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At the edges of perception: William Gaddis and the encyclopedic novel from Joyce to David foster Wallace

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"AT THE EDGES OF PERCEPTION": WILLIAM GADDIS AND THE
ENCYCLOPEDIC NOVEL FROM JOYCE TO DAVID FOSTER WALLACE.

A thesis submitted in August 2001 for the degree of PhD to the University of Durham

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ABSTRACT

"AT THE EDGES OF PERCEPTION": WILLIAM GADDIS AND THE ENCYCLOPEDIC NOVEL FROM JOYCE TO DAVID FOSTER WALLACE

"Longer works of fiction," a character in William Gaddis's JR complains of the current literary scene, are now "dismissed as classics and remain . . . largely unread due to the effort involved in reading and turning any more than two hundred pages" (527). This study argues that despite most literary critics constructing American postmodernism as a movement that privileges short works, in contrast to the encyclopedic masterworks of modernism, there are in fact a large number of artistically sophisticated contemporary novels of encyclopedic scope that demonstrate often ignored lines of continuity from works like James Joyce's Ulysses. In arguing this, I attempt not just to draw attention to a neglected strain in contemporary American fiction, but also to provide a more accurate context in which those few recent encyclopedic novels that have assumed centrality, like Gravity's Rainbow, might be evaluated.

In doing so, this thesis also seeks to demonstrate the pivotal position of William Gaddis who, despite publishing four impressive novels that engage with the legacy of modernism and pre-empt elements of postmodernism, has been excluded from most studies dealing with the transition between the two movements. Through detailed readings of four encyclopedic novels – Gaddis's The Recognitions, Don DeLillo's Underworld, Richard Powers's The Gold Bug Variations, and David Foster Wallace's Infinite Jest – I show Gaddis's continuation of encyclopedic modernism, the importance of his example to later writers, and the continuing vitality of the encyclopedic novel beyond the defined limits of modernism. However, as these novels try to encompass the full circle of knowledge, in order to do justice to their diverse learning I have adopted a different approach in each chapter. Very broadly, they attempt to encircle art, psychology, science, and literature, which, taken together, attempt to synthesise a defence of the contemporary encyclopedic novel.

While minimalist writers from Raymond Carver to Ann Beattie have affirmed that less is more, this thesis argues that, in some cases, more really is more.

Frontispiece: Engraving by Benoît-Louis Prévost, Frontispiece to the 1772 edition of Diderot and D'Alembert's <u>Encyclopédie</u> (Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco). The engraving shows Truth, wrapped in a veil, encircled by Reason, Philosophy, Theology, and other personifications of sciences, arts and crafts.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

With all the primary texts by Gaddis, DeLillo, and Powers, I have endeavoured to use the American first editions with the exception of Gaddis's The Recognitions and JR, where Gaddis corrected some errors for the first Penguin editions, and DeLillo's Americana which DeLillo cut slightly for its reprint as a Penguin paperback in 1989. David Foster Wallace's works provide a slightly different case. The first edition of The Broom of the System is so rare that even Wallace himself reputedly does not have a copy, so I have used references to a paperback reprint. More difficult to establish is the textual status of Infinite Jest. There are a number of differences between the first edition and the paperback reprint, such as Hal claiming to be "thirteen in June" on page 27 of the hardback, and "eleven in June" on the same page in the paperback. There is no note on the copyright page of the reprint suggesting that any corrections have been made, but details such as Hal's age (given IJ 49), are only consistent with the book's chronology if the reprint is taken as authoratitive, so I have assumed that this is the case.

Scholarly disputes about the authority of different texts of Joyce's works have once more flared up following the 1997 publication of Danis Rose's edition of Ulysses, and, as it seems an authoritative edition of Ulysses, in particular, may never be established, I have used Penguin reprints of Joyce's first three books. While these editions are perhaps not definitive, they are at least widely available. For Finnegans Wake, however, there does seem to be some consensus on the authority of the Faber third edition, so I have used this text of Joyce's last work. It is perhaps also worth noting that I have used square brackets to signal capitalisation changes made to preserve grammatical constructions for all texts, with the exception of the Wake on

the assumption that its language, and Joyce's avowed aim to forego "cutandry grammar" (Selected Letters 318), presents a special case.

Works by James Joyce:

D   Dubliners, introd. Terence Brown (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1992).

P   A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man, ed. and introd. Seamus Deane (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1992).

U   Ulysses, introd. Declan Kiberd (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1992).

FW   Finnegans Wake, 3rd ed. (London: Faber, 1964).

Works by William Gaddis:

R   The Recognitions, introd. William H. Gass (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1993).

JR   JR, introd. Frederick R. Karl (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1993).

CG   Carpenter's Gothic (New York: Viking-Penguin, 1985).

F   A Frolic of His Own (New York: Poseidon-Simon, 1994).

Works by Don DeLillo:

A   Americana (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1989).

EZ   End Zone (Boston: Houghton, 1972).

GJS   Great Jones Street (Boston: Houghton, 1973).

RS   Ratner's Star (New York: Knopf, 1976).

RD   Running Dog (New York: Knopf, 1978).

AZ   Amazons: An Intimate Memoir by the First Woman Ever to Play in the

National Hockey League [published under the pseudonym Cleo Birdwell]

(New York: Holt, 1980).

N   The Names (New York: Knopf, 1982).

WN   White Noise (New York: Viking-Penguin, 1985).

L   Libra (New York: Viking-Penguin, 1988).

M   Mao II (New York: Viking-Penguin, 1991).

UW   Underworld (New York: Scribner-Simon, 1997).

BA   The Body Artist (New York: Scribner-Simon, 2001).

Works by Richard Powers:

3F   Three Farmers on Their Way to a Dance (New York: Beech Tree-Morrow,

1985).

PD   Prisoner's Dilemma (New York: Beech Tree-Morrow, 1988).

GBV   The Gold Bug Variations (New York: Morrow, 1991).

OWS   Operation Wandering Soul (New York: Morrow, 1993).

G2.2   Galatea 2.2 (New York: Farrar, 1995).

G   Gain (New York: Farrar, 1998).

PTD   Plowing the Dark (New York: Farrar, 2000).

Works by David Foster Wallace:

BS   The Broom of the System (London: Abacus-Little, 1997).

Girl   Girl with Curious Hair (New York: Norton, 1989).

IJ   Infinite Jest (London: Abacus-Little, 1997).

Fun   A Supposedly Fun Thing I'll Never do Again (Boston: Little, 1997).

BI   Brief Interviews with Hideous Men (Boston: Little, 1999).

ETYMOLOGY

"ENCYCLOPE'DIA. * * * The circle of sciences, the round of learning"
                    Samuel Johnson, A Dictionary of the English Language.

"ENCYCLOPÆ'DY. * * * The circle of instruction, knowledge, learning "
                    Richardson's Dictionary.

ΕΥΚΥΚΛΟΠΑΖΔΕΙΑ,	Greek.
ENCYCLIOS DISCIPLINA,	Latin.
ENCYKLOPÆDI,	Danish.
ENCYCLOPEDIE,	Dutch.
ENCYKLOPEDI,	Swedish.
ALFRÆÐIBÓK,	Icelandic
ENCYCLOPEDIA,	English.
ENCYCLOPÉDIE,	French.
ENCICLOPEDIA,	Spanish.

EXTRACTS

"Let them have that Encyclopœdian, all the learning in the world, they must keep it to themselves, live in base esteeme, and starve," (Burton, The Anatomy of Melancholy 131).

"Furthermore, he has stated for me, and at the same time resolved, certain other knotty points of inestimable importance; and in so doing he has, as I can assure you, opened to me the true and encyclopaedic well and abyss of learning" (Rabelais, The Histories of Gargantua and Pantagruel 238).

"My illusions about the world caused me to think that in order to benefit by my reading I ought to possess all the knowledge the book presupposed. . . . This foolish conviction forced me to stop every moment, and to rush incessantly from one book to another; sometimes before coming to the tenth page of the one I was trying to read I should, by this extravagant method, have had to run through whole libraries. . . . my method ought to be changed. For a start I took the Encyclopaedia and began dividing it according to subjects" (Rousseau, The Confessions 223).

"The word ENCYCLOPÆDIA is too familiar to modern literature to require, in this place, any detailed explanation" (Coleridge, "General Introduction" 1).

> "So every one may dress it to his wish,
> According to the best of dictionaries,
> Which encyclopedise both flesh and fish"
> (Byron, Don Juan 15.540-42).

"this exaggerated laudation of Encyclopedism" (Carlyle, "Diderot" 28: 227).

"When we are young, we spend much time and pains in filling our notebooks with all definitions of Religion, Love, Poetry, Politics, Art, in the hope that, in the course of a few years, we shall have condensed into our encyclopædia the net value of all the theories at which the world has yet arrived. But year after year our tables get no completeness" (Emerson, "Intellect" 121).

"Mr. Pickwick . . . looked encyclopædias at Mr Peter Magnus" (Dickens, The Posthumous Papers of the Pickwick Club 409).

"The truth was, that the human race had now reached a stage of progress, so far beyond what the wisest and wittiest men of former ages had ever dreamed of, that it would have been a manifest absurdity to allow the earth to be any longer encumbered with their poor achievements in the literary line. Accordingly, a thorough and searching investigation had swept the booksellers' shops, hawkers' stands, public and private libraries, and even the book-shelf by the country fireside, and had brought the world's entire mass of printed paper, bound or in sheets, to swell the already mountain-bulk of our illustrious bonfire. Thick, heavy folios, containing the labors of lexicographers, commentators, and encyclopediasts were flung in, and, falling among the embers with a leaden thump, smouldered away to ashes, like rotten wood" (Hawthorne, "Earth's Holocaust" 349).

"These are the words of the Encyclopædia" (Poe, "A Descent into the Maelström" 230).

"His only books were an almanac and an arithmetic, in which last he was considerably expert. The former was a sort of cyclopædia to him, which he supposed to contain an abstract of human knowledge," (Thoreau, Walden 194).

"What Steam-engine . . . did these Encyclopedists invent for mankind?" (Carlyle, "Voltaire" 26: 464).

"Read Voltaire! . . . read Holbach, read the Encyclopédie" (Flaubert, Madame Bovary 270).

"The principle of selection I find distinctly given in an ancient Chinese encyclopaedia" (Darwin, The Origin of Species by Means of Natural Selection 92).

"the happiest is a prosperous provincial auctioneer keenly alive to his own jokes and sensible of his encyclopaedic knowledge" (Eliot, Middlemarch 604).

"He was our encyclopedia, and we were never tired of listening to his speeches, nor he of making them" (Twain, Roughing It 73).

"She asked fewer questions than before and seemed to have lost heart for consulting guide-books and encyclopædias" (James, Roderick Hudson 396-97).

"I should like to write a novel certainly, a novel that would be as lovely as a Persian carpet and as unreal. But there is no literary public in England for anything except newspapers, primers, and encyclopædias" (Wilde, The Picture of Dorian Gray 42).

"the end was at hand when men bought the Encyclopedia" (Shaw, "Epistle Dedicatory to Arthur Bingham Walkley [Man and Superman]" 141).

> "Lean encyclopædists, inscribe an Iliad"
> (Stevens, "New England Verses" 9).

"an ineffectual, inarticulate man with a taste for . . . drowsing over the Encyclopædia" (Fitzgerald, This Side of Paradise 11).

"The high hall of Horne's house had never beheld an assembly so representative and so varied nor had the old rafters of that establishment ever listened to a language so encyclopaedic" (Joyce, Ulysses 546).

> "desire and control.
> The pain of living and the drug of dreams
> Curl up the small soul in the window seat
> Behind the Encyclopaedia"
> (Eliot, "Animula" 20-23).

"his unfallable encyclicling" (Joyce, Finnegans Wake 153.26).

"Two years before I had discovered, in a volume of a certain pirated encyclopedia, a superficial description of a non-existent country" (Borges, "Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius" 31).

"But what do we mean by education? . . . I mean, you could have a child learn by heart a good encyclopedia and he or she would know as much or more than a school could offer" (Nabokov, <u>Lolita</u> 178).

"the man at the end of the encyclopedia" (Pynchon, <u>Gravity's Rainbow</u> 267).

"I heard a note of defeat in Victor's words. 'My clarinet is in hock,' the letter said, 'my bank statement reads nil, and the residents of Boise have no interest in encyclopedias'" (Auster, <u>Moon Palace</u> 18).

"See how much damn difference one more bungled encyclopedia's going to make" (Gaddis, <u>JR</u> 693).

"The unnamed master who composed these lines reminds us that we are in the realm of literature, in one of those obsessively encyclopedic novels that bore inward toward some central truth . . . This is the novel in which nothing is left out" (DeLillo, "American Blood" 28).

"I've created my own problem . . . a private encyclopedia" (Powers, <u>The Gold Bug Variations</u> 77).

"Julie, best likes: contemporary poetry, unkind women, words with univocal definitions, faces whose expressions change by the second, an obscure and limited-edition Canadian encyclopedia called <u>LaPlace's Guide to Total Data</u>" (Wallace, <u>Girl with Curious Hair</u> 10).

INTRODUCTION

THE ENCYCLOPEDIC NARRATIVE IN THE TWENTIETH CENTURY

"The twentieth century will be American," a character notes at the beginning

of John Dos Passos's thousand page modernist encyclopedia U.S.A., "American

thought will dominate it. American progress will give it color and direction.

American deeds will make it illustrious" (21). While this confidence may not apply

to the century as a whole, along with the rise of magic realism, and the increasing

prominence of post-colonial literature, the American novel might be thought to have

dominated contemporary literature in the last fifty years. Despite criticisms from

writers like Gore Vidal and Tom Wolfe,[1] and the near constant announcements of the

death of the novel, some sort of consensus seems to have been reached amongst

leading literary critics about the relative strength of the contemporary US novel:

Leslie A. Fiedler contended at the start of Love and Death in the American Novel that

American literature "ha[d] become the model of half the world" (xvii), Malcolm

Bradbury noted that by 1950 "American fiction . . . seemed to govern the directions of

the contemporary novel" (vi), while, more recently, Harold Bloom has argued that

American literature dominates the twentieth-century canon.[2] This celebrated vitality,

however, rarely includes writers of encyclopedic ambition, as the omission of John

Dos Passos from many studies illustrates. While Dos Passos spanned the literary

century (his work in the 1920s and 30s shows the clear influence of James Joyce and

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[1] In his essay "American Plastic: The Matter of Fiction", Vidal evaluates the work of Donald
Barthelme, John Barth, Grace Paley, William Gass and Thomas Pynchon as representative of
contemporary American fiction and, noting the links some of these writers have to universities, claims
that "the future is dark for literature" (39). Tom Wolfe, heralding the "New Journalism," argues that
contemporary fiction is regressive because novelists "have made a disastrous miscalculation over the
past twenty years" (34).

[2] Towards the end of The Western Canon Bloom notes that in "the Age of Chaos" (his term for the
twentieth century) American literature "dominate[s] . . . because we have always been chaotic" (518).
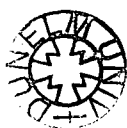
T. S. Eliot, while in a late interview he notes his response to John Barth, John Updike and Norman Mailer),[3] was involved in several important artistic movements (working with the New Playwrights theatre), and published one of his last pieces of non-fiction on one of the centuries most important scientific breakthroughs (the Apollo 10 rocket launch), his work rarely receives more than a cursory mention in studies of twentieth-century fiction.[4]

Instead, the focus has tended to fall upon what Frank O'Connor in 1962 called America's "national art form": the short story (41). For O'Connor, the short story is the melancholy voice of a nation's submerged population groups, typically concerned with "outlawed figures wandering about the fringes of society" (19), and he sees societal reasons which make it the typically American form:

> America is largely populated by submerged population groups. That
>
> peculiar American sweetness toward the stranger – which exists side by
>
> side with American brutality toward everyone – is the sweetness of
>
> people whose own ancestors have been astray in an unfamiliar society
>
> and understand that a familiar society is the exception rather than the
>
> rule; that the strangeness of behavior which is the very lifeblood of the
>
> short story is often an atavistic breaking out from some peculiar way of
>
> life, faraway and long ago. (41)

---

[3] In an interview published in 1969 Dos Passos noted: "I liked John Barth's The Floating Opera and The End of the Road, though I haven't been impressed with his later work. I liked the small-town effect John Updike brought to Rabbit, Run. Mailer seems to me the ruin of a great talent" (Major Nonfictional Prose 295).

[4] While George Steiner has called Dos Passos "the principal literary influence on the twentieth century" ("Note" 139), studies such as David Daiches's The Novel and the Modern World, Peter Faulkner's Modernism, and Ann Massa's American Literature in Context, IV: 1900-1930 do not include even a single reference to his work.

Similar arguments for an inevitable connection between American literature and the short story have been put forward by numerous critics and editors of anthologies,[5] but the position is stated most forcefully by William Peden in The American Short Story: Front Line in the National Defense of Literature. Peden's study traces the roots of the modern US short story in America's magazine culture, and offers a fairly thorough taxonomy of contemporary authors, before arguing that the short story is not just a significant subset of America's national literature, but actually constitutes the most important literary contribution of the last two decades. "It seems increasingly probable," Peden contends, "that future generations of historians of American literature will find in the short story, rather than the novel or the drama and poetry, the major literary contribution of recent years" (10).

This bias towards what is often seen as the slighter genre of the short story seems, in fact, to be part of a wider tendency to perceive American literature as in some way insubstantial. D. H. Lawrence, writing in 1923, noted this when he argued that we tend to dismiss the classics of Nathaniel Hawthorne, Herman Melville and Edgar Allan Poe as just a "mass of words! all so unreal!" (Studies 3), and even in more recent criticism, America's literature is often framed in rather ethereal, linguistic terms that increases the distance of these works from the prosaic data of the world that forms such a central part of the encyclopedic narrative. In Richard Poirier's influential study A World Elsewhere, for example, the key characteristic of American fiction is defined as the quest to seek liberation into "momentary expansions of consciousness" (15). "The classic American writers," Poirier argues, "try through

---

[5] Arthur Voss, for example, in his survey, The American Short Story, begins by noting that "it is in America particularly that the modern short story has flourished" (3). A. Walton Litz, introducing an influential anthology, similarly argues that "the history of the American short story is a faithful record of our literary and social development. No important American writer of fiction has neglected the short form" (v), while James Cochrane observes that "American literature and the short story might be said

style temporarily to free the hero . . . from systems, to free them from the pressures of time, biology, economics, and from the social forces which are ultimately the undoing of American heroes" (5).

While Tony Tanner's <u>City of Words</u> notes the importance of encyclopedists Thomas Pynchon and William Gaddis, it similarly describes American fiction in terms of an unusually heightened awareness of a transcendent verbal realm. Reading post-war novels through the lens of Jorge Luis Borges and Vladimir Nabokov, Tanner argues that US writers can be defined by their:

> unusual degree of awareness of this City of Words. . . . a general self-
> consciousness about the strange relationship between the provinces of
> words and things, and the problematical position of man, who
> participates in both. . . . the American writer often seems to feel or imply
> – 'I am a citizen of somewhere else.' I have taken the liberty of calling
> that 'somewhere else' the City of Words. (21)

Alongside such preconceptions, another reason for the comparative absence of encyclopedic narratives from recent surveys of American fiction is the perception of encyclopedia making as a specifically modernist activity. In the age of postmodernism, dominated by Jean-François Lyotard's influential announcement of the collapse of grand narratives – a splintering of knowledge where there is "no universal metalanguage" and the "diminished tasks of research have become compartmentalized and no one can master them all" (Lyotard 41) – the encyclopedia, with its implicit project of attaining total knowledge seems anomalous. Although I discuss this in more detail in chapter one, this tendency is neatly summarised by Michael André Bernstein in his recent article "Making Modernist Masterpieces."

---

to have come of age at about the same time, and this . . . might go some way toward explaining why the two go together as well as they do" (7).

5

Seeing the drive to create "a new kind of encyclopedic masterpiece" (5) as a key

characteristic of modernism, Bernstein defines the modernist encyclopedia in terms of

its desire to move from local detail to universality, its insistence upon its own

primacy, its emphasis on impersonality, and its difficulty. Finding his exemplars in

James Joyce's Ulysses and Ezra Pound's Cantos, Bernstein concludes his essay by

limiting the creation of encyclopedic narratives to the first half of the century, and

offering a condescending look at the fiction which has followed modernism:

> The initial thrust of the much contested and increasingly threadbare
>
> catch phrase "postmodernism" arises from the systematic subversion of
>
> all of the imperatives I have just listed. Such a critique dismisses the
>
> idea that art can redeem lost time or damaged lives, and counters
>
> assertions of the masterpiece's universality with an insistence that every
>
> work explicitly acknowledge its own historicity and partiality. At its
>
> most radical, postmodernism throws into doubt the category of genius.
>
> (12)

While such a reading neglects to take into account the fact that the history of

encyclopedias actually mirrors the fragmentation of knowledge that Lyotard

diagnoses – the early, systematically ordered, encyclopedias that were intended to be

read cover to cover, giving way to the modern, multi-authored, collections of articles

– there are, of course, a few exceptions to this bias, most notably the place accorded

Thomas Pynchon's encyclopedic postmodern masterpiece Gravity's Rainbow in most

surveys of contemporary American fiction. However, while most critics would

probably concur with Frederick Karl's estimation of the novel's importance, as "the

Ulysses of the seventies" (American Fictions 444), such praise is still frequently

mixed with reservations about the novel's length and erudition. Richard Locke, for

example, reviewing the novel for the <u>New York Times Book Review</u>, compared the

novel to Herman Melville and William Faulkner, but complained that "the book is too

long and dense; despite the cornucopia of brilliant details and grand themes, one's

dominant feelings in the last one to two hundred pages are a mounting restlessness,

fatigue and frustration" (14).

*

"We will have to learn . . . new maps," the narrator of <u>Gravity's Rainbow</u>

notes, "as the maps grow another dimension" (321). This thesis contends that current

constructions of American postmodernism, tending to privilege short works that

highlight differences from modernism, offer an incomplete map of twentieth-century

literature. Ignoring what might be seen as a tradition of encyclopedic novels, this bias

tends to obscure lines of continuity from the demanding masterworks of modernism,

while at the same time giving the misleading impression that works such as <u>Gravity's</u>

<u>Rainbow</u> are unique acts of literary excess. In doing so, the thesis seeks to

demonstrate the importance of William Gaddis as a pivotal figure between modernism

and postmodernism. The author of four novels of encyclopedic range, Gaddis has

recently begun to receive some of the attention his achievement deserves,[6] but he is

still largely excluded from wider studies concerned with the shift from modernism to

postmodernism. Robert Scholes and Robert Kellog argued in <u>The Nature of Narrative</u>

that the "greatest narratives are inevitably those in which the most is attempted" (16),

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[6] While the first book-length study dealing with Gaddis's work was not published until nearly thirty
years after his first novel was released, there are now seven studies devoted to his work: Steven
Moore's <u>A Reader's Guide to William Gaddis's</u> The Recognitions, John Kuehl and Steven Moore's
collection <u>In Recognition of William Gaddis</u>, Moore's <u>William Gaddis</u>, John Johnston's <u>Carnival of
Recognition: Gaddis's</u> The Recognitions <u>and Postmodern Theory</u>, Gregory Comnes's <u>The Ethics of
Indeterminacy in the Novels of William Gaddis</u>, Peter Wolfe's <u>A Vision of His Own: the Mind and Art</u>

and although Gaddis's novels (and the others I discuss in this study) are undoubtedly among the most ambitious narratives in recent years, when they have achieved any reputation it has normally been in the sense that Mark Twain defined a classic: a "book which people praise and don't read" (Following the Equator 241). More typically, however, they have remained, as DeLillo writes in Underworld, "at the edges of perception" (UW 159), receiving at best an occasional footnote, or cursory mention, while more time is devoted to increasing the already weighty scholarship explicating the works of more famous postmodernists like Barth, or Pynchon.

More alert than many critics, Tony Tanner argued while elucidating Pynchon's literary context that although the "aesthetic funds alive at this time were various . . . in particular I believe [Pynchon] was affected by the work of William Gaddis, whose novel The Recognitions (1955) exerted a general influence that has yet to be fully traced" (Thomas Pynchon 90). In part, this thesis seeks to trace this influence, suggesting that The Recognitions begins a line of post-war encyclopedic narratives that includes work by writers like William Gass, John Barth, Joseph McElroy, Thomas Pynchon, and Robert Coover. Through detailed readings of four encyclopedic novels – Gaddis's The Recognitions, Don DeLillo's Underworld, Richard Powers's The Gold Bug Variations, and David Foster Wallace's Infinite Jest – I attempt to show both the importance of Gaddis's example to these writers, and how, together, they constitute what might be considered an important subgenre of the contemporary novel that fully engages with the legacy of modernism's encyclopedias.

The Oxford English Dictionary defines an encyclopedia as the "circle of learning; a general course of instruction" or as a "work containing extensive information on all branches of knowledge," but the extent to which such projects have

of William Gaddis, and Christopher J. Knight's Hints and Guesses: William Gaddis's Fiction of Longing.

engaged with literature has varied over the years. Initial relations, in particular, were not spectacularly notable – the third edition of the <u>Encyclopædia Britannica</u>, for example, devotes only seven lines to its definition of drama, and only six words to literature – but, in subsequent years the connections have been far more numerous. As James M. Wells has observed, the <u>Encyclopædia Britannica</u> alone has in the past commisioned articles from such celebrated writers as William Hazlitt, Walter Scott, Thomas De Quincey, Algernon Charles Swinburne, and Robert Louis Stevenson (17, 20). More deeply involved, however, were writers like Denis Diderot, Oliver Goldsmith, Samuel Taylor Coleridge, and Laurence Sterne. Diderot's involvement with the production of the <u>Encyclopédie</u> is, of course, well known and is commonly cited as an important foundation of the enlightenment.[7] Less frequently remarked upon, though, is Goldsmith's planned volume. Amongst his posthumous papers there was found a draft prospectus for an encyclopedia which, Collison explains, was to have been called "a <u>Universal Dictionary of Arts and Sciences</u>" (109). The list of proposed authors – including Samuel Johnson, Edmund Burke, Sir Joshua Reynolds, Edward Gibbon, and Adam Smith – gives some idea of what an intriguing volume this would have been.

Similarly, Coleridge was drawn to the idea of "furnish[ing] a compendium of human knowledge" (1), having drawn up the plan and written the general introduction for the <u>Encyclopædia Metropolitana</u>, which was published in 1829. Basing the encyclopedia's claims to uniqueness around the particular approach it adopts in its attempt to "methodize the great mass of human knowledge" (7), Coleridge accords the human mind a central role in advancing to encompass such a project: "All things,

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[7] It is tempting, though beyond the scope of this project, to pursue Diderot's connections to postmodern encyclopedic narratives further, as he is not only significant for his work on the <u>Encyclopédie</u>, but also for <u>Jaques the Fatalist</u>, a novel that might be considered a precursor to some metafictional strands of postmodern literature.

in us, and about us, are a chaos, without Method: and so long as the mind is entirely

passive, so long as there is an habitual submission of the understanding to mere events

and images, as such, without any attempt to classify and arrange them, so long the

chaos must continue" (2).

Sterne, by contrast, is connected through the parodies of such projects

included in <u>Tristram Shandy</u>, but he can be considered relevant here for locating his

interest in encyclopedias within a work of fiction, in the form of the <u>Tristrapædia</u>.

The <u>Tristrapædia</u> is a scheme proposed by Tristram's father, "a system of education

. . . collecting . . . his own scattered thoughts" (307), but the attempt soon faces

complications. Tristram reflects on his father's efforts, "[h]e imagined he should be

able to bring whatever he had to say, into so small a compass, that when it was

finished and bound, it might be rolled up in my mother's hussive" (308), but, of

course, "[m]atter grows under our hands" (ibid.), and life outruns his father's attempts

to catalogue it.

While this is perhaps useful background information, an encyclopedic

narrative, however, is obviously different from these conjunctions of encyclopedias

and literature, just as it is obviously different from an encyclopedia itself. While an

encyclopedia is simply a catalogue of information, arranged either systematically or

alphabetically, an encyclopedic narrative must synthesise knowledge into a

component of a larger narrative.[8] Equally, a definition cannot be easily arrived at just

by a crude measurement of length, as length would seem to be a necessary, but not

sufficient criterion for an encyclopedic narrative. Although these works are typically

long, they are normally composed according to strict principles of artistic economy,

which distinguishes them from long works by less disciplined writers. It is, rather, a

blending of scale and diverse fields of knowledge – normally including art, literature, and science – that begin to define an encyclopedic narrative, although they typically also attempt to gain greater coverage through the use of varied perspectives, an emphasis on cataloguing, and the use of different literary styles.[9]

In his Anatomy of Criticism, Northrop Frye notes the difficulty that criticism has had dealing with encyclopedic novels like Moby-Dick and Ulysses observing that it "is the anatomy in particular that has baffled critics" (313), and he goes on to devote a few pages to discussing the composition of encyclopedic narratives.[10] The argument I put forward here, however, differs from Frye's as he maintains that the encyclopedic narrative tends to be an isolated phenomenon. Describing the emergence of the encyclopedic form, he writes: "a total body of vision that poets as a whole class are entrusted with . . . [is incorporated in] a single encyclopaedic form, which can be attempted by one poet if he is sufficiently learned or inspired, or by a poetic school or tradition if the culture is sufficiently homogeneous" (55, emphasis mine). Similarly, although he discusses the encyclopedic characteristics of both Ulysses and Finnegans Wake, he asserts that the authors of such wide-ranging texts tend to "build their creative lives around one supreme effort" (322).

Instead, in arguing for a tradition of encyclopedic novels, I follow Italo Calvino, who saw the urge to create encyclopedic texts as "typical of the [twentieth] century" (105). For Calvino, the encyclopedic narrative is not rendered obsolete by postmodern critiques of the relativity of knowledge, but rather, he argues that "the

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[8] An exception to this is Richard Horn's innovative novel, Encyclopedia, which is entirely related through alphabetical encyclopedia entries, and even includes a reference to The Recognitions as "the best in English since Ulysses" (48).

[9] Critics such as Edward Mendelson, Frederick Karl, and Tom LeClair have all attempted to define the encyclopedic narrative as it appears in contemporary American literature. I outline their definitions in some detail in the next chapter.

[10] It should be noted here that the terms "anatomy" and "encyclopaedic form" are distinct terms for Frye, the former being a "form of prose fiction . . . characterized by a great-variety of subject-matter

great novels of the twentieth century" are enlivened by the "the idea of an <u>open</u> encyclopedia" that accepts that knowledge is "potential, conjectural, and manifold" (116), and he even goes so far as to see the encyclopedic ambition of the writer as essential to the continuing vitality of literature:

> Overambitious projects may be objectionable in many fields, but not in literature. Literature remains alive only if we set ourselves immeasurable goals, far beyond all hope of achievement. Only if poets and writers set themselves tasks that no one else dares imagine will literature continue to have a function. Since science has begun to distrust general explanations and solutions that are not sectorial and specialized, the grand challenge for literature is to be capable of weaving together the various branches of knowledge, the various "codes," into a manifold and multifaceted vision of the world. (112)

While outlining this tradition of encyclopedic fictions, and tracing the influence of Gaddis, I have, however, attempted to avoid the implication that the novels published after <u>The Recognitions</u> derive their interest solely from their relation to Gaddis's work. Frye summarised the failings that such a perspective can entail, arguing that "a scholar with a special interest . . . expresses that interest by the rhetorical device of putting his favourite study into a causal relationship with whatever interests him less. Such a method gives one the illusion of explaining one's subject" (6), and so I have confined my argument about the importance of Gaddis to the first chapter, and to a few remarks at the start of each subsequent chapter.

I have instead sought to explicate the other three novels in terms that they seem to suggest themselves: as these authors of encyclopedic narratives attempt to

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and a strong interest in ideas," and the latter a "genre presenting an anagogic form of symbolism, such as a sacred scripture" (365), but he often uses them to describe the same works.

encompass the whole circle of learning in their novels, so, for breadth of coverage, in each of the chapters I have adopted a different approach. Very broadly, they aim to encircle art, psychology, science, and literature, which, taken together, attempt to synthesise a defence of the encyclopedic novel's vitality. Chapter one reads William Gaddis's first novel, The Recognitions, alongside critical constructions of postmodernism to demonstrate how the novel, which has remained at the edges of most academic discussions, draws generally ignored lines of continuity from the big books of modernism. While many critics have lamented the limited intellectual range and ambition of post-World War II fiction, I contend that The Recognitions satisfies most of the criteria that they argue have not been met since the publication of fictional encyclopedias like Ulysses and The Cantos.

While noting this encyclopedic range, the first chapter also puts forward a case for the pivotal position of The Recognitions by suggesting that it anticipates later developments: through examining the shift in portraits of the artist from Joyce's A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man, through Finnegans Wake, to The Recognitions, the chapter argues that both writers are preoccupied with the limitations inherent in modernism's insistence on originality, and contends that The Recognitions's theory of art pre-empts later, and more famous, analyses of the shift from modernism to postmodernism put forward by John Barth and Brian McHale.

In chapter two I focus on Don DeLillo, who has recently been celebrated as one of America's foremost writers,[11] a creator of "accessible and entertaining narratives" (LeClair, In the Loop 233). Through an analysis of Underworld, I seek to demonstrate that his work is more complexly layered than his popularisers sometimes suggest, and that Underworld can be seen, like the novels of William Gaddis – which

DeLillo has expressed his admiration for – to be an encyclopedic narrative that draws heavily on the legacy of the big books of high modernism. In doing this, I argue that DeLillo has been at the centre of a shift in the dominant psychological foundation adopted in works of contemporary literature, from Freudian psychoanalysis to a concern with more recent neuroscientific research, a subtext that recurs through the discussion of the younger writers, Powers and Wallace.

The perceived divide between the arts and the sciences provides the background for chapter three's discussion of Richard Powers's <u>The Gold Bug Variations</u>. From C. P. Snow's complaint in 1959 that it was "bizarre how very little of twentieth-century science ha[d] been assimilated into twentieth-century art" (16), to the criticisms of more recent commentators like Raymond Tallis, the alleged scientific ignorance of literary intellectuals has been a recurring theme. In the seven novels he has published so far, however, Richard Powers has shown a consistent interest in producing, what he calls in his first novel, a "human encyclopedia" (<u>3F</u> 41): a fictional form that could effectively combine knowledge and biography, the scientific and the literary. Through a reading of <u>The Gold Bug Variations</u>, his most ambitious and encyclopedic novel to date, I attempt to illustrate both Powers's extension of Gaddis's work, and his union of various sciences – molecular, neuroscientific, and ecological – with the artistic.

Concluding the thesis, chapter four returns to the concerns of the first chapter, detailing the tendency of reviewers and critics to disparage a new generation of writers through comparisons with their precursors. While Gaddis and his generation were criticised for their perceived failure to continue the project of literary modernism, it is a seemingly inevitable irony of literary criticism that more recent

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[11] Mark Osteen, for example, begins his recent study of DeLillo by describing him "as perhaps the most gifted stylist in American letters today" (2), while DeLillo's most recent publication, <u>The Body Artist</u>

writers have, in turn, been castigated for failing to match writers like Gaddis, Pynchon and DeLillo. Arguing against this, I propose David Foster Wallace's Infinite Jest as an example of the continuing vitality of the kind of encyclopedic narrative written by these older postmodernists. The novel offers an appropriate example for a final chapter not just because of its artistic quality, but also because it represents something like an encyclopedia of the postmodern novel: employing a range of postmodern techniques (metafiction, infinite regress, and so on), engaging with key postmodern themes (such as ontological uncertainty and the impact of television) and including references to postmodernist authors like John Barth, Jerzy Kosinski, William Burroughs, and Thomas Pynchon.

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Since the practitioners of modernism were themselves deeply preoccupied with the origins and membership of their movement,[12] it is unsurprising that the exact boundaries of modernism, both literary and temporal, have subsequently been the subject of some academic debate. The recently published introductory volume edited by Michael Levenson, The Cambridge Companion to Modernism, for example, includes sections devoted to analysing Gertrude Stein's absence from earlier constructions of modernism, and to highlighting the, often underrated, importance of the Harlem Renaissance to the movement. In this study, however, I am concerned with literary modernism generally, as the movement of modern writing covering a period from 1890 to 1940 characterised by an emphasis on innovation, difficulty, and

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features effusive blurbs from Michael Ondaatje, Harold Bloom and Salman Rushdie.
[12] Wyndham Lewis's construction limited interest to Pound, Joyce, Eliot and himself – the "Men of 1914" (Blasting 9) – while Gertrude Stein offered a similarly exclusive ideal when she announced that

the rendering of individual subjectivity. I refer to this fairly traditional conception of

modernism not because I am seeking to undermine the valuable work that has been

done redefining the modernist canon, but rather because this seems to be the construct

that the writers under discussion here respond to most clearly. More specifically, the

example of modernism typically invoked by this thesis is provided in the work of

James Joyce, whose importance to these writers is underlined by the fact that each

makes reference to Joyce in their work. [13]

Joyce is, of course, a major figure in most constructions of postmodernism

from modernism. In Brian McHale's Postmdernist Fiction, for example, the

progression of Joyce's work from "The Dead" to Finnegans Wake is used to conclude

McHale's study as an exemplum of his model of postmodernism's development. His

relevance here, however, lies in the encyclopedic form of modernism he perfected,

which has meant that his work, and particularly Ulysses, provide something like a

template for later encyclopedic narratives.

There are hints of an encyclopedic attempt to encompass the infinite even in

Joyce's early work – Stephen's list in A Portrait, moving from Clongowes's "Class of

Elements" to "The Universe" (P 12) suggests the vast frame around the action, and

the novel ranges through politics, literature, philosophy, and theology – but Ulysses

and Finnegans Wake are, of course, more clearly encyclopedic in their efforts to

incorporate specialist knowledge from other disciplines.

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there were only "three novels written in this generation that are . . . important," singling out works by
Joyce, Proust and herself (Lectures 184).
[13] While the rather complicated nature of Gaddis's relation to Joyce is discussed in detail in the next
chapter, DeLillo's description of the report into Kennedy's assassination as "the Joycean Book of
America . . . the novel in which nothing is left out" (L 182) is telling, as is Powers's reference (given
the importance of the word "code" in his fiction) to the "encoded" works of Joyce in Galatea 2.2 (G2.2
325). Wallace's short story, "Order and Flux in Northampton" is based around a web of references to
Joyce: featuring a character writing a PhD. on "Stephen Dedalus's sublimated oedipal necrophelia vis à
vis Mrs. D. in Ulysses" (91), and having a key moment in the story "4:30pm on 15 June" (92), twenty-
four hours before Molly's adultery.

Ezra Pound, writing in 1922, drew attention to the encyclopedic aspect of Ulysses when he argued that the work "carried on a process begun in Bouvard et Pécuchet" (Literary Essays 403)[14] and, like Flaubert's unfinished work, Joyce's novel aims to encompass as much information as possible. Drawing on archaeological reports, literature from ancient Greece onwards, detailed medical knowledge, musical form, and with individual chapters meant to represent not just different parts of the body, but also disciplines as varied as theology, economics and painting, the novel makes an attempt at "containing the Encyclopaedia" (U 838), and Joyce even went as far as to conceive of the novel as an encyclopedia of Dublin life, seeking "to give a picture of Dublin so complete that if the city one day suddenly disappeared from the earth it could be reconstructed out of my book" (Joyce qtd. in Budgen 69).

Stan Smith has noted that this "anecdote deserves more consideration than it usually receives" (15), and the idea that we may be witnessing a "[c]ityful passing away" (U 208) does appear to have been significantly incorporated into the text. The theme of the destruction of cities, "shattered glass and toppling masonry" (U 28, 54, 683), runs through the text alongside what Bloom calls the "last day idea" (U 133). While the novel is famously set on Thursday 16 June 1904, the knowledge that "[t]omorrow is killing day" (U 122) lurks behind the action, going beyond its literal reference to the city's abattoirs, to suggest a wider "[s]laughter of innocents" (U 218). News is brought of "[f]unerals all over the world everywhere every minute" (U 127), and rumours spread as far as the city's brothels that "the last day is coming this summer" (U 623).

These intimations of imminent apocalypse are reinforced by the hints of a coming biblical flood, "an infinite great fall of rain" (U 520). Thursday has been

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[14] Wyndham Lewis, despite being less sympathetic to Joyce's work than Pound, similarly noted: "Ulysses . . . is an encyclopaedia of english literary technique" (Time and Western Man 74).

another day in a long "[h]eatwave" (U 107), but around ten in the evening it begins to rain, and the novel ominously notes "after wind and water fire shall come" (U 520). Although he is unaware of it, Stephen's suspicion that he might be "walking into eternity" (U 45) is not without its foundation.

