe ways of acting that exhibit greater or lesser free will in opposition to the control of a drug. The slippage and range of these categories suggest the inadequacy of a single unified idea of ‘the will’. In the unified ideal, the notion of ‘the will’ is used reciprocally to constitute the definition of ‘free will’:

⁶³ *Under the Volcano*, p. 74.

⁶⁴ Richard Holton, ‘Disentangling the Will’, in *Free Will and Consciousness: How Might They Work?*, ed. by Alfred Mele, Roy Baumeister, and Kathleen Vohs (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), pp. 82–100.

[Freedom] is dependence of action upon the will [...] the relative dependency relation defines the relevant notion of self-determination; the self *is* the will. Hence self-determination is determination by the will.⁶⁵

In these absolute terms, exercising the will is both the constitutive mark of self-determination and – reflexively – of free will itself. However, as the different facets of ‘free will’ suggest, several concepts have to be tied together in order to give substance to the experience of freedom. A definitional usage of ‘the will’ alone seems too thin for this purpose, as it is unable to capture the phenomenological complexity of the feeling of agency.⁶⁶ To add further complexity to the idea of free will, it is clear that the concept of human freedom is not restricted to moral and agential categories, but extends to a metaphysical usage. Holton also describes this third facet, which he describes as the ‘modal’ concept of free will.⁶⁷ In *Under the Volcano*, Lowry’s treatment of addiction touches on aspects of moral and phenomenological free will, in addition to the willpower theses. The broad conceptual scope of the terminology of free will allows him to interweave these uses with distinctly metaphysical uses of the term. From this point, Lowry’s scope is not limited to the individual, but widens to involve concepts invoking both historical and political freedom. Even within this deeply entangled structure, it is possible to distinguish how the language of addiction and intention continues to reverberate among the more distinct symbolism of the novel.

From early drafts of *Under the Volcano*, Lowry has included a discursive section of prose in which the Consul, Hugh and Yvonne are eating a meal, following the episode in which the *pelado* robs the peon. This scene is interwoven with a long history of colonial politics. The peon is a native Mexican, who is found by the side of the road, dying of a head wound. The Consul, Hugh and Yvonne are on their way to Tomalín on a bus, when the vehicle is stopped to allow inspection of the body. The *pelado* is another passenger on the bus, a ‘Spaniard’ who ‘came over [to Mexico] after the Moroccan war’.⁶⁸ The term *pelado* is defined in the novel as follows:

⁶⁵ Gary Watson, ‘Free Action and Free Will’, *Mind*, 96 (1987), 145–72 (p. 145), original emphasis.

⁶⁶ For a description of how the vagueness of the thin unified concept of ‘the will’ opens it to rhetorical abuses, see: Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, ‘Epidemics of the Will’, in *Tendencies* (London: Routledge, 1994), pp. 129–40.

⁶⁷ Holton, ‘Disentangling the Will’, p. 83.

⁶⁸ For a full explanation of the Spanish intervention in Morocco, see: Chris Ackerley and Lawrence J. Clipper, *A Companion to Under the Volcano* (Vancouver, BC: University of British Columbia Press, 1984),

A Spaniard, say, could interpret it as Indian, the Indian he despised, used, made drunk. The Indian, however, might mean Spaniard by it. Either might mean by it anyone who made a show of himself. It was perhaps one of those words that had actually been distilled out of conquest, suggesting, as it did, on the one hand thief, on the other exploiter.⁶⁹

The *pelado* in this scene is a belated conquistador, who also symbolises the historic exploitation of the people of Mexico. His position is summed up in his action of robbing the dying man of his few remaining coins. Although the *pelado* robs the peon, the main crime, which is shared by all of the onlookers, is their collective non-intervention. They do not help the dying man because of a law, as the Consul explains, to prevent others becoming an ‘accessory after the fact’.⁷⁰

This scene of non-intervention and guilt forms the background for the argument in Chapter Ten. The conversation emerges in complex waves of abstractions as the Consul attempts to justify their passive inaction, both as metaphysically sound, and as part of a larger, global-historical dynamic. In the conversation, the excursus on freedom and responsibility is dominated by the Consul’s use of arguments from Tolstoy’s Second Epilogue to *War and Peace*. Although the scene was present from early on in the drafting stage of *Under the Volcano*, the Tolstoy allusion, and its structural significance within this scene, has markedly changed between drafts.⁷¹ An early draft of the novel embeds the quotation in the rather plain exchanges of the conversation, with the allusion acting predominantly as an ironic comment on the Consul’s drunken state:

p. 313. ‘[A]fter the Moroccan war’ would refer to the time period between 1934 and the start of the Spanish civil war in 1936, though it is hard to pin point because, as Ackerley and Clipper suggest, Spanish involvement in Morocco was protracted, spanning the period between 1906 and 1934. In addition to this information, Ackerley and Clipper note that ‘The Consul held a posting in nearby Rabat (French Morocco) at a key time during this war.

⁶⁹ *Under the Volcano*, pp. 237–8.

⁷⁰ *Under the Volcano*, p. 245.

⁷¹ The inventory for the Malcolm Lowry collection, held in Special Collections at the University of British Columbia, records the stages of the drafting process for *Under the Volcano*. A short story version, which formed the basis of Chapter 8 in the final novel, is listed as draft (A). Draft (B) is the first novel version, though it is labelled “second draft” by Lowry’s wife, Margerie. Draft (C) is an unmarked carbon which includes the corrections that are pencilled on (B). Draft (D) is an annotated carbon labelled “third draft” by Margerie. The base of this carbon is (C). Draft (E) is the second novel version, and is changed substantially from (D). This text is labelled “fourth draft” on copy. The printer’s copy is labelled (F), and the galley proofs (G). There are also numerous notes, sketches, poems, and miscellaneous intermediate chapter drafts included in the collection.

‘This is the way I should begin it, something like this.’ He cleared his throat and spoke slowly, trying to make the ponderous, long-created phrases sound impromptu, as though he had just thought of them himself: in fact, it was his main idea now to make them think this, since he had forgotten having mentioned *War and Peace* a minute ago. Nevertheless he felt quite capable of repeating what he had not had occasion to repeat in public since those days seventeen years ago as a lecturer at Tortu, that seat of learning where knowledge was so literally imbibed, and where work, as the English had it, was so admittedly the curse of the drinking classes. ‘The act of a madman or a drunkard,’ he said flatly, ‘or of a man labouring under violent excitement, seems less free and more inevitable to the one who knows the mental condition of the man who performed the action, and more free and less inevitable to the one who does not know it.’⁷²

When, in later drafts, this section is developed, the modifications embed the Consul’s Tolstoy in a more rhapsodic atmosphere. Lowry’s drafting period for *Under the Volcano* took place over a period of ten years. During this time, the novel was radically altered. In terms of the form of the novel, the clearest stylistic change took place in narration. As Vice notes, the early versions of the text often include statements which are set within ‘the consciousness of the characters’. Part of the editorial process that Lowry conducted was to unmoor these statements from their ‘ostensible originators’, whose original voices seem ‘stilted and unlikely, precisely as if the people, who are simply the pretexts for certain verbal snippets to appear, are also merely speaking for the sake of it’.⁷³ In later drafts, the quotations and claims which made up these ‘verbal snippets’ are truncated, erased, redistributed, or reattributed to other sources within the text, with the resultant effect of increased density and polyphony.⁷⁴

Instead of ‘trying to make the ponderous, long-created phrases sound impromptu’, the Consul now talks:

⁷² Malcolm Lowry, ‘Under the Volcano (Manuscript B) Chapter 10’, p. 15, Box 26, Fol. 3, Malcolm Lowry Manuscript Collections, The Library of the University of British Columbia Special Collections Division.