In the face of this uncertain future, the novel plays with various methods of information storage – Bloom's "mnemotechnic" (U 834), messages scratched into sand, and even the "plasmic memory" of the soul (U 538) – but the most frequently invoked archive is the library. William S. Brockman has noted that, for Joyce, the "library was a dynamic tool" in the composition of his works (120), and Ulysses is preoccupied with "the great libraries of the world" (U 50). Several appear in the text, from invocations of the scribe of the gods, "Thoth, god of libraries" (U 248), through the library that provided the intellectual centre of Hellenistic culture, "Alexandria" (U 50), to parodic collections of the "World's Twelve Worst Books" (U 607). Most significant, however, is Bloom's library of "several inverted volumes improperly arranged and not in the order of their common letters with scintillating titles" (U 832). Although only including twenty-two books, the range of Bloom's library is encyclopedic, as those books encompass literature, philosophy, astronomy, theology, geography, maths, history and biography, but the collection might also, in a sense, be considered to form the centre of the book. The list of books appears in the "Ithaca" chapter and, according to the list of correspondences Joyce prepared, the penultimate chapter was to represent the "skeleton" of his epic. Bearing this in mind, Bloom's library can be seen to function as a kind of backbone to the text, not only laying out the materials for the book's construction (a crude formula for which might run Thom's Dublin Post Office Directory + Shakespeare's Works), but also providing a spine from which a number of the book's obsessions radiate outwards. For example,

Bloom remembers his copy of "Physical Strength and How to Obtain It by Eugene

Sandow" (U 833) in connection with his anxieties about his masculinity on three

occasions (U 73, 567, 797), his tendency to evaluate human life against "the apathy of

the stars" (U 867) is highlighted by the reverence he holds for his A Handbook of

Astronomy (U 299, 654, 833) and the "[f]ascinating little book . . . of sir Robert

Ball's" (U 194), The Story of the Heavens (U 591, 832), while the linkage between

Bloom and the Sun, going "forth to the ends of the world to traverse" (U 623), that

has been hinted at in the novel is reinforced by the "recurrent title" In the Track of the

Sun included in Bloom's library (U 833).[15]

This obsession with the storehouse of books is, in many ways, appropriate

because the novel's encyclopedic aim is to culminate the literary tradition, an

ambition that is revealed in another of the novel's library scenes, "Scylla and

Charybdis."[16] Stuart Gilbert has noted that in this chapter Joyce exhausts the three

forms of literature Stephen defines in A Portrait by including "some lyrics, a short

passage in blank verse and another in dramatic form" (208), but, perhaps more

significant, is the way Joyce structures literary history in this episode. Michel de

Montaigne remarked that Homer could be called "'the first poet and the last': since

before him there was none whom he could imitate: after him, none who could imitate

him" (852), but, in the national library in Ulysses, Joyce's literary episode enshrines

three key literary presences, rather than one: Homer, implicit in the novel's structure,

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[15] In addition, the influence of Bloom's library on his daily thoughts is underlined as he thinks about
his copy of "Voyages in China by 'Viator'" (U 832) in the cemetery (U 145), and remembers "what
Spinoza says in that book of poor papa's" (U 367) in the Ormond Hotel (presumably a reference to
"Thoughts from Spinoza" [U 832]).
[16] There is, of course, a clearer catalogue of literary history in the stylistic diversity of the "Oxen of the
Sun," but there the choice of literature is controlled by the governing metaphor of embryonic
development, whereas in "Scylla and Charybdis" Stuart Gilbert tells us the representative art is
literature (208).

Shakespeare, present in the discussion of Hamlet and through a series of allusions,[17] and, of course, Joyce himself, "like the God of the creation, . . . within or behind or beyond or above his handiwork," (P 233). This holy trinity encircles literary history from the early oral tradition, through Shakespeare, who Joyce considered the peak of English literature,[18] to a final culmination in Joyce's own work that is hinted at throughout the episode.[19] Going beyond this, however, Joyce even tries to encompass these two accepted precursors, by absorbing Homer in his rewrite of the Odyssey, and trying to subsume Shakespeare within his two main characters – at a climactic moment "Stephen and Bloom gaze in the mirror. The face of William Shakespeare, beardless, appears there" (U 671) – an act of consumption which, given the imminent apocalypse the text seems to promise, proposes Joyce as literature's cumulative endpoint, like the enlarged full stop at the end of "Ithaca," after which there could only be reflections on what had already passed.

Viewing Ulysses in this way also suggests a redefinition of the novel's Homeric foundation. After the initial years of Joyce criticism were dominated by what Vladimir Nabokov called the "dull nonsense" of excessive attention to minute Homeric parallels (Lectures 288), more recent critics like Richard Madtes have argued that "little is to be gained from a study of [the] Homeric references" (30). However, outwith the search for plot parallels, it is possible to see that Joyce's use of

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[17] Hugh Kenner, writing in The Stoic Comedians of both Shakespeare's importance to the novel and Joyce's efforts to be encyclopedic, noted that "Shakespeare wrote some thirty-six plays; I do not know whether Joyce includes in the library scene an allusion to each of them, but it would not be surprising" (53). In fact, according to Don Gifford and Robert J. Seidman's list of annotations, Ulysses Annotated, there are (sometimes tenuous) allusions to thirty-four Shakespeare plays, the exceptions being Titus Andronicus, Timon of Athens and the third part of Henry VI.

[18] Joyce told Frank Budgen that he believed the superior richness of Shakespeare elevated him above Dante (Budgen 184).

[19] The chapter includes knowing references specifically to the novel's technique ("[w]e should not now combine a Norse saga with an excerpt from a novel by George Meredith" John Eglinton argues [U 271]) as well as broader observations that teasingly observe that Ireland's "national epic has yet to be written" (U 246). It is perhaps worth noting that in The Consciousness of Joyce Richard Ellmann divides his study into three parts: Homer, Shakespeare, and Joyce.

Homer is relevant, in a larger sense, as it is connected to the encyclopedic project of

Ulysses. Although Plato, in book ten of the Republic, dismissed the possibility of

Homeric poetry acting as a storehouse of knowledge, because its lessons made

"pleasure and pain . . . your rulers instead of law and the rational principles" (607a), it

is clear from the references to Plato in Ulysses that Joyce himself did not subscribe to

this evaluation (U 237). Instead, Joyce's attitude to Homer is perhaps more in line

with Eric A. Havelock's, who, in his Preface to Plato, has examined the ways in

which Homer combines the role of "a storyteller and also a tribal encyclopedist" (83),

by including information about different codes of law, rules for family order,

seamanship and so on. Joyce's use of Homer, then, is not necessarily, as Eliot

claimed, designed to point up a contrast between antiquity and "the immense

panorama of futility and anarchy which is contemporary history" ("Ulysses" 177), but

serves rather to highlight his continuation of the role of the book as encyclopedic store

of knowledge.

As Pound equated Ulysses with Bouvard and Pécuchet, so Finnegans Wake

also seems to have its roots in Flaubert's encyclopedic work, making reference to a

development "From here Buvard to dear Picuchet" (FW 302.9-10). However, while

Ulysses grew from its initially modest beginnings as a short story, Finnegans Wake,

by contrast, appears to have been intended from the start to be encyclopedic in its

scope. Even in the early 1920s Joyce was invoking the medieval encyclopedia to

defend his technique: "Some of the means I use are trivial," he explained, "and some

are quadrivial" (qtd. in Ellmann, James Joyce 546).[20]

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[20] Robert Collison, in his guide Encyclopaedias: Their History Throughout the Ages, notes that the
Trivium and Quadrivium (which covered grammar, logic, rhetoric, geometry, arithmetic, astronomy
and music) provided the basis of education in the Middle Ages and had first been devised by "both
Varro and Martianus in their encyclopaedias" (44). The connections between Finnegans Wake and
encyclopedias has been discussed by Hilary Clark, in her study The Fictional Encyclopaedia, but she
confines her discussion mainly to the encyclopedic possibilities of Joyce's language: "in a pun or a

The Wake is self-conscious about the demands it places upon the reader,

constantly questioning the encyclopedic range of the reader's knowledge, by asking

"How farflung is your fokloire and how velktingeling your volupkabulary" (FW

419.12-13).[21] It draws attention to the various ways encyclopedic narratives

encompass knowledge – lists (the book comments on its own "overlisting" [FW

503.30]), allusion to earlier works ("Isn't he after borrowing all before him" the book

asks [FW 463.23]), and cataloguing (information in the Wake is "variously

catalogued, regularly regrouped" [FW 129.12]) – and its knowledge extends through

military history, geometry, myth, the Bible, languages as diverse as Sanskrit and

Norwegian, and even makes reference to the history of encyclopedias[22] as it

underlines Joyce's position at "the crux of the catalogue" (FW 47.3).

Where the encyclopedic quality of Ulysses was summed up by the library, in

Finnegans Wake, although there are still "books in evidence" (FW 544.16), the

dominant metaphor shifts and the reader begins, after the fall, at the "national

museum" (FW 8.1-2). The museum is an appropriate place to begin the book as,

according to Peter Cannon-Brookes, "museums are storehouses of knowledge as well

as storehouses of objects" (501). A museum is an archive that maintains the cultural

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portmanteau word, several categories of knowledge may be drawn or collapsed together; further, in a lexical chain a category may be listed metonymically – and potentially endlessly – in a push to name the totality of things known" (53). The extreme example of this approach to the Wake is provided, predictably, by Jacques Derrida in his essay "Two Words for Joyce" where he takes two words from the work – "he war" (FW 258.12) – as the occasion for a fourteen page essay.

[21] Roland McHugh observes that, although "fokloire" can be read as folklore, it is similar to the Irish foclóir, meaning vocabulary, and "velktingeling" to the Danish velklingende, meaning euphonious (419), while "volupkabulary," in addition to its obvious suggestion of vocabulary, might also be intended to evoke Volapük, an artificial language devised in 1880 by the German priest Johann Schleyer, that, in its combination of English, German, Latin, French and Italian, might be considered, like the Wake, to be an encyclopedia of European language.

[22] Pliny, whose Historia Naturalis is frequently considered to be the first major encyclopedic work, is referred to several times in the Wake (FW 255.18-19, 281.4, 319.7-8, 354.26, 615.2), while James S. Atherton lists "a drowned doll, to face downwards" (FW 210.23-24) as an allusion to Pliny's great work (273). Gautier de Metz's thirteenth century Mappemonde, which Collison supposes to be probably "the first encyclopaedia in verse" (xiii), is suggested in the line "the mappamund has been changing pattern" (FW 253.5-6), and Chambers's Encyclopaedia also receives a mention: "'twas her hour for the chamber's ensallycopodium" (FW 334.2-3).

memory of a society, a collection that may display its artistic peaks, military past, or the historical foundations of a nation's myths and legends, but the word <u>museum</u> also means the seat of the muses, suggesting that the artefacts collected will be the muse which inspires Joyce's linguistic performance. This development, from library to museum, signals a shift in Joyce's encyclopedic project, from <u>Ulysses</u>'s ambition to culminate literary history to the wider aim of encompassing all human history. The "studious silence of the library" (<u>U</u> 30) has been exchanged for a panoramic view of "all . . . cyclewheeling history" (<u>FW</u> 186.1-2).

It is noticeable, in fact, that there are relatively few literary allusions in the museum section of the <u>Wake</u> (<u>FW</u> 8.9-10.23),[23] but characteristically, in a passage where literature seems irrelevant, there is still a reference to Joyce's own work: "Wounderworker" (<u>FW</u> 8.35), the "world's greatest remedy for rectal complaints" (<u>U</u> 850) which is advertised at the end of <u>Ulysses</u>. The museum, instead, presents a catalogue of the debris of military history, ranging from the conflict between the Greeks and the Persians at "marathon" (<u>FW</u> 9.33) in 490 BC to the battle at "Mons" (<u>FW</u> 8.29) in 1914, and the violence of this history is intimated by the word "Redismembers" (<u>FW</u> 8.6) which, combining remember with dismember, suggests that the act of remembering is intimately associated with pain, a conjunction similar to Stephen Dedalus's view of history as a traumatic "[n]ightmare from which you will never awake" (<u>U</u> 174). Stephen's conversation about history with Garrett Deasy in <u>Ulysses</u> dramatises two opposing constructs of the past – that of the conservative Deasy from Ulster, affiliated with the triumphant English, against the unhappily oppressed Irish, lapsed Catholic, Stephen – highlighting the tendency of victors to impose their construct of events, and similar concerns are included here. The passage

through the museum is punctuated with the word "Tip" (FW 8.8, 8.11, 8.15, 8.16,

8.21, 8.36, 9.30, 10.11, 10.21), drawing attention to the fact that the preservation and

display of relics depends upon economic and military power (the excuse for war is

"Poor the pay" [FW 9.32]: suggesting the French "for the country," but, more

straightforwardly, for the money), while also raising the suspicion that history might

be no more than a selection from a rubbish tip, the "pick of the wasterpaperbaskel"

(FW 194.13).

While there are dark intimations in Ulysses that the novel is an encyclopedia

prepared against the destruction of a city, it is interesting that Finnegans Wake's

earliest commentators similarly noted that "if our society should go smash tomorrow

(which, as Joyce implies, it may) one could find all the pieces, together with the

forces that broke them, in Finnegans Wake" (Campbell and Robinson 8), and,

appropriately, at the end of Joyce's first-draft of the museum section, there is the word

"mewseyruin" (A First-Draft Version of Finnegans Wake 52): a coinage that suggests

that the end of the muses will take place in Joyce's writing, at the same time as it links

the museum with the possibility of destruction, a hint of "the end of time" (FW

493.8).

Since Joyce's death, an industry of critical writing has emerged around his

work, the breadth of which (ranging from the literature of sainthood to the Egyptian

Book of the Dead)[24] might be viewed as sufficient evidence of Joyce's encyclopedic

range, and a significant portion of this criticism has been concerned with detailing his

literary legacy. While there have been numerous individual articles devoted to

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[23] Lavonne M. Mueller, in her article "A Wind-Schlemihl in the Museyroom," has suggested a series of parallels with Cervantes's Don Quixote in this passage, but her reading is not based around any explicit literary allusions, but rather around the presence of hats.
[24] See R. J. Schork's Joyce and Hagiography and Mark Troy's Mummeries of Resurrection.

Joyce's influence upon American fiction,[25] of particular relevance to this study are

two book-length studies: Robert Martin Adams's AfterJoyce: Studies in Fiction After

Ulysses, and Craig Hansen Werner's Paradoxical Resolutions: American Fiction since

James Joyce.[26]

Adams begins his study of post-Joycean fiction by defining what he sees as

the unique characteristics of the Joycean achievement: the large-scale use of mythic

parallels, looping structures, innovative use of language, and the conflation of

minimalist and encyclopedic techniques. Examining the use of these techniques by

Joyce's near contemporaries Virginia Woolf and William Faulkner, and later writers

like Barth and Pynchon, Adams, while sometimes appearing unimpressed by his

chosen subject,[27] goes on to detail numerous affinities. Although his argument is

sometimes flawed by contradictions,[28] Adams plots a course from Joyce through to

postmodernism that is concerned with highlighting discontinuities from Joyce's

encyclopedic achievement.

Having established in the early part of his book the careful construction of

circular structures in Joyce's work, Adams sets this against Samuel Beckett's work,

which he finds to be more interested in subverting structure, thwarting reader

expectations: "So far as Beckett concerns himself with pattern at all, it is with

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[25] Zack Bowen's article "Barth and Joyce," for example, details the influence of Joyce in terms of Barth's involvement in his own fictions, his ironic relation to his hometown, and the ambitiousness of his literary schemes.

[26] It is perhaps worth acknowledging that there are several other works concerned with Joyce's influence, such as David Hayman and Elliott Anderson's In the Wake of the Wake and Vivian Mercier's The New Novel. I have, however, excluded them from the following discussion because Hayman and Anderson are mainly concerned with introducing excerpts of Joyce influenced work, while Mercier, although he devotes some time to defining the specific technical influence of Joyce in terms of the use of arithmetic structure, treatment of time, and experimentation at the level of the individual word, confines his study to French novelists.

[27] There has been, he maintains, "an awful lot of dreary writing by the epigones" (198), and he argues that it is not possible to read Dos Passos's U.S.A. "without fatigue" (80), while even Woolf is criticised because certain episodes in Ulysses are deemed "beyond her reach" (74).

[28] Writing of Beckett, for example, Adams argues "Joyce is going somewhere, and uses his verbal decorations to enrich and forward his theme; Beckett is going nowhere, and uses his decoration to

incomplete pattern; his circles are never closed, his lists are always bogus, when he

plays games they cry aloud . . . their own meaninglessness" (93). Beckett has

commonly been seen as the obvious juncture between modernism and postmodernism

by critics as diverse as Ihab Hassan, Hugh Kenner, and Brian McHale,[29] perhaps

because of the ease with which he can be portrayed as a subverter of the imperatives

of modernism, and this is a tendency that Adams seems to exemplify, as the picture of

fiction after Ulysses we are offered seems to rely less upon Joycean inclusiveness

than upon Beckettian negation. Events in more recent novels "lead nowhere" (171)

according to Adams, and, although he praises Gravity's Rainbow, he observes that it

is "altogether chaotic" and "almost unreadable" (178). Despite the fact that six

carefully crafted novels making use of mythic parallels, looping narratives, innovative

language, stream of consciousness, and sometimes explicitly invoking Joyce, had

been published by Gaddis and DeLillo before Adams's study was released,

surprisingly, neither writer receives a single mention in his work.

Published five years later, Craig Hansen Werner's Paradoxical Resolutions, by

contrast, does include a section devoted to Gaddis's The Recognitions, but DeLillo is

still excluded from his study. Limiting his field of enquiry to American fiction,

Werner details Joyce's influence as facilitating the reconciliation of the historical

divide between romance and realism that many critics have documented as

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delay his arrival there" (97), while later in the book he announces that Finnegans Wake "is an
impedance-machine, intent on getting elaborately nowhere" (170).
[29] In Paracriticisms Hassan describes Joyce and Beckett as comprising "the extreme tensions of the
contemporary imagination" (xi), while McHale begins his study Postmodernist Fiction by discussing
Beckett's Trilogy as a way of understanding the shift from modernism to postmodernism. Beginning
his work by employing a "minimal structure of modernist perspectivism – its locus classicus is the
'Nausicaa' chapter of Joyce's Ulysses" (12), McHale argues that the Trilogy goes on to complicate this
by shifting the focus to epistemological issues which brings his work to the brink of postmodernism.
More generally, Kenner notes that "Beckett, . . . is a bridge to the so called Post-Modern" (Mechanic
Muse 15).

fundamental to American literature.[30] His discussion is fairly broad, covering a lot of novels in sometimes limited detail, and examines the dangers of being overwhelmed by the influence of Joyce, use of the epiphany, mythic parallels, and a "de- or re-construction of language" derived from Finnegans Wake (Werner 98).

In his section discussing The Recognitions, Werner characterises Gaddis as a late modernist, halfway between Joyce and Pynchon: a writer preoccupied with the priestly role of the artist and, although aware of the limitations of modernism, unable to wholly reject modernist ideals. Werner's discomfort with the category he has assigned to Gaddis, however, soon becomes apparent as he begins to contradict himself, and criticises The Recognitions for its failure to neatly fit his argument. Introducing his chapter devoted to Joyce, Gaddis and Pynchon, Werner confidently asserts how they reinforce his larger thesis: "All three immerse their characters in landscapes where realistic details demand attention; characters' mental states interact continually with the minute details of their environments" (168). Discussing The Recognitions in more detail, however, Werner notes, perhaps with some disappointment, Gaddis's "deemphasis of . . . realistic events" (173), and criticises Gaddis for his lack of "sympathy with . . . realistic circumstances" (174) and "failure to provide a realistic base" (175).

Werner does propose the category of encyclopedia to deal with some other writers, but this category seems ill defined and his selection of representative writers ill chosen. For Werner, Saul Bellow, Ralph Ellison, John Barth and Norman Mailer are the "[c]ontemporary writers of towering aspiration" who share Joyce's "impulse to tell the reader everything they know about the world – to write encyclopedias – and to encompass individual human personalities" (120). Though he acknowledges the

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[30] Most notably Richard Chase who, in his influential study The American Novel and its Tradition, argued that the US novel could be seen as distinct from the British because "the best works of

differences between these writers, Werner argues that they are united through a

"profound moral sense" (122), and divides their efforts to create encyclopedias into

two subsets: Bellow and Ellison, who realise the need to humanise the encyclopedia

and so suggest that "living in the world requires an encyclopedic sense of self" (124);

and Barth and Mailer who, by contrast, entertain "doubts concerning the ability of any

one mind to encompass the encyclopedia" (144) and so "blend autobiography, essay,

and whatever other forms seem appropriate with aspects of the traditional novel" to

create encyclopedic performances (122).

The reasoning behind Werner's decision to discuss Bellow, Mailer and Ellison

in terms of Ulysses's encyclopedic aspect instead of Gaddis and Pynchon, is difficult

to fathom. Equally, his rather curious definition of an encyclopedic narrative,

narrowed down to focus on individuality, seems arbitrary and idiosyncratic. While

Werner, unlike Adams, at least seems genuinely impressed by the majority of post-

Joycean fiction, his determination to reduce each novel to its negotiation between

romance and realism tends to distort his data, and both writers tend to downplay the

tradition of contemporary encyclopedic narratives that this thesis seeks to document

in detailing later reverberations of Joyce's influence.

"[I]nfluence," Gaddis cautioned in response to an enquiry about his relation to

Pynchon, is a "perilous word" (qtd. in Moore, "Parallel, Not Series" 22), and while

the delicate balance between originality and plagiarism is a subject in all the novels

considered here, the subject is a sensitive one: it was, after all, the allegation of

unacknowledged influence that prompted one of Pynchon's rare public statements.[31]

American fiction have to be called . . . romances rather than novels" (13-14).

[31] In response to a letter to the New York Times Book Review Pynchon wrote: "In a recent letter to the editor, Romain Gary asserts that I took the name 'Genghis Cohen' from a novel of his to use in a novel of mine, The Crying of Lot 49. Mr. Gary is totally in error. I took the name Genghis Cohen from the

Inevitably, however, the suggestion of literary influence, and the use of terms like

precursor, necessitates reference to Harold Bloom's studies of influence. His theory,

first sketched out in his study Yeats, and then elaborated in more detail in the series of

books beginning with The Anxiety of Influence, is less concerned with source study

and the transmission of images between poets, than with the psychodynamics of

agonistic poetic succession. For Bloom, a poem comes into being as a reading of an

earlier poem, a reading that is necessarily anxious because Bloom conceives of a

poet's relation to his precursor as an oedipal struggle for canonical survival. In

Bloom's scheme, a young poet's career as a poet begins when he discovers great

poetry external to himself and, unable to accept his lack of priority, begins a career-

long wrestle with his powerful precursors. This struggle figuratively cripples and

distorts him, but, Bloom argues, if he emerges from this struggle "however crippled

and blinded, he will be among the strong poets" (Anxiety 14). The various stages of

this agonistic relation are worked out through six esoterically named revisionary

ratios, and the whole process is broadly analogous to Freud's "family romance."

Numerous critics have subsequently applied Bloom's system to a wide variety

of historical works, providing both straightforward Bloomian interpretations[32] and

more subversive revisionary readings.[33] His theories have, however, been less

name of Genghis Khan (1162-1227), the well-known Mongol warrior and statesman. If Mr. Gary
really believes himself to be the only writer at present able to arrive at a play on words this trivial, that
is another problem entirely, perhaps more psychiatric than literary, and I certainly hope he works it
out" (Reply 24, 26).

[32] Daniel Mark Fogel's study, Covert Relations, offers an apposite example here as he adopts Bloom's
model in order to examine the artistic development of Joyce and Woolf. Similarly, Perry Meisel, in his
study The Myth of the Modern, examines modernism as "a defensive response to the increasingly
intolerable burdens of coming late in a tradition" (2) and notes the compatibility of Bloom's approach
with his own.

[33] Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar, for example, in The Madwoman in the Attic employ Bloom's
system not to perpetuate a model that they note "will continue to seem, offensively sexist to some
feminist critics" (47), but as a way of identifying and defining "the patriarchal psychosexual context in
which so much Western literature was authored" and as a way of "distinguish[ing] the anxieties and
achievements of female writers from those of male writers" (48).

frequently applied to discussions of contemporary literature,[34] and while it may seem that this study proposes a Bloomian reading of the twentieth century with Gaddis playing Wordsworth to Joyce's Milton, the great ancestor and the revisionist leading to the dependent heirs, the map of reading I outline is less concerned with Bloom's attribution of guilty appropriations for specific historical reasons. Since it has been more than thirty years since Bloom first formulated his theory, the self-consciousness with which a writer regards his tradition has changed dramatically. Partly due to the notoriety of Bloom's scheme, and partly due to the attention currently being directed towards the composition of the canon, the modern writer's awareness of his tradition has increased greatly, and where contemporary writers like John Barth, Ronald Sukenick and Donald Barthelme show their knowledge of Bloom's model, it seems in fact to have encouraged them to draw away from Bloom, and sometimes freely admit influences.[35] While it may be argued that these distinctions are themselves manifestations of anxiety, the resulting "deliberate misinterpretation[s]" (Bloom, Anxiety 43) of these writers would surely be of a vastly different order to that of the dead writers covered by Bloom in his study.

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[34] Patricia Tobin's John Barth and the Anxiety of Continuance is a notable exception. Tobin argues that Barth is a strong writer whose canonical struggle, over his career, has been with himself: "reinventing himself with each new work of art, as new ephebe to his own precursor," (9). Studying these revisions through ten Barth novels, Tobin argues that "Barth's creative revision of his previous work . . . follow precisely the sequence of revisionary ratios predicated for the strong poet by Bloom in A Map of Misreading" (10).

[35] John Barth, discussing the question of his affinities with Walt Whitman, refers to Bloom, but claims "I didn't invent, nor was I invented" by Whitman, and in place of literary parricide, offers a "nephewlike wave of the hand" (Friday Book 157); Sukenick, while praising Bloom for writing "probably the best book on [Wallace] Stevens" (In Form 231), argues that "Bloom is most useful as a critic if one doesn't take him seriously" (233); while Donald Barthelme revealed where he differed from Bloom, noting that it is "amazing the way previous work can animate new work, amazing and reassuring. . . . This is not the anxiety but the pleasure of influence" (Not-Knowing 276).

Since Virginia Woolf highlighted the limited opportunities available to women writers in <u>A Room of One's Own</u>, one of the most important strands in twentieth-century literary criticism has been the revaluation of their historically suppressed achievements. Even the relatively recent construction of postmodernism has been critiqued, with Patricia Waugh noting in 1989 that "glancing through almost any of the major theoretical postmodernist statements, one is forcibly struck by the total absence of reference either to women writers or, indeed, to issues of gender" (4). Similarly, the politics of canon formation have recently come under increased scrutiny from multiculturalists, seeking to draw attention to its predominantly white composition. I am aware that the tradition I focus on here is made up entirely of white, male novelists, and although there have been countless learned and artistically sophisticated novels published in the recent years by writers from marginalised groups like Sherman Alexie, A. M. Homes, and Toni Morrison, these novels have been largely uninfluenced by the work of William Gaddis, the focus of this study. Franco Moretti, in his examination of encyclopedic fictions, suggests historical reasons why few European women writers choose to write epics like <u>Ulysses</u> or <u>Moby-Dick</u>,[36] but it seems more likely in this case that it is simply coincidental that the writers who have been most responsive to Gaddis are white and male, than that the genre is gender or race specific, as female writers like Gertrude Stein, who described her compositional technique as "the using everything" ("Composition as Explanation" 499), have written novels of encyclopedic scope, as have writers from outside the white Anglo-American tradition like Gabriel García Márquez and Carlos Fuentes.

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[36] Moretti argues that the "original interweaving of epic and war did indeed relegate female figures to a marginal role, which has persisted to our own day. Joyce's Penelope is fortunate enough to have a tremendous monologue – but she is restricted to the book's last chapter. It is because of this symbolic imbalance, I think, that European women writers have always preferred novels to epic story telling" (14n8). The novelist Joanna Scott, by contrast, has recently sought, in an essay evaluating the differences between male and female writers, to undermine the pejorative opposition between the male

While it is difficult, then, to find either female novelists or writers of colour who are central to the argument put forward here, the choice of just four writers, from what I claim is a wider movement, is, perhaps inevitably, open to the suggestion that my selection criteria are arbitrary. Contemporary novels by writers like John Barth, Joseph McElroy, and William T. Vollmann might each be considered encyclopedic, while the general influence of Joyce and the modernists is, of course, everywhere. More specifically, there are a number of works, by writers like Robert Coover, Ralph Ellison, and William Gass that, in different circumstances, would ideally have been included.

Robert Coover would have been an appropriate inclusion here as his fiction has clearly been moulded by his awareness of the passing of modernism: he notes, for example, in Pricksongs and Descants that he is "standing at the end of one age and on the threshold of another" (78). However, while it has been his short fiction that has received the most critical attention, Coover has also worked on a more encyclopedic scale, most notably in The Public Burning. Discussing the novel as practising an "art of excess," Tom LeClair has noted Coover's use of non-literary knowledge from fields like politics, and anthropology in The Public Burning,[37] but it is perhaps worth noting that the novel demonstrates an encyclopedic range of literary reference too. Craig Hansen Werner has detected references to Hawthorne, Poe, Whitman, Emerson, Twain, and Faulkner (Werner 86), while the novel also refers to The Waste Land

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novel of "Big Ideas" and the more compact female study of relationships, arguing that "a great novel distinguishes itself not with its subject matter but with its imaginative treatment of its subject" (4).

[37] LeClair discusses the influence of Emile Durkheim and Clifford Geertz on Coover, and argues that the novel is modelled on the "three-ring circus" (Art of Excess 114).

(Public Burning 326), quotes "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" (400), and seems

to allude to Ulysses.[38]

I have not included Coover, however, because it seems that The Public

Burning will not be the work which is likely to offer the encyclopedic climax to

Coover's career, but rather Lucky Pierre. A long work, which he has been working

on at least as far back as the early seventies, when he was said to be "very excited

about" it ("Interview" 78), Lucky Pierre will presumably, like Gass's The Tunnel,

represent the culmination of his fictional achievement, but to date only minor excerpts

of this long-awaited work have been forthcoming.[39]

Similarly, Ralph Ellison's long-awaited second novel, Juneteenth had seemed

likely to be suitable for inclusion as an ambitious and wide-ranging masterwork. Just

as, in his first novel, the invisible man frames his search for identity in Joycean

terms,[40] Juneteenth is explicit about its modernist heritage, quoting T. S. Eliot and

W.B. Yeats,[41] and having been in preparation from 1951 until Ellison's death in 1994

the work is notable for the scale of Ellison's ambition. Planned as a vast late-

modernist epic, the novel was to be an encyclopedic survey of black experience in the

twentieth century, and was apparently to include a minimum of three plot-lines and

perhaps more than a dozen narrators. In its current published state, however, the

novel has been radically reduced from its rumoured thousand pages to a more modest

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[38] Uncle Sam's rebuke late in The Public Burning, "you ain't the only pebble on the beach!" (484) may be intended to echo Bloom's melancholy reflection in "Sirens": "Think you're the only pebble on the beach?" (U 339).

[39] Such as "The Titles Sequence from The Adventures of Lucky Pierre," published in the electronic journal Postmodern Culture.

[40] Trying to "save [himself] from disintegration" (Invisible Man 286), Ellison's narrator remembers a literature class from college: "Stephen's problem, like ours, was not actually one of creating the uncreated conscience of his race, but of creating the uncreated features of his face"(ibid.).

[41] The novel's epigraph is from Eliot's "Little Gidding," while, later in the novel, a character quotes Yeats's "The Second Coming" (61).

348 pages, covering one narrative strand, and given the current scholastic dispute

about Ellison's intentions,[42] it seems prudent to discount it from consideration.

The most obvious omission from this study, however, is almost certainly

William Gass's sprawling epic The Tunnel. Having taken some thirty years to

complete, The Tunnel is "the Big Book," (The Tunnel 4) of Gass's career, and given

that he greatly admires Gaddis's work,[43] reads books "about the brain" ("William H.

Gass" 39),[44] and sees his work as transitional between modernism and

postmodernism,[45] he would appear to be an ideal subject for this thesis.

Equally, The Tunnel deserves lengthy consideration as it is clearly one of the

most innovative, and perhaps one of the most significant, fictional works of the last

fifty years, but has suffered a disappointingly uneven critical reception. Despite the

fact that Gass acknowledges that The Tunnel is his "crucial work," and that all his

earlier fiction represented only "exercises and preparations" ("William H. Gass" 42),

his critical reputation still hinges almost wholly on his short fiction and essays.

Ironically, however, while the argument of his most famous collection of essays,

Fiction and the Figures of Life, centred on the importance of examining works of art

in terms of the composition of their language, rather than naively treating novelistic

characters as if they were real, nearly all the reviews of The Tunnel concentrated on

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[42] Notably, Gregory Feeley's high profile critique of John F. Callahan's editing of the novel, "Invisible Hand."

[43] Outwith writing the introduction to the reprint of The Recognitions, Gass has made countless positive references to Gaddis, describing his work as a "monumental effort" ("Interview with William Gass" 169), and was apparently a major influence in Gaddis receiving the National Book Award for JR.

[44] The Tunnel makes reference to the different processing capabilities of the brain's hemispheres on several occasions (42, 148, 341).

[45] Gass, noting that he has "never been clear about the nature of postmodernism in literature," situates his work between the two literary movements as "late or decayed modern" ("Interview with William H. Gass" 14).

delineating the character of William Kohler, the narrator and "human-racist" (Gass, The Tunnel 362), and speculated on his relation to Gass himself.[46]

In spite of these reasons, and although I sometimes make reference to Gass and his work in discussing other novels, I have not included a chapter devoted to The Tunnel because, being "a domestic epic . . . that took place entirely in the mind" (The Tunnel 32) of one character, The Tunnel does not allow the varied perspectives that seem an indispensable component of the encyclopedic novel. Being confined to one mind reduces the encyclopedic scope of a work, limiting it to individual abilities and local prejudices, and consequently, because Kohler experiences discomfort with "the puzzling certainties of geometry" (138), the novel has little to say about science.

However, while The Tunnel might not strictly qualify as an encyclopedic narrative in the terms I have outlined, the novel is still, as its narrator notes, "a kind of encyclopedia" (157). A sprawling monologue, filled with puns, countless allusions, endlessly proliferating verbal echoes,[47] and an indistinct chronology,[48] the novel does however assert, through this disorder, that "chaos is an order" (452), and an order begins to take shape if The Tunnel is considered as an encyclopedia of the arts. Painting is present in the novel's composition as one of the "characters," Mad Meg, takes his name from a painting by Peter Bruegel the Elder; Heide Ziegler, discussing The Tunnel with Gass, has observed that music is built into the novel's structure, as the "book has twelve sections relating to Arnold Schoenberg's chromatic scale" (12); and literature permeates the work through the web of quotations and allusions Gass weaves into his text. While these quotes and allusions are impressively eclectic –

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[46] Louis Menand typified this urge, noting that "readers will naturally look for a way to distinguish Gass himself from the petty, self-absorbed, and deeply unpleasant narrator he has created. . . . They will find this extremely difficult to do" (8).

[47] For example, the opening phrase "LIFE IN A CHAIR" (3) echoes through the novel with occasional variations (5, 6, 9, 12, 32, 38, 41, 75, 85, 95, 245, 285).

ranging from François Rabelais (70) to Melville (442) – it is notable the frequency

with which they return to modernist texts. With references to Proustian "made-up

memory" (17), Ulysses (448), Finnegans Wake (561), Ezra Pound (428), D. H.

Lawrence (290), Franz Kafka (636), Gertrude Stein's The Making of Americans (71),

T. S. Eliot (300), quotations from the diary of Virginia Woolf (11), and countless

references to Rainer Maria Rilke, the novel's catalogue of modernism is so thorough

that, as a quasi-encyclopedia encompassing the arts, it remains a background text in

the other discussions.

Even without the addition of these authors, however, Gaddis, DeLillo, Powers,

and Wallace offer a certain unity, partly because of the variety of subjects they

illuminate, but, more significantly, for the chronological progression they encompass

that suggests that the encyclopedic narrative is not merely the phenomenon of one

generation as some critics have suggested. This chronological progression is offered

by their dates of birth – Gaddis born in the twenties, DeLillo in the thirties, Powers in

the fifties, and Wallace in the sixties – by the decade in which they published their

first novel – the fifties for Gaddis, the seventies for DeLillo, and the eighties for

Powers and Wallace – but, additionally, with the birth of Gaddis in 1922, and

Powers's most recent novel being published in 2000, these four authors offer a frame

of reference that runs from the publication of Ulysses, through the continual reports of

the death of the novel, to the end of the twentieth century.

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[48] There are a few hints given that allow the reader to chart the passage of time, such as the refrain
"another day" (33, 156, 404, 632, 651) or observations like "Tuesdays are terrible" (198).

CHAPTER ONE

"A PERFECTLY ORDERED CHAOS": WILLIAM GADDIS'S THE RECOGNITIONS

"One senses," observed Robert Coover of his experience judging largely conservative novels for the 1983 PEN/ Faulkner award, "an aura of diminished hopes" ("On Reading 300 American Novels" 37). Of the 300 novels Coover had to read most were either genre fictions retelling "well-known formulaic tales" (38), or the homogenized products of creative writing schools "soon to be pulped and forgotten" (1), and in an article for the New York Times Book Review reflecting on the event, Coover expressed his disappointment with the "pervasive lack of formal ambition" in these novels, along with the impossibility of finding "any ideas in most of them more current than Darwinism" (37). Coover's dissatisfaction with the novels produced in one particular year would tessellate comfortably with the views of most critics surveying the wider field of post-World War II fiction, as a perceived crisis in the future of the novel has been a consistent undercurrent in most literary criticism published in the last fifty years: contemporary fiction has been described as "a literature without qualities," as a "decline of the new," as the "end of intelligent writing," the idea of a postmodern breakthrough has been called "mythical," the advent of hypertext has led to apocalyptic cries of the "End of Books," and metaphors of the "literature of exhaustion" and the "death of the novel" are continually cited.[1]

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[1] The descriptions are from, respectively, Warner Berthoff's A Literature Without Qualities, Irving Howe's Decline of the New, Richard Kostelanetz's The End of Intelligent Writing, "The Myth of the Postmodern Breakthrough" is the title of the first chapter of Gerald Graff's Literature Against Itself, "The End of Books" is the title of Coover's essay introducing hypertext, "The Literature of Exhaustion" is the title of John Barth's famous 1967 essay which, despite his constant denials ("[i]t has been . . . frequently misread as one more Death of the Novel or Swan-Song of literature piece," Barth explains in The Friday Book, "[i]t isn't" [64]), has been continually interpreted in negative terms, and the "Death of the Novel" is the title story from a collection of Ronald Sukenick's short stories, a title whose apocalyptic tone he has recently re-emphasised: "I wasn't merely punning when I titled my

Even Harold Bloom's mapping of literary influence, which stresses the continuity of

aesthetic strength, argues for its decline in contemporary literature. Outlining his

theory in 1973, with regard to poetic history, Bloom wrote: "That this quest [to

achieve canonical greatness] encompasses necessarily the diminishment of poetry

seems to me an inevitable realization, one that accurate literary history must sustain"

(Anxiety 10). We are living now, according to Bloom, in the apocalyptically titled

"Chaotic Age" (The Western Canon 548) where the problems of literary

overpopulation and a diminished reading public are at their height, sending embattled

readers back to the established classics for sustenance.