⁷³ Sue Vice, ‘Self-Consciousness in the Work of Malcolm Lowry: An Examination of Narrative Voice’ (unpublished D. Phil Thesis, University of Oxford, 1988), p. 186.

⁷⁴ See: Vice, ‘Self-Consciousness in the Work of Malcolm Lowry: An Examination of Narrative Voice’, pp. 147–182.

[L]ike Sir Thomas Browne, of Archimedes, Moses, Achilles, Methusleh [sic.], Charles V and Pontius Pilate.⁷⁵ The Consul was talking furthermore of Jesus Christ, or rather of Yus Asaf who, according to the Kashmiri legend, *was* Christ – Christ, who had, after being taken down from the cross, wandered to Kashmir in search of the lost tribes of Israel, and died there, in Srinagar –

But there was a slight mistake. The Consul was not talking. Apparently not. The Consul had not uttered a single word. It was all an illusion, a whirling cerebral chaos, out of which, at last, at long last; at this very instant, emerged, rounded and complete, order:

‘The act of a madman or a drunkard, old bean,’ he said, ‘or of a man labouring under violent excitement seems less free and more inevitable to the one who knows the mental condition of the man who performed the action, and more free and less inevitable to the one who does not know it.’⁷⁶

The change is from the Consul reciting the quotation and laboriously attempting to make it sound spontaneous, to the narration removing speech from the conscious efforts of the Consul, and making it a ‘chaos’ from which emerges the small habitual remembrance:

[L]ike that little piece one had learned, so laboriously, years ago, only to forget whenever one particularly wanted to play it, until one day one got drunk in such a way that one’s fingers themselves recalled the combination and, miraculously, perfectly, unlocked the wealth of melody; only here Tolstoy had supplied no melody.⁷⁷

By redirecting the narration, Lowry makes the interaction between the Consul’s mind-states, the drink, and the effort to produce the quotation, more of a complex operation. In the amended version, drink takes an operative role by making the act of recall appear spontaneous. This has a more nuanced relation to the Tolstoy quotation itself, because we

⁷⁵ The Sir Thomas Browne reference is to *Hydriotaphia*. Although the Lowry collection at the University of British Columbia includes a copy of Browne’s *Religio Medici* as part of Lowry’s library, the allusion is not to that text.

⁷⁶ Lowry, *Under the Volcano*, pp. 309–10; This section is unchanged, barring slight grammatical amendments, from the draft version labelled: Malcolm Lowry, ‘Under the Volcano (Manuscript E) Chapter 10’, Box 27, Fol. 15, Malcolm Lowry Manuscript Collections, The Library of the University of British Columbia Special Collections Division, original emphasis.

⁷⁷ *Under the Volcano*, p. 310.

are given free-indirect access to the Consul's surprise at his own miraculous inspiration. This has a different emphasis to the draft version, in which the labour of recollection is clear:

‘Let's get to the bottom of all this.’ Of all what, he thought. His mind was like a tempestuous sky in which the sun, chasing through galloping clouds, disappears for long periods at a time, then emerges, shedding a baleful, untrustworthy radiance. But he was going to make a supreme effort.⁷⁸

In this example, the *effort* of recall points in two different directions. On the one hand, effort is indicative of the will, and so the laboriousness of the Consul's quotation is evidence of his free intent. On the other hand, the labour is conducted from the inside of the Consul's alcoholised senses, and the slow workings of his recall reveal a time-lag that gives an inevitability to his actions from an external (and impatient) viewpoint. The final copy slightly obscures these differing interpretations by submerging the explicit intent of the Consul and focussing on the idea that his thoughts oscillate between focus and free-association, dampening any explicit connotations of control and determinism and giving temporary emphasis over to the more allusive distinction between rationalism and anti-rationalism. The Consul's free-associative thoughts signal him as an anti-rationalist hero, but when the ‘whirling cerebral chaos’ gives way to perfect order, a slice of recall, it appears that drink has facilitated the rationalist project by allowing the quote to emerge unhindered from where the Consul deliberately set it ‘so laboriously, years ago’.⁷⁹

The Consul's miraculous recall brings the discussion to a sub-personal level. This has interesting repercussions for the analysis of the quotation, and its intellectual role, both within the Consul's and Lowry's arguments. The Consul's literary excerpt comes from Tolstoy's Second Epilogue to *War and Peace*. The element of Tolstoy's argument that is quoted by the Consul is part of a larger theory, expounded in *War and Peace*, but in the Consul's speech only touched upon. Following the ‘rounded and complete’ remembered quotation, the Consul reveals a little more of Tolstoy's argument in an attempt to elucidate his point:

⁷⁸ Malcolm Lowry, ‘Under the Volcano (Manuscript D) Chapter 10’, p. 328, Box 27, Fol. 3, Malcolm Lowry Manuscript Collections, The Library of the University of British Columbia Special Collections Division.

⁷⁹ *Under the Volcano*, p. 310.

When we have absolutely no understanding of the causes of an action – I am referring, in case your mind has wandered to the subject of your own conversation, to the events of the afternoon – the causes, whether vicious or virtuous or what not, we ascribe, according to Tolstoy, a greater element of free will to it.⁸⁰

Although the Consul can remember the basic points of Tolstoy's formulation, he has trouble turning the abstract observations into an argument. Confusedly, the above point leads him to conclude that '[according] to Tolstoy then, we should have had less reluctance in interfering than we did'.⁸¹ This is not just in direct opposition with the tone of the rest of his argument, but is a practical point that is then obfuscated by the next stage of his speech:

'Moreover, according to Tolstoy,' he went on, 'before we pass judgment on the thief – if thief he were – we would have to ask ourselves: what were his connexions with other thieves, ties of family, his place in time, if we know even that, his relation to the external world, and to the consequences leading to the act ...'⁸²

Although the Consul's argument falls to pieces, mainly because of his inability to maintain a direct line of thought, it is also worth noting that the overwrought dependence on Tolstoy further complicates matters, because the original points in *War and Peace* are also riddled by the same complexities that beset the Consul. Tolstoy's overarching claim, a part of which is his discussion of responsibility, is based on the theoretical belief in determinism. The deterministic claim implies a resumption of our ordinary ways of thinking about freedom and control insofar as it, in Tolstoy's view, means giving up the idea that we are effective agents who have some control over the events in which we take part. Isaiah Berlin recognises freedom as the 'great illusion' which Tolstoy attempts to expose in *War and Peace*: 'that individuals can, by the use of their own resources, understand and control the course of events'.⁸³ Berlin explains how this intersects with epistemology in everyday circumstances. The point of contention that is implicit in the deterministic scheme is over 'true causes'. Although agents might think that they know the true causes of an event, and act accordingly in the opinion that they can alter the course of events, the Tolstoyan view

⁸⁰ *Under the Volcano*, p. 310.