Although contemporary American literature has, as summarised earlier, been

relatively exonerated from this critique, it has not been immune to the atmosphere of

literary pessimism which has been heightened by the pronouncements of influential

novelists and critics. The writer Philip Roth, for example, gives an account of

contemporary American life as an overstimulating media-poisoned environment

rather than a rich source of novelistic material. Written in 1960, his essay "Writing

American Fiction" is a melancholy document detailing the withdrawal of America's

leading contemporary novelists – in his estimation J. D. Salinger, Bernard Malamud,

and Saul Bellow – from the depiction of American society. Arguing that the demands

of portraying the surreal and labyrinthine contemporary world overload the picaresque

realist novel in which these writers work, Roth despairingly notes:

> the American writer in the middle of the twentieth century has his hands
>
> full in trying to understand, describe, and then make credible much of
>
> American reality. It stupefies, it sickens, it infuriates, and finally it is

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second book of fiction The Death of the Novel and Other Stories," Sukenick explained, "I've always
been trying to get away from the damned form" ("Not-Fiction" 3).

even a kind of embarrassment to one's own meager imagination. The

actuality is continually outdoing our talents. (120)

While Roth laments the diminished ability of the writer to encompass contemporary

life, the structuralist critic Roland Barthes, although adopting a striking different tone,

offers a similarly ominous report on the fate of the writer in his 1968 essay "The

Death of the Author." Beginning with a reading of a Balzac story, Barthes critiques

the Western notion of the author-genius as "the epitome and culmination of capitalist

ideology" (143) and posits instead a scriptor who, like Bloom's belated writer, creates

a text from an immense dictionary of previous writings. While Bloom proposes an

enshrinement of the works of the great writers, like an Eliotic order of timeless

monuments, Barthes, by contrast, sees every text as a pluralistic world where a

potential infinity of meaning is generated. Exploding the image, cherished by the

romantics and modernists, of the artist-hero creating original work from nothing,

Barthes, attempting the "scribicide" (FW 14.21) prophesied in Finnegans Wake,

argues that:

> a text is not a line of words releasing a single "theological" meaning (the
>
> "message" of the Author-God) but a multi-dimensional space in which a
>
> variety of writings, none of them original, blend and clash. The text is a
>
> tissue of quotations drawn from the innumerable centres of culture . . .
>
> the writer can only imitate a gesture that is always anterior, never
>
> original. His only power is to mix writings. (146)

There may be many social and cultural reasons for the apocalyptic tone of these

statements – the impact of televisual culture, fin de siécle pessimism, or the changing

status of English as a discipline within the university that Alvin Kernan argues has

seen literary criticism turn on "literature and deconstruct . . . its basic principles" (3) –

but one literary reason may be the intimidating prospect of following the explosion of

innovative fiction that dominated the century's early decades. As Christopher Butler

has argued, "who would not be daunted by the past heroic age of modernism? In

literature alone, there were Joyce, Eliot, Pound, Rilke, Yeats, Kafka, Mann, Proust,

Valéry, Gide, Conrad, Lawrence, Woolf and Faulkner" (After the Wake 8). The

verbal inventiveness, the richness of the rendering of consciousness, and the allusive

range variously displayed in novels like Ulysses, To the Lighthouse, In Search of Lost

Time, and Absalom, Absalom! was a conscious attempt to reinvigorate the novel, to

write, as Joyce said of Ulysses, in styles "all apparently unknown or undiscovered"

(Selected Letters 284). Virginia Woolf claimed that, in doing so, the modernists

provided an important antidote to the sense of "incompleteness and dissatisfaction"

("Mr Bennett and Mrs Brown" 77) that she had found in the novels of the preceding

generation, and Woolf sensed that, along with her contemporaries, she was "trembling

on the verge of one of the great ages of English literature" (87). This intuition has

proved to be accurate, as modernism has become the twentieth century's official

"high" culture, the standard against which subsequent artistic developments have been

measured. As early as 1959, Harold Rosenberg noted this institutionalisation of the

modernist impulse, arguing that the once iconoclastic "appetite for a new look is now

a professional requirement, . . . The famous 'modern break with tradition' has lasted

long enough to have produced its own tradition" (9), while more recently the Norton

Anthology, Postmodern American Fiction, has called modernism the "'official,'

canonical form of art" (xvi). In the face of this widespread canonisation of the

achievements of modernism, postmodernism, as John Barth observed, has frequently

been styled as "something anticlimactic, feebly following a very hard act to follow" (<u>Friday Book</u> 196).[2]

Whilst the borders between artistic movements tend to shade into each other, making it almost impossible to date definitively where modernism ends or postmodernism starts, the perception of postmodernism as an anticlimax by an ageing critical community, trained to respond to modernist texts, is easier to locate. By 1960, and becoming more widespread over the next fifteen or so years, influential critics of modernism like Harry Levin, Hugh Kenner, Irving Howe, and Robert Martin Adams began to express their reservations about the failure of contemporary fiction to match the modernist standard. Levin's essay "What was Modernism?" was important in setting the tone.

Although he described his early years as a critic as having been spent "immersed in Elizabethan drama" (<u>James Joyce</u> 13), Harry Levin had a heavy investment in modernism, having written an early critical study introducing Joyce's work to an academic audience, and been congratulated by Joyce himself for his review of <u>Finnegans Wake</u>.[3] With such a background it is unsurprising that, in his essay surveying contemporary fiction, experimental modernism provided the model against which new works were measured, with the judgement being levelled that novelistic ambition had declined. "[N]ovelists writing in English," Levin argued,

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[2] It should, however, be noted that some critics are unconvinced that there is any significant difference between the two movements. Richard Kostelanetz, for example, argues that "'post-modernism' should be a development so clear-cut that historians of art and literature could draw a line between the two periods – a line at least as definite as that separating 'modernism' from pre-modernism. However, this dividing line is not drawn and in my judgement, cannot be" (<u>An ABC of Contemporary Reading</u> 217), while Frank Kermode, similarly, suggests that "there has been only one Modernist Revolution, and that . . . happened a long time ago. So far as I can see there has been little radical change in modernist thinking since then. More muddle, certainly, and almost certainly more jokes, but no revolution, and much less talent" (<u>Continuities</u> 24).

[3] On 21 February 1940, Joyce wrote to James Laughlin, "[m]any thanks for having sent me the book with Prof. Levin's article. Please convey to the writer my thanks also for his friendly and painstaking study of my book. In the opinion of all those to whom I have shown it his article . . . is the most striking one that has appeared so far" (<u>Letters</u> 468).

"perhaps discouraged by the monumental examples of [the modernist] masters, seem willing to settle for the traditional form, more or less well made" ("What was Modernism?" 272). For Levin, modernism was significant for its attempts to represent the workings of the brain, for the demands it made upon its readers, for the incorporation of non-literary arts, and for its attempts to register the impact of technological innovations in an effort to create "a conscience for a scientific age" (295), while fiction of the fifties was marked by a cowardly "limitation of scale and retrenchment of variety [that] cannot but seem anticlimactic when contrasted with the sweep and richness of previous attainments" (273). The veracity of Levin's argument was confirmed, in his eyes, by the fact that the most significant American writer of the time appeared to be Saul Bellow who, he argued, showed "little concern for the life of the mind" preferring instead "the monologue of a slob" (ibid.), and he concluded his essay by asserting that no "attempt to press beyond Ulysses" had been made, a comment that led him to speculate on the death of the novel (290).

The suggestion that postmodern writing had withdrawn from the high watermark of modernism, abandoning formal innovation, intellectual ambition, and science and psychology, was repeated in the following years, often with specific echoes of Levin's criticisms. Robert Martin Adams, for example, adopted Levin's title in his essay dismissing postmodernism as "a blank spot on our cultural map, to be filled with amorphous, nondescript creatures" who had repudiated "artistic distinction as a category" ("What was Modernism?" 30-31), while Irving Howe's collection of essays, Decline of the New, similarly attributed only superficial mimicry to the contemporary writers who "follow these masters" (32). Although Adams and Howe made fairly general claims, the critique Hugh Kenner presented was more specific, devoting the conclusion of his retrospective study of the American modernists, A

<u>Homemade World</u>, to analysing what he saw as the disappointing aftermath of modernism. The "world of American modernism terminates," Kenner argued, "not in climactic masterworks but in an 'age of transition' – we live in it – where the very question gets raised, what the written word may be good for" (xviii). Kenner singled out <u>Gravity's Rainbow</u> and <u>The Recognitions</u> as novels of this age of transition whose artistic claims could be dismissed according to the somewhat mystifying distinction that, unlike their precursors, Gaddis and Pynchon's novels rely on the arbitrary establishment of "an order achieved by the writer specifying for himself laws like a programmer's" (220). Despite their superficial similarities to the encyclopedic masterpieces of modernism that "solicit[ed] our note cards" (211), Kenner contended that no real continuity existed:

> the big book full of Piranesi corridors now insists on its own illusoriness, and fades.
>
> And with it goes the sense of life it fostered: the dialogue exactly heard, honed, polished; the absolute scientific typicality that stemmed from Flaubert's notebooks where he wrote down what people <u>always</u> said, and that since got arranged according to Ford's conviction that since people never listen to other people, a conversation in a novel should be a fugue of purposeful cross-purposes. (212)

For Kenner, William Faulkner may be "the Last Novelist" (ibid.). After him, "cries about the Death of Art . . . are familiar" (213).

"If I were a writer," a character in Don DeLillo's <u>The Names</u> reflects, "how I would enjoy being told the novel is dead. How liberating, to work in the margins, outside a central perception. You are the ghoul of literature" (<u>N</u> 77). Against the

pessimistic background detailed here, the writers included in this study – William

Gaddis, Don DeLillo, Richard Powers, and David Foster Wallace – have disputed the

apocalyptic claims of these critics,[4] and have continued to produce large scale novels

worthy of comparison with the encyclopedic classics of modernism, but in spite of

this, their work has remained outside the central perception of academia, with

relatively little critical attention directed towards situating them in a broader literary

context. This neglect is particularly surprising because the longer novels written by

these writers – Gaddis's The Recognitions, DeLillo's Underworld, Powers's The Gold

Bug Variations, and Wallace's Infinite Jest – offer a powerful response to the

criticisms of Roth, Levin, Adams, Howe, and Kenner outlined above. Even the

superficial characteristics of these works suggest an ambitious attempt to match the

scope of novels like Ulysses, rather than the conservative regression that Levin

perceives: all the novels are forbiddingly long (ranging from The Gold Bug Variations

639 pages up to Infinite Jest's 1079 dense pages), each had a lengthy gestation period

(the six years DeLillo spent writing Underworld being fairly typical, although

Gaddis's second novel, JR took twenty), and each makes innovative use of

typographical possibilities (from the use of footnotes and endpapers in Wallace and

DeLillo to the insertion of musical scores in Powers's text). More specifically, and

although I discuss it in more detail later, taking The Recognitions, which had been in

print for five years when Levin made his survey, as a test case, Gaddis's novel can

easily be seen to fulfil the criteria set by Levin and the other ageing critics. While

Roth found contemporary American society too chaotic, The Recognitions,

metafictionally describing its form as a "perfectly ordered chaos" (R 18), employs

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[4] Their refutations have often been quite specific, such as DeLillo's response to Roth's claim that American reality was too complex for fiction: "It's not true that modern life is too fantastic to be written about successfully. It's that the most successful work is so demanding" ("A Talk with Don DeLillo" 26).

multiple perspectives to offer a wide and diffuse view that is more capable of representing the complex and chaotic twists of contemporary life than the more traditional narratorial perspectives employed by the writers Roth celebrates; the novel's central story, replayed through a number of characters, of an artist's attempt to find a useful relationship between his belatedness, originality, and personality highlights the issues raised in Barthes's essay ("[w]hat is it they want from a man that they didn't get from his work?" Wyatt, the artist-hero of The Recognitions asks. "What's any artist, but the dregs of his work? The human shambles that follows it around" [R 95-96]); while the ambitious scale of the novel (shifting between three continents over a thirty-year period), the detailed knowledge of other arts, and the breadth of literary allusion (ranging from Voltaire to Dale Carnegie)[5] obviously aims at the kind of inclusiveness typified by Ulysses, The Waste Land, and The Cantos.

"[W]hat counts in the art of any nation, since the Renaissance, at any rate, is primarily the works of its individual masters," Harold Rosenberg wrote just four years after The Recognitions was published. "American art has differed in this respect: that the triumphs of individuals have been achieved against the prevailing style or apart from it, rather than within it or through it" (15). Despite the way it seems to answer these criticisms, like its encyclopedic precursor Moby-Dick, which was dismissed by contemporary reviewers as "a huge dose of hyperbolical slang, maudlin sentimentalism and tragic-comic bubble and squeak" (qtd. in F 39, emphasis mine),[6] Gaddis's novel has suffered the neglect Rosenberg describes. Perhaps because his novel made greater demands upon readers than the celebrated works of conservative realism of the 1950s, like Bellow's The Adventures of Augie March or Salinger's The

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[5] Voltaire is quoted on page 617, while Dale Carnegie's How to Win Friends and Influence People is the subject of a number of derogatory references (R 498-501, 504, 564, 667-68, 710, 859, 862).

Catcher in the Rye, or possibly because it did not easily conform to the literary

fashion of the day,[7] The Recognitions was poorly received, with reviewers managing

to get even the names of both the author and the novel wrong.[8] While it is perhaps

unsurprising that deadline-pressured reviewers should be unreceptive to a novel of the

complexity of The Recognitions, more disheartening, particularly considering how

relevant it seems to be to the issues raised by critics like Harry Levin, is the fact that

the novel was virtually ignored by academic readers for nearly thirty years. This

discrepancy can be explained by the fact that, while the novel seemed to neatly

answer the criticisms of older modernist critics, a number of younger critics were, at

the same time, beginning to canonise contemporary fiction as a movement that

favoured very different qualities.

Brian McHale, discussing Lyotard, has remarked that "each successive

cultural phase recuperates what has been excluded and 'left over' from the preceding

phase" (Constructing Postmodernism 56), and, in the late 1960's and 70's, literary

postmodernism began to be constructed as a movement characterised in terms of its

opposition to modernism: by its use of chance methods of composition,[9] as a

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[6] Gaddis's quotation is from William Harrison Ainsworth's review in New Monthly Magazine which he seems to have taken, along with a cluster of other poor reviews of classics in this section of A Frolic of His Own from the anthology Pushcart's Rotten Reviews.

[7] Richard Kostelanetz, in The End of Intelligent Writing, has analysed the dominance of literary cliques in determining US literary taste, arguing that "nearly all of the prominent critics and novelists of the fifties and sixties were either Southerners or Jews" (16), and noting how difficult it could be for work independent of these cliques to succeed. It is perhaps in terms of this – and Kostelanetz includes Gaddis amongst "important authors who were unaffiliated and thus neglected" (33) – that the poor reception of Gaddis's novel is explicable.

[8] These details of the error-ridden reviews The Recognitions received are taken from Jack Green's idiosyncratic study of the novel's reception, written without punctuation or capital letters, entitled Fire the Bastards! (11).

[9] An early attempt to define postmodern art in terms of chance methods of composition is provided by Leonard B. Meyer in his 1963 essay "The End of the Renaissance?" where he argues that "in literature the elements of syntactical organisation – plot, character and conventions of grammar – have been progressively weakened until almost only words remain" (175). Later critics, like Christopher Butler, in his After the Wake, and Richard Kostelanetz, in An ABC of Contemporary Writing, each include a section devoted to chance as a compositional technique.

development out of existentialism,[10] as a re-engagement with popular culture after the

elitism of modernism,[11] as a predominantly metafictional enterprise,[12] and through its

use of arbitrary constructions and fragmented forms.[13] This idea of postmodernism as

modernism's polar opposite has tended to be reinforced by the use of contrasting lists

by critics like David Lodge and Ihab Hassan to delineate each movement's typical

artistic strategies,[14] contrasting such characteristics as modernist "[d]ehumanization"

to postmodern "[a]nti-elitism," or "[p]rimitivism" to "existentialism" (Hassan,

Paracriticisms 55-56). In addition to these distinctions, however, there also seems to

be an opposition that remains implicit in their analyses, one that Bernstein made

explicit in his essay, "Making Modernist Masterpieces," discussed in the introduction:

that modernism is characterised by the attempt to be encyclopedic, while

postmodernism responds with a diminishment of scale. While the most discussed

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[10] This interpretation was fairly common in the early years of postmodernism's canonisation and can be seen in Ihab Hassan's 1961 study Radical Innocence which discusses writers "born after 1910" who "suggest a new tenor of American writing" (8) whose "awareness of the modern experience can be called supremely existential" (19); and in William V. Spanos's influential essay "The Detective and the Boundary" where Spanos, seeking to "differentiate between an early . . . modernism and a later 'postmodernism' (18), argues that "the contemporary writer is likely to find his tradition not in the 'anti-Aristotelian' line that goes back from the Concrete poets to Proust, Joyce, Mallarmé, Gautier, and Pater, but in the 'anti-Aristotelian' line that looks back from Beckett, Ionesco, and the Sartre of Nausea" (39).

[11] For example, Leslie Fiedler's influential essay "Cross the Border – Close that Gap" argues that "a closing of the gap between elite and mass culture is precisely the function of the novel now" (336).

[12] Of particular importance here is John Barth's frequently quoted essay "The Literature of Exhaustion" which is discussed in some detail later in this chapter.

[13] "Fragments are the only forms I trust," wrote Donald Barthelme (Unspeakable Practices 169), and of particular relevance here are those critics who take the statement as an important statement of his postmodern aesthetic. Barthelme, however, noting that even Joyce Carol Oates had taken it as such, argued that whatever he thought about "aesthetics would be a shade more complicated than that" (Not-Knowing 206), but since then critics such as Charles Molesworth still argue for a tempered version of this.

[14] Brian McHale notes this tendency in his 1987 study, Postmodernist Fiction, where he argues that catalogues "of postmodernist features are typically organized in terms of oppositions with features of modern poetics" (7). In addition to the examples listed above, Hassan has a long series of postmodernist notes that modify his seven modernist rubrics (urbanism, technologism, dehumanization, primitivism, eroticism, antinomianism, and experimentalism), while in The Modes of Modern Writing David Lodge (although less schematic than Hassan), having summarised the history of English literature as oscillating between metaphoric and metonymic modes of writing, with modernism showing a "general tendency . . . towards metaphoric structure and texture" (144), characterises postmodernism as opposed to this history. As "essentially a rule-breaking kind of art" (245) that seeks "to defy . . . the obligation to choose between these two principles" (228), Lodge instead lists the

works of modernism tend toward the encyclopedic – <u>Ulysses</u>, which Joyce described as "a kind of encyclopedia" (<u>Selected Letters</u> 271n), Pound's <u>Cantos</u>, which he planned as an "endless poem . . . all about everything" (<u>Pound/ Joyce</u> 102), or Proust's <u>In Search of Lost Time</u>, which he outlined, against the normal template of "a succinct plot with few characters," as an "experiment [that] had to be . . . long-lasting" ("<u>Swann</u> explained by Proust" 234) – the canonical postmodern works would appear from the most popular constructions to be mainly novellas and short stories: Borges's <u>Labyrinths</u>, Coover's <u>Pricksongs and Descants</u>, Barth's <u>Lost in the Funhouse</u>, Barthelme's short stories, Pynchon's <u>The Crying of Lot 49</u>, the short plays of Beckett, and Gass's <u>In the Heart of the Heart of the Country</u> are all frequently cited. That there is some degree of design about this contrast is summed up by Philip Stevick who, introducing a series of innovative short story writers (including Barth, Coover and Gass) in 1971 to a wider audience, argued that although "[n]o one doubts the place of fiction of novel length in [the] tradition of experiment. . . . Conrad, Proust, Mann, Gide, Joyce" (xi), in more recent years the locus of innovation is now located in shorter forms. Stevick claimed that the finest contemporary writers "have used short fiction so as to extend its formal possibilities with daring and imagination and to make artistic objects which the masters of the story in the early years of the century could scarcely recognize" (xiii).

While this roughly outlines some of the positions adopted in the early construction of literary postmodernism, in subsequent years a number of academic studies have strengthened, and elaborated upon, these foundations. Amongst the more significant of these studies, as an important landmark in the canonisation of postmodernism, is the Norton anthology <u>Postmodern American Fiction</u>, published in

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following six strategies as postmodernism's alternative strategies: contradiction, permutation, discontinuity, randomness, excess, and short circuit.

1998. Notable for its wide circulation and authority in the teaching world, the Norton

anthology represented a "first large scale attempt," as Sven Birkerts observed in his

review of the volume, "to draw some boundary markers around this most protean

cultural extension" (Readings 155), and it is instructive to see where these boundaries

have been drawn. Placing its emphasis on inclusivity, the anthology aims to be free

from overt editorial bias, carefully attempting to recognise the plurality of

postmodernism, including previously marginalised ethnic groups, less academically

respectable genres (science fiction, the graphic novel), and emerging electronic forms

(hypertext fictions). A bias of the volume does emerge, however, in the editors'

contention that "cultural and literary postmodernism begin[s] in the 1960s" (xi). Of

the anthology's fifty-eight entries only one is excerpted from a work published before

1960, and even then only by a year: Grace Paley's 1959 short story "The Pale Pink

Roast." The origins of postmodernism, then, are firmly placed in the work of writers

who first published in the sixties, and a significant stress is placed on the self-

referential aspects of their works. "During the 1960s," the editors argue, "the first

generation of authors to be called 'postmodernists' explicitly interrogated narrative

conventions, particularly those that created coherence or closure" (xii). In addition to

this foregrounding of metafictional works from the sixties, there is also, for

understandable editorial reasons, a notable bias, as in earlier constructions, towards

the easily excerptable short story and novella. Given the number of connections,

however, between many of the writers included in the anthology and teaching

institutions, it is perhaps worth considering whether an unhealthy influence has begun

to be spread by the sheer number and pedagogical convenience of such anthologies.

Unlikely as it may sound, there is perhaps now a situation where artistic decisions

have begun to be dictated by the ease with which a work might be anthologised. The

longest entry in the Norton anthology is devoted to John Barth's novella

"Dunyazadiad," and this could be seen as pragmatic justification of his decision to

abandon the long complicated novel in favour of shorter forms. Explaining his move,

from the 806 page <u>Sot-Weed Factor</u> and 710 page <u>Giles Goat-Boy</u> to the short-stories

of <u>Lost in the Funhouse</u>, Barth wrote:

> I teach stories as well as telling them, and like most writing coaches I
>
> find the short story most useful for seminar purposes. . . . But those
>
> model stories that I was teaching came from classroom anthologies in
>
> which (novels being hard to excerpt coherently, and excerpts being
>
> formally less useful than complete works), my own fiction was seldom
>
> included. . . . but I wanted to be in those anthologies. Not all of a
>
> writer's motives are pure. (<u>Further Fridays</u> 274)

While not wishing to dispute the artistic value of short works by many of the writers

included in the Norton anthology, I would like to argue that these constructions

generally, and the Norton volume's construction specifically, of postmodernism as a

phenomenon of the sixties best represented by self-reflexive short forms – a fairly

uncontroversial and popular construction[15] – are both ahistorical and incomplete in

their neglect of a number of artistically significant writers of long novels, such as

Gaddis who (although his 1955 novel might be considered prescient) does not receive

even a single mention in the anthology. This neglect is all the more surprising

considering that at least two of the writers the anthology cites as instigators of

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[15] Larry McCaffery's <u>Postmodern Fiction: A Bio-Bibliographical Guide</u>, for example, which is a work
of equivalent pedagogical importance, posits a similar construction (albeit more cautiously), noting that
"there is no sharp demarcation line between what constitutes modernism and postmodernism . . . [but]
it would be very convenient to list November 22, 1963 (the day John Kennedy died) as the day
postmodernism was officially ushered in – at least in the United States" (xii).

postmodernism –William Gass and Robert Coover – have acknowledged the importance of The Recognitions as an example.[16]

In fact, as Steven Moore has demonstrated in his 1989 study, William Gaddis, it has generally been writers rather than critics who have been more receptive to Gaddis's achievement. Moore lists as examples of Gaddis's importance to other novelists the fact that Gaddis provided the model for "Harold Sand in Jack Kerouac's The Subterraneans," and that:

> The Recognitions appears on the bookshelf of the protagonist of Richard
> Horn's innovative novel Encyclopedia (1969), and JR is named and
> amusingly imitated in John Sladek's science fiction novel Roderick
> (1980). More recently, Gaddis's friend Stanley Elkin included in his
> novel The Magic Kingdom an eight year old geriatric named Charles
> Mudd Gaddis . . . and an editor named Virginia Wrappers ("the guardian
> of standards") in Charles Simmons's jeu d'esprit The Belles Lettres
> Papers (1987) includes Gaddis on her list of the twenty-five best writers
> in America. (138-39)

Since Moore's study was published, Gaddis has been referred to in at least four more works of fiction: The Recognitions is included in Rick Moody's quasi-short story "Primary Sources" where Gaddis is described as "the writer I most admired, then and now" (The Ring of Brightest Angels 236), there are two references to Gaddis in John Updike's Bech at Bay (28, 71), Joseph Heller's last novel, Portrait of an Artist, as an

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[16] For William Gass, the publication of The Recognitions "proved . . . the genuine work of art could be accomplished; that the novel was not dead" ("Memories of Master Gaddis" 152), while Rick Moody reports that Coover said that writers in his generation had "two very different models of what the novel might be. One . . . was Saul Bellow's realistic if picaresque Adventures of Augie March; the other was William Gaddis's encyclopedic Recognitions" ("Surveyors of the Enlightenment" 106). It is interesting to note, in the light of this comment, that for the cover of the first edition of his third book, Pricksongs and Descants, Coover chose Hieronymus Bosch's The Seven Deadly Sins, a work whose authenticity is of great significance to The Recognitions.

Old Man, lists Gaddis amongst "successful novelists who felt like failures" (166),

while in Kurt Andersen's Turn of the Century Gaddis heads a list of "lesser-knowns"

that also includes DeLillo and David Foster Wallace (482). Beginning with this

chapter's discussion of The Recognitions alongside the constructions of

postmodernism outlined above, I attempt to demonstrate that this constellation of

references to Gaddis by other novelists is something more than mere coincidence, and

that it is, in fact, indicative of the significance of his achievement. Although

postmodernism has been constructed by critics with Gaddis as a somewhat mystifying

omission, his example has been recognised by other writers, and The Recognitions

can be seen to begin a strain of encyclopedic postmodern narrative that, drawing

heavily on modernism, forms an important current in contemporary American

literature.

Specific attention has been directed towards encyclopedic narratives and

contemporary fiction by Edward Mendelson who seeks to outline the defining

characteristics of the form in his 1976 essay "Gravity's Encyclopedia."[17] As

Mendelson constructs it, the encyclopedic narrative is a work that attempts to

encompass the full circle of knowledge, but which is also notable for the significant

relation it bears to the culture which produced it. Although such works normally

begin their history on the edges of a culture, Mendelson argues that they soon assume

centrality as a monument to a nation's newly-emerged consciousness of itself as a

unity. They are, then, generally singular achievements – Mendelson admits elsewhere

that "I know of only seven" ("Encyclopedic Narrative" 1267) – with major Western

cultures being individually represented by works like Dante's Commedia, Rabelais's

Gargantua and Pantagruel, Cervantes's Don Quixote, Goethe's Faust, Melville's

Moby-Dick, and Joyce's Ulysses. Chronologically set approximately twenty-five years before the date of the novel's publication, an encyclopedic narrative nevertheless attempts to assume a prophetic role, aiming to show "the modes of human action and perception that its culture will later discover to be its own central concerns" ("Gravity's Encyclopedia" 178), and Mendelson lists four key "characteristics peculiar to themselves" by which encyclopedic narratives can be recognised:

> 1: "All encyclopedic narratives include a full account of at least one technology or science."
>
> 2: "An encyclopedic narrative normally also includes an account of an art outside the realm of written fiction."
>
> 3: "Each encyclopedic narrative is an encyclopedia of literary styles, ranging from the most primitive and anonymous levels . . . to the most esoteric of high styles."
>
> 4: "All encyclopedias metastasize the monstrousness of their own scale by including giants or gigantism." (164)

Although America is already represented by Moby-Dick, Mendelson goes on to argue that Gravity's Rainbow is equally worthy of the status of encyclopedic narrative, noting that it is Pynchon's recognition of the existence "of a new international culture, created by the technologies of instant communication and the economy of world markets" (165) that elects the novel to membership of what Mendelson calls "the most important single genre in Western literature" (161).

Hilary Clark, in her study The Fictional Encyclopedia, has remarked of the limitations of Mendelson's definition that it excludes too much while elevating

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[17] Mendelson offers a more general formulation in his essay "Encyclopedic Narrative: From Dante to

seemingly arbitrary characteristics,[18] and this does seem to be a valid criticism. His insistence that an encyclopedic narrative must include giants rather than, say, a discussion of theology (a characteristic which would seem an essential component of Faust or Ulysses, but which would fit Gravity's Rainbow less well) seems somewhat forced, while his emphasis on the cultural singularity of the encyclopedic narrative is surely misleading. Attributing only one narrative per country unnecessarily deflects attention away from novels of encyclopedic range produced in a nation that already has a, possibly centuries old, encyclopedic narrative – for example, Mendelson's scheme would prohibit the possibility of a French novelist writing an encyclopedic narrative because of Rabelais's work nearly five hundred years ago. Equally, it establishes an enshrinement of individual national works that makes the attempt to write encyclopedic narratives seem like a nationalistic battle of the books, an implication that is particularly inappropriate considering the emphasis that novels like Ulysses put on the cosmopolitan over the parochial. In spite of this, and partly because of the frequency with which they are cited by other critics,[19] the key characteristics of encyclopedicism which Mendelson singles out, with the exception of the fourth, retain a certain usefulness, as mapping them onto other novels demonstrates that the encyclopedic narrative is not the isolated phenomenon Mendelson argues.

While Mendelson is prepared to fracture his scheme to include Gravity's Rainbow as a second American text, providing the summit of postmodernity, it is

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Pynchon."

[18] Clark writes: "Mendelson's view does not take into account the great number of works that we sense to be encyclopaedic in nature. When we say that a work we have just read is 'encyclopaedic,' we usually mean literally that the work encircles or includes all human knowledge. This is surely to say more than that the work fulfils certain fixed generic conditions – for example, that it contain a discussion of statecraft, feature giants and provide a history of languages, as Mendelson would have it" (v).

perhaps also worth noting that a similar case might be made for <u>The Recognitions</u>

which preceded <u>Gravity's Rainbow</u> by eighteen years, and may have had some

influence on Pynchon's work. While early critics of Pynchon like Tony Tanner noted

quite generally that <u>V</u> seemed "to owe quite a lot to Gaddis" (<u>City of Words</u> 393), in

subsequent studies the relationship has been quite extensively explored.[20] There are,

however, several other suggestive resonances between <u>The Recognitions</u> and

<u>Gravity's Rainbow</u> that have not been noted, such as the girl in Pynchon's novel with

her hair "rolled up, George Washington style, all the way around" (254), who seems

to recall the female Washington lookalike who appears four times in <u>The</u>

<u>Recognitions</u> (<u>R</u> 63, 77, 312, 938), or the way that <u>Gravity's Rainbow</u>'s metafictional

description of itself as a "randomness deliberately simulated . . . an elegant chaos"

(586) echoes the "perfectly ordered chaos" of <u>The Recognitions</u> (<u>R</u> 18). The most

tempting evidence of Pynchon's knowledge of Gaddis, however, is provided by a

series of letters written to a paper in North California during the period that Pynchon

was living there while researching and writing <u>Vineland</u>. The letters, signed Wanda

Tinasky, have been strongly rumoured to have been pseudonymously authored by

Pynchon,[21] showing a considerable overlap of writing style, range of reference, and

attitude, and a letter, dated 21 August 1985, teasingly states: "The novels of William

Gaddis and Thomas Pynchon were written by the same person" (48).

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[19] In addition to the references already cited from Hilary Clark's study, Franco Moretti, in his study <u>Modern Epic</u> (4), Tom LeClair, in <u>The Art of Excess</u> (68n9), and Trey Strecker, in his essay "Ecologies of Knowledge," all refer to Mendelson's categories.

[20] The fullest discussion of the relationship can be found in Steven Moore's essay "Parallel, Not Series," where Moore notes similarities in source materials, use of party scenes, and descriptions (both Rachel Owlglass in <u>V</u> and Esme in <u>The Recognitions</u> are compared to a succubus [<u>V</u> 30, <u>R</u> 199-200]), but concludes that "where two writers draw upon the same cultural materials, there is bound to be a certain amount of overlapping" (10). More recently Gregory Comnes, in his essay "The Law of the Excluded Muddle," has suggested the possibility that the writers are offering each other mutual recognition by comparing passages in <u>Vineland</u> and <u>Carpenter's Gothic</u> (40n17).

[21] Charles Hollander, who seems convinced by the parallels, discusses them in his essay "Where's Wanda? The Case of the Bag Lady and Thomas Pynchon."

Outwith questions of priority, however, The Recognitions can be seen to
satisfy Mendelson's criteria for encyclopedic narratives equally well through its
inclusion of detailed knowledge of alchemical science, lengthy accounts of painting,
and a catalogue of literary styles that includes interior monologues, innovative use of
dialogue, and the interpenetration of the text with letters and poems. Additionally,
Mendelson's requirement for encyclopedic narratives to occupy a special cultural
position is also satisfied by The Recognitions, as its intimations of the impact of
broadcasting culture might be considered to be prophetic. Although there were some
early warnings of the reductiveness of television from writers – the mechanical
newsreels in John Dos Passos's Joycean trilogy U. S. A., charting the increasingly
intrusive noise and power of the media,[22] might be seen as prescient, while T. S. Eliot
wrote to the Times in 1950 about the "anxiety and apprehension" that should be felt
about the "effect (mentally, morally, and physically)" of increased exposure to
television ("The Television Habit" 7) – The Recognitions is perhaps the first novel to
register the effect of the intrusion of disembodied voices of inane radio and TV
adverts and programs into people's lives. Although the novel parodies the easy
pseudo-intellectual rejection of television (R 602-3), it presents a critique of how
"[i]mages surround us" (R 152), while in the background the radio plays one record
"repeated, over and over again" (R 97). Eliot's concerns were not to be "allayed by
the provision of . . . superior and harmless programmes" ("The Television Habit" 7),
and in The Recognitions the claims of programmes to be superior, like the serialised
version of the Catholic Lives of the Saints, are undercut by the presence of pop

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[22] Dos Passos's newsreels, one of four subsections of his encyclopedic novel, chart the loss of meaning
in the endless rush and juxtaposition of media headlines ("TEDDY WIELDS BIG STICK / MOB
LYNCHES AFTER PRAYER" [80]) as the messages become increasingly inhuman ("admits he saw
floggings and even mutilations but no frightful outrages" [83]) or simply obscure ("BUGS DRIVE
OUT BIOLOGIST" [63]). It is interesting to note (as will be discussed in more detail in the next

presenters – "Lazarus the Laughing Leper" (R 365) – and the interruption of the show

by, ironically, contraceptive adverts. In addition to this examination of reductiveness,

more disturbing shows are also presented, as television directors mistakenly broadcast

the suicide of one of their colleagues (R 737-38). While Gaddis's last novel takes this

to a new level, with the text broken up by the inane interjections of the TV ("[w]hat

breed of African antelope is named after an American car?" [F 506]), the theme that

Gaddis explores in The Recognitions has become a central concern in US fiction since

the 1970's,[23] a fact underlined by the importance of TV to novels as different as

DeLillo's White Noise, which is played out against the background of TV's "narcotic

undertow and eerie diseased brainsucking power" (WN 16), and Curtis White's

Memories of My Father Watching TV. Curtis White is pertinent here as an example

of Gaddis's prescience because his novel, which is also interested in the move "from

the modern to the postmodern" (146), posits television as now being the universal

American experience and seeks to support this assertion by returning to the decade of

The Recognitions, the 1950s, to examine the roots of televisual culture.

While an argument, then, could be made for the status of The Recognitions as

the historical successor to other encyclopedic narratives like Don Quixote, Moby-

Dick, and Ulysses, I would like to argue that the novel differs from their historical

position (as Mendelson constructs it), in that it has not been an isolated phenomenon.

It has, instead, provided something like a template for a surprising number of

encyclopedic novels that were published in the 1970s, 80s, and 90s, similarly

combining innovative literary forms with diverse fields of knowledge, a fact which, in

chapter) that the impetus for DeLillo's Underworld resulted from such a juxtaposition in the New York Times, between a report of a nuclear explosion and a baseball game.

[23] The importance of the relationship of television to contemporary fiction is perhaps underlined by the fact that Philip E. Simmons feels compelled to write as the first sentence of his study of mass culture and the American novel: "In thinking about the position of the postmodern novel in the larger scene of

fairness, was perhaps not as apparent when Mendelson published his essay in the seventies. Novels that share many technical features with The Recognitions, as well as its modernist roots, while fulfilling the major criteria outlined by Mendelson, like Pynchon's Gravity's Rainbow and Mason & Dixon, Gaddis's JR and A Frolic of His Own, DeLillo's Ratner's Star and Underworld, Coover's The Public Burning, McElroy's Women and Men, Vollmann's You Bright and Risen Angels, Powers's The Gold Bug Variations, Gass's The Tunnel, Dara's The Lost Scrapbook, and Wallace's Infinite Jest, that were viewed by reviewers and critics as singular freaks, verbose and self-indulgent,[24] could, in the reading this thesis will suggest, be comprehended more usefully in the context of a coherent tradition following on from The Recognitions. Metafictionally aware of their blend of modernist scale and unity with postmodern themes and methods, the question of belatedness and the relationship between modernism and postmodernism is at least a partial subject in many of these books,[25] and the recognition of the number and artistic significance of these encyclopedic works might allow more accurate maps of postmodernism to be drawn, directing attention to a trend that has been somewhat neglected in the construction of postmodernism.

Although the construction of postmodernism proposed by the Norton anthology conforms to a model that seems to have widespread support, and

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American culture, one at some point confronts television, which seems at once everywhere and nowhere" (1).

[24] The charge of self-indulgence was a frequent refrain in reviews of these novels – JR was described as "overlong" (Halio 840), while Kenneth Haynes, complaining of the density of The Tunnel ("[l]imericks, self-conscious and self-regarding phrases, fantastic similes, graphic and typographic tricks" [cxxi]), argued that "every page of the book is intolerable . . . Besides the fact that such a monologue can be done . . . why do it?" (ibid.). The exception was Dara's novel which, more disappointingly, received only two reviews. The uses of excess by Pynchon, Gaddis, Coover, and McElroy is examined and defended by Tom LeClair in The Art of Excess.

[25] For example, the portrait of the artist in The Recognitions discussed below, or the mini-essay inserted into Infinite Jest that seeks to articulate the difference between the "classically modern hero" (IJ 140) and the "'post'-modern hero . . . suited to a more complex and corporate American era" (IJ 141).

Mendelson's argument for the infrequency of encyclopedic narratives has been

similarly well received, the encyclopedic strain running through contemporary

American fiction has not gone totally unnoticed by some critics. Two studies in

particular – "American Fictions: The Mega Novel" by Frederick Karl[26] and The Art

of Excess by Tom LeClair – have made impressive cases for the importance of recent

big books. Karl argues that what he calls the "Mega-Novel," a term that covers

novels such as The Recognitions, Gravity's Rainbow, The Tunnel, and McElroy's

Lookout Cartridge, is a "phenomenon peculiar to postwar American fiction" which

"may well be the dominant element in our fiction, neither a subgenre nor an offshoot"

(248). The Mega-Novel, which Karl argues develops "in the line from high

modernism" (254), is characterised by its length, the demands its oblique language

makes upon the reader, the tightness of its form despite the fragmentary chaos of its

materials, and its mixed reception – receiving generally poor reviews, but earning

respect from other creative writers in subsequent years.

LeClair, in his longer study, makes a similar argument for the importance of

the "massive novel" that is "profoundly informed, inventively crafted, and cunningly

rhetorical" (2) in contemporary fiction. With particular emphasis on the use of

systems theory[27] in seven novels – Gravity's Rainbow, Heller's Something Happened,

JR, The Public Burning, Women and Men, Barth's Letters, and Ursula LeGuin's

Always Coming Home – LeClair summarises these novels as "highly rhetorical" (22),

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[26] Gaddis is also awarded a prominent place in Karl's lengthy survey, American Fictions 1940/ 1980,
where The Recognitions is described as "perhaps the novel of the fifties" (179), but it is in this essay
that Karl specifically develops his theory of the Mega-Novel.

[27] LeClair summarises systems theory, a paradigm he also employed in his previous book In the Loop,
as growing out of biological theory, through the Austrian biologist Ludwig von Bertalanffy's attempts
to develop a way of apprehending the world that could cross disciplinary boundaries: "Aware of
accelerating scientific specialization and the distance between scientific discourse and ordinary
discourse, von Bertalanffy attempted to create a science of sciences, a discourse about wholes and
relations that would enable workers in both the natural and human sciences to see isomorphisms in
their work and to communicate with one another" (Art of Excess 9). Systems theory stresses

making use of a "comic mode, [as] a means of overcoming reader suspicion and resistance" (22), employing metafictional devices, and including a surrogate persona who is "a collector rather than a creator, an editor rather than an artist" (23), but the importance of these books for LeClair, specifically rests in their timeliness. In "our time of massive mastering systems," LeClair argues, "we need large-scaled visions" (31).

Despite the fact that both these works are well informed, and offer some valuable readings of contemporary novels, the argument in this thesis differs from them in two ways. Firstly, because LeClair's emphasis is so strongly tilted towards the use of science in these novels – discussing, for example, the foundations in ecological science that underlie Gravity's Rainbow's representation of "the whole chain of life" (Gravity's Rainbow 412), or Barth's use of biology in Letters – he cites Gravity's Rainbow as the chronological and artistic starting point of the tradition he draws. Pynchon, for LeClair, is "the master of the Art of Excess" (36), and with this in mind, he includes the more obviously entropic JR (which explicitly makes reference to Norbert Wiener [JR 403]) as a successor text to Gravity's Rainbow, rather than, as I argue, The Recognitions as a precursor to Pynchon's novel.