⁸¹ *Under the Volcano*, p. 310.

⁸² *Under the Volcano*, p. 310.

⁸³ Isaiah Berlin, *The Hedgehog and the Fox: An Essay on Tolstoy's View of History* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1953), p. 19.

insists that understanding events within the determinist scheme would involve plotting ‘every drop of which the stream of history consists’.⁸⁴ Because we are ‘pathetically ignorant, and the areas of our knowledge are incredibly small compared to what is uncharted’, the real workings of the universe are inaccessible to us.⁸⁵ Freedom of the will is an illusion because we cannot know the first causes of our actions or the complexities of the stream in which they are embedded.

This argument dovetails with the Consul’s favoured quotation, though he seems to miss the larger implications of his statement. In the case of the balance between freedom and inevitability upon which the Consul draws, Tolstoy remarks the following:

In all these cases the conception of freedom is increased or diminished, and the conception of compulsion is correspondingly decreased or increased, according to the point of view from which the action is regarded, so that the greater the conception of necessity the smaller the conception of freedom and vice versa.⁸⁶

Determinism holds that there is the observable possibility which recognises the total necessity of all action; it is only the limited ‘point of view’ of our own observations that allows us to insert a ‘conception of freedom’ into events. Tolstoy uses the differential balance between freedom and inevitability, not to show how we *should* judge the blameworthiness of certain actions, but to show that our changeable knowledge of events points to the fact that we are ultimately ignorant of the true course of events. It seems, then, that the deterministic viewpoint has a spectrum of repercussions. While total adherence to the deterministic scheme seems to remain speculative or theoretical, knowledge of determinism also widens the field of questioning by repeatedly invoking antecedent causes. However, recognising the scope of theoretical determinism does not elucidate, or lend strength to the Consul’s argument from Tolstoy, as the answer that the argument invites lies beyond the capacity of the enquiry; indeed, it is ultimately unattainable.

The Consul invokes Tolstoy’s argument as a way of examining external circumstances. However, the determinist paradigm, when framed as the Consul’s miraculous recall, points to another self-reflexive criticism implicit in the allusion. Even if the extent of the

⁸⁴ Berlin, p. 26.

⁸⁵ Berlin, p. 26.

⁸⁶ Leo Tolstoy, *War and Peace* (Ware: Wordsworth, 1993), p. 520.

connections within the determinist universe could be known at minute levels of interaction, it is still not clear that this knowledge would help us to understand the way in which we directly experience feelings and actions. Daniel Dennett, in 'Personal and Sub-Personal Levels', argues for a sharp distinction between the knowledge systems of, on the one hand, conscious processes and feelings, and on the other, 'blind' anatomic facts about the interaction of neurons and stimuli.⁸⁷ Because the Consul's experience of the quotation is through the shock of spontaneous recollection, a Tolstoyan level of deterministic knowledge still couldn't elucidate the process in a way that would tie into first-hand experience. The Consul *experiences* his recall as miraculous, and that feeling would not be diminished by deep causal explanation.

As I have tried to show above, the Tolstoy allusion is not embedded as a direct insight into an elucidatory system, but is posed to confuse an exact or operable stance in the Consul's relation to the events surrounding the *pelado*.⁸⁸ Lowry makes an assessment of the Consul's mind-states particularly difficult by representing his drunken thoughts and actions as complex interactions between rational and non-rational systems of thought, consisting of conscious and non-conscious levels, and with varying degrees of control. This dynamic representation has interpretive ramifications for the scene. With reference to the Tolstoy quotation, it is evident especially in the microcosm of the Consul's thoughts and utterances that it is impossible to come to a satisfactory assessment, not even of what *is* free and what inevitable, but more simply of what *seems* free or what inevitable. While the Consul's Tolstoy asks us to take an external stance on events, Lowry is working against this by corrupting our observational purity with the hopelessly overwrought and heterogeneous quality of the Consul's thoughts. The final draft of *Under the Volcano* renders the Consul's actions largely without comment, relying instead on the complex movement between observable states, and erasing the broader claims which would simplify our judgment of the Consul. In the third draft of the novel, it is clear that the Consul's Tolstoyan rejection of political or state interference is in fact a manifestation of his own introspective paranoia and self-justifications:

⁸⁷ Daniel C. Dennett, 'Personal and Sub-Personal Levels of Explanation', in *Philosophy of Psychology: Contemporary Readings*, ed. by José Luis Bermúdez (Oxford: Routledge, 2006), pp. 17–21; It seems to me that Isaiah Berlin argues for something broadly similar, though in a different intellectual context, in: Berlin, p. 41.

⁸⁸ In this I broadly disagree with Grace, who emphasises the general content of the allusion in relation to other war references in the novel. See: Sherrill Grace, 'Remembering Tomorrow: Malcolm Lowry, War, and *Under the Volcano*', in *Strange Comfort: Essays on the Work of Malcolm Lowry* (Vancouver, BC: Talonbooks, 2009), pp. 189–213.

‘And you needn’t sit there looking so goddamn stupid,’ he cried aloud, turning on Yvonne, ‘Father dear father, why don’t you stop drinking! I know all about you. Yes.’ He staggered to his feet. ‘You’re all the same, all of you, Priscilla,⁸⁹ Jacques, you, Hugh, trying to interfere with other people’s lives, interfering, interfering, interfering, without the goddamned guts to take any of the normal responsibilities of your own life, of your own country, on your shoulders [...]’⁹⁰

In similar style, another point which is cut from later drafts is the Consul’s use of the Tolstoy distinctions in moral responsibility to comment directly on his own behaviour:

The Consul grabbed his arm and addressed himself to Hugh’s back, gibbering in his ear.

‘What I’m driving at is this, Jacques,’ he said, ‘Hugh, I mean, I’m insane with liquor, and worse, and you must make allowances. Ha, yes, allowances!’⁹¹

These cuts are also in line with a general simplification of the Tolstoy quotation, and a move away from explicitly rendering the intellectual ramifications of Tolstoy’s philosophy on the *pelado*-scene. Drafts show Lowry giving more space to the Consul attempting to think through his detached position and filter it through the quotation. In one particularly confused example, the Consul attempts to make use of Tolstoy’s claim that, the further in the past an action is, the more we see it as inevitable, as we observe it as part of a larger course of events rather than an isolated act:

‘[...] there was such a sense of unreality about the whole show, that we didn’t believe it. We didn’t belong to it. It was something that had happened hundreds of years ago, being re-enacted for our benefit, like those ghostly balls that one hears of held at Versailles from time to time [...] what he did, didn’t seem so free – at least this would be the Tolstoyan argument – since no one’s actions seem so free a long time ago [...]’ And he went on more rapidly, knowing that, philosophically speaking, or in any other manner of speaking, this was not right at all. ‘On the other

⁸⁹ In the first drafts of *UtV*, the character of Yvonne was not the Consul’s wife, but his daughter. In these versions, his estranged wife is named Priscilla. There are no characters with this name in the final draft.

⁹⁰ Lowry, ‘Under the Volcano (Manuscript D) Chapter 10’, pp. 333–4.

⁹¹ Lowry, ‘Under the Volcano (Manuscript D) Chapter 10’, p. 335.

hand it did seem more inevitable he should do precisely what he did do and consequently we felt all the more reluctance about interfering.’⁹²

The Consul’s argument is blundering, but although Lowry cuts this portion from the final text, he replaces it with a denser allusive texture that operates similarly, though less accessibly. One of the Consul’s rhetorical strategies in the above quotation is to bend the event to fit Tolstoy’s argument by introducing a time-slip – the purported similarity to the ghostly balls of Versailles – that makes the *pelado*-scene both of the moment, and an event that ‘had happened hundreds of years ago’. This confusing sophistry is not lost in the final copy, but deferred to the Consul’s allusions, among which Sir Thomas Browne takes a central role. The Consul’s dense arguments are in some ways mirrored by Browne, whose critical history is divided. The move towards Thomas Browne, and away from the explication of Tolstoy’s philosophy, is also a move away from the content of the argument and towards a suggestion that the argument is primarily a mirror of the rhetoricians themselves.

The idea of an egotistical rhetoric is certainly foregrounded in Browne’s critical history. The literature on Browne has typically attempted to characterise the high prose style and convoluted arguments of his texts, with many assessments regarding his style as vacuous and inward looking. Samuel Johnson, for example, seems to recognise in Browne a kind of narcissism which, developed through scholarly seclusion, draws parallels between the fantastic subject matter of the prose and the high-minded ability of their observer:

The wonders probably were transacted in his own mind: self-love, co-operating with an imagination vigorous and fertile as that of Browne, will find or make objects of astonishment in every man’s life: and, perhaps, there is no human being, however hid in the crowd from the observation of his fellow-mortals, who, if he has leisure and disposition to recollect his own thoughts and actions, will not conclude his life in some sort of miracle, and imagine himself distinguished from all the rest of his species by many discriminations of nature or of fortune.⁹³

⁹² Lowry, ‘Under the Volcano (Manuscript D) Chapter 10’, pp. 328–9, original emphasis.

⁹³ Samuel Johnson, ‘The Life of Sir Thomas Browne’, in *Sir Thomas Browne: The Major Works*, ed. by Constantinos A. Patrides (London: Penguin, 1977), p. 488.

Extending this point into near-polemic, William Hazlitt regards Browne as a stylist of disinterest, whose facility with paradox constantly conjures a sense of doubt, but from a position of sublime remove:

He pushes a question to the utmost verge of conjecture, that he may repose on the certainty of doubt; and he removes an object to the greatest distance from him, that he may take a high and abstracted interest in it, consider it in its relation to the sum of things, not to himself, and bewilder his understanding in the universality of its nature and the inscrutableness of its origin. His is the sublime of indifference; a passion for the abstruse and imaginary. He turns the world round for his amusement, as if it was a globe of pasteboard. He looks down on sublunary affairs as if he had taken his station in one of the planets.⁹⁴

Hazlitt's commentary even takes a Lowry-type turn, when he describes the distracted scholarship that characterises Browne's persistent turn away from everyday matters:

He stands on the edge of the world of sense and reason, and gains a vertigo by looking down at impossibilities and chimera. Or he busies himself with the mysteries of the Cabala, or the enclosed secrets of the heavenly quincunxes, as children are amused with tales of the nursery.⁹⁵

This sophistic reading seems important to the image of Browne as alluded to by Lowry. This takes on particular importance in Chapter Ten, in which Hugh and the Consul argue about the proper reaction to the *pelado* and the dying peon. The Consul's 'whirling cerebral chaos', and the eventual quotation from Tolstoy, can be read both charitably and uncharitably; charitably if we assign some importance to the Consul's shifting allusions; uncharitably if we assign importance to the appearance of Thomas Browne, and assume that the Consul's argumentative strategy draws the attention away from the real concerns of the world, and into a confused web of esoteric symbolism. The argument between Hugh and the Consul is poised on this balance, between what, in an earlier draft, Lowry refers to as the 'different worlds' of their positions.⁹⁶ In the final *Under the Volcano*, the argument

⁹⁴ William Hazlitt, 'Lecture VII: Character of Bacon's Works – Compared as to Style with Sir Thomas Browne and Jeremy Taylor', in *Elizabethan Literature, and Characters of Shakespeare's Plays* (London: Bell & Daldy, 1870), pp. 213–38 (p. 223).

⁹⁵ Hazlitt, p. 223.

⁹⁶ Lowry, 'Under the Volcano (Manuscript D) Chapter 10', p. 330.

takes a slightly more ironic twist, with Lowry adding emphasis to the separation between the basic points of the crime and the Consul's confused abstractions:

‘Of course we’re taking time to find out all this while the poor fellow just goes on dying in the road,’ Hugh was saying. ‘How did we get on to this? No one had an opportunity to interfere till after the deed was done. None of us saw him steal the money, to the best of my knowledge. Which crime are you talking about anyway, Geoff? If other crime there were...And the fact that we did nothing to stop the thief is surely beside the point that we did nothing really to save the man’s life.’

‘Precisely,’ said the Consul, ‘I was talking about interference in general, I think [...]’⁹⁷

Here, Hugh’s attack is broadly against the symbolic capital that the Consul is attempting to invoke in support of his argument. While the Consul is attempting to rationalise his actions in relation to the dying man by linking the event to recurring patterns and universal laws, Hugh rebuffs this with his emphasis on the ethical urgency invoked by the ‘poor fellow [...] dying in the road’. The Consul’s emphasis on ‘interference in general’ is indistinguishable from the other generalities that form his historico-political excursion. The Tolstoy allusion is central to this chapter, and as I have suggested, it is with this allusion that Lowry buries the Consul’s putatively political argument under the vagaries of his interpretation of the free will issue. In this way, the free will problem as it appears through Tolstoy’s philosophy becomes largely symbolic within the Consul’s argument.