While Karl, by contrast, does posit The Recognitions as "one of the earliest and most innovative of the post-war Mega-Novels" (249), his concluding statement that "[n]ow the postwar energies are becoming exhausted, the question remains whether the Mega-Novel will also pass" (260) is open to revision. Through detailed readings of more recent novels by younger writers like Richard Powers, born in 1957, and David Foster Wallace, born in 1962, the second half of this thesis will attempt to demonstrate the continuing vitality of the Mega-Novel and the legacy of the writers

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ecosystemic interrelations which LeClair sees as analogous to both the structures and the mastery of disparate information in the novels he discusses.

Karl and LeClair celebrate: Thomas Pynchon, William Gass, Joseph McElroy, and

William Gaddis.

William Gaddis is an elusive novelist. Unlikely to be found in most surveys

of contemporary fiction,[28] Gaddis maintained a reclusive existence as a writer,

publishing only four books in forty years. All of his novels are currently out of print

in the UK, with Gaddis having been criticised by the editorial director of Penguin UK,

Simon Winder, for not having "establish[ed] himself here with the vigour necessary"

(Letter),[29] and, until recently, were only intermittently in print in America. The

novels themselves are elusive too – hard to pin down, densely written, eclectically

allusive – as the difficulties critics have had attempting to pigeonhole The

Recognitions illustrate. The novel has variously been seen as: "profoundly anti-

modern," "an American form of modernism," "quite postmodern," "a templet of

postmodernism," "a revealing precursor to 'postmodernism' before it knew what to

call itself," and "one of late modernism's sacred monsters."[30] Even the title of

Gaddis's first novel is elusive, open to several interpretations. The "recognitions"

refer to the epiphanies the novel is structured around, to Hawthorne's The Scarlet

Letter,[31] ironically to the cases of mistaken identity in the novel, and to Gaddis's

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[28] Critical studies such as Jerome Klinkowitz's Literary Disruptions, Christopher Butler's After the Wake, Brian McHale's Postmodernist Fiction, Alan Wilde's Horizons of Assent, whose spectrum of concerns would seem to necessitate reference to The Recognitions, do not manage even a single mention of his work.

[29] This is a depressing analysis considering that there are tentative signs that a more positive reception may be developing in other countries. Paul Neubauer, for example, in an essay entitled "The General Reception of Postmodern American Literature in Germany" reports that the translation of Carpenter's Gothic "received unanimously positive reviews" (46).

[30] The quotes are from, respectively, Joseph S. Salemi "To Soar in Atonement" (131), Frederick R. Karl American Fictions 1940/ 1980 (191), Gregory Comnes The Ethics of Indeterminacy (2), John Kuehl and Steven Moore In Recognition of William Gaddis (ix), Patrick O'Donnell's review of Johnston's Carnival of Repetition and Joseph Dewey's In a Dark Time (356), and Robert Towers "No Justice, Only the Law" (1).

[31] As Bernard Benstock notes, "The Recognition" is the title of the third chapter of The Scarlet Letter (185n4), and Hawthorne is an important influence upon Gaddis's analysis of the puritan "heritage of guilt" (R 23).

recognition of the literary tradition in which he works. This last recognition is in itself double: while there is a wealth of the literary allusion in the novel, the richness of this tradition also necessitates a recognition of the author's belatedness, a recognition of, as Harold Bloom notes, "the embarrassments of a tradition grown too wealthy to need anything more" (Anxiety 21).

These anxieties are dramatised in the novel in a number of ways, but most clearly through the character of Otto (whose palindromatic name, as Brian Stonehill has noted, "reflects his talent for mirroring" other people's work in his own [118]) and Faulkner's The Sound and the Fury. At a vapid cocktail party early in the book a character asks: "The Sound and the Fury. Faulkner's novel, haven't you ever read it?" "[W]ithout an instant's hesitation," Otto responds: "Of course I've read it" (R 187). Three hundred pages later, during another party scene, the painter Max Schling is discussing Otto's play with him:

> –Somebody, I can't think, who was it, Max appeared sympathetically thoughtful, –said they thought you'd lifted parts of The Sound and the Fury.
>
> –The what?
>
> –Faulkner's novel, The Sound and the Fury, that you'd plagiarized . . .
>
> –I've never even read it, I've never read The Sound and the Fury damn it, so how the hell . . . (R 463)

This exchange is relevant for a number of reasons. Firstly, it highlights the detailed care of Gaddis's composition, where apparently insignificant details recur significantly hundreds of pages later. For the reader who, to fully appreciate the book, must retain such apparently minor details for long periods, this obviously presents the kind of difficulties that Levin, Howe, and Kenner denied that the post-

war novel offered. Secondly, it introduces two key themes of Gaddis's book: belatedness and modernism.

While Harry Levin could only find timid retrenchment from modernism's masterworks in fiction of the fifties, The Recognitions displays several characteristic modernist features. Like the work of Yeats, T. S. Eliot, Joyce, and Lawrence, The Recognitions is heavily influenced by Frazer's The Golden Bough[32] with much of the novel's action maintaining an ironic relation to the Clementine Recognitions, a religious tract of the third century; the key moments in the novel, as in Joyce, Proust, and Woolf's novels, are epiphanies; like To the Lighthouse, Ulysses, and Sons and Lovers, Gaddis's novel is concerned with the obsessive relationship of a son to a dead mother; Freud and Nietzsche, who might be called the key philosophers of modernism, are both mentioned in the novel;[33] and the novel is concerned with a series of questions which might be termed broadly modernist: "what is a hero?" (R 32); why human "senses . . . [fall] into disuse under the abuses of cities" (R 16); and, centrally, what is the status of art in the modern world?

More specifically, the novel bears an intriguing relation to Joyce's fiction, a fact that is particularly significant given that, to Adams and Levin, Joyce represents the highest point of the modern novel. Like A Portrait of the Artist, The Recognitions could be broadly described as a Kunstlerroman, charting the development of a sensitive, but sickly, young boy brought up amidst conflict between a puritanical aunt

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[32] The use of The Golden Bough by modernist writers is detailed in Sir James Frazer and the Literary Imagination, edited by Robert Fraser, and in John Vickery's The Literary Impact of The Golden Bough, which includes a reference to Gaddis (155n30). It is perhaps worth noting that although Gaddis is fairly open about the influence of Frazer's work – the connection to the Clementine Recognitions is revealed by a character in the book (R 373), and a lengthy section from volume nine is quoted (R 49) – Robert Martin Adams argues in his study of post-Joycean fiction that "the Ulysses-procedure of maintaining a running parallel with a single, specific myth (or, alternatively, of maintaining an overlay of myth above fable or vice versa) has continued as a working technique of fiction, but not generally with Joyce's effects and never on Joyce's scale" (AfterJoyce 40-41).

[33] Freud is mentioned on page 477, while references to Nietzsche occur on pages 69, 149, 500, 530, 546, and 599.

and a more liberal father, who abandons a religious calling to become an artist. Both

Gaddis and Joyce rely heavily on dialogue which they introduce with the tirez

favoured by Flaubert rather than those "signs of suspicion . . . invented gommas" (FW

374.9-10). The two artist-heroes, Wyatt and Stephen, spend time in Paris, are seen as

potential surrogate sons by disappointed fathers, and Wyatt even assumes the name

Stephen at the end of the book. The historical figure Jim the Penman, whom Joyce

based his forger Shem the Penman on, is described in Gaddis's novel as "a real artist"

(R 489), the Viconian basis which Joyce used in Finnegans Wake is discussed by

Wyatt's grandfather,[34] while Wyatt himself outlines an Odyssean-solution that seems

very reminiscent of Bloom's equanimity: "not slaying the suitors, no never, but to

supersede where they failed, lie down where they left" (R 898).

Suggestive as these correspondences are, it is important to note that Gaddis

himself denied having read Ulysses and warned about the dangers of "finding

'sources'" ("The Art of Fiction" 63) that were nothing more than coincidences.[35] By

the end of Gaddis's career, however, similarities between the two bodies of work are

still notable, and are frequently accompanied by teasingly inserted references to

Ulysses. Joyce is named twice in A Frolic of His Own,[36] and Bloom's money saving

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[34] The Town Carpenter explains: "men went around with their heads up, alone and unafraid they went, like heroes should, you know. . . . And then that damn thunder started, and scared them all so much, looking up to see nothing, that they took the image of terror right out of their own minds and hung them up there in the empty space above their empty heads" (R 417).

[35] Bernard Benstock's article "On William Gaddis," outlines in convincing detail most of the similarities noted above, but in 1972 Gaddis responded: "I recall a most ingenious piece in a Wisconsin quarterly some years ago in which The Recognitions' debt to Ulysses was established in such minute detail I was doubtful of my own firm recollection of never having read Ulysses" (qtd. in Moore A Reader's Guide 321). A fuller account is offered in Moore and Kuehl's In Recognition of William Gaddis: "Gaddis read Joyce's Dubliners and Molly Bloom's monologue at the end of Ulysses while at college (but never read the rest of the novel), and later, parts of Stuart Gilbert's edition of Joyce's Letters" (19).

[36] Joyce is mentioned, firstly, in connection with Pound's September 1915 letter to Joyce (see note 75, later in this chapter, for the full quote) discussing "that dreary play Exiles" (F 97), and secondly, in the description "undoing his overalls and, in the phrase that has caught currency from its high Joycean literary pedigree 'making a man of him'" (F 410), which probably (given Gaddis's interest in Joyce's letters) refers to Joyce's letter, dated 7 August 1909: "O Nora! Nora! Nora! I am speaking now to the

scheme (U 893) is alluded to in a knowing aside: "intruding the abrupt image of milking her into the morning tea, where might he have read that?" (F 256).

Whatever the status of these denials, or the inevitable reference to Harold Bloom's The Anxiety of Influence they would seem to encourage, there are at least two possible explanations for the similarities that many critics have remarked upon.[37] Firstly, the pervasive influence Joyce has had generally on twentieth-century writers is indisputable, and T. S. Eliot, Pound, and Faulkner – writers whom Gaddis has certainly read – would all seem to have shaped their aesthetic partly through an absorption of Joyce's work.[38] Given this ubiquity, it is perhaps fairer, rather than entering the tenuous realms of simply attributing influence,[39] to note that the influence of Joyce's innovations is so diffuse that Gaddis almost certainly benefited from them, albeit at a second remove. Secondly, the persistence of the comparison between Joyce and Gaddis can perhaps be seen to lie in questions of genre, rather than in terms of indebtedness. Where critics have yearned to see Gaddis's novel, as Time argued, as "a try at redoing Joyce" (qtd. in Green 42), the connection that many have intuited between the two can perhaps be more usefully explained in the similarity of their

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girl I loved, who had red-brown hair and sauntered over to me and took me so easily into her arms and made me a man" (Selected Letters 159).

[37] The precedent for comparing Gaddis's work with Joyce's was set in the reviews of The Recognitions with, as Jack Green notes, reviews in the New Yorker, New York Times, Atlantic Monthly, and Time all making the connection (41).

[38] Peter W. Koenig, who had access to Gaddis's notes for The Recognitions, reported that: "Gaddis at one time planned to parody every line of T. S. Eliot's Four Quartets somewhere in The Recognitions" (67), and his debt to Eliot has been explored more extensively in Miriam Fuchs's essay "'Il Miglior Fabbro': Gaddis's Debt to T. S. Eliot," which is included in the volume edited by Moore and Kuehl. Pound is mentioned in JR (JR 692), while, as noted, one of his letters is quoted in A Frolic of His Own (F 97), and Faulkner's The Sound and the Fury, as mentioned earlier, is important in The Recognitions. The influence of Joyce upon these writers has been discussed by Christopher Butler in "Joyce, Modernism, and Post-Modernism" and by Robert Martin Adams in AfterJoyce.

[39] In the wake of Gaddis's refutation of Benstock's essay, critics of Gaddis have displayed considerable anxiety at the prospect of discussing the influence of Joyce, either ignoring the numerous and persuasive similarities, or going to strange and desperate lengths to prove Gaddis's culpability, as John Johnston does in his study Carnival of Repetition: "Gaddis as much as admitted a debt to Joyce (at least for his method) when he revealed to Peter Koenig that he had begun The Recognitions as a parody of Goethe's Faust, but that it began to change after he read Frazer's The Golden Bough, the

ambition: like Joyce in his late works, Gaddis is attempting to write an encyclopedic narrative in The Recognitions. Viewed in this way, the difficulties listed above that critics have had classifying Gaddis's novel can be considered to result from the fact that although the novel enacts a postmodern investigation, it does so in an encyclopedic form that critics have canonised, perhaps mistakenly, as quintessentially modernist.

"[A]n encyclopedia," a reviewer of The Recognitions complained, "is not a work of art" (qtd. in Green 54), but while Gaddis's novel satisfies the criteria that numerous critics have set for a narrative to be encyclopedic, it also seems, like the Wake, to be unashamedly self-conscious about its encyclopedic orientation. The novel draws attention to its kinship with other big books by its references to encyclopedic works by Dante (R 116, 156, 323, 677, 881, 910, 953), Eliot (R 42), Melville (R 574), and Proust (R 180), while the novel is explicitly grounded in Goethe's Faust.[40] In addition to this Steven Moore's Reader's Guide to the novel has shown how Gaddis drew upon the fourteenth edition of the Encyclopaedia Britannica for details about painting, alchemy, mummification, religion, and Hungarian literature, but, perhaps more interesting, is the fact that Gaddis's use of the encyclopedia in writing the novel is dramatised within the novel itself. Wyatt's father has this edition, and he consults "volume eighteen . . . PLANTS to RAYM" (R 420) in part two, chapter three of the novel. Later in that chapter it becomes apparent that Wyatt's grandfather has borrowed the book, as he receives a note "Return vol. 18" (R 442), and given that Moore notes Gaddis use of various details in this chapter from volume eighteen (Reader's Guide 199), the difficulty Wyatt's father has in getting

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latter having led him to discover that beneath the Faust story the Clementine Recognitions lay as a subtext" (216n4).

hold of his encyclopedia when there is "a great deal of work to be done" (R 442),

reads like an ironic comment on Gaddis's own struggle to keep track of the disparate

resources needed to write his novel.

While The Recognitions, then, seems to share a genre and an interest in

encyclopedias with Ulysses and Finnegans Wake, questions of periodisation are not

entirely irrelevant. If the novel is considered in its historical context – published

sixteen years after Finnegans Wake and twelve years before John Barth's influential

construction of postmodernism in "The Literature of Exhaustion" – the novel can be

seen to occupy a pivotal position between modernism and postmodernism, continuing

the artistic concerns of Joyce's work and pre-empting Barth's formulation. This

transitional position can perhaps be most clearly illuminated by examining the artistic

argument embedded in Gaddis's novel alongside Finnegans Wake, particularly if

Joyce's work is considered in the context of the attempted encyclopedic narratives of

his contemporaries.

Although for critics like Ihab Hassan and Brian McHale Finnegans Wake

represents the beginning of postmodernism,[41] for John Barth it is rather an extreme

example of modernism. "Works like Finnegans Wake," Barth argues, "strike some of

us as being, after all, the monumental last cry of a certain variety of modernism and

not terribly consequential, though impressive in themselves" ("John Barth" 3). One

of the reasons that Barth, who has been strongly influenced by Joyce,[42] posits

Finnegans Wake as a climax to one movement, rather than as a site of continuities to

the next, is perhaps because in its esoteric polyglot style, Joyce's work seems to

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[40] Gaddis's notes for the novel explain that the work was to be "a parody on the FAUST story, except the artist taking the place of the learned doctor" (qtd. in Koenig 30), and from the opening epigraph on, there are numerous references to Goethe embedded in the novel (see, for example, R 135, 498, 661).
[41] See Hassan's Paracriticisms (43), and McHale's Postmodernist Fiction (233-35).
[42] In an autobiographical essay, Barth has described how he began his career as a writer "imitating Joyce" (Friday Book 10).

represent the climax of one of modernism's most important obsessions: its persistent emphasis on innovation.

Although it is important to recognise that modernism is partly characterised by an interest in primitive modes of expression – fauvism, primitivism – one of its most important defining features is surely a corresponding insistence on its own modernity. Virginia Woolf characterised the modernist writer as "sharply cut off from [their] predecessors" ("How it Strikes a Contemporary" 235), and a strong sense of historical disjunction recurs in the statements of important modernist writers: Woolf, again, famously remarked that "in or about December 1910 Human character changed," ("Mr Bennett and Mrs Brown" 70), D. H. Lawrence wrote in 1915 that "[i]t is finished and ended," now "there must be a resurrection" (Selected Letters 90), while Gertrude Stein, apologising for being "not very good at dates," more generally announced that "the whole nineteenth century . . . no longer sufficed . . . we are the twentieth century literature" (Lectures 29, 48-49). The urge of these writers to advertise their modernity, and effect their liberation from the past, to "[m]ake it new" as Pound commanded (Cantos 98.5), is almost impossible to ignore and modernist critics as influential as Frank Kermode and Richard Ellmann have both defined the movement in terms of this ambition.[43] The innovative encyclopedic narratives that modernists like Pound and Stein wrote are obviously involved in this project, and, as a hugely complex and demanding work that promises to be written in "the new style"

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[43] Frank Kermode argues that "all modernist art and literature between the 'Nineties and now is associated" with a "proclamation of a break with the immediate past, a stimulating sense of crisis, of an historical license for the New" (Continuities 2), while Richard Ellmann and Charles Feidelson preface their anthology, The Modern Tradition, with the observation that "Modernism strongly implies some sort of historical discontinuity, . . . a liberation from inherited patterns" (vi). That Joyce's work partakes in this spiral of innovation is noted by Robert Sage, in his essay "Before Ulysses – and After," where he writes: "Joyce's development . . . has been and continues to be a firm mounting line. Each of his books has represented an enormous advance in expression and technique" (149). It seems likely that Joyce endorsed this summary of his career, as the essay was originally included in the collection Our Exagmination Round his Factification for Incamination of Work in Progress, and Richard Ellmann

(FW 575.24), Finnegans Wake perhaps represents, as Barth suggests, the most

extreme example of this urge. Although Joyce apparently intended readers to devote

the rest of their lives to deciphering his text, his unconventional approach, and the

problems which are perhaps inherent in the ideal, proved too much even for some of

his staunchest supporters.[44] Even today, the extreme innovation of the work presents

the greatest difficulties, as Barth notes: "Dostoyevsky would have trouble

understanding Finnegans Wake, but then we who come after Joyce do, too" ("John

Barth" 3).

While Barth is doubtless right to highlight the problems that the aesthetic of

originality presents for the reader, to appreciate the difficulties that such works pose

for the writer, and indirectly to recognise what Joyce achieved in writing Ulysses and

the Wake, it is helpful to go back to the man who Michel Foucault credits with

instigating modern literature[45] through his encyclopedic ambition: the proto-modernist

Gustave Flaubert. Flaubert is often casually cited as a forerunner of modernism for

his ambition to write "a book about nothing" (Letters 1830-1857 154), but he might

also be thought of as prescient for his corresponding interest in encyclopedic books

about everything. For Flaubert the greatest achievements of literature were

encyclopedic – Homer and Rabelais, he wrote, were "encyclopedias of their time"[46] –

and the erudition he injected into his unfinished last work, Bouvard and Pécuchet,

reveal his efforts to match this: Flaubert claimed to have read "[m]ore than fifteen

reports that Joyce claimed he had stood behind "those twelve Marshalls more or less directing them
what lines of research to follow" (James Joyce 613).

[44] Joyce's brother, Stanislaus, for example, suspected Finnegans Wake to be the product of "the
beginning of the softening of the brain" and called it "the witless wandering of literature before its final
extinction" (qtd. in Letters of James Joyce: 103).

[45] Foucault writes that Flaubert's work "may appear as merely another new book to be shelved
alongside all the others, but it serves in actuality, to extend the space that existing books can occupy. It
recovers other books; it hides and displays them . . . In writing The Temptation, Flaubert produced the
first literary work whose exclusive domain is that of books: following Flaubert, Mallarmé is able to
write Le Livre and modern literature is activated – Joyce, Roussel, Kafka, Pound, Borges. The library
is on fire" (91-92).

hundred" books in working on the novel (<u>Letters 1857-1880</u> 263), which seems to have preoccupied him throughout his life, and each chapter includes a discourse on a different field of knowledge, ranging through agriculture, literature, medicine, religion and so on. The weight of data, however, introduced severe difficulties for the work's progress as a novel. Critics have complained that the "characters are treated mechanically, there is hardly any development, and the novel tends altogether to be too much of a demonstration" (Brombert 262), and the eventual direction of the work also seems questionable. Upon his death, Flaubert had all but completed the work's first volume, but the second was intended to detail the return of his two protagonists to their original work as copyists. It seems likely that what they would be copying would have been heavily based upon Flaubert's <u>Dictionary of Received Ideas</u>, a collection of clichés and meaningless statements. While the list includes a defence of encyclopedic projects – the entry for "<u>Encyclopédie</u>" mocks people who "laugh at it pityingly for being quaint and old-fashioned, or else thunder against it" (303) – even a sympathetic biographer has gone so far as to observe of this plan that it "is as well that death put an end to matters before a publisher had to refuse the volume" (Bart 609). While this is perhaps a bit extreme, the descent into an almost pure catalogue that Flaubert proposed would surely have been unworkable.

The difficulties that Flaubert faced encompassing his massive erudition within one work were, in some ways, paradigmatic of the struggles that later writers like Robert Musil, Gertrude Stein, and Ezra Pound would face. Although these writers were markedly different in their aims and artistic sensibilities, a recurring theme is the difficulty each faced with adequately completing their ambitious works, enclosing the disparate information and innovative techniques within a cohesive whole.

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[46] "Homère, Rableais, sont des encyclopédies de leur époque" (<u>Correspondance</u> 480, translation mine).

Gertrude Stein's <u>The Making of Americans</u>, for example, begins as an encyclopedic attempt to tell "a history of every one who ever can or is or was or will be living" (<u>Lectures</u> 143), an exhaustive catalogue of psychological profiles that would be presented through the innovative techniques she had developed: the use of a continuous present, and a re-orientation from phrase to paragraph that she saw as distinctive of the twentieth century. To do this Stein announced that she "had proceeded to enlarge [her] paragraphs so as to include everything" (159), and while the final work is more readable than Edmund Wilson suggested,[47] Stein was unable to entirely complete the work. Although her reasons for not going on with the work are typically confident – "I do not want to . . . go on with what was begun because after all I know I really do know that it can be done and if it can be done why do it" (157) – it is not difficult to see her dilemma as equivalent to Flaubert's.

Similarly, Pound's <u>Cantos</u> begin by promising "[g]reat bulk, huge mass, thesaurus" (5.1), and, like Joyce's use of the library in <u>Ulysses</u>, a bookish orientation is suggested for his epic, typified by the spin he puts on the end of Eliot's <u>The Waste Land</u>: "These fragments you have shelved" (8.1). Perhaps more than any other poem, Pound's work is obsessed with gathering information,[48] framing itself as a "sail after knowledge" (47.11):

things have ends (or scopes) and beginnings. To

know what precedes 先 and what follows 後

will assist yr/ comprehension of process (77.30-32)

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[47] In his influential study, <u>Axel's Castle</u>, Wilson wrote of <u>The Making of Americans</u> "I confess that I have not read this book all through, and I do not know whether it is possible to do so. 'The Making of Americans' runs to almost a thousand large pages of small closely-printed type" (239).

[48] Ronald Bush, for example, has noted that in 1919, while Pound was composing his epic, he expressed his admiration for the capacity of Wyndham Lewis's war paintings for "suggesting unlimited subject-matter" (qtd. in Bush 46).

Although Pound claimed that a reader struggling "[f]or facts" when faced with this accumulation of data could consult "the <u>Encyclopedia Brittan.</u>" for clarification (<u>Selected Letters</u> 210), he seemed to have to spend a lot of time defending the coherence of the work, a coherence that he promised would ultimately emerge. "I believe that when finished," he explained to Hubert Creekmore, "<u>all</u> foreign words in the <u>Cantos,</u> Gk., etc., will be underlinings, not necessary to the sense, in one way. I mean a complete sense will exist without them; . . . As to the <u>form</u> of <u>The Cantos</u>: All I can say or pray is: <u>wait</u> till it's there. I mean wait till I get 'em written and then if it don't show, I will start exegesis" (<u>Selected Letters</u> 322-23). In spite of these claims, his melancholy comments about his "Error of Chaos" (<u>The Cantos</u> 113.76) in the poem's final fragments are revealing and might be equally applicable to the projects of Flaubert and Stein:

> my errors and wrecks lie about me.
>
> And I am not a demigod,
>
> I cannot make it cohere. (116.27-29)

Pound's example is particularly instructive here as his career, progressing from an early classical influence, through Nietzschean aloofness,[49] to a final esoteric encyclopedic work might be thought to follow a similar path to Joyce's. While Joyce, however, enjoyed considerably more success than all these writers making his encyclopedic narrative cohere, and the "ideal reader suffering from an ideal insomnia" (<u>FW</u> 120.13-14) eventually emerged to help decipher his text, even Joyce apparently entertained doubts about the fruitfulness of the esoteric route he had pursued: "Why should I write anything else?" he complained to Maria Jolas, "[n]obody reads this book" (qtd. in Ellmann, <u>James Joyce</u> 730).

While the full extent of the pragmatic difficulties of creating works that make such high demands upon both the author and reader seem to have been recognised quite late by the modernists, the implicit elitism of such strategies has been critiqued in their wake. In recent studies by John Carey and Anthony Julius[50] an increasing distaste for the elitist political stances of not just the more openly fascist writers, like Pound and Wyndham Lewis, but also for more canonical writers like Woolf and Eliot has become apparent. Feminist criticism, in a similarly motivated move, has also begun to dispute the construction of the modernist literary canon as a series of great works created through the idiosyncrasies of isolated men of genius. Following Virginia Woolf's insight that "masterpieces are not single and solitary births; they are the outcome of many years of thinking in common, of thinking by the body of the people, so that the experience of the mass is behind the single voice" (A Room of One's Own 66), a more complex picture has emerged as studies from the seventies onwards by critics like Elaine Showalter[51] have appropriately sought to direct attention towards a wider panorama that features under-recognised works by women writers.

Although the later Joyce has perhaps been more exonerated than most from the re-evaluation that has critiqued the modernist project of innovative encyclopedia-making,[52] there are signs that in his last work he was beginning to move away from

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[49] "Fear . . . the stupidity of the populace" Pound exhorted in The Cantos (74.27), while Joyce, who moved away from this position, traces in his first novel the efforts of his young artist-hero to liberate himself from the "characterless" mass (P 182).

[50] John Carey's The Intellectuals and the Masses reads "modernist literature and art . . . as a hostile reaction to the unprecedentedly large reading public created by late nineteenth-century educational reforms" (vii), while Anthony Julius's T. S. Eliot, Anti-Semitism, and Literary Form contends that "Eliot made poetry out of anti-Semitism" (218).

[51] In A Literature of Their Own, Showalter, noting how women's writing is often perceived in terms of the isolated success of a few authors, attempts "to construct a more reliable map from which to explore the achievements of English women novelists" (vii).

[52] Carey, for example, writes of Ulysses, "[c]an we say, then, that in Ulysses mass man is redeemed? Is Joyce the one intellectual who atones for Nietzschean contempt of the mass, and raises mass man, or a representative of mass man, to the status of epic hero? To a degree, yes. One effect of Ulysses is to

the obsessive spiralling innovation of modernism. Although it is perhaps pointless to attempt to infer Joyce's subsequent artistic direction from the few disappointed comments he made regarding the reception of Finnegans Wake,[53] the shift that seems to take place across his work in his conception of the artist is instructive. While art is an important theme in all Joyce's fiction – from the failed artists of Dubliners, like Little Chandler and Gabriel Conroy, to the Wake's forger Shem the Penman, Joyce continually returns to draw, what he ironically calls, "endlessly inartistic portraits of himself" (FW 182.18-19) – his most sustained examination is perhaps his portrait of Stephen Dedalus.

At the start of On the Infinite Universe and Worlds, Giordano Bruno – who Stephen Dedalus refers to at the end of A Portrait of the Artist (P 271) – writes:

> If, O most illustrious Knight, I had driven a plough, pastured a herd, tended a garden, tailored a garment: none would regard me, few observe me, seldom a one reprove me; and I could easily satisfy all men. But since I would survey the field of Nature, care for the nourishment of the soul, foster the cultivation of talent, become expert as Daedalus concerning the ways of the intellect; lo, one doth threaten upon beholding me, another doth assail me at sight, another doth bite me upon reaching me, yet another who hath caught me would devour me; not one, nor few, they are many, indeed almost all. (229)

The parallel drawn with Daedalus by Bruno is revealing here, as it is not impossible that Joyce had this passage in mind when he planned his portrait of Stephen Dedalus,

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show that mass man matters" (The Intellectual and the Masses 20). Similarly, Bonnie Kime Scott observes that "Joyce probably has more positive female defenders than do Lawrence, Eliot, or Pound" (198).

[53] Ellmann reports that, in response to his brother's criticisms of the obscurity of Finnegans Wake, Joyce replied that "there would be a sequel, a reawakening" (James Joyce 603), and that, later, a depressed Joyce announced his intention to write "something very simple and very short" (731).

particularly given that the development traced in <u>A Portrait</u> similarly details the

difficulties involved in escaping "nationality, language, religion" (<u>P</u> 220), to "foster

the cultivation of talent." Through this cultivation, Stephen Dedalus might in many

ways be considered a template for the modernist artist who, finding that the traditional

ways – driving a plough, pasturing a herd – insufficient, seeks to become expert in

obscure arts. As with the modernists discussed earlier, a sense of historical

disjunction is intimately tied in with his aesthetics: like the artist-heroes in novels by

Lawrence, Woolf and Proust, Stephen's artistic stance is dependent upon effecting a

break with the past.[54] Deliberately setting himself against his most celebrated Irish

contemporary, W. B. Yeats, Stephen stresses the forward-thinking orientation of his

work against Yeats's dependence upon "the broken lights of Irish myth" (<u>P</u> 195):

> Michael Robartes remembers forgotten beauty and, when his arms wrap
>
> her round, he presses in his arms the loveliness which has long faded
>
> from the world. Not this. Not at all. I desire to press in my arms the
>
> loveliness which has not yet come into the world. (<u>P</u> 273)

Stephen, then, manifests the characteristic modernist obsession with originality, but

his sense of a break goes beyond historical liberation. A young Joyce had quoted

Bruno in an essay, arguing that "[n]o man, said the Nolan, can be a lover of the true or

the good unless he abhors the multitude" (<u>Critical Writings</u> 69), and while Yeats and

Synge travelled to Aran to "learn style from the peasants" (Ellmann, <u>Yeats</u> 151),

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[54] Different as these writers are, each created an artist-figure whose modernity was underlined by a move away from the previous generation: in <u>Sons and Lovers</u>, for example, Paul Morel must liberate himself from the hold of the past, symbolised by his dead mother, and realise that "[l]ife ahead looked dead . . . he would escape" (463); similarly, the painter Lily Briscoe, in <u>To the Lighthouse</u>, must discover the courage to break away from the perceptions of the Victorian generation which Mrs Ramsay embodies and assert that "this is what I see" (24); and, in one of his many asides on art and literature, Proust's narrator reflects that "each new original writer . . . advanced beyond the stage of his immediate predecessor" (3: 377).

Stephen expresses a typically elitist modernist anxiety to distance himself from "the hundredheaded rabble" (U 49).

"[R]eal books," the narrator of In Search of Lost Time reflects, "should be the offspring not of daylight and casual talk but of darkness" (6: 257), and as Joyce swaps the dedalian labyrinth for a "nightmaze" (FW 411.8), his "nightynovel" (FW 54.21) begins a move away from this elitist conception of the artist. Although critics have frequently seen the portrait of Shem, mainly elaborated in part one chapter seven of the Wake as offering simply "another Stephen Dedalus" (Tindall 277),[55] the contrast between them is, in many ways, more revealing.

As was sometimes his habit, Joyce endowed several autobiographical characteristics, upon Shem the Penman.[56] While Stephen Dedalus, however, is something of a parody of the young, single-minded and aloof Joyce, Shem, like Ulysses's everyman Leopold Bloom, represents the more mature and humane Joyce. Shem's first difference from the aloof modernist artist becomes apparent through his choice of food. Whilst in "the intellectual's conceptual vocabulary tinned food becomes a mass symbol because it offends . . . against the sacredness of individuality" (Carey, The Intellectuals and the Masses 22), Shem, like the derided typist in Eliot's The Waste Land "lays out food in tins" (223): "So low was he that he preferred Gibsen's teatime salmon tinned, as inexpensive as pleasing, to the plumpest roeheavy lax or the friskiest parr or smolt troutlet that ever was gaffed between Leixlip and Island Bridge" (FW 170.26-9).

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[55] Although less simplistic in her description, Adaline Glasheen similarly describes Shem as "a burlesque of Stephen Dedalus" (262). There are several notable similarities – both the louse-infested Stephen and Shem share a general "lowness" (FW 170.25), a dissatisfaction with Ireland (Shem "would far sooner muddle through the hash of lentils in Europe than meddle with Irrland's split little pea" [FW171.4-5]), and like the temperamental Stephen, Shem is prone to be in a "rank funk" (FW 176.25-26) – but, as I argue above, there are significant differences.

[56] Apart from the similarities of name, one of the clearest similarities is the attribution of the authorship of the "usylessly unreadable Blue Book of Eccles" (FW 179.26-27) to Shem.

On top of this offence against modernist breeding, Shem similarly lacks the "lightning of the intellect" (U 63) that distinguishes the modernist artist: "aware of no other shaggspick, other Shakhisbeard," Shem is not well read (FW 177.31-32). With this lack of learning, then, Shem is ill equipped to effect the historical break that modernism is predicated upon. The Wake's artist recognises, instead, that the "Past now pulls" (FW 594.26), and he turns from the originality that Stephen Dedalus prided himself upon to forgery. His quest, perhaps detailed with an ironic eye to Joyce's use of Shakespeare in Ulysses, is "Toborrow and toburrow and tobarrow" (FW 455.12-13). "All ears" (FW 169.15) to pick up "quashed quotatoes" and "borrowed plumes" (FW 183.22-32) to work with, Shem the "fraid born fraud" (FW 172.21), can only produce "very many piously forged palimpsests" with "his pelagiarist pen" (FW 182.2-3). Copying "all their various styles of signatures so as one day to utter an epical" forgery (FW 181.14-16), Shem is incapable of originality: a mix of low materials and artistic theft his work can be summed up as a "wholeborrow of rubbages" (FW 17.4-5). This point has not been lost on his antithetical brother Shaun, "the most purely human being that ever was called man" (FW 431.11). Shaun exposes Shem's work as "the last word in stolentelling" (FW 424.35): "Every dimmed letter in it is a copy" (FW 424.32).

Reflecting upon this shift in Joyce's conception of the artist, Richard Ellmann writes in his biography of Joyce: "By day we attempt originality; by night plagiarism is forced upon us" (James Joyce 716). "Forced" is an apt word in this context – the movement from innovation to imitation might be seen to represent Joyce's recognition of, not just the fundamental belatedness of the writer in the twentieth century, but also of the fairly unique problem of facing himself as his own precursor. Joyce was forced to ask himself a question that has faced the many writers who have

followed him: what kind of utterance is left after the encyclopedic Ulysses? It is

worth remembering that T. S. Eliot, according to Virginia Woolf, thought that Ulysses

"left Joyce himself with nothing to write another book on" (Diary of Virginia Woolf

203), and it is surely significant that the figure of the creatively-blocked writer recurs

with such frequency in technically adept, though very different, post-Joycean novels

such as Martin Amis's The Information, William Gass's The Tunnel, and, with an

explicitly Joycean twist, Joseph Heller's Portrait of an Artist, as an Old Man.

While the movement, then, is away from the iconoclastic elitism of high

modernism, towards a creation that is based on existing forms, it is important to note

that the shift remains at the level of subject matter, rather than technique: the multi-

lingual construction of Finnegans Wake itself is obviously not informed by this shift

in aesthetics. The Wake resists all but the most committed attempts to "rede . . . its

world" (FW 18.18-19), and as Clive Hart noted in 1962, more than twenty years after

its publication, "in spite of all the excellent exegetical work that has appeared in

recent years, the bulk of the long text of Finnegans Wake remains almost entirely

unexplicated" (15). Although, fifteen years later, David Hayman felt that the level of

understanding had risen sufficiently to allow him to introduce an anthology of writers

who "have assimilated aspects of the methods of the Wake, or of the Wake as

method" (4), for many writers the immediate difficulties and inherent elitism of such

esoteric strategies remained less appealing. As John Barth argues: "we really don't

need more Finnegans Wakes and Pisan Cantos, each with its staff of tenured

professors to explain it to us" (Friday Book 202).

As an alternative to the modernist project of continual esoteric innovation that

produces such texts, Barth outlines his own program in the paired essays "The

Literature of Exhaustion" and "The Literature of Replenishment: Postmodernist

Fiction." Barth's much disputed essays examine "the effective 'exhaustion' . . . of the aesthetic of high modernism" (Friday Book 206) and advocate a postmodernism that effects a synthesis between modernist and pre-modernist elements of literature. Barth sees the waning of the great modernists as affording an opportunity to develop a more democratic literature that might "rediscover validly the artifices of language and literature – such far-out notions as grammar, punctuation . . . even characterization! Even plot!" (68). He is, however, quick to stress that such a return is not to be coincident with a lapse into naïve "moral or artistic simplism" (203): a key feature of Barth's argument is the necessity of maintaining an awareness of "what one's predecessors have been up to" (68).

Through a reading of a Borges fiction, Barth offers an example of how this might be done. "Pierre Menard, Author of the Quixote," details the efforts of a turn-of-the-century French symbolist to, not simply transcribe or imitate, but to actually compose a few pages of Cervantes's Don Quixote. By producing a verbally identical work, Menard, according to Borges's narrator, achieves a text that is "almost infinitely richer" than that of Cervantes (Labyrinths 69). The ambiguities and layers of meaning that accrue from attributing the text to a twentieth-century writer, rather than a seventeenth-century former soldier, enriches "by means of a new technique, the halting and rudimentary art of reading" (71). For Barth, this story demonstrates how the twentieth century's perceived apocalypticism can be employed to create new work. By making the subject of the fiction the relation of a new work to a major work of new literature, Borges, without regressing to premodern innocence, escaped the major problem facing the belated writer: the question of originality and "the used-upness of certain [artistic] forms" (Friday Book 64). Borges, Barth argues, "writes a remarkable and original work of literature, the implicit theme of which is the

difficulty, perhaps the unnecessity [sic]of writing original works of literature. His

artistic victory, if you like, is that he confronts an intellectual dead end and employs it

against itself to accomplish new human work" (69-70).

Barth's theory, and its apparent emphasis on predominantly self-referential

works, generated much discussion, and was taken by many critics as embodying a

manifesto for postmodernism.[57] One of the more interesting aspects of the essays,

however, is the way that, like T. S. Eliot's critical essays "Tradition and the Individual

Talent" and "Ulysses, Order and Myth," they strategically construct a movement that

culminates in the writer's own work. Although Barth complained in 1964 that he

could not "speak earnestly of young writers who [weren't] getting critical attention"

because he was not getting any himself ("John Barth: An Interview" 4), in the decades

since, the situation has changed dramatically, and it is now rare to find a work on the

contemporary American novel that does not include at least an incidental mention

(and normally much more) of his work. Despite the disparity in their critical profiles,

however, the similarities between the issues discussed in Barth's essay and those

raised in The Recognitions are striking.[58]

Although it was published twelve years before "The Literature of Exhaustion,"

The Recognitions strongly prefigures the concerns Barth outlines. Both are concerned

with the way modernism raised the problem of originality to a new level, both are

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[57] As Kenner does at the end of A Homemade World where he uses Barth to sum up the limitation of scale he sees in contemporary literature by asking "[w]hy does the infinite possibility that stretched before Williams signify in the imagination of John Barth 'The Literature of Exhaustion'?" (219).

[58] Although, as discussed below, there is some affinity in their conception of the postmodern artist, it is difficult to ascertain how familiar Barth was with The Recognitions as he formulated his aesthetic theory. Commenting on the book in 1964, Barth is characteristically flippant: "I know that book only by sight. 950 pages: longer than The Sot-Weed Factor. Somebody asked me to review the new reprint of it, but I said I couldn't think of anything worth saying in literature that can't be said in 806 pages [the length of The Sot-Weed Factor]" ("John Barth: An Interview" 8). In his 1995 essay collection, however, Gaddis is mentioned at least twice (Further Fridays 72, 79) although he is mysteriously absent from the book's index.

interested in metafictionally drawing attention to the problems of the belated writer,[59] and both seem to favour a recognition of both pre-modern and modernist traditions. Although the two works share similar concerns, however, Gaddis's novel does not foreground its self-conscious aspects in the way that Barth's theory seems to demand, and so faces the same issues while avoiding the rather negative connotations that have (often unfairly) gathered round Barth's essay.[60] Although Gaddis, unlike Barth, is absent from many studies that leave a twenty-year gap between modernism and postmodernism, or take a diversion into existentialism, examining the portrait of the artist in The Recognitions links up the artistic arguments of Finnegans Wake and Barth, neatly linking canonised modernism with canonised postmodernism. In doing so, the novel also provides grounds to dispute Barth's view of Finnegans Wake as "not terribly consequential" ("John Barth" 3).

Like Joyce's work, Gaddis's fiction centres around portraits of the artist. The early sections of The Recognitions prepare the basic foundations for a traditional Kunstlerroman, and suggest the outlines of a fairly typical first novel: a youth, Wyatt Gwyon, whose sensitive nature seems poorly suited to the strictness and cruelty of his

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[59] Gaddis's novel features an embattled minor character called Willie who is writing a novel entitled "The Recognitions" (R 373) that is based around the Clementine Recognitions. Another character warns him that "salvation is hardly the practical study it was then" and that he must be "writing for a rather small audience" (R 372-73). The reception of the novel is also anticipated in the exchange between two characters at the end of the book: "they silenced, each bending forth, closer and closer, to fix the book the other was carrying with a look of myopic recognition.
 –You reading that? both asked at once, withdrawing in surprise.
 –No. I'm just reviewing it, said the taller one . . . all I need is the jacket blurb to write the review" (R 936).

[60] Possibly because of the rather negative sounding "exhaustion" in the title of his first essay, or perhaps because of the ease with which his essay can be wilfully misread, Barth has been frequently been an easy target for criticism. The worst example of this is to be found in Jerome Klinkowitz's thinly-argued study Literary Disruptions where, aside from somewhat mystifyingly asserting that there "is a generational gap . . . between Barth and [the Klinkowitz favoured] Barthelme" (175, there is, in fact, only a year between them), Klinkowitz reads Barth's essay as a "literary suicide note" (5) and, puzzlingly, accuses him of impotence. Seeking to dispel this conception, Barth has argued that "[i]f I believed my writing were no more than . . . formal fun-and-games . . . I'd take up some other line of work" (Friday Book 79). Equally, in his later essay, "The Literature of Replenishment," his emphasis more clearly moves away from just self-referentiality to embrace a more varied set of qualities, such as "straightforwardness and artifice, realism and magic and myth, political passion and nonpolitical artistry, characterization and caricature, humor and terror" (204).

religious upbringing, spends a lonely childhood geared towards a career in the church.

As Wyatt reaches maturity, however, he rejects this religious role in favour of

travelling to Bohemian Paris to pursue a career as a painter. At this point, though, the

reader's expectations are thwarted and the conventional pattern fails to emerge.

Wyatt, rather than create original work, achieves his greatest successes through his

"piously forged" (FW 182.2) paintings and, like Shem, devotes himself to forgery.

The reasons for this swerve from the conventional pattern of the Kunstlerroman are

multiple: the sense of guilt instilled in Wyatt by his puritanical aunt (Lucifer's sin, she

assures him as a boy, was to try "to become original" [R 34]); the corrupt reviewing

industry;[61] and, specifically, the ambivalent feelings of an artist following the

innovations of modernism.

Working from the same premise as Barth, that "there's no direction to act in

now" (R 143), the artistic action of the novel is played out against the backdrop of the

problematics of modernist experimentation and belatedness. The latecoming poet

Esme struggles with the fact that "the words which the tradition of her art offered her

were by now . . . coerced through the contexts of a million inanities" (R 299), the

musician Stanley almost enacts a textbook case of Bloomian guilty forgetting,

prefacing his comments with a defensive, "I don't read Voltaire of course . . . but

somewhere I came across some words of his" (R 617),[62] and, centrally, the book

examines Wyatt's struggle with the "fallacy of originality" (R 632).

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[61] In another example of the kind of oblique cross-reference that Levin, Kenner, Howe and Adams
imply is not to be found in contemporary fiction, the irony of the negative review that Wyatt's work
receives when he refuses to bribe a critic ("Archaïque, dur comme la pierre, dérivé sans cœur, sans
sympathie, sans vie, enfin un esprit de la mort sans l'espoir de la Résurrection" [R 74]), becomes
apparent when it is recycled, word for word, as a positive commentary on another artist's work six
hundred pages later (R 665).

[62] A little earlier in the book, for example, Stanley maintains "you know I never read Nietzsche, but I
did come across something he said somewhere . . ." (R 599). It is worth noting that the devout Catholic
Stanley's defensiveness also stems from his reluctance to be seen reading the works of famous
blasphemers.

Wyatt's aesthetics have been formed partly under the influence of a teacher in Munich who sees the emphasis on originality in modern art as a "disease": "all around we see originality of incompetent idiots, they could draw nothing, paint nothing, just so the mess they make is original . . . Even two hundred years ago who wanted to be original, to be original was to admit that you could not do a thing the right way, so you could only do it your own way" (R 89). Taking heed of this, Wyatt retains an aloofness from current painting fashion – the narrator notes that he "knew no more of surréallisme than he did of the plethora of daubs turned out on Montmarte for tourists" (R 67) – and begins to forge old Flemish masters. Rather than see himself as an isolated creative genius, Wyatt sees himself as an old fashioned member of an artistic guild, obliged to conform to their rules about artistic materials:

> – And . . . any knock at the door may be the gold inspectors, come to see
>
> if I'm using bad materials down there, I . . . I'm a master painter in the
>
> Guild, in Flanders, do you see? And if they come in and find that I'm
>
> not using the . . . gold, they destroy the bad materials I'm using and fine
>
> me. (R 250)

This artistic argument is reinforced by other characters who argue that "[o]riginality is a device that untalented people use to impress other untalented people, and protect themselves from talented people" (R 252), but it is clear that, like the "groupography" proposed in the Wake (FW 476.33), Wyatt's artistic creation, rather than following the modernist template, is based on a collaboration with the past.

Outwith this, almost polemical, artistic argument the notion of the modernist artist as impersonal God is more subtly parodied through Wyatt's artistic progress. The connection of art and religion is hinted at at the very beginning of Wyatt's career as a forger, as the first work he copies is the table top of a religious relic his father had

purchased. The table, a Bosch depiction of the Seven Deadly Sins which is engraved "Cave, Cave D'videt" (R 26),[63] suggests an ironic commentary on the omniscience of Wyatt as artist-God as it is never entirely clear whether or not the table is authentic.[64] Although, when he has later established himself as a forger, he is mistaken for a priest (R 117), he successfully copies this religious relic, which he then sells to fund his defection from the ministry – a move, which ironically indulges the sins of pride and greed.

This parody of the artist-god is strengthened as the book progresses. While the identity of the modernist artist is frequently emphasised by the author through either a literal marking, or singular name – Mann's Tonio Kröger has a first name that is "something foreign and special" ("Tonio Kröger" 144); Stephen Dedalus sees his name as "a prophecy of the end he had been born to serve" (Portrait 183); while Lily Briscoe is distinguished by "her Chinese eyes, aslant in her white, puckered little face" (To the Lighthouse 31) – in The Recognitions, Gaddis begins to move towards a more postmodern conception of character. While Wyatt is initially marked out by "hazel eyes which burned into green on angry occasion" (R 18), he displays even less of a fixed self than the artist-heroes of modernism, losing his name for two-thirds of the book. Although during this time, his distinctive eyes provide one of the ways the reader can intuit his presence (Wyatt's eyes are described at R 47, 71, 111, 237, 654, 691, 787, 816), the distinctiveness of this feature is undercut as the eyes of other characters begin "burning into green" (R 461), and imitators try to pass off Wyatt's deeply cherished aesthetic reflections as their own (as Otto does [R 121]). The more postmodern idea of character as a linguistic function, as "largely other-determined" in Hans Bertens words (6), is suggested as Wyatt has three different names assigned to

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[63] The Latin translates: "Beware, beware, God sees."

him as the book moves towards its conclusion, names which are even adopted by the narrator, and the novel begins to be concerned with "what a man will do to prove his own existence" (R 800).

In raising such questions, a certain ontological problematisation is introduced into the novel, a complication which obviously suggests Brian McHale's construction of postmodernism in his study Postmodernist Fiction. In McHale's neat formulation, postmodernism can be distinguished from modernism as a "poetics dominated by ontological issues differs from one dominated by epistemological issues" (xii). This construction obviously fits the encyclopedic aspect of modernism I have been discussing. The questions that McHale lists – "[w]hat is there to be known? . . . How is knowledge transmitted . . . [w]hat are the limits of the knowable?" (9) – as characteristic of modernism are especially central in encyclopedic texts. While, as this thesis shows, such questions are still a continuing concern in postmodern texts, The Recognitions, as it questions the substantiality of its central character, brings to the foreground "ontological dialectics" (R 465) and introduces these postmodern poetics while it continues to examine modernist epistemological questions. This is particularly interesting because, although Gaddis does not receive a single mention in McHale's study, The Recognitions's move into postmodern poetics occurs earlier than many of the examples McHale offers as paradigmatic in works by Carlos Fuentes, Vladimir Nabokov, Robert Coover, and Thomas Pynchon.

While The Recognitions, then, as it moves towards postmodernism, critiques originality and parodies the modernist conception of the artist, it should be stressed that Gaddis and his artistic surrogates are not simply arguing for a wholesale rejection of "the Modernism heresy" (R 178), and that the attitude towards modernism is more

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[64] For the disputes over the table's authenticity see: R 59, 246, 688-89. Despairing, Wyatt eventually

complex and ambivalent than many critics have suggested. Established Gaddis

commentators Christopher Knight and Steven Weisenburger, for example, both read

the novel as an assault on what Weisenburger calls the "satanic regime" of modernism

(In Recognition 148), with Weisenburger reading the novel as a "fierce satire against

the modernist program" (160), and Knight interpreting Wyatt's disdain for originality

as an attempt "to work himself free of [the] self-imposed intellectual boundaries that

modernism has tended to reinforce" (In Recognition 59). Although, as detailed

above, the novel's aesthetic argument does critique the modernist ideal of continual,

esoteric innovation, the novel argues for modifications rather than wholesale

rejection, and it is important to recognise how deeply implicated in modernism

Wyatt's aesthetic is. In one of the critical passages early in the novel Wyatt outlines

his experience upon viewing a true work of art:

> when I saw it, it was one of those moments of reality, of near
>
> recognition of reality . . . When I saw it all of a sudden everything was
>
> freed into one recognition, really freed into reality that we never see,
>
> you never see it. You don't see it in paintings because most of the time
>
> you can't see beyond a painting. Most paintings, the instant you see
>
> them they become familiar, and then it's too late. (R 91-92)

While this scene seems to owe a lot to the classic scenes of modernist enlightenment –

the moments of intense feeling and revelation of Proust's involuntary memories,

Woolf's "moments of being," ("A Sketch of the Past" 73), Joyce's epiphanies,

Lawrence's "effort[s] of attention" that discover "a new world within the known

world" (Review 255) – perhaps the key fact regarding it is that the work of art which

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exclaims "[c]opying a copy? Is that where I started?" (R 381).

triggers Wyatt's reverie is Picasso's oil painting from August 1939, <u>Night Fishing at Antibes</u> (fig. 1).

Fig. 1. Pablo Picasso, <u>Night Fishing at Antibes</u>.

Picasso's picture, dominated by two stylised fishermen graphically impaling fish while two children look on eating ice cream, shows characteristic features of both primitivism and Picasso's earlier cubist phase, and few would dispute that the work could be called quintessentially modernist. Furthermore, the complex nature of Wyatt's aesthetic is underlined by the fact that it is a work by Picasso, of all painters, that is central here, and perhaps no other painter has been so frequently criticised for "mere originality." Thus, the scene which Gaddis uses to illustrate the concept of "recognitions" – a theory that is at the very heart of both Wyatt's aesthetic and Gaddis's book – is centred around a modernist work.

It is also important to note that any criticisms that Wyatt addresses to the demands made upon readers by the modernist aesthetic, like Barth's, do not involve a

straightforward regression to derivative, simplistic art. Commenting on contemporary

writing Wyatt argues:

> most writing now, if you read it they go on one two three four and tell
>
> you what happened like newspaper accounts, no adjectives, no long
>
> sentences, no tricks . . . They write for people who read with the surface
>
> of their minds, people with reading habits that make the smallest
>
> demands on them, people brought up reading for facts, who know
>
> what's going to come next and want to know what's coming next, and
>
> get angry at surprises. (R 113)

Characters who seek to bypass the creative process by simply appropriating the works

of others are similarly a target for the novel's critique. Mr. Feddle, for instance, who

spends the novel trying to pass himself off as "Feodor Feddle," author of The Idiot (R

937), and signing copies of Moby-Dick is ridiculed, as is Otto who notes down

profound-sounding phrases from Wyatt ("Orignlty not inventn bt snse of recall,

recgntion" [R 123]), and repeats his conversations. Just as The Recognitions is

delicately balanced between modernism and postmodernism, the issue seems to be

one of establishing the correct balance between original work and a recognition of

earlier masterpieces, and it is revealing that one of the most admired aspects of

Wyatt's bridge designs is their "perfect delicate tension": "every tension was perfect,

the balance was perfect" (R 606, emphasis mine).

Significantly, this artistic argument is enlarged upon in Gaddis's later

encyclopedic narratives,[65] which, focussing upon a musician and a writer, compose,

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[65] The focus in the following discussion is largely upon Gaddis's two longer works: the 726 page JR,
and the 586 page A Frolic of His Own. While Carpenter's Gothic at 262 syntactically dense pages
hardly represents a concession to the uncommitted reader – its narrative is oblique, and its range of
allusion, from references to T. S. Eliot (the fifth section of Eliot's "East Coker" is echoed in the line "to
recover what had been lost and found and lost again and again" [CG 155]) to Einstein's letters (the
aside "talk about playing dice with the universe" [CG 180] alludes to Einstein's famous letter to Max

alongside The Recognitions's portrait of a painter, something of an encyclopedic survey of the major arts.

Published twenty years after The Recognitions, JR continues Gaddis's encyclopedic project with the novel's action unfolding against a larger mythic parallel,[66] and allusions ranging from Empedocles to Hart Crane,[67] but it also represents a technical advance over the first novel, its 726 pages being related almost entirely in unattributed dialogue. Although the novel notes the difficulties facing "longer works of fiction now dismissed as classics and remaining largely unread due to the effort involved in reading and turning any more than two hundred pages" (JR 527), the encyclopedic aspect of the work is foregrounded as the book includes an encyclopedia covering "the world's history, culture, civilization, government, history, art and literature and . . . science . . . the ideal reference work for the casual browser" (JR 602), and it dramatises the difficulties of such endeavours as it includes a character writing a work that tries to encompass "the beast with two backs called arts and sciences" (JR 289), who despairingly notes: "must have thought I could, like Diderot good God how I ever thought I could do it . . ." (JR 588).

While both novels, then, aim to be encyclopedic, continuity with the artistic argument of The Recognitions is ensured, as the earlier novel's basis in Goethe is indirectly mocked as the composer Edward Bast explains his musical composition:

　　　　－Well I, for what I'm working on myself I've sort of started with

　　　　Locksley Hall and tried to . . .

Born, where Einstein rejects quantum mechanics by asserting that "I, at any rate, am convinced that He is not playing at dice" [91]), is typically encyclopedic – and despite the fact that the novel features a character who actually used to write articles for encyclopedias, the restriction of scale in the novel – Gaddis spoke of his aim in writing the novel as being "to write a shorter book, one which observes the unities of time and place" ("The Art of Fiction" 60) – prevents it from being strictly encyclopedic in the sense that the other novels discussed are.

[66] Steven Moore has detailed the parallels between JR and Wagner's Ring (William Gaddis 89-99).

–Locksley Hall Christ, next thing you'll shock us with a novel call it the

Sorrows of Young Werther. (JR 280)

Despite this, The Recognitions's theme of artistic collaboration is hinted at throughout

the later work: Keats's 1819 letter to B. R. Haydon regarding originality ("[i]t is true

that in the height of enthusiasm I have been cheated into some fine passages, but that

is nothing" [Keats 43]) is teasingly crossed out (JR 486), and a major subtext of the

work revolves around a writer's attempt to plagiarise his dead friend's work. The

portrait of Bast, surrounded by "the litter of this life" (R 323), provides probably the

clearest similarities. "[H]unched as though listening to bring sounds into being," Bast

works late into the night, and his description – part original inspiration, part passive

receptor, and partly engaged with the commercial detritus of the world – echoes

Wyatt's balanced aesthetic:

> digging among undeveloped film rolls, string, an odd glove, defunct
>
> cigarette lighters, coming up with a straw beach slipper he fitted
>
> descending, paused again to brush a layer of dirt down his front before
>
> he sat on the sofa's edge staring down at a fresh lined page, up at the
>
> ceiling, at the Baldung, at 24-7 Oz Pkgs Flavored Loops, appearing to
>
> listen as shreds of sound escaped sporadic partings of his lips, scribbling
>
> a clef, notes, a word, a curve, still reaching for fresh pages. (JR 286)

Gaddis's survey of the three major arts is completed in his final novel as he

offers a portrait of the embattled writer, to add to the painter Wyatt Gwyon, and the

composer Edward Bast. Played out against an appropriately apocalyptic

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[67] Early in the novel Empedocles and "the second generation of his cosmogony" are discussed (JR 45), while the lines "there is a world dimensional for those untwisted by the love of . . ." (JR 621) are from Hart Crane's "For the Marriage of Faustus and Helen."

background,[68] this most pessimistic of his novels portrays Oscar Crease, an ageing playwright and history lecturer, in his efforts to maintain his cultured stance in an increasingly media-dominated society, the "noisiest country that ever existed" (JR 289). Typically allusive (references range from the British astrophysicist Sir Arthur Eddington to the modernist writer Joseph Conrad)[69] and artistically innovative, with the narrative broken up by the insertion of legal documents, A Frolic of His Own continues the examinations of The Recognitions and JR into the creative process. Rather than shift to a different theme in his last work, Gaddis underlines the consistency of his thinking by developing the analysis in The Recognitions of artistic creation as being founded upon a fine balance between past achievement and present innovation: while the novel argues that "even novel and original ideas to a greater or lesser extent combine elements that are themselves not novel. Originality does not exist in a vacuum" (F 408), it also warns that a "plagiarist is not himself pro tanto an 'author'" (F 412). Where the novel differs, is that it begins to outline a context within which both this argument, and even Gaddis's earlier novels, might be understood.

In a work that still registers Gaddis's disappointment at the reception of his first novel,[70] Frolic provides a context for that reception by showing that "risk of

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[68] As Gaddis's novel examines "the entire crumbling of civilization" (F 251), the sense of an end of an era is given a suggestively modernist slant through the references to Yeats's apocalyptic "The Second Coming" which is quoted four times in the book (F 251, 304, 321, 532).

[69] The allusion to "Sir Arthur Eddington's famous step 'on a swarm of flies'" (F 34) refers to Eddington's observation at the start of The Nature of the Physical World, where he writes of whether we consider a table to be "constituted of substance" (xi) rather than made of atoms (and hence largely composed of empty space) that it "makes all the difference in the world whether the paper before me is poised as it were on a swarm of flies and sustained in shuttlecock fashion by a series of tiny blows from the swarm underneath, or whether it is supported because there is substance below it, it being the intrinsic nature of substance to occupy space to the exclusion of other substance; all the difference in conception at least, but no difference to my practical task of writing on the paper" (xiv). Later in the novel the lawyer Madhar Pai quotes Conrad's preface to The Nigger of the Narcissus: "You remember Conrad describing his task, to make you feel, above all to make you see? And then he adds perhaps also that glimpse of truth for which you have forgotten to ask?" (F 363, see Conrad's Prefaces to His Work 52).

[70] The unfavourable response to Oscar's play, "[t]he author makes it clear throughout that he does not trust the director, he does not trust the actors and he does not trust any audience he would be fortunate to have" (F 123), echoes Granville Hicks's 13 March 1955 review of The Recognitions in the New

ridicule, of attracting defamatory attentions from his colleagues and even raucous

demonstrations by an outraged public have ever been and remain the foreseeable lot

of the serious artist." (F 39). Presenting a history of innovative and taboo-breaking art

by the likes of Ibsen, Stravinsky, and Whistler, Gaddis, by quoting actual reviews,[71]

demonstrates how the established "classics" of one generation are used to provide

unflattering comparisons against the work of succeeding generations: "the initial

scorn showered upon the Impressionists and, once they were digested upon the

Cubists" (F 39) perhaps providing an analogy for the way The Recognitions was

criticised through unflattering comparisons to Ulysses.

Alongside this tradition, the novel also details classical precedents for

Gaddis's critique of originality. Outlining a history of "plagiarism" that runs back to

Shakespeare and Ancient Greece,[72] A Frolic of His Own subtly suggests the historical

prevalence of this idea. For example, while the variations played on Henry

Wadsworth Longfellow's Song of Hiawatha serve to point up a number of themes –

the lost innocence of Oscar and Christina's youths, the conflict between father and

son – they are also appropriate because the poem was itself at the centre of a

plagiarism row. Longfellow's use of pre-existing materials – Henry Rowe

Schoolcraft's two books on North American Indian tribes and the Finnish epic

Kalevala – to create a new poem might be seen as a case study for Gaddis's theory.

York Times: "William Gaddis (among other things, to be sure) is playing a game with such readers as he may be fortunate enough to have" (qtd. in Green 26). The review is also parodied in JR as the work of "Glandvil Hix"(JR 515) reviewing "I CHOSE ROTTEN GIN" (an anagram of The Recognitions).
[71] The quote dismissing Ibsen's Ghosts as "a loathsome sore unbandaged, a dirty act done publicly" (F 39), for example, is from an editorial comment in the Daily Telegraph, from 14 March 1891, which uses the safely canonised example of Greek tragedy to diminish Ibsen: "Ay! the play performed last night is 'simple' enough in plan and purpose, but simple only in the sense of an open drain, of a loathsome sore unbandaged; of a dirty act done publicly; or of a lazar-house with all its doors and windows open. It is no more 'Greek,' and can no more be called 'Greek' for its plainness of speech and candid foulness, than could a dunghill at Delphi, or a madhouse at Mitylene" (qtd. in Egan 190).
[72] Madhar Pai, in one of the book's main legal wrangles, describes Shakespeare's creative process: "he raided Holinshed's Chronicles of England, Scotland, and Ireland pretty freely didn't he, for Richard III

While the novel appears to endorse this conception of artistic creation, the

ideals of the artist at the novel's centre provide a notable contrast. Like the creatively

blocked writers in novels from the nineties by Coover, DeLillo, and Gass, Oscar

Crease dramatises the end of the romantic-modernist ideal of the artist.[73] In his

appeals to the example of the modernists[74] and his work itself, Oscar clings to the

artistic ideals of a previous age. His artistic sources are literary classics: the title of

his play "echoes a line in Othello" (F 193), and his most frequent references are to

Shakespeare and the ancient Greeks, touchstones that Joyce and Pound would surely

have endorsed. Elitist and isolate, Oscar, with his disdain for the "[g]reat unwashed"

(F 198), sees the artist as a man apart, "working on his immortality every minute" (F

422). Quoting Pound's disdain for the masses approvingly, on the primacy of solitary

reading over a theatre production "speaking to a thousand fools huddled together" (F

97),[75] Crease is a strong advocate of the artist as individual genius. Against the

collaborative conception of art that Gaddis seems to favour, Oscar has difficulty even

communicating with others.

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and the Scottish history in Macbeth, even for King Lear? And Plutarch, he lifted Antony and Cleopatra and Julius Caesar right out of Plutarch didn't he?" (F 201).

[73] While William Kohler's decision, while suffering from writer's block, to begin writing to himself as a method "of desperate disappearance" (The Tunnel 12) was discussed in the introduction, DeLillo's Mao II, which the critic Frank Lentricchia claims "plays out the endgame of modernist consciousness" (287), is a dramatisation of the unsuccessful attempts of the proud, difficult, reclusive writer Bill Gray to complete satisfactorily his most recent novel. Similarly, in Coover's John's Wife, the writer Ellsworth, who proclaims art's aloofness from any "moral position" (123), is working on a novel with a typically cold modernist aesthetic theme – the artist's relation to his model – and, like the other writers, there is a great difference between his perception of his work and his actual achievement: "At times, Ellsworth stepped forth onto the international stage to accept the world's accolades for his innovatively designed yet classically structured masterpiece of creative fiction, and at other times he recognized that he had only managed to write about fourteen pages and probably only three of those were keepers" (133-34).

[74] Yeats appears to be his favourite poet – along with his references to "The Second Coming," he also quotes "Maid Quiet" twice (F 88, 318) – and he also makes reference to modernists like Pound (F 97), Eugene O'Neill (F 209, 211), and Robert Frost (F 583).

[75] Oscar's quote is from a letter to Joyce where Pound explains: "My whole habit of thinking about the stage is; that it is a gross, coarse form of art. That a play speaks to a thousand fools huddled together, whereas a novel or poem can lie in a book and find the stray persons worth finding, one by one . . . can one appeal to the masses with anything requiring thought?" (Pound/ Joyce 46).

It is interesting to note that this conception of artistic creation seems to be shared by several other writers. The reworkings of myths and fairy-tales by Donald Barthelme in <u>Snow White</u> and Robert Coover in works like <u>Pricksongs and Descants</u> and <u>Pinocchio in Venice</u> perhaps show some affinity with this idea, while John Barth is explicit about using a similar working principle. Writing an autobiographical piece originally intended for a series in the <u>New York Times Book Review</u>, Barth explained: "At heart I'm an arranger still, whose chiefest literary pleasure is to take a received melody – an old narrative poem, a classical myth, a shopworn literary convention, a shard of my experience . . . and, improvising like a jazzman within its constraints, reorchestrate it to present purpose" (<u>Friday Book</u> 7). This practice reached its climax in Barth's 1979 epic <u>LETTERS</u>, a re-orchestration of both the epistolary novel and all his previous fictions, but perhaps the best example of the continuity of the conception of the artist Gaddis puts forward in his work is provided by Powers's <u>Galatea 2.2</u>.

Without pre-empting the discussion of Powers's "encyclopedia of the Information Age" (<u>G2.2</u> 215) in chapter three, the portrait of the artist in this short, apparently autobiographical,[76] work provides a neat example when read alongside <u>Frolic</u>. While the writer "Powers" is still alienated and critically-neglected – at one point the narrator is forced to ask himself how he "could have missed the fact that the age of reading was dead" (<u>G2.2</u> 116) – and describes himself as a "picturesque but archaic man of letters" (<u>G2.2</u> 75), he is, in fact, a far more modern and adaptable artist than the modernist artist in decline, Oscar Crease.

While the isolate Crease relies on centuries-old works like George Fitzhugh's dated <u>Cannibals All!</u> for his research, "Powers" combines his insights into

Middlemarch with internet-based "Boolean searches across incomprehensibly huge

textbases" (G2.2 25). His technological approach, then, is a collaborative one: the

internet allows "researchers [to peer] into colleagues' labs on other continents . . .

[and to share] data in 3D, as they gathered it" (G2.2 9). This quick access to other

realms of knowledge, allows "Powers" to overcome the division between the two

cultures that C. P. Snow divined,[77] and allows him a new map of the mind at "the

vertex of several intersecting rays – artificial intelligence, cognitive science,

visualization and signal processing, neurochemistry" (G2.2 6) – a discovery that

becomes the subject of his novel. Galatea 2.2, then, might be seen as the information

age culmination of Gaddis's theory: unlike Oscar Crease and the creatively blocked

writers in late novels by Coover, DeLillo and Gass, "Powers," collaborates with the

knowledge of others. By doing so he finds a way to create a new work in an age that

seems hostile to art, like the artists in Gaddis's other modernist-influenced

encyclopedic narratives, JR and The Recognitions.

The modernists, Frank Kermode has argued, "wanted, consciously or not, to

produce encyclopedias for the fallen modern world. . . . to confront the corrupt world

with messages, mostly about its corruption, which it will not, of its own will, even try

to decipher" ("T. S. Eliot" 114-15). In its efforts to expose the forgeries and false

standards of twentieth-century life, Gaddis's "diary of dead souls" (R 353) represents

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[76] Galatea 2.2 features a narrator called Richard Powers, and so, to avoid any confusion in the following discussion, the narrator will be distinguished from the author by the use of inverted commas for the former.

[77] I discuss Snow's division of intellectuals into polar opposites, with "[l]iterary intellectuals at one pole – at the other the scientists" and "between the two a gulf of mutual incomprehension" (Two Cultures 4) in some detail in chapter three, but it is worth noting that Powers's refusal to respect this divide predictably alienated some reviewers who appeared uncomfortable at the idea of a literary novel introducing scientific material. William H. Pritchard, for example, reviewing the novel for the Hudson Review, wrote that Powers is "altogether formidable, brilliant, a genius, and in my current state of technological sophistication I can't read him with more than occasional success" (143).

such an attempt.[78] The Recognitions's mastery of literary styles, breadth of

knowledge, temporal and spatial range, and the demands it makes upon the reader,

satisfy numerous criteria for the encyclopedic modernist masterpiece, demonstrating

the continuity of an encyclopedic strain that many critics have chosen to ignore.

At the same time, however, in its conception of artistic creation as a delicate

balance between originality and more traditional values, it might also be seen to trace

a path out of the labyrinth of esoteric, spiralling innovation that modernism resulted

in. After works like Ulysses and Finnegans Wake, and the great, but apparently

doomed efforts of modernist ambition like The Cantos and The Making of Americans

ended up as obscure classroom texts, Gaddis's long novel (in William Gass's words)

"proved that great ambitions were still possible" ("Memories of Master Gaddis" 152),

without becoming impenetrable. It begins then in its aesthetic argument, examination

of broadcasting culture, and conception of character to approach what was later

celebrated as postmodernism in the work of writers like Coover, Pynchon and Barth.

Although The Recognitions was perceived, upon its release, by many critics to

be singularly freakish in its scale and ambition – reviewers described the novel as a

"monstrous annotation," of "forbidding length," "frighteningly ambitious"[79] – the rest

of this thesis will attempt to demonstrate that Gaddis's encyclopedic synthesis of

modernism and postmodernism might be seen as something of a template for

ambitious writers of succeeding generations who often explicitly invoke Gaddis's

example and significantly repeat aspects of The Recognitions aesthetic theory, or

methods, and whose work forms a loose tradition of contemporary encyclopedic

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[78] The appropriateness of this quote as a summary of Gaddis's ambition is highlighted by the fact that Christopher Knight cites it at the start of his study of Gaddis's novels, Hints and Guesses (5). While this might suggest a modification of his reading of The Recognitions as a rejection of modernist art, he remains disinterested in assigning the category: "it should be tempting to describe [Gaddis's work] under the rubric of modernism or, as has been more commonly the case, postmodernism" (4).

narratives. The Recognitions, on this evidence, could be viewed as one of those rare narratives that Coover found on his weary and disheartening trawl through 300 contemporary novels. Having dismissed most of these novels as either genre fictions (the "folk tradition" Coover calls them) or more serious fictions, attempting to reach into "morally perplexing realms," (Coover designates them the "priestly tradition") Coover writes:

> occasionally – rarely – a third voice arises, radically at odds with the priestly and folk traditions alike . . . [t]his voice typically rejects mere modifications in the evolving group mythos, further surface variations on sanctioned themes, and attacks instead the supporting structures themselves, the homologous forms. Whereupon something new enters the world – at least the world of literature, if not always the community beyond.
>
> Though this voice is often thought of as disruptive, eccentric, even inaccessible . . . it could easily be argued that it is true mainstream fiction, emerging from the very core of the evolving form, peculiarly alert to the decay in social forms that embrace it, early signals of larger mutations to follow. ("On Reading 300 American Novels" 38)

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[79] The quotes are from reviews which first appeared in, respectively, New York Herald Tribune, Montreal Star, Commonweal (qtd. in Green 43, 46).

CHAPTER TWO

"THE AMERICAN BOOK OF THE DEAD": DON DELILLO'S UNDERWORLD.

"To free you from this fear," Virgil announces to Dante at the edge of the underworld, "let me explain the reason I came here" (Inferno 2.49-50). Instructed by Dante's amaranthine love, Beatrice, to rescue him from despair, Virgil explains that he left his exile in limbo to guide Dante through the wretched and tortured souls of hell and purgatory on a journey towards enlightenment. A vast allegory of man's redemption, this pilgrimage in The Divine Comedy is intended, as Dante wrote to Can Grande, "to remove those living in this life from a state of misery, and to bring them to a state of happiness" (Letters 202).

Alongside this cosmic vision, however, an obsession with encyclopedias is also woven into his descent into the underworld. Dante's former teacher, Brunetto Latini, who around 1264 authored the first encyclopedia to break with Latin (Li Livres dou Trésor), is in the seventh circle of hell, the castle in limbo "that seven times was circled by high walls" (4.107) has been taken by some critics to represent the seven liberal arts that made up the trivium and quadrivium, and the work itself, containing "within its depths / all things bound up in a single book" (Paradise 33.85-86), is, of course, also an encyclopedic narrative. Guiseppe Mazzotta has shown that the poem is expert in "planetary orbits, mythography, angelology, classical myths, chronicles of ancient and contemporary politics, heresies, family dynasties, Roman and church history, biblical typologies" among many other diverse fields of knowledge (18).

Although Don DeLillo's 1997 novel Underworld is concerned with delineating a number of diverse underworlds – artistic underworlds, technological

underworlds, New York's criminal underworld, and the conspiratorial underworld

that the paranoid sees lying behind everything – the novel is rarely considered to be

preoccupied with embedding data the way encyclopedic narratives like Dante's, or (to

take twentieth-century examples) Joyce's Ulysses and Gaddis's The Recognitions are.

Joseph Tabbi, for example, argues that DeLillo's fiction moves towards a rejection of

the aesthetic of Gaddis and Pynchon whose works are "infinitely complex fictions . . .

whose ambition cannot rest until it has plumbed every level of an obsession" (171), in

favour of "a step back from . . . American high postmodernism" (174).[1] Similarly,

although Tom LeClair acknowledges DeLillo's affinities with Gaddis and Pynchon,

and has written some impressive expositions of the sophisticated depths of DeLillo's

works, he also draws a distinction between their more esoteric works and DeLillo's

"accessible and entertaining narratives" where knowledge does not simply go "from

learned author to specialist reader" (In the Loop 233). While there is some truth in

LeClair's claim, problems have emerged because, as DeLillo has increased in

popularity,[2] later critics have not always been sufficiently attentive to how complexly

layered his fictions are, leading some to even doubt whether DeLillo is "a highbrow

or popular writer" (Johnston, "Generic Difficulties" 261).

The extent to which this definition has been accepted is especially surprising

because DeLillo has frequently characterised his ideal novel in oppositional terms, as

one that is "equal to the complexities and excesses of the culture . . . [that can] absorb

and incorporate the culture instead of catering to it" ("The Art of Fiction" 290), and

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[1] Although, as I outline above, I disagree with Tabbi's construction of DeLillo's aesthetic, it is worth noting that his chapter devoted to DeLillo in Postmodern Sublime is marred by some factual errors: for example, he refers to DeLillo expressing his admiration for Gaddis, Coover and Pynchon in an interview with Robert Harris, when in fact the quote only refers to Gaddis and Pynchon (169), and he elides a quote from Ratner's Star with a quote from an interview (170).
[2] The extent of DeLillo's recent upsurge in popularity can perhaps be gauged by the fact that he has come to exert an influence on disciplines outside the literary, with Ron Rosenbaum, for example, acknowledging that the "satiric vision of 'Hitler studies' in Don DeLillo's brilliant novel White Noise" was "one of the inspirations" for his historical study Explaining Hitler (xxvii).

has also expressed his admiration for Gaddis's encyclopedic works. Before most

critics had even heard of Gaddis, DeLillo praised him along with Pynchon "for

extending the possibilities of the novel by taking huge risks and making great

demands on readers" ("A Talk with Don DeLillo" 26), and his novels suggest that

Gaddis's example may have been instructive.

In terms of technique, the most obvious similarity between the two writers lies

in their use of dialogue. The Recognitions metafictionally describes itself as

"[m]ostly talk, talk, talk" (R 373), and one of the most distinctive features of that

novel was the presence of long stretches of dialogue, unaccompanied by the

conventional "he" and "she saids." This technique was taken to its extreme limit in

the entirely dialogue driven JR, a development that prompted George Steiner to brand

the novel "unreadable" ("Crossed Lines" 106). Despite this criticism, there is

something of a correlation between the publication of JR and DeLillo's first widescale

use of unattributed dialogue in his 1976 novel Ratner's Star and, especially, his 1977

novel Players. This later novel which, like JR, employs Wall Street as a backdrop,

was described by DeLillo as the work in which he "concentrated on dialogue most

deeply" ("The Art of Fiction" 284), and from this point on, lengthy passages of

unmediated dialogue continue in his work through to Underworld.

In addition to this, there are a number of subtle references to Gaddis's first two

novels in DeLillo's writing. In his play The Day Room the lead character, as in The

Recognitions, is called Wyatt, his pseudonymous novel Amazons[3] features a character

called "J.R." (AZ 256), and, while this is DeLillo's marginal work, there are also

possible resonances in Mao II, his 1991 novel. Mao II focuses on Bill Gray, a

reclusive novelist, stricken with writer's block. Although he has been interpreted by

different critics as a portrait of Salman Rushdie, Thomas Pynchon, and DeLillo

himself (and he surely represents something of a synthesis of all these writers),[4] Gray

shares the same initials as Gaddis, has a similar publishing history, possibly shares

some personal characteristics (marital break-ups and a heavy smoking habit), and at

one point the novel paraphrases a passage from The Recognitions.[5]

I would like to argue in this chapter, however, that DeLillo's affinities with

Gaddis go deeper than this, and can be located more significantly in the fact that, in

Underworld, DeLillo has followed Gaddis in drawing on a modernist tradition to

write a postmodern novel of encyclopedic scope that includes more diverse

knowledge and artistic coherence than has previously been recognised. In

demonstrating that the novel is more complex than is usually assumed, I would like to

respond to some of the criticisms that the novel has attracted, and begin to map out

how DeLillo's work has, in turn, been influential for a number of younger writers.

At 827 pages, and with a timescale that covers nearly fifty years, Underworld

is easily DeLillo's longest novel, and, like Gaddis's A Frolic of His Own, it provides

a fitting epilogue to his career, reprising and extending the themes and actions of his

previous ten novels.[6] In fact, given the range of DeLillo's novel, it is surprisingly that

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[3] Amazons was published under the pseudonym "Cleo Birdwell," but, apart from the similarities in prose style, DeLillo's authorship is apparent through the appearance of the character Murray Jay Siskind, who has a central role in White Noise.

[4] See, for example, Margaret Scanlan's essay "Writers Among Terrorists," and Peter Baker's "The Terrorist as Interpreter."

[5] The comment on Brita's career photographing spent writers, "[s]o often in her work the human shambles was remade by the energy of her seeing, by the pure will that the camera uncovered" (M 37), seems to be an allusion to Wyatt's observation in The Recognitions: "What's any artist, but the dregs of his work? the human shambles that follows it around. What's left of the man when the work's done but a shambles of apology" (R 95-96).

[6] Amid numerous broad continuities (an interest in John F. Kennedy, the Zapruder film, Wittgenstein, paranoia), Underworld contains a number of more specific references to DeLillo's earlier work: early in Underworld, for example, in Cotter's history class "[t]here's a kid . . . who eats pages from his history book nearly every day" (UW 141), a habit that recalls DeLillo's first novel Americana where in Dr.Oh's class "a student named Humbro ate his copy of D.T. Suzuki's introduction to Zen" (A 175), and the DuPont slogan which forms the background to the student riot in Underworld, "Better things

it has not "seemed like an encyclopedia" (UW 207) to more readers, as its breadth of

knowledge runs from waste management to etymologies, and literary references

extend back to Poe and Thoreau.[7] With such range, the novel can be seen to

comfortably satisfy the three central criteria that Mendelson sets for encyclopedic

narratives: in the detailed knowledge of the brain that DeLillo embeds into the novel,

the novel includes an account of a science; featuring a painter, whose aesthetic

theories are outlined in the text, an art outside the literary composes part of DeLillo's

novel; while Mendelson's requirement for an encyclopedic narrative to include a

range of literary styles is satisfied by the novel's mixture of lists, omniscient

narration, interior monologues, and first person narration. Additionally, Underworld

might be considered to occupy the sort of special cultural position that Mendelson

insists is necessary, as the novel strategically positions itself on the brink of the Cold

War, at the inception of an age about to be dominated by nuclear terror.