Addiction and Conversion

The Tolstoy quotation – or more particularly, the Consul’s spontaneous recollection of it – does not only form part of the symbolic web of *Under the Volcano*. It also acts as a significant connective section, both thematically and in relation to specific content, between the symbolism of the novel and the sub-layer of alcoholic intentionality explored above. The appropriation of William James’s ideal of religious conversion by Alcoholics Anonymous forms an instance in which the action-discourse of addiction becomes enmeshed, both in the pragmatism of therapeutics, and the oblique interactions between conscious volition and mystical knowledge. This seems to be a point of intersection

⁹⁷ *Under the Volcano*, pp. 310–11.

between the agent-centred analysis that I have concentrated on so far, and the symbolic and metaphorical uses of alcoholism which are examined by other critics; a combination of psychology and psyche. It is clear that Lowry mixes these discourses thoroughly, multiply embedding several levels of interpretation within a single allusion. While the Tolstoy allusion broadens the concept of freedom in the novel, the mystical operations of the Consul's miraculous recall widen the content of addictive discourses.

The way in which the Consul's sentence emerges, 'rounded and complete' from his 'whirling cerebral chaos' recollects the way in which James illustrates his discussion of how the self is primed without conscious input, and how this can lead to the point of spiritual conversion. In *Varieties of Religious Experience*, James distinguishes between 'volitional type' religious conversion and 'type by self-surrender'.⁹⁸ He distinguishes between these based on the type of effort that brings them about, likening the conversion by self-surrender to the experience of effort 'when you try to recollect a forgotten name'.⁹⁹ Here, initial effort is fruitless, but it starts '[some] hidden process [...] which went on after the effort ceased, and made the result come as if it came spontaneously'.¹⁰⁰ Bringing the anecdote closer to Lowry's drunken pianist, James additionally uses the example of a music teacher who 'says to her pupils after the thing to be done has been clearly pointed out, and unsuccessfully attempted: 'Stop trying and it will do itself!''.¹⁰¹

The idea that James builds is that the 'subliminal' effort that goes into remembering a name is similar to the role of subliminal effort in religious conversion. Even if conversion is desired, it can often be hard to bring it about by conscious effort. However, the candidate's conscious efforts are related to a subconscious framework which becomes the operative conversionary force:

A man's conscious wit and will, so far as they strain towards the ideal, are aiming at something only dimly and inaccurately imagined. Yet all the while the forces of mere organic ripening within him are going on towards their own prefigured result, and his conscious strainings are letting loose subconscious allies behind the scenes, which in their way work towards rearrangement and the rearrangement towards

⁹⁸ James, *Varieties*, p. 206.

⁹⁹ James, *Varieties*, p. 205.

¹⁰⁰ James, *Varieties*, p. 205.

¹⁰¹ James, *Varieties*, p. 206.

which all these deeper forces tend is pretty surely definite, and definitely different from what he consciously conceives and determines.¹⁰²

It is clear that here James is distinguishing between the will as a conscious tool, and the ‘subconscious allies’ which potentially aid the work of the will. James makes stronger claims later in his argument, and suggests that, in the pursuit of goodness as such, overreliance on the conscious will to direct one’s life can have negative effects:

[T]o exercise the personal will is still to live in the region where the imperfect self is the thing most emphasized. Where, on the contrary, the subconscious forces take the lead, it is more probably the better self *in posse* which directs the operation. Instead of being clumsily and vaguely aimed at from without, it is then itself the organizing centre.¹⁰³

James’s argument here posits the centrality of self-surrender to religious conversion. This is one of the main premises that Alcoholics Anonymous took from James in their repositioning of religious conversion as a conversion to abstinence.¹⁰⁴ James touches on the anti-rationalism of spiritual conversion in his description of spiritual truths appearing as ‘cold-blooded falsehoods’ to the pre-convert. Alcoholics Anonymous reframe this distinction between the alcoholic and the recovering-alcoholic, though their discourse appears to reverse the images of rationalism; here the alcoholic becomes anti-rational, though infinitely rationalising, and the schematised conversion becomes the single, rational solution because of its efficacy. By apparently drawing on both of these references, Lowry further entangles ideas of volition in the discourses of addiction. In *Under the Volcano*, this largely emerges through the conflict between the repeated self-rationalisations which fuel the Consul’s drinking, and the conversionary promise of a renewed relationship with Yvonne.

Insidious rationalising is well documented in the addiction literature. George Ainslie expresses the idea most clearly in his concept of ‘hyperbolic discounting’, which aims to characterise the way in which addicts prioritise drug consumption in the immediate period before they consume, even if the desire for the drug is consistently rejected up until that

¹⁰² James, *Varieties*, p. 209.

¹⁰³ James, *Varieties*, pp. 209–10.

¹⁰⁴ See: A. H. Walle, ‘William James’ Legacy to Alcoholics Anonymous’, *Journal of Addictive Diseases*, 11 (1992), 91–99; James is also mentioned explicitly at: Bill W., p. 38.

point. Central to this idea is the observation that '[r]ationalization [...] is the most notorious threat to willpower', as an addict can self-identify as rationally endorsing the desire to consume, despite its conflict with their longer term plans.¹⁰⁵ Moving away from rationalist labelling, the similarities between Alcoholics Anonymous and James become clearer, insofar as A.A. do not seem to dispute James's basic assumption that the conscious will does not necessarily have executive control. This is evidenced by conversionary reliance upon subconscious mechanisms, and the complementary inability of conscious effort to bring about a similar result. In this way, the discourse around conversion is implicitly based on reforming assumptions about the relationship between subliminal and conscious control. Through its reliance on subliminal control, conversion overturns the idea that action is reliant upon conscious control as a distinct executive mechanism. Even in a spiritual format, the discourses of addiction remain tied to ideas of autonomy and intention.

Lowry plays into these discourses by giving voice to the Consul's *ad hoc* rationalisations. It is through these he justifies his taking another drink. Illustrating the insidious malleability of rationalisation, the Consul appears to offer a series of sound reasons for drinking. However, his logic is often made paradoxical by the very circumstances in which he rationalises. The prospect that the Consul can '[drink] himself sober'¹⁰⁶ means that he continually needs to drink in order to face the effects of his drinking:

[O]ozing alcohol from every pore, the Consul stood at the open door of the Salón Ofelia. How sensible to have had a mescal. How sensible! For it was the right, the sole drink to have under the circumstances. Moreover he had not only proved to himself he was not afraid of it, he was now fully awake, fully sober again, and well able to cope with anything that might come his way. But for this slight continual twitching and hopping within his field of vision, as of innumerable sand fleas, he might have told himself he hadn't had a drink for months. The only thing wrong with him, he was too hot.¹⁰⁷

¹⁰⁵ George Ainslie and John Monterosso, 'Hyperbolic Discounting as a Factor in Addiction: A Critical Analysis', in *Choice, Behavioural Economics and Addiction*, ed. by Rudy E. Vuchinich and Nick Heather (Oxford: Elsevier, 2003), pp. 35–61 (p. 45).

¹⁰⁶ *Under the Volcano*, p. 22.

¹⁰⁷ *Under the Volcano*, p. 286.