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for better living. Through chemistry" (UW 603), also appears in the earlier work (A 130); like Great Jones Street, Underworld refers to the Gloria Patri's "world without end" (GJS 60, UW 825); the title of Underworld's third section, "The Cloud of Unknowing" (taken from a religious tract), is mentioned in White Noise (WN 290); the pub which Nick Shay goes to late in 1965, "Frankie's Tropical Bar" (UW 617) was visited by Moll Robbins and Glen Selvy in Running Dog (RD 33); the reflection in Amazons, "New York, New York. . . . we say it twice" (AZ 6) is recycled in one of Lenny Bruce's monologues (UW 624); and late in Underworld, in a section which may deal most directly with biographical material from DeLillo's youth in the Bronx, DeLillo makes a point of mentioning "the narrow house, 607" (UW 756), which may shed some light on (the partly Bronx-based) Libra's dedication: "To the boys at 607: Tony, Dick and Ron." Outside DeLillo's novels, he appears to nod to the title of the first critical examination of his work, "in the loop" (UW 225), and he closely paraphrases two of his statements from earlier interviews. Firstly, in an interview with Kevin Connolly, DeLillo explained "I think it was Octavio Paz who said that man spies on himself, and eventually I think this is what happens to Win Everett in Libra. He begins to examine himself as a subject, as someone in the third person" (263), which becomes in his later novel, "[h]e was spying on himself. The third person watches the first person. The 'he' spies on the 'I'" (UW 119). Secondly, DeLillo's observation in an interview with Maria Nadotti that "[i]f you could write slogans for nations, similar to those invented by advertisers for their products the slogan for the US would be 'Consume or die'" (93), reappears in Underworld as Detwiler tells Nick: "I take my students into garbage dumps and make them understand the civilzation they live in. Consume or die. That's the mandate of the culture" (UW 287).

[7] A character is reading Poe's "The Raven" late in the book (UW 775), while the first page's reference to the mass of the baseball crowd bringing "their own small . . . desperations" (UW 11) may be intended to echo Thoreau's observation in Walden that the "mass of men lead lives of quiet desperation" (50).
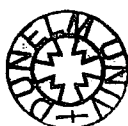
Alongside this encyclopedic range the novel is also, appropriately for a work that includes an allusion to Proust in its opening section,[8] something of a personal memoir, a remembrance of things past, dealing with DeLillo's most personal material concerning his youth in the Bronx. In an interview published to coincide with the novel's release, DeLillo confirmed that Underworld might be taken as the summa of his career: "at some level, this was a book I'd been writing all my life without knowing it . . . but it's not just a summary of my work. It's where I lived and how I lived and what I knew" ("Everything Under the Bomb" 37). Unlike the narcissistic meditations on lost potency in recent reflective works by John Updike and Norman Mailer,[9] however, DeLillo's retrospective abandons local prejudices in favour of a more impersonal examination of the self caught up in the increasingly violent history of the last fifty years, seeking, what he called, the "pattern in art that eludes us in natural experience" ("An Outsider in this Society" 66).

This attempt to encompass individual biographies within the flows of recent history, a strategy previously explored by DeLillo in Libra, has not, however, been universally popular. Despite the generally favourable reviews that Underworld received,[10] in a number of more considered responses several criticisms were levelled at the novel. The most significant of these, particularly in the light of his earlier

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[8] The narrator's observation that "[i]t's like the first waking moment of the day and you don't know who's house you're in" (UW 40), recalls Proust's narrator's reverie on waking in the Combray section of Swann's Way.

[9] Updike's Toward the End of Time is set in an unconvincing future and collects a series of misogynistic reflections from an ageing egotistical narrator who is prone to such reflections as "[t]his planet supports but two life-forms – myself, and an immense fungus" (312), while Mailer's meditation on "the most mysterious word of them all – time" (xii), The Time of Our Time, is literally an anthology of his previous work. Attempting to prevent the reader from being able to say "let's move on" (ix), Mailer puts exactly the same material in front of them.

[10] Martin Amis, for example, observed that Underworld rendered "DeLillo a great novelist" (148), while a reviewer for the Times Literary Supplement remarked that with "Underworld, DeLillo confirms himself in the select group of American writers truly equal to the temper of very strange times" (Quinn 21).

positive response to DeLillo's work,[11] were contained in Tony Tanner's essay "Don

DeLillo and 'the American Mystery.'"[12] For Tanner, <u>Underworld</u> represented a

mistaken direction in DeLillo's development as a writer, a move towards an over-

reliance on recent history as a novelistic structuring principle that rendered his work a

sub-journalistic catalogue, rather than a fictional achievement. Drawing unfavourable

comparisons with works by Conrad and Joyce, Tanner saw <u>Underworld</u> as a descent

into a disconnected series of fragments: "in the relative absence of significant

characters or narrative plot . . . the book presents us with a string of more or less

sensationalist news items or crises from 1951 to, presumably, the present day" (206-

7). This shift, Tanner maintained, had repercussions that went beyond an

unsatisfyingly incoherent structure, and he complained that the novel lacked

"traditionally delineated characters" (213), and included an account of paranoia that

was heavily derivative of Pynchon's novels. With some dismay, Tanner concluded,

"having pretty much given up on people and plots (conventional ones, anyway),

DeLillo in <u>Underworld</u> is totally reliant on history" (220), a reliance that left the

reader with a series of "fragments [that] do not collect around anything" (208) and

Tanner drew a comparison between DeLillo's "arbitrary choices" (ibid.) and

"manifestly aleatory" postmodern works (207).[13]

This characterisation of a postmodern work as fragmentary, in contrast to the

unity of the modernist masterpiece, recalls Robert Martin Adams's comparison of

Joycean structure with later subversions outlined in the introduction, and it is perhaps

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[11] Although DeLillo was yet to publish his first novel when Tanner's landmark study <u>City of Words</u> was completed, in his later work <u>Scenes of Nature, Signs of Men</u> he singles out DeLillo as "greatly underrated" (241).

[12] I refer here to the version reprinted in Tanner's posthumous essay collection, <u>The American Mystery</u>, although the essay was originally printed as "Afterthoughts on Don DeLillo's <u>Underworld</u>" in <u>Raritan</u>.

[13] Tanner was not alone in holding this view of <u>Underworld</u> as Sven Birkerts, who despite coming to a more positive evaluation of the book, similarly characterised it as "a loose confabulation of episodes and meditations" where "unifying elements . . . are few" (<u>Readings</u> 257). "Clearly," Birkerts argued, "DeLillo has taken an enormous risk in giving so massive a book so little endoskeleton" (260).

worth examining Adams's formulation in a little more detail. For Adams, one of the most distinctive features of Joyce's work was its tendency to form circular structures. Developing this argument, Adams describes these structural shapes as a:

> formal configuration applied to a basic narrative but not integrally or expressively connected with it . . . Viconian cycles and circles, for example, generally form themselves in Joyce's fiction without regard to the motivation or even the conscious awareness of the characters; . . . one doesn't see further and further into action or characters, and so discover a pattern; the pattern is a thing apart, exterior to everything except the author and his book. (AfterJoyce 45)

While Adams contends that later writers are more interested in thwarting these patterns, it is useful to consider the way DeLillo characteristically organises his novels.

Nick Shay, the narrator of Underworld, reflects that he had been taught "to examine things for . . . deeper connections" (UW 88), and similar training is necessary for the reader of a DeLillo novel, as they are typically structured through the establishment of subtle connections, whose implications stretch out to gain an often revealing resonance. In End Zone, for example, the possible relation between football and warfare is considered by a number of characters, but, separate from these discussions, a linkage is established through a subtle formal symmetry. In the novel each chapter unfolds as a fairly straightforward reflection on an incident told by the narrator, Gary Harkness. Exceptions to this, however, are chapters sixteen and nineteen, which are collections of discrete paragraphs. Tellingly, chapter sixteen charts a night Harkness spent playing war games, while chapter nineteen covers a football match.

In Libra, DeLillo's 1988 novel about the Kennedy assassination, he continues

to employ this method of patterning, as is apparent, even in the novel's opening

paragraph, which details Lee Harvey Oswald riding the subway:

> This was the year he rode the subway to the ends of the city, two
>
> hundred miles of track. He liked to stand at the front of the first car,
>
> hands flat against the glass. The train smashed through the dark. People
>
> stood on local platforms staring nowhere, a look they'd been practicing
>
> for years. He kind of wondered, speeding past who they really were. . . .
>
> sometimes he thought they were on the edge of no-control. (L 3)

On a first reading this is a fairly innocuous introduction. On closer examination,

however, it is apparent that, through his careful choice of language, DeLillo is

proposing, at the start of the book, a connection between Lee's ride and Kennedy's

more famous passage through a crowd of the unknown in Dallas, at the end of the

book. The ambiguity surrounding Kennedy's murder is intimated by the conjunction

of the violent "smashed" and the murky "dark," Lee's position as an observing

passenger on the train highlights the possibility that Lee may be an essentially passive

tool of a conspiracy, while the vulnerability of the motorcade is hinted at by the

suggestion that someone may be "on the edge of no-control." In establishing Lee as

Kennedy's dark counterpart, however, DeLillo also intimates a larger connection. By

foreshadowing the motorcade in Dallas with Lee's earlier journey, DeLillo suggests a

certain inevitability about Oswald's destiny, that his fate may have been decided

above his head (in the stars, as it were), introducing the reader to one of the possible

interpretations of the novel's astrological title.

This method is, of course, reminiscent of Joyce's method in Ulysses, where

apparently incidental parallels are often important. Prior to their meeting, for

example, a connection between Bloom and Stephen is intimated through the subtle

symmetries between their situations that Joyce establishes: both are in mourning, both

have lost a key, for both paternity is an important concern, and so on. The similarities

of technique are pertinent here because, as noted in the introduction, Adams does not

include DeLillo in his study. This omission is surprising considering how explicit

DeLillo has been about his Joycean heritage. "I wanted to be known as Kinch," the

narrator of DeLillo's first novel announces, "[t]his is Stephen Dedalus' nickname in

Ulysses" (A 143), and Americana also includes references to Molly (A 95) and

Leopold Bloom (A 234), Buck Mulligan (A 145, 368), Joyce himself (A 220, 326),

and quotes from chapter two of Ulysses (A 234; U 42). Although references to

writers are rarer in his later novels, the end of The Names perhaps owes something to

Finnegans Wake,[14] Marvin Lundy's reflection in Underworld, "[d]ark, light. These

are words" (UW 178), seems (as I discuss later) to echo Ulysses, and End Zone

includes a play on Stephen's vow at the end of Portrait of the Artist (P 269): "Of all

the aspects of exile, silence pleased me least" (EZ 30). These allusions are significant

because, in addition to the similar structuring techniques already outlined, DeLillo

made specific reference to Joyce, while explaining in an interview with Tom LeClair,

that the inclusion of looping structures has been an important part of his novelistic

practice [15]:

> Somebody ought to make a list of books that seem to bend back on
>
> themselves. I think Malcolm Lowry saw Under the Volcano as a wheel-

---

[14] The Names ends with some excerpts from a novel being written by the narrator's son. The pages, filled with "spirited misspellings" and "mangled words" (N 313), are described by the narrator who finds the incorrect words: "exhilarating. He'd made them new again, made me see how they worked, what they really were. . . . His other misrenderings were wilder, freedom-seeking, and seemed to contain curious perceptions about the words themselves, second and deeper meanings, original meanings. It pleased me to believe he was not wholly innocent of these mistakes. I thought he sensed the errors, but let them stand, out of exuberance and sly wonder" (N 313-14). This description, and phrases in the text like "[h]e felt retched" (N 335), could be influenced by Joyce's last work.

like structure. And in <u>Finnegans Wake</u> we're meant to go from the last

page to the first. In different ways I've done this myself. ("An Interview

with Don DeLillo" 87)

Perhaps unsurprisingly, then, <u>Underworld</u>, rather than being comparable to aleatory

works as Tanner suggests, can be seen to draw on a modernist legacy as it mixes

subtle parallels with Joycean circles. Although DeLillo has noted that a novelist

working with history may feel "the nearly palpable lure of large events" ("The Power

of History" 60), the novel can be shown to have a much more complex structure than

the reliance on the chaotic flow of history that has been suggested.

*

In his critique of <u>Underworld</u>, Tanner quotes Jack Gladney's search through

the household waste in <u>White Noise</u>:

> There was a long piece of twine that contained a series of knots and
>
> loops. It seemed at first a random construction. Looking more closely I
>
> thought I detected a complex relationship between the size of the loops,
>
> the degree of the knots (single or double) and the intervals between
>
> knots with loops and freestanding knots. Some kind of occult geometry
>
> (<u>WN</u> 259)

and while <u>Underworld</u> may have seemed "a random construction" to Tanner and some

other critics,[16] on closer analysis the most important structure in the novel can be seen

to rest in the "complex relationship between . . . loops."

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[15] Tom LeClair has examined the use of looping structures in DeLillo's first eight novels in his study <u>In the Loop</u>.

[16] Mark Osteen, for example, in his study <u>American Magic and Dread</u> argues that a different structure is central to the novel, seeing subtle connections between motifs (such as the one that emerges around

Like <u>Finnegans Wake</u>, <u>Underworld</u> has its "Doublends Jined" (<u>FW</u> 20.16),

with the major structure in the novel being a massive loop that encircles the entire

text, and which is established mainly through verbal echoes. The first sentence of the

novel, "[h]e speaks in your voice, American, and there's a shine in his eye that's

halfway hopeful" (<u>UW</u> 11), introduces Cotter Martin, a black youth from Harlem,

about to become part of a communal celebration at a game of baseball. When this

sentence is echoed on the last page of the novel, it now refers to a man alone in a

room with a computer, and the people who share his voice play a smaller ball game

and are separated by wall and window: "you can glance out the window for a

moment, distracted by the sound of small kids playing a made-up game in a

neighbor's yard, some kind of kickball maybe, and they speak in your voice" (<u>UW</u>

827). This circle back to the novel's first sentence encourages a contrast between the

mid-century moment when "people want[ed] to be in the streets, joined with others"

(<u>UW</u> 47), and the atomised world of the late-century where "[e]verything is

connected" (<u>UW</u> 826) still, but only through artificial cyber-links, through "the

sequence of pulses on a dullish screen" (<u>UW</u> 827).

This circling back is reinforced by a number of other correspondences

between prologue and epilogue: there are minor verbal echoes, such as the description

of Maglie, as "some shambles of the inner man" (<u>UW</u> 35), being recalled in the later

description of Ismael as a "sort of human shambles" (<u>UW</u> 812); the crowd at the Polo

grounds at the start of the novel, with its "insistence on faith . . . against the power of

doubt" (<u>UW</u> 31), is repeated at the novel's end in the more desperate and fearful

crowd "wedged onto a traffic island in the bottommost Bronx" (<u>UW</u> 818) waiting for

a supposedly religious vision; J. Edgar Hoover and the Russian bomb are mentioned

the word "orange" [<u>UW</u> 463, 532, 442, 67, 820-22]) as representing the novel's organisational
principle. While there is undoubtedly something in this, as I outline above, I believe that there is a

in both parts (UW 23, 826); and the joke which the KMOX engineer tells about "the fastest lover in Mexico" (UW 34), is retold by Russian waste engineers in the novel's final section (UW 794).

The architecture of Underworld, however, does not stop at one all-encompassing loop. The arrangement of the eleven individual sections of the novel – prologue, part one, Manx Martin 1, part two, part three, Manx Martin 2, part four, part five, Manx Martin 3, part six, epilogue – can be seen as mirror-images, splitting around the second Manx Martin insert into two roughly equal halves. Each half covers nearly twenty-five years, and within each there are a number of complicated subsidiary circles reinforcing the looping structure of the whole.

The first half of the novel, after the prologue, forms one of these loops. The loop begins at the start of part one, which opens with Nick "driving a Lexus through a rustling wind" (UW 63) in the desert to see Klara Sax, a woman whose marriage he helped break up when he slept with her in the fifties, and is completed at the end of part three, where the final image is of Nick's wife, Marian, driving in tears after Nick has admitted a later adultery. Replicating this, the second half similarly forms a circular structure, again excluding the first part, and enclosing from the beginning of part five to the last page of the novel. Part five begins with Nick in a penitentiary in Staatsburg, staring at "rolling hills that made you wonder who you were" (UW 501). The last description in the novel, narrated by an unnamed character, is of "solitary hills" (UW 827).

This circles within circles pattern is repeated a further level down, with parts two and five – mirrored parts in the novel's palindromatic structure – both being circular. Part two consists of ten chapters that apparently proceed chronologically,

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larger structure to which Osteen's pattern is subordinate.

but outwith this progression, a circle forms around the Texas Highway Killer. The

first chapter in this section begins with Matt Shay watching a video of a murder

committed by the Texas Highway Killer, and the tenth chapter ends with the serial

killer walking out to his car wearing a glove on his shooting hand, about to commit a

murder he may be filmed committing. A further circle is ensured here because the

video of the murder is endlessly looped: according to Matt's wife the video is

replayed "a thousand times a day" on television (UW 160).

The structure of part five, a section that Tanner singled out as particularly

"discontinuous and unrelated" (207), is more complicated. Consisting of seven

chapters, each subdivided into three sections covering different time periods, part five

begins and ends in November, and begins in light and ends in darkness on the night of

the great New York City blackout. A version of the book's structure in microcosm,

part five divides into two mirror image halves and hinges on its middle chapter. In

the pivotal central section, the fourth, the temporal variation is shortest, a little over

six months, and DeLillo places at this centre Truman Capote's "Black and White

ball," a symbolically loaded gesture, the significance of which will become apparent

later.

The mirroring of part five's two halves is created through the temporal

arrangements of the three fragments that make up each chapter. In the first half

(chapters one to three), the fragments all begin with a chronologically earlier event,

have a later event at their centre, before returning to an earlier event: for example, the

first fragment of chapter one is set in 1952, the second in 1962, and the third goes

back to 1953. In the mirror image second half (chapters five to seven), the

arrangement is reversed to run later, earlier, later. So, the fragments in chapter five

begin in 1962, revisit 1959, and then conclude in 1962 once more. This structuring of

the novel into paired halves, with great significance attached to the notion of balance, resonates throughout the text, and can be seen to have been importantly built into DeLillo's plan of the novel from its earliest conception.

In an essay published in the New York Times magazine, entitled "The Power of History," DeLillo detailed how the foundations of the novel are based upon the unexpected symmetries of history. Casually looking for a newspaper report covering the 1951 play-off between the Giants and the Dodgers in the basement archives of a library, DeLillo found the front page of the New York Times for 4 October 1951 to include a suggestive pairing. Towards the end of Underworld, Bronzini picks up this newspaper:

> The front page astonished him, a pair of three-column headlines
>
> dominating. To his left the Giants capture the pennant, beating the
>
> Dodgers on a dramatic home run in the ninth inning. And to the right,
>
> symmetrically mated, same typeface, same-size type, same number of
>
> lines, the USSR explodes an atomic bomb. (UW 668)

In his essay, DeLillo describes the "detached fascination" he felt on seeing this "unexpected connection, a symmetry that seemed to be waiting for someone to discover it" (60). The headline suggested a first pairing – mass celebration and global terror – in a novel that would be "about conflicts on many levels" (63). The section that covers the ball game goes on to develop other pairings that recur throughout the rest of the book: black and white, "[f]ame and secrecy" (UW 17), crowds and power.

This, then, is the function of history in the novel: not to provide an overarching structural principle, as Tanner argues, but merely to suggest hidden symmetries and balances, and the notion of balance can be seen to operate in the novel on a number of levels. The emphasis on balance is even reflected in the graphic

layout of the novel. The book, which attempts to evoke "day[s] now gone to black and white in the film fade of memory" (UW 134), balances a black frontispiece with white endpaper around these memories.

The chronology of the book also seems to reinforce this emphasis on equilibrium. The ball game with which the novel begins is significantly placed exactly halfway through the century (the year is "1951" [UW 23]). And the date with which the second half of the novel begins, summer 1974, roughly pivots the book on the midpoint of the half-century. Within this timespan, DeLillo subtly balances (through a similar method to that used in End Zone and Libra), a number of characters as unsuspected counterparts. Throughout the book, the nun Sister Edgar and J. Edgar Hoover are covertly linked: one a carrier of religious faith, the other of "the faith of paranoia" (UW 825); both, in a novel about connection, fear the infection of others, the "all-pervading medium of pathogens, microbes, floating colonies of spirochetes" (UW 19) that people carry; and the link is made explicit at the end of the novel when DeLillo pairs Sister Edgar with J. Edgar Hoover as "biological opposites" (UW 826).

This pairing of male and female is repeated in probably the most important counterpoint established in the novel: the connection between Nick Shay and Klara Sax. Obviously linked by their affair, this connection is reinforced as the parallels are elaborated on a number of levels. Superficially, they are connected as escapees from the Bronx, as former teachers (Klara taught art [UW 688] and Nick taught "Civics and English" [UW 619]), as people who deal in the transformation of waste, and as people who do not carry their correct surnames: Nick carries his mother's maiden name because his father left her during her pregnancy (UW 105), and, after her divorce from Albert Bronzini, Klara discarded the spelling of her maiden name, "Sachs," for

the more marketable "Sax" (UW 483). More significant, however, is the contrast DeLillo establishes between their vertical movements in the novel.

In 1951, when the novel begins, Nick is a "sixteen-year old in the Bronx who takes his radio up to the roof of his building" to listen to baseball games (UW 32). After the game between the Giants and the Dodgers, however, Nick spends his time almost completely at ground level where he knows things "only at street level," feeling "a little isolated" and scared by "knowingness" (UW 635). Through most of parts five and six Nick, at street level, either seeks conflict or fears it, and his downward motion climaxes when, at the end of part six, some steps take him below the level of the city into a "basement room" (UW 778). It is here that he shoots George Manza.

Although by 1992 Nick, having been "reimagined and . . . made again" (UW 416), has begun to climb once more – his work place, significantly, is in the "Tower" – his downward movement is mirrored by Klara's ascent. In the chronologically earliest action involving Klara in the novel she is walking around at street level, and shortly later is in a car with her lover, paralleling Nick's youth (UW 397-99), but she soon moves above the street, and is next seen in the 1950s nursing a dying woman in a Bronx apartment. This ascent becomes explicit after her divorce when she commits herself to becoming an artist. By 1974 she is "forty stories" up (UW 388), enjoying what she calls her "rooftop summer" (UW 371), and it is at this point that she is seen as having successfully established her artistic credentials. When she is last seen, in 1992, her art projects have led her to deal with the skies, painting B-52 aircrafts, a project that puts her at the opposite pole to the terror of Nick's basement underworld.

"In a work of art," Tanner noted, "you usually feel that the scramblings and wrenched juxtapositionings have some point" ("Don DeLillo" 207), and outwith

demonstrating DeLillo's artistic mastery in being able to present a narrative packed with diverse information within a tight structure, it is perhaps fair to ask whether this elaborate structure serves any deeper point. Does it, as Adams maintains Joyce's Viconian circles do, refer to a deeper pattern that is largely indifferent to the novel's action? I believe that there is such a structure present in Underworld, and that it explains the complicated pattern of balanced loops and "wrenched juxtapositionings" in the novel. While the Joycean looping structure outlined here demonstrates DeLillo's affinities with modernism, it is partly through the implications of this hidden structure that the novel goes beyond the ideas of the modernists in a way that has made him an important influence on younger writers like Richard Powers, David Foster Wallace, and Evan Dara.

There is evidence, both in Underworld and DeLillo's other fiction, that he is well informed on contemporary theories of the mind, and the structure of Underworld begins to take on an added level of coherence when it is recognised that DeLillo is attempting to make the novel imitate a massive model of the human brain: the novel seeks to present "a living likeness of the mind's own technology" (UW496). Like Joyce's structures that form without "the conscious awareness of the characters" (Adams, AfterJoyce 45), this structure is obviously beyond the "mopey C-plus in introductory chemistry" that Nick Shay achieved (UW 678), but it is DeLillo's use of neuroscientific research, rather than Freudian psychology, that explains, not just why critics have had such problems discerning the structure and deeper plot of the novel, but also why Tanner felt such discomfort with the lack of "traditionally delineated characters." In Underworld, characters are not delineated according to the more traditional psychoanalytic template, but, as David Foster Wallace notes elsewhere, "entire psychological maps are being redrawn" (BI 91).

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"How do minds work?" a character in Don DeLillo's The Names asks, "[w]hat does the latest research show?" (N 98). Although the third edition of the Encyclopædia Britannica defined the novel as being "above all" interested in "the nature of the affection called Love, and the consequences of indulging it" (13: 130), writers have shown a persistent interest in exploring introspection, psychological motivation, and how minds work, whether it be Addison reading character as a mix of "humours . . . grave or mellow" (292), or the phrenology-influenced Charlotte Brontë attributing behaviour to the "organ of veneration" in Jane Eyre (49). In the twentieth century, however, by far the most influential explanation of how the mind works has been the Freudian map of the mind.

Perhaps because Freud's emphasis on fear, madness, introspection, morality, guilt, dreams, sex and death shows some affinity to the traditional interests of fiction, his theories were quickly assimilated or disputed by writers.[17] Amongst the modernists his influence seems to be everywhere: Joyce's reference to a "freudful mistake" (FW 411.35-6) makes his knowledge explicit; Virginia Woolf (whose sister-in-law wrote a book about Freud) seems, despite her denials, to have assimilated some of his ideas; Lawrence wrote two books reacting against psychoanalysis; while, to the slightly later Auden, Freud seemed upon his death to have expanded to be "no more a person . . . but a whole climate of opinion" ("In Memory of Sigmund Freud" 67-68).

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[17] Frederick J. Hoffmann, in his study Freudianism and the Literary Mind, has noted of the spread of Freud's theories that by "1915 psychoanalysis was . . . well launched in the magazines from which the intellectual of that day drew his information" (52), while Philip Rahv noted in 1970 that there was still "a close affinity between the Freudian and the literary mind" (152).

Despite the breadth of this influence, however, the scientific validity of Freud's work has been increasingly questioned in the last few decades: Freud has been criticised for lying about his past, for distorting accounts of his procedures, and some critics even go so far as to allege that "a careful scrutiny of his texts reveal inconsistencies so gross that they point to a profoundly opportunistic cast of mind" (Cioffi 1-2). Even the usefulness of applying his theories to literature has been critiqued, with Joseph Carroll, noting that even in the 90s "overwhelmingly the most influential version of psychology in literary studies is the Freudian version," arguing that such a basis "almost inevitably introduce[s] distorting ideas of incest and castration anxiety" (165).

Nevertheless, even in the last few decades, some writers have continued to look to Freud for the psychological foundations of their novels. The clearest example of this is probably provided by Philip Roth, who even goes so far as to accord psychoanalysis a critical role in his development as a writer. Roth explains:

> If I hadn't been analyzed I wouldn't have written Portnoy's Complaint
>
> as I wrote it, or My Life as a Man as I wrote it, nor would The Breast
>
> resemble itself. Nor would I resemble myself. The experience of
>
> psychoanalysis was probably more useful to me as a writer than as a
>
> neurotic. ("Philip Roth" 279)

The importance of Freud to Roth is apparent on even a cursory examination of his infamous Portnoy's Complaint. Explicitly based around Freud's essay "The Most Prevalent Form of Degradation in Erotic Life," the novel quotes Freud, makes reference to "Oedipal rage" (64), repression, the id, and the super-ego. "This is right out of the casebook, is it not?" the narrator asks (86).

Few contemporary novelists are as open in their use of Freud as Roth is here, but nonetheless, his importance to writers remains tangible. For John Updike, for example, Freud is significant as one of the "brave strong spirits" who "in the last century, have most brilliantly illuminated our sense of humanity" ("On One's Own Oeuvre" 869), while in Saul Bellow's most recent novel, Ravelstein, despite his apparent ambivalence towards Freud,[18] two psychoanalysts are mentioned (49, 95, 163), and one character seems to have something like an Oedipus complex.

How the Mind Works is the title of a recently published popularised account of the neuroscientific map of the mind by Steven Pinker and, along with accessible expositions by the likes of Daniel Dennett, Joseph LeDoux, and Susan Greenfield,[19] such works have begun to make more widely known the biologically-based theory of the mind. While writers like Roth, Bellow, and Updike have continued to draw upon an outdated and discredited psychological paradigm, more scientifically alert writers have begun to respond to these new developments in their novels. Rather than being based around ideas of desire and repression, the psychological foundations of these novels re-orientate emotional interest to consider automatic responses, like fear, whose generation can be traced to specific biological structures of the brain.

Freud, of course, began his career as a neurologist, studying the nervous systems of crayfish, and later the medulla oblongata, and in 1886 even planned to write an "ambitious book . . . on the anatomy of brain" (Jones 232).[20] Much of this

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[18] Of his mixture of suspicion and attraction to Freud's theories, Bellow wrote to Lionel Trilling in 1974 that "Freudian theory" was to him a "story, albeit a fascinating one" (qtd. in Atlas 420).
[19] Daniel Dennett's Consciousness Explained attempts to show that "the various phenomena that compose what we call consciousness . . . are all physical effects of the brain's activities" (16), Joseph LeDoux's The Emotional Brain traces the development of emotional life from the brain's "10 billion neurons . . . wired together in enormously complex ways" (22), while Susan Greenfield, in The Human Brain, discusses "how the 'mind' might arise from the brain" (xiv).
[20] Ernest Jones, one of Freud's many biographers, even goes so far as to credit him with outlining "the essence of the neurone theory, which, however, he failed to formulate definitely" (241).

research was fairly laborious – trying to trace paths through the complicated patterns

of stained nervous tissue – and, in a later study of fear, he disassociated himself from

such materialist interpretations of the mind, explaining that "I must remark that I

know nothing that could be of less interest to me for the psychological understanding

of anxiety than a knowledge of the path of the nerves along which its excitations

pass" (393).[21] In the last few decades, however, such limitations have been eased as

new imaging techniques have allowed neuroscientists to map the brain's neuronal

circuitry with increasingly clarity, and while the neurobiologist Jean-Pierre Changeux

has called attention to the importance of the field, observing that the "impact of the

discovery of the synapse and its functions is comparable to that of the atom or DNA"

(xvii), the shift from Freudian psychoanalysis to biology-based neuroscience as a way

of understanding how minds work has gone largely unrecognised by literary critics,

often causing them to misinterpret recent novels. Even when critics have brought an

awareness of recent brain research to literary studies, their focus has been wholly

upon theoretical issues, rather than upon writers who have explored the possibilities

for a new understanding of emotions that neuroscientific research offers.[22]

Of course, having been published in 1955, and inspite of its references to

"those nerve tissues between the frontal lobes of the brain" (R 933), The Recognitions

for specific historical reasons is only partly involved with this shift. The novel reacts

against Freudian psychoanalysis, but, as critics have persuasively argued, the novel's

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[21] It is interesting to note this rejection of the materialist position alongside Gerald Edelman's claim, in his study Bright Air, Brilliant Fire which argues for "a biological theory of how we come to have minds" (1), that Freud was "essentially correct" about the action of the unconscious (145).

[22] Two book-length studies have already been published: Mark Turner's Reading Minds, which proposes "a reframing of the study of English . . . upon the study of the human mind" (vii) as a response to the fracturing of literary studies, and Ellen Spolsky's Gaps in Nature, which reads literary critical texts under the assumption that "a culture's most powerfully imaginative texts are understandable as the heroic efforts of particularly responsive minds, goaded by the asymmetry and incompleteness of mental representation to vault the gaps in brain structure thus surpassing the limitations of the biological inheritance" (2).

psychological basis is broadly Jungian.[23] Slightly younger writers, like Joseph

McElroy, whose novel Plus takes a disembodied brain floating in space as its subject

matter, and John Barth who adopts "neuroscientific terminology" in his essays to

explore memory (Further Fridays 191), have, however, shown their knowledge of

recent brain research and, amongst the earliest of these, I would argue, is DeLillo who

employs neuroscience to explain psychological motivation and emotions from his

third novel onwards.

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"Fear," the neuroscientist Joseph LeDoux has observed, "is probably the

emotion that has been studied the most, both by psychologists and by neuroscientists,"

("In Search of an Emotional System" 1050) and, while DeLillo's novels detail the

media fascinations of modern America – reclusive rock stars, football, the Kennedy

assassination, terrorism, the power of the image – they also explore what he calls in

Ratner's Star, "the fear level . . . the starkest tract of awareness" (RS 4).[24] In Ratner's

Star it becomes apparent that this exploration has been heavily influenced by

DeLillo's knowledge of neuroscience. The "human brain," the novel notes:

> As now constituted . . . can be viewed in cross-section as a model for
>
> examining the relative depths of protohistoric and modern terror.
>
> Cycles and depressions and earliest wetland secretions of dread
>
> (brainstem and midbrain), not to mention . . . that (limbic) region of
>
> emotional disorganization, . . . leaving us, he thought, with the

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[23] Steven Moore in particular argues for such a foundation in A Reader's Guide and William Gaddis.
[24] Nan Graham, who worked as DeLillo's editor, noted of his genesis as a novelist that "he had two folders – one marked 'art' and the other marked 'terror' . . . Eventually the two folders became one" (qtd. in DeLillo, "Dangerous Don DeLillo" 76).

geometry, music and poetry of our evolved, cross-referencing and

highly specialized outer layer of gray tissue (cerebral cortex). (RS 381)

The development of the brain, as this passage notes, begins at the top of the spinal

column with the brain stem, a part of the brain that evolved millions of years ago and

which, because of its resemblance to the entire brains of reptiles today, is often

referred to as the reptilian brain. Above is the limbic system which generates most of

our emotions, and at the top is the cerebral cortex which controls higher mental

functions like conceptualising, planning and verbal abilities. Although such

generalisations are a little over-reductive, there is a rough correlation between literally

higher portions of the brain, and "higher" realms of thought, with DeLillo's reference

to the brain stem and "the depths of modern terror" referring to the reptilian brain's

connections to fear control. Directing heart rate and other nervous system responses,

the brain stem works with the amygdala (a component of the limbic system) to dictate

responses to terror, by interpreting stimuli without the involvement of higher cortical

processing systems. The generation of fear reactions in the base of the brain, typically

freezing and fight or flight, then, are automatic responses that demonstrate man's

continuity with animal. They are primitive reactions that evolved to ensure survival.[25]

After including elements that might be considered Freudian in his first novel,[26]

DeLillo begins to explore the possibilities of this more modern conceptualisation of

how the mind works in two novels he published in the seventies, Great Jones Street

and Ratner's Star. The two novels are paired by internal correspondences,[27] by

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[25] LeDoux outlines the brain's response to terror in chapter six of his The Emotional Brain.

[26] DeLillo drew attention to the novel's oedipal plot by noting that one of the "two planes of incest" in Americana is "between the protagonist and his mother" ("Don DeLillo on Don DeLillo" 327), although Tom LeClair argues that the foundation lies in Gregory Bateson's work rather than Freud's (In the Loop 34-35).

[27] Both novels refer to the fictional study of "latent history" (GJS 75; RS 387).

reference to some of the same historical figures (Kafka is used as a symbol of

paranoia in each), and through their references to neuroscience and the brain.[28]

Great Jones Street traces the retreat of a rock star, Bucky Wunderlick, away

from the "tropics of fame" (GJS 4) into monkish isolation in a first floor flat. In this

block of flats, where most of the novel's action takes place, a map of the mind can be

revealingly overlaid, a strategy the novel encourages through several references to the

brain.[29] In the flat directly below Bucky is Micklewhite, a deformed skull-less boy

who is kept hidden and is unable to speak, managing only the most primitive pre-

linguistic responses to stimuli. In the flat above Bucky, by contrast, the garrulous

poet, novelist, mystery-writer, and pornographer Edward B. Fenig lives. Overbearing

and ubiquitous, Fenig keeps a massive trunk in his room where he stores everything

he has ever written. In this layout, the geography of the building resembles a "living

organism" (GJS 27), with Micklewhite representing the primitive demands of the

reptilian brain, and Fenig representing the cerebral cortex, with his writing trunk

perhaps corresponding to memory as, in Ratner's Star, a character reflects that

"[w]riting is memory" (RS 362). Bucky, then, would represent the emotional limbic

system, negotiating between primitive urges and more sophisticated demands, and this

reading is encouraged by the way his music moves between these two poles: while on

the one hand he is a creative lyric writer, on the other, the childish "[p]ee-pee-maw-

maw" (GJS 118) has become his catch-phrase. While this is DeLillo's first attempt at

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[28] Despite the length of time that has elapsed since these novels were published, and the explicit nature of DeLillo's references to neuroscience in Ratner's Star, surprisingly little research has been devoted to explicating his ideas. Rare exceptions include Tom LeClair, in his chapter discussing The Names in In the Loop, and Jefferson Eitig Faye's doctoral dissertation "Cerebrating the Novel: Toward a Neuro-Cognitive Analysis of Contemporary American Fiction." LeClair devotes a few pages to expatiating how the mind works, concluding that "the emotional continuum of safety and fear could be mapped onto the vertical axis of brain development that DeLillo describes in Ratner's Star" (200), while Faye reads White Noise and Ratner's Star as paired novels: White Noise is "a narrative emerging from the reptilian brain, the story of Jack Gladney's attempt to ascend from an atavistic fear-dominated existence to the cerebral hemisphere's informational processing capabilities" (142), while Ratner's Star traces the corresponding descent.

overlaying brain structures onto one of his novels, the more sophisticated layout of Underworld works in a similar way.

Mapping the balanced movements of characters in Underworld onto the vertical structures of the brain, it becomes clear that one of DeLillo's aims is to dramatise the descent into the brain's own underworld: the fear-dominated reptilian brain. Viewed in this way, Underworld represents "a kind of neural process remapped in the world" (UW 451), and Nick's rapid descent from the top of a building to a basement after the loss of a baseball game can be seen as a metaphor for his regression to a more primitive level of the brain, where his responses are increasingly dictated by the reptilian brain's fight or flight instinct. Under the influence of "the snake brain of early experience" he responds at this stage to stimuli that are "familiar in some strange paleolithic root-eating way" (UW 422). In part six of the novel, the key phase covering Nick's regression, the action mainly takes place on, or below, street level. In this section Nick's behaviour oscillates between shying from confrontation with the more established denizens of the Bronx and attacking those who have strayed from "where [they] belong" onto his territory (UW 762-63) – in this case two men who, significantly, are marked out as members of the animal kingdom by the imprint "Hawks" on their jackets. When he goes below street level, in the climax of this section, and shoots George Manza he has symbolically descended to the most primitive impulses of the brain, given in to the "craving[s] . . . of the brain stem" (UW 451).

Klara's corresponding ascent, then, represents the climb to a higher level of cognition, which Nick will eventually try to follow. Having risen from the streets to the roofline, Klara is now able to look down on the lower levels Nick occupies and

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[29] For example, the references to "the left sector of the brain. Language sector" (GJS 255).

recognise the less advanced stage of intellectual evolution they seem to represent: "the streets were taking on a late medieval texture," she reflects, "which maybe meant we had to learn all over again to live among the mad" (UW 391). As an artist living "above the grid of fever streets" Klara finds "a hidden city" (UW 371) and is able to gain the wider, more inclusive, perspective that DeLillo suggests is characteristic of higher-level brain activity. Looking down, she describes her newly found holistic perspective in a passage where the contrast in levels of cerebral evolution is made explicit: "Ten million bobbing heads that ride above the tideline of taxi stripes, all brainwaved differently, and yes the streets abound in idiosyncrasy, in the human veer, but you have to go to roof level to see the thing distinct" (UW 371, emphasis mine).

These different levels of cognition are reflected in the opposed ways Nick and Klara have used waste over the course of their careers. Nick senses, after his relative re-ascendance, that there may be a connection, but the wider implications of it are closed to him. Early in the novel he reflects:

> I almost mentioned my line of work to Klara Sax when we had our talk
> in the desert. Her own career had been marked at times by her methods
> of transforming and absorbing junk. But . . . I didn't want her to think I
> was implying some affinity of effort and perspective. (UW 102)

Nick, along with most of his colleagues in waste management, has risen above the reptilian brain's fight or flight dictates by the time he is engaged in landfill work, but they are still far from the wide inclusive perspective achieved by Klara. In fact, their reaction to waste is akin to those of a society that, having achieved some freedom from animal conflict, now conceives of their wellbeing as being at the mercy of mysterious and punitive gods. Waste, especially in the view of Nick and Jesse Detwiler, becomes an object of awe and veneration. They fear and revere it,

according it the respect demanded by a mythological god. Nick traces etymologies back to reveal the religious undercurrents of the most potent waste – "[t]he word plutonium comes from Pluto, god of the dead and ruler of the underworld" (UW 106) – and Detwiler imagines this view receiving widescale recognition in the future: "Irradiated ground. The way the Indians venerate this terrain now, we'll come to see it as sacred in the next century. Plutonium National Park. The last haunt of the white gods" (UW 289).

Ultimately, Nick, like his co-worker Simeon Biggs (UW 283), develops a totalising vision regarding waste, and begins to see it everywhere:

> Marian and I saw products as garbage even when they sat gleaming on store shelves, yet unbought. We didn't say, What kind of casserole will that make? We said, What kind of garbage will that make? Safe, clean, neat, easily disposed of? . . . First we saw the garbage, then we saw the product. (UW 121)

Their anxious perspective demands that the passage of products into waste and under the ground is speedy and efficient, like the rites undertaken with the burial of the dead to ensure a swift passage to the underworld. This outlook also, however, begins to explain the role that paranoia has in the novel.

Tony Tanner argued in his essay that DeLillo was "engaged in a prolonged and repetitious quoting or re-working of Pynchon" (210) in his use of paranoia in the novel, and he summarised what he saw as the contrasting levels of achievement:

> in Gravity's Rainbow Pynchon diagnosed two dominant states of mind – paranoia and anti-paranoia. Paranoia is, in terms of the book, "nothing less than the onset, the leading edge of the discovery that everything is connected . . ." Paranoia is also related to the Puritan obsession with

seeing signs in everything, particularly signs of an angry God. . . . The opposite state of mind is anti-paranoia, "where nothing is connected to anything, a condition not many of us can bear for long." . . . Pynchon is a truly brilliant and richly imaginative historian and diagnostic analyst of binary, either-or thinking, and its attendant dangers. DeLillo, by contrast, rather bluntly disseminates a vaguely fraught atmosphere of defensive voices, sidelong looks, and intimations of impending eeriness. (210-11)

In fact, recognition of the neuroscientific basis of Underworld shows that this is not the case, and that DeLillo is involved in a quite different enterprise to Pynchon. Rather than giving the novel, what Tanner called, "a rather wearingly uniform paranoid texture" (209), DeLillo's use of paranoia can be seen to be closely tied to his account of the descent into the reptilian brain, with the novel actually critiquing paranoia as the product of a fear-dominated outlook. This can be seen by examining the key examples of paranoia in the book, which are each tied to moments of evolutionary regression. For example, Nick's brother's recognition of paranoia and "what it meant" (UW 421), comes when he is engaged in weapon's work, a job which he links to the "brain stem" (UW 451), and Nick's paranoid erection of a mystical aura around bad luck after the loss of a baseball game, complete with a system of numerology based around the number thirteen, begins when he moves down from the rooftops, beginning his cerebral regression (UW 95).[30] These fear-inspired instances, like those involving Nick and his colleagues' treatment of waste, elevate the "false faith . . . of paranoia" to a quasi-religion (UW 825).

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[30] Similarly, J. Edgar Hoover, who is something of an antenna for paranoia in the novel, interprets the behaviour of those around him as that of competing animals, as he becomes nervous in the novel's opening crowd. The noise Jackie Gleason makes, according to Hoover, is "an aquatic bark . . . the hoarse call of some mammal in distress" (UW 44).

At the opposite pole, as her movements suggest is Klara, and this fear-dominated outlook contrasts sharply with her work. Existing in what "was supposed to be a postpainterly age" (UW 393), Klara creates innovative art by reinvigorating the discarded materials of society, as demonstrated by her B-52 project. She explains: "There were a few of us then. We took junk and saved it for art. Which sounds nobler than it was. It was just a way of looking at something more carefully. And I'm still doing it, only deeper maybe" (ibid.). Her summary of her work is modest but, in this recycling of waste into art, a collaborative project less concerned with romantic notions of originality than with the recombination of existing materials, her work is in line with the portraits of the artist by Joyce and Gaddis, detailed earlier and perhaps shares some resemblance to the artistic processes of DeLillo and the other postmodern artists of his generation.[31]

Of course, the human brain, however, does not simply work on this vertical axis, but, considered in horizontal cross-section, is split into two roughly equal hemispheres, connected by the thickly bundled nerve fibres of the corpus callosum. Each hemisphere is distinguished by the different specialised capabilities they control,[32] and while some researchers have gone so far as to suggest that "an independent stream of consciousness resides in each of the separate hemispheres,"[33] the brain works most effectively when it can integrate these specialised processing strengths into an unified whole. While Ratner's Star can be read in terms of a vertical

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[31] It is perhaps worth noting that DeLillo's contemporaries, Pynchon and Gaddis, have both written novels with waste as a subtext. "What America's all about," one character claims in JR, "waste disposal and all" (JR 27), and (as outlined at the end of the last chapter) the novel itself is partly about the possibility of creating art in a world where everything seems to be waste. In Pynchon's short novel, The Crying of Lot 49, W.A.S.T.E. is one of the revealing acronyms for the Tristero.

[32] Neuroscientists like Sally Springer and Georg Deutsch have analysed the division of these functions between the two hemispheres, finding abilities like language skills in the left hemisphere, and spatial skills in the right, in their influential study Left Brain, Right Brain.

[33] Roger Sperry's research with split brain patients summarised in Left Brain, Right Brain (6).

overlay of the brain,[34] more central to the novel is this horizontal map of the mind.

As DeLillo explained to LeClair: "There's a strong demarcation between the parts.

They are opposites. . . . Left brain, right brain" ("An Interview with Don DeLillo"

28). Sharing Underworld's structural belief that "[e]very invention has an element of

balance" (RS 348-49), Ratner's Star is divided into two mirrored and opposing parts

entitled "Field Experiment Number One" and "Logicon Project Minus-One" (RS 1,

277, emphasis mine). Distinguished by radically different styles, these two parts

dramatise the different processing strengths of the brain's two hemispheres through a

number of thematic oppositions, paired characters, and looping structures.

While the two halves of Underworld are not marked by the distinct stylistic

contrast DeLillo adopts in Ratner's Star, the structuring of the novel into two large

hemispheres, with numerous subsidiary parallel loops, can similarly be seen to imitate

the structure of the brain. As the brain seeks complementary relationships between

the opposed capabilities in each hemisphere, the structure of paired halves in

Underworld might be seen to seek a similarly symbiotic relationship, encouraging the

reader to explore "what is the connection between Us and Them, how many bundled

links do we find in the neural labyrinth?" (UW 51). Viewed in this way, Underworld

is an unitary book that seeks collaboration between its many opposed pairings: young

and old, male and female, and, perhaps essentially, black and white.

Sandwiched between black and white end papers, the text of Underworld

might be thought to have the relationship between different races at its centre. This

suggests one of the ways that Marvin Lundy's comment "[d]ark, light. These are

words" (UW 178), that I referred to earlier as an allusion to Ulysses, could be

interpreted. Viewed as a reference to Joyce (an allusion that, in typically Joycean

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[34] DeLillo's heavily science based novel, which argues that "[n]o definition of science is complete
without a reference to terror" (RS 36), fits the vertical overlay as it begins in mid-flight and ends below

fashion, would be made above and beyond the consciousness of the character making the statement), Marvin's comment echoes the pacifistic Leopold Bloom's "[h]ate. Love. Those are names" (U 368). Underworld, then, attempts to establish Bloom's preference for "abnegation, equanimity" (U 864), over violent retribution as a parallel for relationships between races, and like the carefully poised equilibrium with which Ulysses ends, with Molly and Leopold "at rest relatively to themselves and each other" (U 870), DeLillo's novel seeks a similarly symbiotic relationship between races that, like the one between the brain's two hemispheres, would be "reciprocally satisfying" (UW 591).

If this is the case, then the passage of the baseball (whose path ties together the different narrative strands of the book) between black and white might be significant. In this reading Truman Capote's "Black and White Ball" which, as mentioned earlier, is situated at the centre of part five (the structure of which parallels the structure of the novel as a whole), attains significance not just as a pun on the ball's movement between races, but also has structural importance: a ball that united black and white would appropriately be at the centre of the novel. The ultimate symbol of unity in the book, then, might be seen as the event which best synthesised difference: the 1950s ballgame crowd with which the novel begins.

Unlike the fearful, looming crowds that inhabit his other novels[35] this crowd of the past is more about connection as it openly embraces black and white.[36] There is an obvious linkage established in the bonding of Cotter Martin and Bill Waterson, but the crowd also creates a link to the past: "That's the thing about baseball," Bill

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the ground as it charts evolutionary regression.

[35] Particularly Mao II, whose prologue ends with the sentence: "The future belongs to crowds" (M 16).

[36] That it became DeLillo's intention to make this crowd unite black and white is perhaps revealed by the fact that, between the version that appeared as a short story in 1992, and the publication of Underworld, DeLillo removed the explicit racism of Bill describing Cotter's behaviour as "nigger-ish" ("Pafko" 68).

explains, "[y]ou do what they did before you. That's the connection you make" (UW 31). The baseball crowd also allows the liberating possibility of what Elias Canetti (an important influence on DeLillo), in his study Crowds and Power, calls "the discharge," which he summarises as the "most important occurrence within the crowd . . . when all who belong to the crowd get rid of their differences and feel equal" (18), while still preserving the individual voice. DeLillo has explained how attempting to encompass this required a new technique: "The prologue is written with a sort of super-omniscience. There are sentences that may begin in one part of the ball park and end in another. . . . they travel from one person's mind to another" ("Exile on Main Street" 44) and, in a further link to the depiction of how the mind works, Daniel Dennett, in Consciousness Explained, has likened human consciousness to a crowd.

Seeking to critique Cartesian dualism and the extravagant Freudian "hypothesis of an internal dream playwright composing therapeutic dream plays for the benefit of the ego" (14), Dennett proposes what he calls the "Multiple Drafts" model of consciousness.[37] In this model, there is no single centre of consciousness, but instead consciousness operates along the same sort of principles as a crowd. The "software of the brain, performs a sort of internal political miracle: It creates a virtual captain of the crew, without elevating any one of [the specialiast organs of the brain] to long-term dictatorial power. Who's in charge? First one coalition and then another" (228). This emphasis on group collaboration, alongside the symbiosis effected by the two halves of the brain, provides a context in which the final word of the novel – "[p]eace" (UW 827) – might be interpreted, and counters the claims of numerous critics who have branded him cynical and depressing. Read in this way, the

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[37] Dennett summarises this model as follows: "According to the Multiple Drafts model, all varieties of perception – indeed, all varieties of thought or mental activity – are accomplished in the brain by parallel, multitrack processes of interpretation and elaboration of sensory inputs. Information entering the nervous system is under continuous 'editorial revision'" (111).

novel's last word, given the mitigating evidence of the violence of the last fifty years, and taking account of the various conflicts the book details, is neither naïvely optimistic or hollowly cynical, but, like Cotter Martin in the novel's first sentence, is at least "halfway hopeful" (UW 11) of a peaceful future.[38]

"The American Book of the Dead" was a title DeLillo considered for White Noise,[39] presumably bearing in mind the novel's examinations of fear of death, and its critique of the empty death-in-life of a consumer based existence, but it would also have been an appropriate title for his encyclopedic Underworld. The opening section of the later novel is entitled "The Triumph of Death," and while this obviously refers to Bruegel, it also alerts the reader to the fact that the dead will be an important part of the book's "census-taking of awful ways to die" (UW 50).

Within the first hundred pages the narrator makes reference to "epic design" (UW 83), and the contemporary action of the novel is shrouded in references to the descent into the underworld of the dead from classical epics. The general framework of such a descent is present as Nick describes himself as having "died inside" (UW 93), after the loss of the baseball game that triggers his evolutionary descent, and the sports field he departs from is described as "elysian" (UW 134). More specifically, Nick's search for his father – who he believes was taken by gangland members of the criminal underworld – echoes the sixth book of Virgil's epic, where his hero descends to the underworld in search of his dead father.

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[38] DeLillo himself, in an interview published shortly after the novel's release, has explained that the last word of the novel is intended to balance the dissension that fills the novel: "The last word of the novel, just a two-dimensional pulse on a computer screen, is Peace. And I mean that, again, to be completely unambiguous. In a novel which is so steeped in conflict . . . I wanted a yearning for peace to be at the end" ("Echo in an Explosion" 17).

[39] LeClair notes that one "working title of the novel was 'The American Book of the Dead.'" (In the Loop 228).

While there are also references to the underworlds of Egyptian mythology and Zoroastrianism,[40] the dead in DeLillo's book are also, as this reading has attempted to show, those many who have been undone by a metaphorical death from fear, unable to ascend to higher cognitive levels. "We find messages of death and danger everywhere," DeLillo noted in an essay. "On the nightly news, in the medical column, on the health channel, in the images of the homeless and the AIDS-afflicted, in the junk mail, in the public service advisories, in the supermarket tabloids and their cult worship of the celebrity dead" ("Silhouette City" 29). Although DeLillo's subsequent book, The Body Artist also employs circular structure and explores "neural depths" (BA 54),[41] Underworld, with its encyclopedic range, takes in this panorama of fear most fully and catalogues the multiplying threats "at the nightmare edge of collective perception" ("Silhouette City" 30). In this sense, the novel is not, as some critics have argued, a late aberration, but represents the deepest examination of what has been the central theme of his work, an exploration of "the relative depths of protohistoric and modern terror" (RS 381). Although Tanner found the centre of the novel "limited and self-restrictive" (213), like Dante's The Divine Comedy, it is an encyclopedic work that traces a journey through an underworld in the hope of achieving freedom from fear.

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[40] The fear-dominated approach to waste of Nick and his colleagues prompts two comparisons of waste disposal to pyramids, and, as I. E. S. Edwards has noted in The Pyramids of Egypt, it was "through the pit of the[se] tomb[s]" that access was gained to the Egyptian underworld (30). References to Zoroastrianism, however, are more oblique. Mary Boyce, in A History of Zoroastrianism, notes that on the way to the underworld there was "a common old belief in some dangerous crossing-place . . . and associated with this there was apparently a myth of a pair of 'four-eyed' dogs by whom the spirit must pass to reach . . . the drear haven of the kingdom of the dead" (116). Significantly, Nick's colleague Brian experiences "terrible things every time he cross[es] a bridge" (UW 167).

[41] Like Underworld, The Body Artist's circular structure involves a series of loops. A loop is established between start and end – the first word of the novella is "[t]ime" (BA 7), while the last sentence is "[s]he wanted to feel the sea tang on her face and the flow of time in her body, to tell her who she was" (BA 124) – but, in addition, chapters one, three and five are also circular.

CHAPTER THREE

"AN ENCYCLOPEDIA OF THE INFORMATION AGE": RICHARD POWERS'S THE GOLD BUG VARIATIONS.

"Since I have undertaken to manhandle this Leviathan," Melville noted in

Moby-Dick, "it behoves me to approve myself omnisciently exhaustive in the

enterprise" (496), and he sought to achieve the widest possible coverage by

synthesising elaborate etymologies, cetology, biblical lore, and a variety of literary

genres into one vast work. With such range, Moby-Dick has long been recognised as

epic in its scale, and several recent studies have set out to delineate the specific epic

characteristics of the novel in some detail. Christopher Sten, for example, argues in

his study of Melville that the "first clues that Moby-Dick belongs with the world's

great epics are to be found in the etymology and extracts sections of the book's

frontmatter. . . . [they] help to establish the epic stature, formidableness, and

inexhaustibility of Ishmael's subject" (138). What has not been so often recognised,

however, is how closely Melville's novel (and this section in particular) is tied in with

the idea of the encyclopedia.[1] The organisation of the extracts section, beginning with

Genesis and running through to secular whale songs, actually imitates the structuring

of systematically ordered encyclopedias which, as Collison notes, "started with things

divine . . . followed by mundane matters" (24).

The fact that Melville had "swam through libraries" (147), however, in the

creation of his encyclopedic work received little praise from contemporary reviewers,

as the novel was criticised for its incorporation of non-literary and scientific

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[1] It is ironic, however, that although the word encyclopedia appears in works by Hawthorne, Twain, Emerson, and Thoreau it does not appear anywhere in Moby-Dick, despite its reputation as the most encyclopedic of the classic American novels. The word dictionary, which, as Collison notes, was initially a rival term to encyclopedia (4), does, however, feature in the novel (262, 496, 602), sometimes in connection with Samuel Johnson's "huge quarto edition" (496).

information. "On this slight framework," George Ripley complained in a Harper's

New Monthly Magazine review in 1851, "the author has constructed a romance, a

tragedy, and a natural history, not without numerous gratuitous suggestions on

psychology, ethics, and theology" (qtd. in W. Branch 274). Similarly, the intersection

of information and fiction was criticised by the Literary Gazette's reviewer, who

raised more sinister questions about the conjunction of encyclopedic range and

specialist knowledge in the novel, noting that the "author has read up laboriously to

make a show of cetalogical learning. He has turned over the articles . . . in every

Encyclopædia within his reach. . . . For our own part, we believe that there must have

been some old original Cyclopædia, long since lost or destroyed, out of which all the

others have been compiled" because the work is "a barefaced pillage and extract from

a second hand source" (qtd. in W. Branch 276).[2]

While Moby Dick is now recognised as a central text in the American canon,[3]

in its encyclopedic attempts at the "classification of the constituents of a chaos" (145),

Melville's novel is also undoubtedly an important precursor of the works discussed in

this thesis.[4] Ironically, however, while Melville's use of nonliterary data brought

censure, it has been the alleged absence of science in postmodernist texts that has

been used as a criticism by modernist critics. The connections between modernism

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[2] Although it is a kind of literary blasphemy to suggest it, there is some basis for this suggestion, inasmuch as the 1836 edition of Charles Richardson's dictionary, which seems to have been the edition Melville used for the third quote in his etymology section, lists the quotes from Hackluyt, Spenser, and Goldsmith that Melville incorporates into his etymology and extracts lists (Richardson 2: 2177).

[3] Harold Bloom, for example, discussing Moby-Dick as a precursor of novels by Faulkner, Nathanael West, Pynchon, Cormac McCarthy, Ellison, and Toni Morrison, argues that the novel "is the fictional paradigm for American sublimity, for an achievement on the heights or in the depths, profound either way" (How to Read 236).

[4] Melville's work is frequently cited as a precursor to works like Ulysses and Gravity's Rainbow, but it is worth noting that an interdisciplinary history of American literature should take into account how widespread the mixing of the literary and the scientific has been in the US, notably (and of particular relevance in the light of Powers's fusion of Poe and DNA in The Gold Bug Variations) in the work of Edgar Allan Poe. Although in his "Sonnet – to Science" Poe had complained that science "preyest . . . upon the poet's heart" (3), in Eureka, which draws on Newton, Laplace and Bacon (the "hog" of the poem [9]), he asks that his prose poem is taken as both a poem and scientific truth, as he seeks to show that "all is Life – Life – Life within Life – the less within the greater" (138).

and science were probably first explored by Edmund Wilson in <u>Axel's Castle</u>, where

he discusses Proust alongside modern physics (157), and later critics like Levin and

Kenner continued to see links. Although Harry Levin made the rather broad claim

that, while new writers had abandoned science, the modernists had attempted to create

"a conscience for a scientific age" ("What was Modernism?" 295), Hugh Kenner was

more insistent about the relationship between modernism and science. Going beyond

his assertion in <u>A Homemade World</u> that new technologies like the Wright brothers'

Kitty Hawk provided "the first American input into the great imaginative enterprise"

of modernism (xii), Kenner outlines, in <u>The Mechanical Muse</u>, the more detailed

relationship between technology and modernism: "x-rays (1895) made plausible

transparent plains of matter (Picasso), the wireless superimposed the voices of twenty

countries (<u>Finnegans Wake</u>), newsreel quick-cutting helped prompt <u>The Waste Land</u>"

(9).

However, while all of the novels included in this thesis, from <u>The</u>

<u>Recognitions</u>'s formulae for forging old artistic materials to Wallace's pharmacology,

display a knowledge of science, there are few contemporary novelists who synthesise

the literary and the scientific as consistently as Richard Powers. "Such, and so

magnifying, is the virtue of a large and liberal theme!" Melville reflects, "[w]e expand

to its bulk. To produce a mighty book, you must choose a mighty theme" (497), and

Powers's theme has been nothing less than a systematic analysis of artistic and

scientific ideas in the twentieth century. In fact, Powers's early novels might be taken

as an unified attempt to create an encyclopedia of the twentieth century: <u>Three</u>

<u>Farmers on Their Way to a Dance</u> moves from the start of the century to the end of

the First World War and details the development of photography; <u>Prisoner's Dilemma</u>

covers the thirties and forties and is concerned with the mathematician John von

Neumann's game theory; The Gold Bug Variations is set in the fifties and eighties and

makes detailed reference to molecular biology; while Galatea 2.2 takes us into the

nineties and is based around artificial intelligence and theories of the mind.[5] While

this displays an impressive range of non-literary knowledge, his novels are also

notable for the breadth of their literary allusion. Three Farmers takes as its first

epigraph a quote from Proust,[6] and the numerous references Powers makes in his

novels to Melville, Joyce and Pynchon demonstrate his affinities with other creators

of encyclopedic narratives. Despite this impressive range, however, his fiction has

not received the attention it perhaps deserves,[7] and this chapter aims to demonstrate

both how his encyclopedic novel The Gold Bug Variations continues the tradition of

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[5] Powers's fourth novel, Operation Wandering Soul, provides the exception to this progression, being set in the near future.

[6] The epigraph – "[w]e guess as we read, we create; everything starts from an initial mistake. . . . A large part of what we believe to be true . . . with a persistence equalled only by our sincerity, springs from an initial misconception" (3F 6) – is taken from the end of volume five of Proust's In Search of Lost Time (5: 754).

[7] It is important to be as clear as possible when discussing this, rather than simply appealing to romantic notions of artistic neglect. Scott Hermanson, for example, writes in his essay "Chaos and Complexity in Richard Powers's The Gold Bug Variations," "despite reviews, [Powers has] been overlooked by academic criticism. N. Katherine Hayles neglects to mention Powers in both Chaos Bound and Chaos and Order, two books that seem tailor-made for The Gold Bug Variations" (38). However, Hermanson's appeal is rather weak given that (as even his own bibliography shows) Chaos Bound was published in 1990, and Chaos and Order in 1991. Since The Gold Bug Variations was not published itself until 1991, it is difficult to see how Hayles could have included it, although she does, in fact, discuss Powers in her next book How We Became Posthuman. For the sake of completeness, here is the complete list of critical work devoted to Powers up to 2000: Arthur M. Saltzman, "The Poetics of Elsewhere: Prisoner's Dilemma and the MacGuffin" in his The Novel in the Balance; Jay A. Labinger "Encoding an Infinite Message: Richard Powers's Gold Bug Variations;" Tom LeClair, "The Prodigious Fiction of Richard Powers, William Vollmann, and David Foster Wallace;" Scott Hermanson, "Chaos and Complexity in Richard Powers's The Gold Bug Variations;" April Lindner, "Narrative as Necessary Evil in Richard Powers's Operation Wandering Soul;" Robert L. McLaughlin, "Fighting Fire with Fire: the Bat Bomb in Richard Powers's Prisoner's Dilemma;" N. Katherine Hayles, "The Posthuman Body: Inscription and Incorporation in Galatea 2.2 and Snow Crash;" Jean-François Chassay, "Pygmalion à l'ère de la Virtualité: Apprendre Avec la Machine;" Luc Herman and Geert Lernout, "Genetic Coding and Aesthetic Clues: Richard Powers's Gold Bug Variations;" James Hurt, "Narrative Powers: Richard Powers as Storyteller;" Greg Dawes, "The Storm of Progress: Richard Powers's Three Farmers;" Joseph Dewey, "Hooking the Nose of the Leviathan: Information, Knowledge and the Mysteries of Bonding in The Gold Bug Variations;" Trey Strecker, "Ecologies of Knowledge: The Encyclopedic Narratives of Richard Powers and His Contemporaries;" Ann Pancake, "'The Wheel's Worst Illusion': The Spatial Politics of Operation Wandering Soul;" Sharon Snyder, "The Gender of Genius: Scientific Experts and Literary Amateurs in the Fiction of Richard Powers;" Charles B. Harris, "'The Stereo View': Politics and the Role of the Reader in Gain;" N. Katherine Hayles, "Material Signifiers in Galatea 2.2" in her How We Became Posthuman; Joseph Dewey, "Humming the (In)sufficient Heart Out: Richard Powers, The Gold Bug Variations" in his Novels

the encyclopedic narrative, and offers a powerful rejoinder to the many critics who have seen the scientific as inimical to the literary novel.

The roots of the debate about the relationship between literature and science, of course, have a lengthy history, but the dispute first achieved public prominence when Thomas Huxley, questioning Matthew Arnold's definition of culture, argued that while for most educated Englishmen a little Latin and Greek was sufficient to be considered cultured, "for the purposes of attaining real culture, an exclusively scientific education is at least as effectual as an exclusively literary education" (7). Although Arnold had made the melancholy prediction that "If I live to be eighty I shall probably be the only person left in England who reads anything but newspapers and scientific publications" (Letters 2:196), his response to Huxley, in his 1882 Rede Lecture "Literature and Science," argued strongly for the continued centrality of letters.[8]

The debate re-opened in the twentieth century with the controversy between C. P. Snow and F. R. Leavis, and while their dispute had significant continuities with the Huxley-Arnold debate, it is more relevant here because of the greater impact it had in the United States. This sometimes bitter feud began when C. P. Snow, in his infamous 1959 Rede Lecture, designated the arts and the sciences as the "Two Cultures," and diagnosed a "gulf of mutual incomprehension between them" (4). Echoing Huxley's concerns about the narrowness of preconceptions about culture, Snow argued that literary intellectuals were impoverished because they "still like to pretend that the traditional culture is the whole 'culture'" (Two Cultures 14). By

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From Reagan's America, an expanded version of his earlier essay; and Arthur M. Saltzman, "The Trope in the Machine: Richard Powers's Galatea 2.2" in his This Mad Instead.

[8] Defending himself against the charge of excluding science from the realm of culture, Arnold nevertheless promotes the humanist aspect of literature over science arguing that, for most people: "Letters will call out their being at more points, will make them live more" ("Literature and Science" 70).

doing this, Snow contended that literary intellectuals were cutting themselves off from arguments that were "usually much more rigorous, and almost always at a higher conceptual level, than literary persons' arguments" (12), and were failing to realise that "the scientific edifice of the physical world was . . . in its intellectual depth, complexity and articulation, the most beautiful and wonderful collective work of the mind of man." (14). Surveying contemporary literature in light of this, Snow notes with disappointment that "[i]t is bizarre how very little of twentieth-century science has been assimilated into twentieth-century art" (16).

A challenge to Snow's claims came, famously, through F. R. Leavis's lecture "Two Cultures? The Significance of Lord Snow." Leavis's response, however, was less concerned with providing examples of literature's interplay with twentieth-century science, than with critiquing the "portentously ignorant" ("Two Cultures?" 41) Snow's writing style and his materialist bias.[9] Rather than seeking to reconcile the two fields, Leavis echoed Arnold's response to Huxley and saw the significance of literature's humanist bias only increasing in the face of the accelerating rate of scientific development. "[T]he advance of science and technology means a human future of change so rapid and of such kinds, of tests and challenges so unprecedented," Leavis argued, that mankind will need "something with the livingness of the deepest vital instinct; as intelligence, a power – rooted, strong in experience, and supremely human – of creative response to the new challenges" (60-61).

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[9] Leavis accused Snow of overdependence on meaningless clichés (50), casually eliding the terms "literary culture" and "traditional culture" (49), and insisted that Snow's concentration upon material standards of living was too exclusive: "if you insist on the need for any other kind of concern, entailing forethought, action and provision, about the human future – any other kind of misgiving – than that which talks in terms of productivity, material standards of living, hygienic and technological progress, then you are a Luddite" (52).

In the face of these new developments the centre of the University, Leavis

concluded, must rest in a "vital English School" (63), but this was not to be the final

word on the debate from either combatant. Snow was to restate his case four years

later in "The Two Cultures: A Second Look," while six out of the seven essays

included in Leavis's <u>Nor Shall My Sword</u> include references to his dispute with

Snow.

In America, the debate was first taken up by Lionel Trilling who criticised

both Snow and Leavis for their failure to adequately respond to the issues raised, and

described the follow-up as symptomatic of the "generally bad state of intellectual

affairs" (150). Although in the ensuing years commentators like Thomas S. Kuhn

have seen "close and persistent parallels between the two enterprises [he] had been

taught to regard as polar" (340),[10] the grounds of the debate have begun to shift

somewhat. Boundaries between the two disciplines have become less clear as

movements like structuralism have sought to scientise literature, and, in the sciences,

Kuhn's <u>The Structure of Scientific Revolutions</u> critiqued the belief in linear scientific

progression, Kurt Gödel convinced the mathematicians that they could never have the

type of completeness they aimed for, and Paul K. Feyeraband argued against the

hegemony of scientific method.[11] With this problematisation of the epistemological

grounds of science, the debate has branched into a separate sub-discipline, often

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[10] Also in America, Richard Rorty suggested that the debate has actually reinforced, and perhaps even created, the division, arguing that "there is no need to continue the tedious culture wars that C. P. Snow and Martin Heidegger, among others have tried to incite. . . . There will be no conflict between these two groups of people unless somebody stirs it up" (36-37).

[11] Feyerabend argued: "Modern society is 'Copernican' not because Copernicanism has been put on a ballot, subjected to a democratic debate and then voted in with a simple majority; it is 'Copernican' because the <u>scientists</u> are Copernicans and because one accepts their cosmology as uncritically as one once accepted the cosmology of bishops and cardinals. . . . There is no special method that guarantees success or makes it probable . . . [e]verywhere science is enriched by unscientific methods and unscientific results" (301-5).

called "science studies,"[12] which frames the subject in terms of its cultural grounding.

Drawing on such diverse fields as philosophy of science, politics, sociology, gender

studies and linguistics, the conflict is no longer situated in terms of a binary

opposition between literature and science.

While the debate, then, has shifted and diversified in recent decades, the

Snow-Leavis line has not been totally abandoned. For example, Raymond Tallis, a

Professor of geriatric medicine, angered by what he sees as the continued dismissal of

science by humanist intellectuals, explicitly sought to defend Snow's position against

Leavis in his recent argumentative work, Newton's Sleep: Two Cultures and Two

Kingdoms. For Tallis, academics in the humanities (or "innumeracies" as he prefers

to call them [40]) have sought to draw upon a misreading of English Romanticism in

order to perpetuate the belief that ignorance of science is acceptable. The reason for

this, Tallis believes, is fundamentally because "scientific discourse is difficult and it is

reasonable to assume that humanist intellectuals share the common human preference

for avoiding difficult things" (6). This difficulty partly results from science's distance

from ordinary gossip. Reading a novel, Tallis contends, "appeals to something closer

to our everyday curiosity" (8), and, retreating into a field that does not necessitate the

rigour of empirical testing, humanities scholars are simply too envious and "idle" to

master science (72).

In contrast to this, Tallis defends the scientific community against critiques of

its lack of imagination and spiritual hollowness, and praises it, not only for its

supreme utility, but also as a truly international community that is notable for its

collaborative efforts. Unlike art, "[s]cience teaches humility: the Great Man matters

less than the Great (co-operative) Enterprise" (70). Whilst Tallis displays here what

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[12] See for example, Science Wars, edited by Andrew Ross, and Science as Practice and Culture, edited
by Andrew Pickering, which argue against the idea of a value-free science, attempting to uncover the

he calls "a laudable prejudice in favour of the useful in science" (xx), he does not deny that art retains some value, but it is consigned to Tallis's secondary category, the "Kingdom of Ultimate Ends" (205). Here art "presupposes that material needs can be forgotten or shelved for a while" (205), and allows us to transcend the quotidian and meet the "high standards set by memory and anticipation" (206). Daily life, Tallis argues, is unsatisfactory because our experiences fail to meet the ideals set by consciousness, but the ability of art to allow us to "rise above our lives" (207), enables us to "experience our own experiences" more fully (206). While Tallis describes the existence of art as a scandal, he does concede that this helps us "to be more completely alive" (207).

Although Tallis, Leavis, and Snow, then, seem to be preoccupied with examining the isolated merits of the different disciplines, and sometimes strengthening somewhat rigid boundaries between them, in much literature this divide has been less respected. While John Carey, introducing the <u>Faber Book of Science</u>, announced his disappointment with how little use poets had made of "the boundless human implications of science" (xix), it can be seen that if Carey's focus was widened to include novels there are many notable examples that blend the literary with the scientific. Writers of encyclopedic narratives in particular, unconcerned with arguing for opposing sides of the debate, and seeing a world suffused with science, have naturally incorporated it into their novels. However, rather than, as Carey seems to envisage, recognising that "scientific language could still be warm, mysterious, and sonorous" (xxi), it can be seen that scientific knowledge is quite often, as is the case with DeLillo's use of neuroscience in <u>Underworld</u>, incorporated in a more

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role of cultural factors, such as gender-laden assumptions.

complicated fashion as a source of structural unity.[13] Joyce, once more, provides the paradigm for these writers.

"Let's hear what science has to say," (FW 505.22), a character in Finnegans Wake suggests in an outburst that alludes to Max Planck (whose equations were instrumental in outlining quantum theory) and Newton's discovery of gravity. Although Stanislaus Joyce claimed that "it will be obvious that whatever method there is in Jim's life is highly unscientific" and argued that "[a]bout science he knows 'damn all,'" Joyce quite frequently incorporated the scientific in his work, and Stanislaus modified his earlier criticism with the observation that the "word 'scientific' is always a word of praise in his mouth" (53-54).[14] Having begun to study medicine three times, it is perhaps unsurprising that there should be superficial references to science in Joyce's fiction – Bloom being parodied as the "distinguished scientist Herr Professor Luitpold Blumenduft" for example (U 394), or the references to the empirical basis of "scientific methods" (U 547) – but Ulysses also includes some more sophisticated interweavings of the literary and the scientific.

"Oxen of the Sun," for example, which Joyce described as "the most difficult episode . . . both to interpret and to execute" (Selected Letters 249) unites literary and scientific knowledge in its style and structure in an unusually complex synthesis. Taking place in a maternity hospital where Mrs Purefoy is in labour, the chapter takes gestation as its structural metaphor and attempts to provide a parallel to the embryo's growth in the development of English literature. Formally divided into nine parts

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[13] Similarly, it seems that Snow, in his critique of the failure of writers to adopt scientific ideas, may also have been looking for a rather straightforward mix of the two disciplines. In his study, The Realists, Snow defines the novel in terms of its gratification of "the primal impulse" for story (7), and dismisses the elaborate "verbal puzzles" of novels that are indifferent to plot as potentially the end of the form (ibid.), so it seems reasonable to assume that he would have been unreceptive to such sophisticated interpenetrations of the literary and the scientific as Joyce attempted.
[14] Of his mixed achievements with science, Ellmann notes that as a youth "the only subject that evaded [Joyce's] zeal was chemistry," as he achieved a score of 100 out of a possible 500 in 1895 (James Joyce 47, 751n23).

(signifying the months of a pregnancy), the chapter parodies English prose from

Anglo-Saxon through Elizabethan prose chronicles and Dickens to the incoherence of

the twentieth century, but, embedded within this linguistic development, Joyce also

includes technical medical information about pre-natal development. As Stuart

Gilbert, explicating the novel at Joyce's request, explains, "[r]eaders of this episode

who have some acquaintance with embryology will find many allusions which mark

the changes of the embryo, month by month, as it grows to perfection in the womb"

(302).[15] A further layer of scientific knowledge also overlays the chapter, as Joyce

saw the role of the characters acting out a larger medical metaphor. He explained:

"Bloom is the spermatozoon, the hospital the womb, the nurse the ovum, Stephen the

embryo" (Selected Letters 252).

This interest in scientific knowledge climaxes in the "Ithaca" chapter of

Ulysses, which Joyce explained would be "in the form of a mathematical catechism"

(Selected Letters 278). In this, the first of the novel's two endings, Joyce is explicit

about how his narrators span the two cultures:

> What two temperaments did they individually represent?
>
> The scientific. The artistic. (U 798)

The importance of artistic perception is underlined in the characteristically wide

allusive framework of the chapter, where allusions to Dante, for example, are

important (U 819), while the scientific is revealed in both incidental details, such as

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[15] Gilbert goes on to explain some of these references in more depth: "Thus, in the first month, [the embryo] is worm-like, a 'punctus,' in the second it has a (relatively) big head, webbed fingers, is eyeless, mouthless, sexless. The mention of fishes 'withouten head' in 'oily water' is a reference to the first month: the vermiform shape and the amniac fluid. Later, Stephen tells how 'at the end of the second month' a human soul is infused and, soon after, we see Mr Bloom 'lay hand to jaw;' the formation of the jawbone is a feature of the third month. At that stage the embryo has a distinct tail – hence the mutation of 'Oxford' into 'Oxtail.' The reference to 'visual organs commencing to exhibit signs of animation' marks the seventh month" (302).

the books Bloom owns,[16] and the parodically precise documentation of phenomena. Bloom's act of turning on a tap, for example, provokes a lengthy discourse on the water's passage from "Roundwood reservoir in county Wicklow" (U 782), the price of the pipes, the gradient, and so on.

By the time that Joyce writes Finnegans Wake his awareness that "science will do your arts good" (FW 440.19-20) is even more acute. The Wake makes reference to "deoxodised carbons" (FW 183.33), "adomic structure . . . highly charged with electrons" (615.6-7), and the research into the "secret workings of nature" (FW 615.14) that had enabled physicists to "split an atam" (FW 333.25). More generally, critics have drawn comparisons between Joyce's approach in his last work and the discoveries of quantum physics, suggesting connections between Joyce breaking down words and the examination of subatomic structure.[17]

Although Gaddis's as yet unpublished work Agapë Agape examines the relationship between technology and the arts, science is rarely a central issue in his novels.[18] He did, nevertheless, observe that entropy was a relevant concept in The Recognitions,[19] and several critics have examined its presence in JR,[20] and, as noted in

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[16] As noted in the introduction, a catalogue of Bloom's books reveals introductory texts like "A Handbook of Astronomy" and "Short but yet Plain Elements of Geometry" (U 833).

[17] See, for example, Andrzej Dusenko's essay "The Joyce of Science" where he notes that the Wake shares several characteristics with new physics "complementarity . . . relativity, subjectivity, indeterminacy, and a lack of strict causality" (282), and Harry Burrell's "Chemistry and Physics in Finnegans Wake" which notes that by "far the greatest number of scientific references are to chemistry" (194), but that other sciences include botany, entomology "and several humorous mathematical parodies on permutations and combinations, geometry and proportions" (195).

[18] Which is not to say that Gaddis is a negligible influence upon Powers. Although, as I argue here, there are similarities in their use of encyclopedic form, there are also more specific echoes of The Recognitions in his novels, such as the narrator's reflection in Three Farmers on "unsponsored recognition": "the practical moment artists call epiphany . . . At this moment of recognition I temporarily stop taking part in the thing at hand and jump a level in the hierarchy of awareness" (3F 207-8).

[19] In an interview Gaddis noted that "Norbert Wiener extrapolated the concept [of entropy] to communications around 1950, and, of course, entropy was mentioned in connection with The Recognitions" ("The Art of Fiction" 66). It is perhaps worth noting that Wiener is also referred to in JR (403) by the character Jack Gibbs, whose name is an allusion to the scientist Josiah Willard Gibbs. Tom LeClair notes that Gibbs was credited by Wiener for introducing "probability and contingency into physics" (The Art of Excess 100).

chapter one, his other novels quote twentieth-century scientists Einstein and Eddington. While it would be inaccurate, however, to suggest that the incorporation of scientific materials in fiction has been restricted to American novels – the Italian writer Primo Levi, for example, who trained as a chemist, employs chemistry as both a structuring principle and subject, in The Periodic Table – it is remarkable to what extent American writers have intertwined literary and scientific ideas in their work.[21]

While Robert Coover, in his survey of 300 novels, found it "hard to find any ideas in most of them more current than Darwinism" ("On Reading 300 American Novels" 37), his own novels, like The Universal Baseball Association, incorporate ideas from such "alien" fields as quantum physics,[22] and in the work of Coover's contemporaries John Barth, Tom Robbins, and Joseph McElroy a similar interpenetration of the literary and the scientific can be found. For Joseph McElroy at the beginning of his writing career, a "certain kind of regular, sensitive American novel" was what he felt was expected from him ("Neural Neighborhoods" 202). Finding this an unsatisfactory method of dealing with his "deepest senses of disorder" (ibid.), however, McElroy rejected the dehumanising view of science that Tallis ascribes to most literary intellectuals, and began to experiment with scientific subject matter and scientific method in his novels. He explains: "[other writers] see science as anti-human. I don't. Science and technology offer forms by which we can see some things clearly; their experimental and measuring methods, their patterns larger than life or smaller than sight, beckon us out of ourselves" ("An Interview with

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[20] For example, the chapters devoted to JR in LeClair's The Art of Excess, and Strehle's Fiction in the Quantum Universe.
[21] An increasing number of studies of American fiction and science have been published in recent years, including N. Katherine Hayles's The Cosmic Web, which examines interconnectedness in novels alongside modern physics, Tom LeClair's study of systems theory and "excessive" novels, The Art of Excess, Joseph Tabbi's Postmodern Sublime, which examines American writer's willingness "to bring their writing into contact with a nonverbal technological reality" in search of the sublime (xi), and John Johnston's reading of works by writers like Gaddis, DeLillo and Pynchon alongside information theory and cybernetics in Information Multiplicity.