The same justificatory language is repeatedly used with reference to his relationship to Yvonne, in which the rationalising process is pushed to logical absurdity by the destructive incompatibility of his drinking and his marriage:

But a look of tenderness came over Yvonne's face and the Consul thought once more of the postcard in his pocket. It ought to have been a good omen. It could be the talisman of their immediate salvation now. Perhaps it could have been a good omen if only it had arrived yesterday or at the house this morning. Unfortunately one could not now conceive of it as having arrived at any other moment. And how could he know whether it was a good omen or not without another drink?¹⁰⁸

This passage is important, not only for its evidence of the Consul's convoluted rationalising, but for the way it holds up the prospect of 'immediate salvation now'. The saving of their marriage is appealed to several times in generally religious terms which recall James's conversionary ideal. The interaction between the Consul's reasoning and the possibility of conversion is entangled with implications of autonomy and control, both in the assumption that his rationalisations are embedded within addictive desires, and in relation to the prospect of self-surrender that is invoked in the possibility of salvation. Interacting with this action-discourse are the Consul's symbolic fixations, here ironically revealed in their flexibility they are bent to the service of his logical deviation. Later in the novel, the conversion appears with special urgency, and a more distinct Jamesian character:

'Darling...' It ran in Yvonne's mind that all at once they were talking – agreeing hastily – like prisoners who do not have hands clasped, with their shoulders touching. [...] 'This isn't just escaping, I mean, let's start again *really*, Geoffrey, really and cleanly somewhere. It could be like a rebirth.'

'Yes. Yes it could.'¹⁰⁹

Configured in this way, the relationship implies the possibility of the kind of contextual and cognitive shift that James notes in conversion, that instance when 'amid tremendous emotional excitement or perturbation of the senses, a complete division is established in

¹⁰⁸ *Under the Volcano*, p. 201.

¹⁰⁹ *Under the Volcano*, p. 279, original emphasis.

the twinkling of an eye between the old life and the new'.¹¹⁰ Again, the symbolic suggestion of a 'rebirth' is undergirded by the embedding of agential problems within the Jamesian formulation. The promise of cognitive change seems to be operating both at the level of the Consul's addiction, and in play with the infernal connotations of his troubled psyche. The Consul's addiction is multiply refracted through these allusions; as the cause of his marital strife, as a metaphor for his metaphysical burden, and as a psychological and physiological fixation that influences his action.

Because *Under the Volcano* provides a multifaceted approach, both to agency and to addiction, it is very difficult to read the novel according to a single concept of intention, or to assess what the novel has to say about the concept of intention *per se*. Rather than attempt a unified theoretical reading, I have given space to the complex layering that the novel exhibits, and the multiple relations that these clues invite with a variety of interwoven theoretical positions. The movements of the text and their embedding in the Consul's oscillating preferences make it very difficult to distinguish any suggestion that the novel is attempting to elucidate a position regarding the relationship between addiction and autonomy. Instead, an exegetical emphasis on the language of intentionality in its multiple guises in the text is able to suggest the complexity of the position of intention within the novel. My analysis suggests both that discourses of addiction are deeply concerned with notions of agential control, and that these discourses play a key role within the text. Lowry repeatedly uses tropes of addiction and action which correlate clearly with sources in the literature in which the relation between drug use and autonomy is of central concern. It is through this use of material that Lowry produces the foundations for a deeply layered treatment of addiction and action in the novel.

Models of addiction – both those which are specifically referenced by Lowry, and more recent models which postdate *Under the Volcano* – provide a particularly rich source of how actions are moderated because they bring the relationship between autonomy and responsibility into strong relief; a relationship which is implicit in much of the action of *Under the Volcano*, and which reverberates through the postures taken by the Consul in relation to both drunkenness and the possibility of abstinence. This layer of the text, in which a firmer philosophical action framework is operational, is in constant interaction with the broader, symbolic level of the text. As the Tolstoy allusion in Chapter Ten makes

¹¹⁰ James, *Varieties*, p. 217.

clear, Lowry blends several distinct discourses at the same time; concepts of free will which are individual, collective, phenomenological, moral, metaphysical, symbolic, political and historical. These further interact with clear traditions and ideologies within the addiction literature. Although these levels are deeply enmeshed, the distinctness of their discourses suggests that alcoholism in *Under the Volcano* is not merely part of the general symbolic explorations of the novel. It appears that Lowry constructed the Consul's actions in constant dialogue with discourses of addiction. If action underpins the movements of the novel then it is clear that the relationship between addiction and action creates a separate plane of interpretation which interacts dynamically with Lowry's more symbolic language. Scrutiny of the relationship between action and addiction reveals the alcoholic content of the novel to be much deeper than assumed in other studies. This enriched critical vocabulary allows a more responsive reading of Lowry's Consul, and his elaborate agency.

Conclusion

A strong thread in this thesis has been the intuition that we, as readers, approach prose with an agency-centred perspective. This might operate at levels as different as basic sentence comprehension, local character intention, motivation cues, text-wide planning structures, and moral interactions and responses between characters and between characters and ourselves. My broad approach to the topic of agency has attempted to show just how joined up these concepts – and methods of reading – are, and how they are all focused upon the fictional character as a quasi-rational, quasi-autonomous being. My explanatory structures have largely come from disciplines which are not concerned with literature, so we might assume that their fruitful application to textual interpretation suggests that the study of agency in real life transfers, at least in part, to the study of agency in fiction. There are certainly norms of interaction between individuals in the real world, and there are structures which we bring to every interpersonal interaction which determine and aid our interpretation of our fellow agents. These mechanisms are deeply engrained, and it is intuitive to suggest that the same mechanisms – though in a moderated form – determine aspects of the way in which we consume and interpret fiction. This approach should not be thought of as simply a model which readers apply to fiction, since the direction of flow is more complex. My study approaches the ways in which authors play with, adopt, and manipulate the automatic postures that we adopt when we approach a text. This means that the flow is bi-directional, authors control and create the ways in which we use the mechanisms of agency and interpretation in the creation of literature. Agency is deeply ingrained in fiction and the reading of fiction, but it is not static.

I have largely taken these background claims for granted, as it was not my intention here to investigate the specific mechanisms involved in reading norms. However, my adoption of this approach, and the theoretical underpinning of these claims, owes much to recent philosophical and literary critical work which has sought to transfer insights from the philosophy of mind to aesthetics. As recent work suggests, insights from the philosophy of mind can help to clarify what interpersonal and communicative mechanisms are involved in readers' interactions with fiction, and particularly with fictional characters. Much of this work has used concepts relating to everyday mindreading and folk psychology, concepts which attempt to describe the lay-mechanisms through which we understand the actions of other agents. Mindreading has come into interdisciplinary focus in recent times, as it seems

to offer ways of describing interaction and communication which are not theory-laden; models which fit with our intuitions and experiences of agential understanding. The turn towards folk theories has included the rise of experimental philosophy, which adapts philosophical reasoning to the results of empirical testing. Similarly psychology, which is traditionally test-based, has also sought to tailor experiments toward how concepts of intention and behavioural comprehension are used in folk discourse, with the expectation that the folk usage can feed back into the definitional and theoretical task. The theoretical leaning of this work has largely focused on the use of folk concepts within action description. While philosophical work on mindreading has largely sought to characterise *how* agents interpret and understand the behaviour of others, experimental work on folk-concepts is largely concerned with the everyday use of action language, and how they can feed back into theoretical discourse. These underlying ties to folk theorising link these approaches to literary application, as the folk understanding of action and how action is understood is presumed to remain broadly constant across everyday life, as well as in the description or representation of agents in numerous literary, or non-literary, media. Because folk models offer ways of describing our automatic and intuitive ways of using action terminology, they offer a key entry point for the discussion of what constitute the automatic and intuitive ways in which we approach literary texts, and the characters within those texts.

Folk concepts – largely as they appear in the philosophy of mind literature on mindreading – have recently come into usage by literary scholars, particularly in the burgeoning field of cognitive poetics. The broadened theoretical base that studies like these present is a very exciting development in critical discourse. However, as I made clear in Chapter One, the transfer from philosophy into literary theory has not necessarily maintained the terminological discipline that is needed for accurate cross-disciplinary application. New work on folk psychology reveals a more nuanced picture, with theorists suggesting that action interpretation does not always involve the inference of beliefs and desires in the comprehension of another agent. Instead, our understanding of the behaviour of others happens fluently because, in most cases, we recognise actions in context according to common scripts that we can predict. Because we have seen certain action sequences before, or because we have enough environmental information to come up with a likely outcome, we can attribute actions and intentions with functional accuracy. This conception of mindreading, which avoids the automatic use of desire/belief models, puts these theories

in closer communication, both with action-theoretical conceptions of intention as plan-based and literary studies which have suggested that fiction comprehension is largely facilitated by the goal structures of characters. This ties into the wider idea that single actions are usually understood, not in isolation, but embedded within broader cross-temporal planning structures. For these structures to be able to function, we assume a certain amount of rationality of our fellow agents (and of fictional characters), because their actions are subject to norms of coherence and cohesion. Although there is not direct transfer between second-person comprehension in real life, and the comprehension of fictional characters, I think that – as a minimum – it can be assumed that readers read for coherence. In doing so, they are reading for rational action.

Although this comprehensive ability on the part of the reader allows the author to present complex levels of information within the fiction, it also constrains the type of action that can be portrayed. If readers automatically infer quasi-rationality to the actions of characters, then authors have to subvert this in some way in order to show mental states which diverge from the norm. Nabokov does this with subtle brilliance in *Pale Fire*, in which he tells the story of Jack Grey through the cracks in Kinbote's dominant narrative. In addition, Beckett subverts the norm with deconstructive power by attacking, not only coherence and rationality, but the very construction of fictional character. Although it is not my task to establish what the exact norms of fictional characterisation are, Chapter Two comes closest to expressing these norms in negative. If Beckett breaks down fictional characterisation by attacking features which make up agency (and these features of agency as they are examined in the real world by philosophers) then it seems very likely that the norms of literary agency utilise very similar concepts to the norms of real world agency. These do not only include the second-person interpretive features that I have examined above, but also include the automatic understanding of one's own actions and the understanding of one's own body; the core experiences which dovetail with one's broad sense of agency and intention. In general, characters understand themselves and other characters in the same way that we understand ourselves; but it is this generality of literary experience that is under attack through Beckett's experimentalism.

My task in this thesis has been to show the interconnectedness of various discourses of agency, and the place of the terminology that these discourses provide in the interpretation of literary agency. I have sought to illustrate this through example, and as a result, the

thesis is dominated by close textual analysis. Through this approach, I have also attempted to exhibit new readings of Kavan, Beckett, Nabokov and Lowry, which illustrate the ways in which they manipulate and examine the concept of agency in their fictions. The assumption that I have been making throughout this thesis – that agency is rendered in fiction in ways which are recognisable from everyday life – is an intuitive claim. I think that the claim is strong, and a tacit strategy of my close readings has been to strengthen it further by evidencing the application of action-theory within literary analysis. However, as I suggest in Chapter One, some attempts to explain directly the link between action-comprehension in the real world and in fictional have severely overstated the transparency and ease of transfer. A lack of theoretical rigour and understanding has meant that the idea of transfer has largely remained intuitive. There is a clear necessity then, for interdisciplinary work which attempts to solve some of the more pressing questions associated with fictional agency; what are the processes involved? Are these the same processes as in the real world? Do norms of understanding emerge through literary reinforcement of tropes or through norm-transfer from the real world? What is the role of the narrator in mediating action-understanding and how does this intersect with fictional mindreading? Are there automatic responses which are always deployed in literary comprehension, despite the massive variety of literary artefacts and experiences? These are just some of the many complex questions which emerge when the idea of transfer is given attention. I have not had the scope to address these questions directly in this thesis, but I hope I have made a claim for their study. Research which maps the automatic frameworks which allow us to understand fiction would provide an invaluable model for any reading of fiction. If we knew more about the ways in which readers understand fiction, then we can better understand how authors manipulate, control, and make use of these models in the creation of narrative stories; how formal aspects of storytelling anticipate the projected responses of readers.

Sometimes, folk language can become mired in additional theoretical complexities. Although a folk framework can offer remarkable clarity on some issues, on other points, its claims to offer a consensus of understanding or usage seem inappropriate. In Chapter Four, I moved away from folk models, and the intuitive grounding of reader-comprehension because the resources and terminology at my disposal seemed inappropriate for the explanatory context. Because Chapter Four uses models of addiction, and addiction is particularly difficult to fit within a tight folk schema, I move to discuss the

theory directly, and apply aspects of addiction theory to a reading of Malcolm Lowry. Addiction is the topic of a multitude of diverse, and theoretically and ideologically distinct, interpretations. *Under the Volcano* provides a complex case, because the Consul's mental states, as well as his topics of conversation (and the symbolic significance of these conversations), are constantly changing. He has clear physical effects from alcohol, including tremors and hallucinations, and at points he seems to be driven by the desire to drink. However, I'm not sure that the novel paints a portrait of a man who is unwaveringly compulsive. He might *feel* driven to drink, but at the same time Lowry portrays the Consul's constant rationalisations, the minutiae of his choices, his preferences, and his understanding of his own mental state. What emerges is not the image of a compulsive addict, but of an individual with very complex intentions which often oscillate between strongly contrary positions. Addicts do not have entirely 'normal' intentional states, as the desire to take drugs gives a strong motivating factor. However, this kind of motivation does not mean that the act of choice and intention is removed. Instead it is augmented. By including Lowry's novel in this thesis, I have tried to suggest a liberal position which is increasingly held elsewhere; that addiction is best characterised using the language of intention, and that addicts – even though some of their choices are strongly influenced by drugs – have intentions in relation to their consumption of drugs, and in every other aspect of their lives.

My move away from folk theories in Chapter Four reflects the complexity of the topic. This does not mean that *Under the Volcano* is immune to this kind of theory, but simply that my scope prevented the full exploration of the topic that the novel demands. Readers must approach *Under the Volcano* with the same assumptions and automatic patterns of comprehension which underlie their other reading experiences. However, because of the alcoholic theme in the novel, there are an extra set of questions which need to be raised. In everyday action comprehension, there is a limit on accuracy. Most mindreading occurs in seconds, and gives enough information for the agent to navigate the world and in relation to others. There is, as I have already suggested, a rationality constraint on mindreading, whether in standard belief/desire models of folk psychology, or in norm-based narrative models of mind. This constraint is important, because fiction often focusses on non-normal mind states, or delves into the mind states of characters at a deeper level than that which is usually dealt with by everyday mindreading. In *Under the Volcano*, these complications are exacerbated because they also intersect with the deep problems of addiction-theory and

the controversies – as presented in my chapter – associated with describing the actions of addicts within intentionalist models. The element that my chapter did not address is the intersection of these problems with broader folk approaches to behavioural comprehension.

Divergent theoretical approaches to addiction conceptualise the addict as more or less in control of their actions. The idea of compulsion, for example, suggests a motivating force which entirely overrides the decision-making apparatus of the individual. This suggests a trajectory of action which is not compatible with conventional mindreading, which attributes intentions and minimum rationality to other agents as part of the process of comprehension. The liberal approach to addiction, because it suggests that the addict's choices are intentions of a kind, seems to fit more intuitively with folk models of second-person understanding. Now that there is a move toward fitting addiction within intentionalist frameworks, a research gap has emerged. Experimental and theoretical exploration into how addictive choice is understood in the folk mind would be a productive line of enquiry, as would the attempt to describe how a folk concept of addiction interacts with everyday mindreading. Because mindreading and everyday models for action comprehension are deeply entangled with more purely theoretical varieties of action theory, an empirical folk theory of addiction also has the potential to feed back into theoretical models of addiction and action. Legal models for addiction already present a folk response of sorts, by offering pragmatic judgement-based solutions to criminal cases which involve addicts.¹ However, the particularities of these legal responses could be fruitfully tied into a more joined-up approach to our folk understanding of addiction and intention, and the relation of these models to action theory in general. A future reading of *Under the Volcano* which would be able to adopt both an integrated folk theory of addiction *and* a unified model of reading norms would be well placed to provide a fresh interdisciplinary analysis of the novel.

The approach that I have taken towards the novels under analysis has revealed, not only that agency is central to literary characterisation, but that the authors that feature in this thesis all take fascinating steps to present agency. This occurs formally, often through

¹ For an explanation of the legal and philosophical positions of addiction, see: Michael Louis Corrado, 'Addiction and Responsibility: An Introduction', *Law and Philosophy*, 18 (1999), 579–88 and; Stephen J. Morse, 'Hooked on Hype: Addiction and Responsibility', *Law and Philosophy*, 19 (2000), 3–49. These are the introductory articles to which open two special issues on addiction and responsibility.

narratorial style; whether in the intense focus on character mind-states in Kavan, the fragmented introspection in Beckett, the layers of narratorial truth in Nabokov, or the interweaving of a multitude of sources in Lowry. Although, as I have tried to suggest through different theoretical foci, these various styles reflect the diverging concerns of each novel, it is also the case that their approaches resonate with each other as facets of agency and the agential experience. The topic of agency is so closely related to the human experience that it is hard to imagine a limit to the ways in which it can be represented. The novel provides a unique way of exploring the diversity, changeability, and malleability, of experience. Through the course of this thesis, in my primary and theoretical material, I have attempted to describe just a small selection of the questions and approaches germane to the concept, and our understanding of, agency and action. The historical moment in which these novels were published – the mid-twentieth century – does not restrict the exploration of, and interest in agency to that period. However, this was a time during which there was a massive growth in the understanding of the self, in the humanities, sciences, and the social sciences. This boom gave us concepts and terminology to accurately describe the sensations and intuitions of the agential experience, as well as uncovering new aspects of agency which have given new ways of thinking about ourselves. We are still in this moment, and current research is increasing our knowledge of the brain at a faster rate than at any other period of time. It is the place of the humanities to absorb and understand this knowledge, and to join it up with what we already know of human agency as it is experienced in our own lives, disseminated through social discourse, and rendered in artistic practice. Some of this work has already begun, in cognitive and experimental approaches to fiction.²

Aside from the theoretical extension that could emerge from this project, there are specific literary concerns which would point to different directions in the application of the broad term, ‘agency’. As I have suggested, the idea of agency spreads from the minutiae of neurophysiology to the world wide dynamics of political autonomy. In the literary context, these ideas are in constant interplay with the formal aspects of writing. As such, it would be interesting to develop studies which explore the idea of agency in different areas of literary enquiry. This might be in relation to works of experimental fiction, such as that of Alain Robbe-Grillet, Muriel Spark or Christine Brooke-Rose. I explored this in relation to

² For an interesting experimental response to the question of the ethical effects of reading fiction, see: Jemeljan Hakemulder, *The Moral Laboratory: Experiments Examining the Effects of Reading Literature on Social Perception and Moral Self-Concept* (Amsterdam: John Benjamins Publishing Company, 2000).

Beckett, but a generic survey would be of comparative value. Alternately, there is space for a study which explores the political ramifications and conceptualisations of agency and fiction, of the kind that might be found in Arthur Koestler,³ J.G. Ballard, or W.G. Sebald. In this thesis, I have concentrated entirely on prose fiction. This has intuitive appeal because narrative has the space to develop characters, and frame their actions within motivational structures. Poetry would be an interesting extension because it abbreviates and condenses action and agency, and sets characterisation within an entirely different set of formal concerns and norms. If, as I have suggested, readers comprehend texts according to automatic frames of understanding that are similar to those of the real world, then reading poetry should demand some of those same responses. However, this idea would have to be moderated in line with the different generic expectations that poetry demands.

This thesis aims to provide a launching point for the exploration of agency within literary criticism. Although it poses a number of unanswered questions, and is restricted to a narrow field of enquiry, I hope to have shown how the philosophical and psychological language of agency can be used in conjunction with literary interpretation. If agency is central to literary works, then the language of agency can provide a vital tool for the exploration of action and characterisation. The close readings offered in this thesis provide a testing ground for this theoretical terminology within literary criticism, and offer enriched readings through the use of this technical vocabulary. Although this approach often focuses on small details and complications of characterisation, it offers way of describing action with accuracy and clarity. The close focus of action readings provides one level to the literary-critical project, but I believe it to be a vital one. As I have attempted to suggest, agency is entangled in a multitude of discourses at multiple levels of description. Close reading is just one approach, but it can provide the foundation for the exploration of agency in broader political, social or historical forms of criticism. At any level, action description can help to explain what we mean when we talk about autonomy, and to clarify the complex apparatus out of which authors build their fictional agents.

³ Koestler's fiction and later theoretical work would be of interest, not least because he directly responds both to political questions and to theoretical concerns. Arthur Koestler, *The Ghost in the Machine* (London: Hutchinson & Co, 1976) for example, directly addresses the theoretical grounding of behaviourism and puts forward an original idea of the interaction between the individual agent, the automatic responses of the agent, and the social network in which the agent is embedded.

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