Joseph McElroy" 238), and in novels like Women and Men McElroy employs chaos

theory and other "non-linear mediums" (672) in order to present an "awesome excess

of data" (1112),[23] while (as noted in the last chapter) in Plus he draws on brain

research.

In Even Cowgirls Get the Blues, Tom Robbins similarly looks to "[r]ecent

neurological research" (140) for a non-literary basis for his novel. For Robbins,

rather than being polar opposites, the serious writer can consider the scientist "his

brother" (69), and taking the amoeba as "the official mascot" (2) of his novel, he goes

on to make numerous references to biology and ecology. Even John Barth, who has

been relentlessly criticised for producing works of narrow metafictional interest,[24] has

shown little respect for the divide between the two cultures. Giles Goat-Boy accepts

the risk of "dismaying . . . [the] poor humanist" (xxvii) by including a sophisticated

computer as the book's putative author, while in LETTERS Barth makes reference to

Albert Einstein (109), and Werner Heisenberg and his uncertainty principle ("[t]hus

has chronicling transformed the chronicler" [80]). Similarly, in his most recent

collection of short fictions, On With the Story, Barth takes an epigraph from

Heisenberg and draws an extended parallel between the uncertainty principle of

quantum physics and the ontological uncertainty surrounding his text, complaining:

"If only life were as simple as theoretical physics" (104).

Alongwith his use of neuroscience, detailed in the previous chapter, Don

DeLillo has also seen science as "a new language to draw from" ("An Interview with

Don DeLillo" with LeClair 84) and in Ratner's Star and his play "The Engineer of

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[22] Arlen J. Hansen's essay, "The Dice of God: Einstein, Heisenberg, and Robert Coover" examines this.
[23] LeClair details McElroy's use of nonlinear sciences in The Art of Excess, noting that the "shift from
a measurable local event to an unpredictable macroscopic scale occurs, along with its reversal, over and
over again in Women and Men. The novel thus formally corresponds to Mandelbrot's fractal set and
Lorenz's strange or chaotic attractor" (149).
[24] John Gardner, for example, speaks of Barth "tangled helplessly in his own wiring" (96).

Moonlight" has placed mathematicians at the centre of his work. When DeLillo was in Glasgow in January 1998 I asked him a few questions about his fiction, and he underlined how significant a part of his work science had been. Suggesting as examples David Foster Wallace's description of him in an essay as "a true prophet" for young writers (Fun 47), and Jonathan Franzen writing to him "in distress" looking for advice about the future of the novel ("Perchance to Dream" 54), I asked DeLillo which aspects of his fiction, did he think, had made him such an important influence. DeLillo replied: "I think it's been because I have used technology in my fiction and these younger writers – and I think you could add Richard Powers to that list – also use science and have grown up with technology" (Personal Interview).

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Richard Powers was born in Evanston, Illinois in 1957, the son of a school principal, and he grew up on the north side of Chicago, before moving to Thailand at the age of eleven. Returning to the US to go to university, Powers "graduated with an 'A' average from Illinois" (LeClair, "Prodigious Fiction" 15), where he took an undergraduate degree in rhetoric with a concentration in math and physics, before completing a Master's degree in English. Having initially assumed that he would become a literary critic, Powers decided to quit academia shortly after the death of his father, when, discussing Edwin Arlington Robinson's sonnet about euthanasia, "How Annendale Went Out," in a graduate seminar, he became disillusioned with literary studies. Powers explains: "we'd been discussing the poem for half an hour and it occurred to me that we'd never mentioned death, suffering, or euthanasia. The question that the sonnet was raising was not the question that we were raising. Somewhere between the life and the study of art, there had been a massive

disconnection."[25] Leaving university, Powers then made use of the programming skills he had taught himself, and worked with a data processing company, before working as a freelance programmer.

During the writing of his first two novels Powers had, like Salinger, Pynchon, DeLillo and Gaddis, maintained a reclusive existence as a writer, granting no interviews. Prior to the publication of The Gold Bug Variations, however, Powers explained the reasons for both his low profile, and re-emergence: "I used to think that Pynchon had the right idea, that this was the way to get on with your work. Now I think that in some way he has been defeated by the game, made captive by it, hasn't reaped the sort of freedom he had probably hoped for" ("PW Interviews: Richard Powers" 38).

Powers's choice of role model is unsurprising as Pynchon is undoubtedly the contemporary novelist who has most frequently combined literary and scientific ideas in his work. Although he has denied having "some kind of a proprietary handle" (Slow Learner 12) on the novelistic use of scientific concepts such as entropy, from his early thermodynamics-based short story "Entropy,"[26] to his recent novel about eighteenth-century astronomers, Mason & Dixon, Pynchon has been continually fascinated by the "scientific approach" (Gravity's Rainbow 153) and scientific subject matter. Having studied engineering and modern physics at Cornell University along with English (under Vladimir Nabokov), Pynchon has been ideally situated to judge the "Two Cultures" controversy, and he did so in an essay marking the twenty-fifth anniversary of Snow's lecture, entitled "Is it O.K. to Be a Luddite?" For Pynchon, the

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[25] This quote, and most of the biographical summary, is distilled from Powers's description of his background in an interview with Jeffrey Williams ("The Last Generalist" 21).
[26] Even before the publication of this short story Pynchon's fascination with the literary and scientific was apparent. In an application for a Ford Foundation fellowship, written in 1959, Pynchon explained that he was working on a play "centering on a spurious mathematical proof, in set theory, that all number are equal" (qtd. in Weisenburger, "Thomas Pynchon at Twenty-Two" 694).

controversy took "some already simplified points" and made "further reductions"

("Luddite" 1), but he notes that in the intervening years the situation has become more

complex. Partly because, there "are so many more than two cultures" (ibid.) now, and

partly because of the wide availability of research resources,[27] "[t]oday," Pynchon

argues, "nobody could get away with making such a distinction" (ibid.). Undoubtedly

this is a conclusion that his novels suggest. "Hadn't he bridged two worlds?" the

narrator of V. asks (481), and Pynchon's early novels are remarkable for the way they

mix the world of literature[28] with the world of science.[29] However, of most relevance

to Powers's work, and The Gold Bug Variations especially, is Pynchon's use of

science in Gravity's Rainbow.

Gravity's Rainbow is commonly considered to have reformed the map of

contemporary American fiction, although, as I argued in chapter one, it was not

without its precedents in its encyclopedic format, and perhaps in some other features

too.[30] The extent of its scientific awareness, however, was notable. Pynchon's

encyclopedic masterpiece is packed with specialist scientific knowledge, making

reference to Newton's second law of motion (555), to Einstein (262), to "Gödel's

Theorem" (320), and to the structure of carbon molecules (412), but the most

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[27] Prefiguring The Gold Bug Variations's many scenes where characters seek out information
databases, Pynchon writes: "Anybody with the time, literacy and access fee these days can get together
with just about any piece of specialized knowledge s/ he may need" (1).

[28] Tony Tanner, for example, notes that in V. we can "detect traces of Conrad, Lawrence Durrell,
Evelyn Waugh, Melville, Henry Adams, Nathanael West, Djuna Barnes, Faulkner, Dashiell Hammett
and many other writers" (Thomas Pynchon 40).

[29] Outwith fairly general references to entropy, probably the most frequently cited instance of
Pynchon's scientific knowledge is his use of James Clerk Maxwell's "Demon" in The Crying of Lot
49. The theory is outlined by Koteks in the novel (59).

[30] In George Orwell's Nineteen Eighty-Four, for example, Slothrop's prescience is foretold: "The
proles were nearly always right when they gave you a warning of this kind. They seemed to possess
some kind of instinct which told them when a rocket was coming, although the rockets supposedly
travelled faster than sound" (87).

fundamental use of science in the novel centres around the contrast between two

different scientific approaches.[31]

The first, which the novel attributes to Pavlov, is the view that "the end we all

struggle toward in science, is the true mechanical explanation" (89). In this view, the

world is treated as a closed linear system, that the "cold fanatical man of science" (41)

can ultimately master and explain. The dominant image is Kekulé's "Great Serpent

holding its own tail in its mouth . . . [t]he Serpent that announces, 'The World is a

closed thing, cyclical, resonant, eternally-returning'" (412), and the aim is to radically

reduce the earth in complexity so that the scientist is "no longer to be at the mercy of

Nature" (249).

Set against this, is a view of nature as a more complex open system that

recognises Anthony Wilden's argument that "[a]ll systems involving or simulating

life . . . are open systems, because they are necessarily in communication with another

'system'" (36). This view abandons the "illusion of control. That A could do B"

(30), in favour of a more sophisticated understanding of complexity: "Not A before B,

but all together" (159). Such an approach recognises that there is no transcendent

position outside nature for "scientist-neutrality" (58) to judge from, and that in fact

such "neutrality" is an illusion. Rather the observer is implicated in the web of

connected living systems that he observes, and, appropriately, this idea is announced

on the first page of the novel that involves the reader in "a progressive knotting into

. . . [a] coral-like and mysteriously vital growth" (3).[32]

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[31] Although with the vast number of essays and studies devoted to Pynchon, Gravity's Rainbow has
begun to approximate the text described in the novel, "a text to be picked to pieces, annotated,
explicated" (520), worthy of mention here is John O. Stark's Pynchon's Fictions which devotes a
chapter to detailing Pynchon's use of "scientific means of organizing data" (45).

[32] A similar, but more detailed, discussion of the novel can be found in LeClair's The Art of Excess,
where he discusses the novel alongside J. E. Lovelock's Gaia (36-68).

This interest in the complexity of living systems is repeated in The Gold Bug Variations, and while Powers's novel (detailing a young woman's quest for knowledge after the death of an older man) seems also to resemble The Crying of Lot 49, there are several more specific examples of the affinity between Powers's work and Pynchon's. In The Gold Bug Variations, for example, we are told that Franklin Todd's "favorite living novelist notes, [that information has] replaced cigarettes as the universal medium of exchange" (GBV 468), an observation that comes from Pynchon's Gravity's Rainbow,[33] and the reference to a "magazine's breezy treatment turning high-ranking Nazi von Braun into the Rock Hudson of Rocketry" (GBV 420), refers to the Nasa rocket engineer Wernher von Braun, who provides the epigraph for Pynchon's novel and whose postwar transformation recurs throughout Gravity's Rainbow.[34] Powers makes the filial relationship explicit when, in his review of Vineland, he addresses Pynchon: "So tell us another one, Pop, before it gets too dark" ("State and Vine" 698).

Three Farmers on Their Way to a Dance, Powers's first novel, also shows signs of the influence of Pynchon,[35] but it is perhaps more notable for Powers's own attempts to combine the literary and the scientific. "Too busy with your microchips to keep current with the arts scene?" a character asks midway through the novel, "[w]hy does everyone have to choose between one cult or the other?" (3F 154), and even the story of the composition of the novel's three narratives reveals an unusually technical basis. Powers explains:

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[33] "What's wrong with dope and women? Is it any wonder the world's gone insane, with information come to be the only real medium of exchange?" (Gravity's Rainbow 258). In his essay "Prodigious Fiction" Tom LeClair notes this Pynchon allusion, and more generally suggests the affinity between the two writers of long books that incorporate scientific knowledge (36n1).

[34] For further references to von Braun, see Gravity's Rainbow 237, 273, 361, 402, 416, 456, 588.

[35] For example, Peter Mays's anxiety about inanimate objects in Powers's novel ("[h]e hated asking favors of inanimate objects, especially man-made ones. It was humiliating when they wouldn't co-operate and humiliating when they deigned to condescend" [3F 102]), recalls Benny Profane's obsession in V. about the fact that "inanimate objects and he could not live in peace" (V. 37).

I wrote Three Farmers longhand, on canary yellow legal pads, then

transferred them into my second ever personal computer, a CP/M

suitcase with an intoxicating 64 K of RAM that stored an inexhaustible

180 K per floppy. I wrote some primitive style-checking routines:

words per sentence, syllables per word, frequency of complex or

compound sentences. I fed the book into the program, a chapter at a

time. I had great fun tweaking each chapter until the machine reported

three very distinctive profiles of prose, each matching the book's three

different frames. I could tell what frame a chapter belonged to just by

looking at the output. ("An Interview with Richard Powers" 19-20)

Like DeLillo's attempts to place his narratives within history – his fictional re-

creation of Lee Harvey Oswald in Libra, or Lenny Bruce in Underworld – Three

Farmers combines a narrative devoted to microcomputer design with a fictional

account of three Germans in a picture from 1914 by the famous Austrian

photographer August Sander.[36] As Sander was devoted to the ambitious quest to

produce "a massive, comprehensive catalog of people" (3F 39), to be called "Man of

the Twentieth Century," so Powers's work attempts an encyclopedic range of

reference. With allusions ranging from Darwin to Joyce,[37] and mini-essays on

physics, photography, painting, and history, the novel is impressively broad, although

this density of information did not please all the reviewers.[38] Such criticisms are

ironic, however, because the novel uses its interdisciplinary knowledge, not as a static

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[36] DeLillo mentioned Powers, alongwith Wallace, to Maria Nadotti as two writers "whose work seems close to [his] . . . taking fiction out of the realm of the domestic and into that of history" ("An Interview with Don DeLillo" 94).

[37] The impact of Darwin's theory of evolution is noted on page 81 of the novel, while the opening of chapter sixteen ("[o]n the evening of the office Christmas party, I'd left my boss's house much later than planned. Fat, slow snow was general over the South Shore" [3F 202]) echoes Gabriel Conroy's reflections at the end of Joyce's "The Dead."

[38] Patrick Parrinder, for example, argued that the novel "tells you more about the cultural impact of the photograph than you probably wanted to know" (18).

monument to the author's learning, but as a response to the perceived inefficacy of art. Specifically drawing on quantum physics' recognition that "there is no understanding a system without interfering with it" (3F 205-6), Powers's art in the novel asks not be taken as "an anaesthetic" (3F 13), but rather asks for interference in the contemporary world he describes. It is a call to make use of the knowledge embedded in the novel, "to continue the daily routine of invention and observation, to dirty my hands in whatever work my hands can do" (3F 209).

Powers's second novel, Prisoner's Dilemma, similarly displays an interest in the "recall of encyclopedia facts" as it explores the place of fiction (PD 90), with references ranging from Moby-Dick to Alan Turing.[39] Detailing a period from the 1930s to the late 70s, the novel covers an Illinois family's internal dynamics, as the relations pivot around the dying father. The guilt and self-deception that the family feels about Eddie Hobson's mysterious blackouts forms only part of the novel's plot, however, as the narrative shifts between his worsening illness, and Hobstown, an imaginary world that Eddie has created. This shift results in some ontological problematisation which is not clarified until the end of the book, when the novel turns out to be a collaborative effort, with his surviving relatives, having realised that fictions might make a brutal world tolerable, resurrect his imaginative project,[40] a scheme that is partly reworked in The Gold Bug Variations.

At 639 densely allusive pages, The Gold Bug Variations is Richard Powers's longest and most ambitious novel. In his apparently autobiographical Galatea 2.2, Powers explains how he consciously aimed at producing a novel of encyclopedic

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[39] The names Eddie Hobson assigns his children on a seaside holiday – Mr. Starbuck, and Master Stubb – are, of course allusions to the chief mate and second mate, respectively, in Melville's novel (PD 23), while Turing's war time cryptography and mysterious suicide is elaborated upon (PD 211-12).
[40] In his discussion of the novel Arthur Saltzman offers a different, and somewhat peculiar, reading: "If Hobstown is Eddie's refuge from the nightmare of history, it still tends to exhibit totalitarian strategies

reach in this work: "I lost myself in data and the heart's decoding urge," Powers

notes, "I wanted to write an encyclopedia of the Information Age" (G2.2 215).

Perhaps appropriately, then, The Gold Bug Variations makes several references to

Melville's epic,[41] while it also easily satisfies Mendelson's criteria for encyclopedic

narratives: a full account of a science is provided in the novel's thorough outline of

molecular biology; "an account of an art outside the realm of written fiction"

("Gravity's Encyclopedia" 164) is provided by the detailed analysis of Bach's

Goldberg Variations, which is itself described in the novel as "an encyclopedia of

transcription, translation, and self-replication" (GBV 579); and mixing letters,

programming language, puns, and first and third person narratives the novel provides

an encyclopedia of literary styles.

In fact, the novel is so concerned with encyclopedias, that it traces the history

of encyclopedias from Diderot's collaborative Encyclopédie,[42] to "the technological

age" (GBV 163), where computerised "waist-high spindles with removable packs

resembling layer cakes under cover . . . [hold] an entire thirty-volume encyclopedia

each" (GBV 108-9).[43]

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of its own. Whatever its initial objectives, this Futurama allows one occupant only; Eddie Hobson hoards all the Fairy Dust for himself" (The Novel in the Balance 107).

[41] Jan's journal entry, "that catalog is a mere draft, no, the draft of a draft" (GBV 249), echoes the end of Melville's chapter on cetology ("[t]his whole book is but a draught – nay, but the draught of a draught" [Moby-Dick 157]), while Ishmael's observations on body warmth from chapter eleven of Moby-Dick – "truly to enjoy bodily warmth, some small part of you must be cold, for there is no quality in this world that is not what it is merely by contrast" (Moby-Dick 59) – are quoted, appropriately, in chapter eleven of Powers's novel (GBV 229).

[42] Powers refers to "Diderot and his Encyclopédie henchmen" (GBV 110). Of course, Diderot's controversial work, which appeared between 1751 and 1772 in seventeen folio volumes of text and eleven of plates, was not the first encyclopedia. Collison, in Encyclopedias, traces the history back to Ancient Greece and China, while John Lough, in The Encyclopédie, details eighteenth-century precedents for Diderot's attempt.

[43] While the novel seeks to be all encompassing it is perhaps worth noting, for the sake of completeness, that there are a few errors in its data gathering, "tiny slippages within the system" (GBV 536). Ressler's reference to "Chargaff's piece in Nature. Half-dozen years old" which he quotes as "[h]ave we the right to counteract, irreversibly, the evolutionary wisdom of millions of years . . . ? The world is given to us on loan. We come and we go" (GBV 410-11) actually refers to a letter that was published in Science, not Nature ("On the Dangers of Genetic Meddling" 940), while Koss's quote from Gale and Folkes's letter "Promotion of Incorporation of Amino-acids by Specific Di- and Tri-nucleotides" mistakenly substitutes "recombinations" (GBV 416) for "combinations" (392).

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In "The Two Cultures: A Second Look" Snow, surveying the sometimes unpleasant dispute his earlier lecture provoked, reflected upon the possibility that he had perhaps chosen an inappropriate question for his test of scientific literacy. Rather than ask for a summary of the Second Law of Thermodynamics, he suggested: "perhaps I should [have] put forward a branch of science which ought to be a requisite in the common culture, certainly for anyone now at school. This branch of science at present goes by the name of molecular biology" (The Two Cultures 72-73). Snow elaborates on how appropriate an example this would be:

> It begins with the analysis of crystal structure, itself a subject
>
> aesthetically beautiful and easily comprehended. It goes on to the
>
> application of these methods to molecules which have literally a vital
>
> part in our own existence – molecules of proteins, nucleic acids:
>
> molecules immensely large (by molecular standards) and which turn out
>
> to be of curious shapes, for nature, when interested in what we call life,
>
> appears to have a taste for the rococo. It includes the leap of genius by
>
> which Crick and Watson snatched at the structure of DNA and so taught
>
> us the essential lesson about our genetic inheritance. (73)

Richard Powers's The Gold Bug Variations, one of the narrative strands of which features research into DNA set just two years before Snow's first lecture, evokes the aesthetic fascination at the discovery Snow eulogises, the "perpetual condition of wonder in the face of something that forever grows one step richer and subtler than our latest theory about it" (GBV 411). The novel, however, does not simply examine

scientific subject matter, but rather attempts to synthesise the scientific and the artistic into an interdependent whole.[44]

The artistic part of this synthesis is provided by musical analogy, and the parallels that the novel's structure maintains with Bach's <u>Goldberg Variations</u> are, of course, obvious – the novel begins and ends with an aria, and has thirty chapters to mirror Bach's thirty variations. This analogy, however, is also maintained at a more detailed level, with references to specific variations suggesting that the chapters are intended to establish an exact parallel with Bach's work: the "great tenth variation" (<u>GBV</u> 207) is listened to in the tenth chapter of the book, the fifteenth variation is discussed in the fifteenth chapter of the book (<u>GBV</u> 331), while "variation twenty-five . . . the most profound resignation to existence ever written" (<u>GBV</u> 554), is played in the novel, as a relationship breaks up, in the twenty-fifth chapter.[45]

The scientific aspect of the structure emerges from one of the key obsessions of the novel's plot: the structure of DNA. Although the novel is composed from the perspective of a year's solitary learning between 1985 and 1986, "symmetrical to an extreme" (<u>GBV</u> 579), <u>The Gold Bug Variations</u> is fundamentally constructed around the story of two parallel love affairs separated by twenty-five years. As Adenine always bonds with Thymine, and Cytosine with Guanine to form DNA's helical structure, in Powers's model, these base pairings are provided by the coupling of

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[44] Although in the ensuing discussion I detail some of the occasions when Powers explicitly quotes scientific works, it is interesting that the observations of scientists often lie uncredited behind some of the more general statements in <u>The Gold Bug Variations</u> as well. For example, Ressler's concern that scientific research is "no country for old men" (<u>GBV</u>44), echoes G.H. Hardy's melancholy reflection in his memoir, <u>A Mathematician's Apology</u> – a book which, incidentally, Snow proof-read – that "[n]o mathematician should ever allow himself to forget that mathematics, more than any other art or science, is a young man's game" (10). Although the substitution – researcher for mathematician – is not trivial, the similarity in the structure of the two paragraphs is striking.

[45] In another braiding of the artistic and the scientific, Powers has revealed that "<u>Gold Bug</u> was born, in part, out of a little Lewis Thomas essay on the CETI project" ("An Interview with Richard Powers" 21). In this essay, the biologist Thomas announces that his choice of message to send to possible extra-terrestrials would be "Bach, all of Bach, streamed out into space, over and over again. We would be bragging, of course, but it is surely excusable for us to put the best possible face on at the beginning of such an acquaintance. We can tell the harder truths later" (45).

Stuart Ressler and Jeanette Koss in the fifties, and Franklin Todd and Jan O'Deigh in

the eighties. Imitating the structure of DNA, the "two couples . . . bend in ascending

spiral dance around each other" (GBV 8), with numerous parallels reinforcing the

conceit: both relationships are disrupted by a third party, both feature an infertile

woman, and Jean is only a one letter mutation away from Jan.

Set just four years after Francis Crick and James Watson had proposed the

"radically different structure for the salt of deoxyribose nucleic acid" as a double

helix (Watson and Crick 737), the first narrative strand details Stuart Ressler's

research into molecular biology. Ressler was a child prodigy who devoured the

encyclopedias his parents bought him, the "spines on every volume were broken

within two years" (GBV 135), and his narrative begins in 1957 as he travels to Illinois

to join the research group Cyfer. Like Crick, and his fellow DNA researcher – the

Nobel prize winning Maurice Wilkins – Ressler has recently departed from another

field to "rush the frontier" (GBV 44) of DNA research[46] as part of a group that is "not

so much a real research team as a loose specialist confederation" (GBV 99). In

another blending of the literary and scientific, several of the scientists see a parallel

between cracking DNA's code and a linguistic puzzle,[47] and they set about their work

initially by "equating specific base sequences with amino acid arrangements in

protein polypeptides" (GBV 254) looking for patterns, a laborious process that

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[46] Wilkins had previously been a physicist, and James Watson explains that Crick decided to leave
physics for biology after reading Schrödinger's What is Life? in 1946 (Watson 23), a move which
foreshadows Ressler's decision to give up a "four-year investment in physiology" after reading Watson
and Crick's famous 1953 paper (GBV 44).

[47] While the complexities of the way this equivalence operates in the book have been noted by a
number of critics – Herman and Lernout, for example, note that literature provides "a metaphor, in the
form of a [Edgar Allan Poe] story, for their DNA research" (160) – it is perhaps worth noting that
Francis Crick himself, used a similar metaphor in his autobiography What Mad Pursuit. As part of his
description of the understanding of the gene in the 1940s Crick suggests: "The amino acids (the
monomers) are just like the letters in a font of type. The base of each kind of letter from the font is
always the same, so that it can fit into the grooves that hold the assembled type, but the top of each
letter is different, so that a particular letter will be printed from it. Each protein has a characteristic
number of amino acids, usually several hundred of them, so any particular protein could be thought of
as a paragraph written in a special language having about twenty (chemical) letters" (34).

necessitates "attending to every amino sequence ever unearthed" (<u>GBV</u> 268). The

situation is complicated, however, as members of the research team begin to favour

different solutions, and Ressler falls in love with Jeanette Koss, a married member of

the group. Ressler begins to outline plans for an <u>in vitro</u> examination of DNA's

protein synthesis,[48] separate from the complexity of an open system, but, as he gets

closer to a solution Jeanette departs with her husband, and Ressler decides to abandon

his work on the gene.

The second main narrative strand is set twenty-five years later when the

librarian Jan O'Deigh comes across Ressler working as a night-shift computer

operator for a data-processing firm. Jan, like Ressler, is in love with information –

both want to "force [their] way into the indifference of data" (<u>GBV</u> 18) – and, while

she is dating Ressler's dilettante assistant Franklin Todd, she becomes fascinated with

Ressler's decision to abandon research. Todd is immersed in the seemingly endless

task of writing a dissertation on the obscure Flemish painter Herri met de Bles,[49] but

Jan leaves him after his infidelity. Although they are briefly to work together again,

following the illness of a work colleague, they split up, and when Jan hears about

Ressler's death, she quits her position at the library to study, as Ressler did in the

fifties, life science.

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[48] Joseph Dewey takes up the distinction between Ressler's <u>in vitro</u> experiment, and the Cyfer team's <u>in vivo</u> plan as an occasion to extrapolate an allegory of the novel's larger argument. In doing so, however, he appears to become confused and mixes up the terms, arguing that "[i]nformation, so much the obsession of Powers's characters comes only in vivo – through lives and hearts separated, protected, immured within libraries, laboratories, or computer networks – the cold simulation of authentic living" ("Hooking the Nose of the Leviathan" 59).

[49] Although met de Bles receives a brief mention in Giorgio Vasari's <u>Lives of the Most Eminent Painters</u> as "Heinrich, of Dinant," a "[r]enowned painter" (5: 460), his obscurity is summed up by the fact that a recent study introduces him as "unknown, even to many art historians" (Muller et al. vii). Very few facts are certain about his life, or even of which works can definitively be attributed to him, but Max J. Friedländer, in his epic study of early Netherlandish painting, makes the following observation of his large, intricate landscapes, which might suggest why Powers thought him an appropriate artist to include in his encyclopedic novel: "A vague yearning stirred in Herry's time to

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The scientific community, for Raymond Tallis, is distinguished by its collaborative basis. In contrast to the arts, with their emphasis on the solitary genius, Tallis puts forward a world of research that is humble, truly international, and concludes that science is not "only the most successful of all human enterprises but also the most co-operative" (59). The research team in The Gold Bug Variations, however, does not easily fit Tallis's vision of "the Great (co-operative) Enterprise" (70), as the group disintegrates under personal pressures.

After a few minor early disputes, the group eventually splits into two competing projects, as their research into DNA "comes down to temperament, individual hobby horses" (GBV 444), and gradually the researchers succumb to a variety of subjective concerns: after being locked in the library overnight Tooney Blake becomes overwhelmed by the increasing weight of data in the world and abandons his speciality for a life of "hopeless generalism" (GBV 364),[50] Joe Lovering erects an imaginary life for himself but then commits suicide, after her adultery Jeanette Koss returns to her husband and leaves town, while Ressler loses his funding, in spite of the quality of his research, because he has "shown himself not to be a team player" (GBV 478).

The break-up of the research group in The Gold Bug Variations, however, is not without its nonfictional counterparts, as it has long been accepted that the idealised community, advanced by critics like Tallis, offers too simplistic a picture. Bruno Latour and Steve Woolgar, for example, put forward a more complex model of

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gain a view of the whole world, and the tondo, as a symbol of totality met this need . . . [met de Bles] looked to multiplicity for grandeur" (24).
[50] Appropriately, Blake is next heard of "as codeveloper of the first artificially intelligent encyclopedia" (GBV 403).

scientific research in their study <u>Laboratory Life: The Social Construction of</u>

<u>Scientific Facts</u>. Based on a two-year study of the Salk Institute for Biological

Studies, Latour and Woolgar argue that "the social world cannot exist on one side and

the scientific world on the other" (13), and instead see the production of scientific

research as being significantly influenced by such factors as the material status of the

lab, funding, chance circumstances, and the personalities of the scientists involved.

These factors interact to such an extent that, in some extreme cases, they suggest that

"[a]rgument between scientists transforms some statements into figments of one's

subjective imagination, and others into facts of nature" (236).

More specifically, the historical events around which Ressler's research is

based provide a clear precedent for the novel's portrayal of scientific research. While

Francis Crick and James Watson's discovery of the structure of DNA in 1953 has

been heralded for its importance to modern science, the background to the discovery,

as outlined in Watson's memoir <u>The Double Helix</u>, is almost as notable for its

personal entanglements. In fact, the memoir was judged to be so controversial that it

encountered problems prior to even being published.[51]

"Science," Watson writes at the start of the work, "seldom proceeds in the

straightforward logical manner imagined by outsiders. Instead, its steps forward (and

sometimes backward) are often very human events in which personalities and cultural

traditions play major roles" (<u>The Double Helix</u> 13), and this is clearly the case with

his own research. On the way to discovering the structure of DNA scientists withheld

data from their fellow scientists, personal animosity divided research groups,

Watson's supervisor divorced and withdrew from the education he was meant to be

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[51] The book was originally to have been published by Harvard University Press but, following objections from Crick and Wilkins, Harvard decided against publication, and the memoir was eventually released by Atheneum. The story made the front page of the <u>New York Times</u> on 15 February 1968.

offering, and Watson lied about his research to ensure continued funding. The picture presented is apparently of a very human competitive struggle: "DNA," Watson writes, was "up for grabs, and no one was sure who would get it and whether he would deserve it" (18). The extent to which this dispute shows, not only how idealised Tallis's vision is, but also how factually grounded Powers's account of Cyfer's dissolution is, can be inferred from the fact that even some twenty years after the discovery, objections were still being raised by some of the other participants.[52]

While the workings of the scientific community, then, are made more human in The Gold Bug Variations, there is a corresponding move to present a more collaborative view of artistic creation. Like The Recognitions, Powers's novel complicates the notion of individual originality, to instead present "[j]oint solutions everywhere" (GBV 324). Jan relates how the art student Franklin Todd, who is himself "[i]ncapable of making anything original" (GBV 301), outlines the problem of originality after modernism:

> "You see the problem," he said. "You've followed the cult of
>
> originality since autographed toilets? The straitjacketing Neo-ist
>
> canvases full of original black paint? The original razor blade and
>
> follow-up hot bath?" I didn't catch his references, but he seemed to
>
> mean that we'd reached a moment in our visual lives when innovation
>
> was itself derivative. All that was left of the painted portal sat in
>
> galleries in Soho, intelligible only with the aid of program notes. (GBV
>
> 301)

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[52] Erwin Chargaff, who is mentioned five times in Powers's novel (GBV 72, 99, 125, 410, 443), noted in a 1974 article reflecting on the dawn of molecular biology his dismay with the "unimpeded boldness" of Crick and Watson ("Building the Tower of Babble" 777), and disputes the portrait Watson presents of him in his 1968 memoir. Chargaff had already reviewed Watson's book, and although he thought its "much-needed demythologization" of science useful, he criticised its "degradation of present-day science to a spectator sport" ("A Quick Climb Up Mount Olympus" 1449).

This critique of relentless innovation is reinforced through a number of other

references in the book. Todd describes Herri met de Bles's paintings, the subject of

his thesis, as "undeniable Patinir derivatives" (GBV 341), and suggests that the most

convenient conclusion to Bles's biographical obscurity would be "that met de Bles

was actually . . . a composite of student panelists from Patinir's workshop" (GBV

340). The art historian Max J. Friedländer elaborates on this, noting that occasionally

> Herry's figures are borrowed – from Dürer . . . for example, or from
>
> Jerome Bosch . . . in certain other cases, fellow painters obviously
>
> collaborated . . . Evidently Herry met de Bles knew his limitations as a
>
> figure painter and, aware of this deficiency, often had his figures
>
> inserted into his landscapes in other workshops, or he may have had
>
> assistants in his own studio, whom he enjoined to do his figures as well
>
> as they could. (26)

Similarly Bach's Goldberg Variations are noted for their balance of originality and

plagiarism. Although the variations "achieve a technical inventiveness . . .

unsurpassed in the rest of music" (GBV 578), the "germ aria, a heavily ornamented

period piece, was not even Bach's own" (ibid.),[53] and even the work's original title,

the Clavier-Übung, had already been used by Bach's predecessor as Thomaskantor in

Leipzig, Johann Kuhnau. The theme of artistic collaboration climaxes in the

production of the book itself, as the final pages of the novel reveal that the novel has

been a collaboration between Jan and Todd. While it has been obvious to the reader

that the text is partly drawn from Jan's attempt to console herself with an account of

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[53] Malcolm Boyd notes that "the theme itself, a thirty-two-bar sarabande in binary form . . . is found in the second Clavierbüchlein or Anna Magdalena (1725) and may not even be by Bach" (181). In fact, Bach's synthesis of originative composition and established patterns has provided the basis for an entire work – Norman Carrell's Bach the Borrower – which argues that "Bach was a great borrower. Not only did he derive creative stimulus from the works of such famous composers as Vivaldi and Corelli, but minor figures like Dieupart also provided him with useful ideas. . . . [he] believed in

her year of solitary learning and memories of her relationship with Todd and Ressler, it is only upon re-reading the novel that the clues to Todd's authorship of the sections covering Ressler in the 1950s becomes apparent.[54] As Arthur Saltzman argues that the creation of fictions in Prisoner's Dilemma operate as "a salve in place of a cure" (The Novel in the Balance 112), so it seems that Todd's partly fictional account of the "story of one life" (GBV 635) has been his parallel response to the loss of Ressler. "Because Ressler . . . erased himself," Todd observes in an aside that, upon a first reading, has apparently little significance, "I am free to elaborate" (GBV 348).

Although this effort to artistically balance established patterns with originality, demonstrated by met de Bles and Bach, has an obvious analogy with a gene's evolution through selected mutation – "[i]dentical, with changes" (GBV 40)– it also links up to another science preoccupied with balance, which, although less explicitly present than molecular biology, might be said to be literally at the centre of the novel: ecology.

Upon its publication The Gold Bug Variations, like The Recognitions, was strongly criticised for its elaborate erudition, particularly scientific erudition. "Most of us cannot remain high on Scientific American for long," the Times Literary Supplement warned (Porter 20),[55] while a review in the Sunday Telegraph noted that the detailed information in the novel made it "suitable only for those who have mastered the art of skim-reading" (Davidson 110). This dismissal of the novel, on the

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extracting every ounce of goodness from a work or movement of a composition which he felt was worthy of more than one immediate appearance" (13).

[54] Tom LeClair notes that this collaborative authorship is more subtly arranged than a simple combination of two narratives: "the text . . . has been, to use a programming term from the novel, a product of 'backstopping' (590), recursive revision. Information, language, and sensibilities developed separately cross over the textual borders and get translated differently in their new context. Clues to this interpenetration or cross-fertilizing occur in chapter 17 when Todd's programming language appears in Jan's narration, and in chapter 22, when information about Ressler in Illinois breaks into a section presumably told by Jan" ("Prodigious Fiction" 19).

implicit grounds that Powers was simply showing-off, is particularly depressing

because careful examination of the novel shows that, rather than being self-indulgent,

Powers is attempting to present an urgent warning about impending ecological

catastrophe. Two-thirds of the way through the book the narrative gives way to a

series of questions that have been sent to Jan's library. The central question of the

series, sent by someone who shares Powers's initials, is: "How many humans will

there be by the beginning of the next century? How many other living things?" Jan

responds ominously: "Eight billion humans, by conservative estimate. There will still

be many animals. But far fewer kinds . . ." (GBV 493), and the novel can be seen to

position and dramatise ecological science as a central theme.

It has been noted by several critics that in chapter fifteen, the book's central

chapter entitled "The Natural Kingdom (II)" (GBV 317), the novel's narrative

abandons its alternation between the fifties and the eighties to present a single

ecological message. Tom LeClair, for example, observes that "[u]nlike most

chapters, [chapter 15] is wholly composed by Jan" ("Prodigious Fiction" 19-20),

while Herman and Lernout, in their joint authored essay, note "[i]n Powers's novel

the numbered chapters are subdivided into three to eight sections. . . . the only

exception is chapter XV, perhaps because this is where O'Deigh learns that 'life is not

designed'" (153). The fifteenth chapter is, in fact, divided into five sections, so

Herman and Lernout seem to be referring to the fact that it is notable for being solely

narrated by Jan. While the positioning of this chapter, the central section of which is

entitled "Ecology," is doubtless significant, the structure of the novel is more complex

than these summaries suggest. Although the ecologically concerned fifteenth chapter

is given prominence, there are, in fact, eight chapters covering only one narrator.

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[55] It is perhaps also worth noting of this review, that, as a rare piece of praise, Roy Porter notes that the "earnest-bohemian culture of the 1970s . . . is agreeably sketched" (20). This is somewhat mystifying

Four of these occur near the centre of the book, with a chapter devoted to each main character: chapter thirteen is confined to Stuart Ressler in the fifties, fourteen to Jan's narrative, sixteen is entirely composed of Todd's letter, and with fifteen being devoted to the "species-mad world" (GBV 317), it seems fair to conclude that Powers is assigning ecology the status usually reserved for a main character.

The plot of the novel reinforces this ecological theme in a number of ways. On the one hand, incidental plot details – such as the elaborate nature museum Ressler keeps as a child which is described as "a walk-in catalog of the planetary pageant" (GBV 178) – keep the theme in sight, but, more interestingly, Powers attempts to make his plot imitate the bewildering interconnectedness of the biosphere. "Life is an immense turbulent system," Ressler notes of the ecosystem, "[s]mall changes produce large swings in outcome" (GBV 410), and Powers's narrative dramatises this in the subplot devoted to Jimmy Steadman, ostensibly Todd and Ressler's supervisor. Feeling playful one night, Todd decides to give Jimmy "a one-time bonus" (GBV 459) by making a change to the payroll computer program. Without Todd realising it, this annuls Jimmy's medical insurance, and when Steadman is confronted by his superiors about these irregularities the stress, combined with a previously hidden "inherited deficiency, secret and soft in his cerebral arteries" (GBV 538), leaves Jimmy in a coma. By illustrating the unforeseen changes that a minor alteration to a computer program can produce, Powers provides a metaphor for the dangers of man interfering in the radically more complex interconnected web of life, "the danger of intervening in systems too complex to predict" (GBV 404).

"Cooperation," Joyce notes in Ulysses, is "one of nature's favourite devices" (U 546), and the organisation of life on earth stresses interconnectedness and

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as no event in either of the novel's twin narratives takes place in the seventies.

symbiotic relations, the circular flow of energy from photosynthesising producers, through consumer populations, to an inevitable return, via decomposers, back to the producer population. "The word I am looking for," Jan writes, concluding the section entitled "Ecology," "the language of life, is circulation" (GBV 327), and as well as providing analogues for the development of unforeseen results in its plot, the novel also attempts to replicate the biosphere's circulation through its looping structure. While a looping structure is obviously suggested by the novel's final words ("Once more with feeling" [GBV 639]), the beginning and the end of the novel are also subtly connected by the placement of the other four single narrator sections: both the first and final two chapters are solely narrated by Jan.

The looping structure is reinforced by the fact that many subtly embedded background features of the novel are designed for re-reading. Early in the novel, for example, when Todd has come to Jan's library to try and find out more about Ressler, he irritates Jan by humming. On a first reading, this seems merely to be an incidental detail, but, with the benefit of hindsight it becomes apparent that "the slow accretion of a haunting chord. Flirting between major and minor" (GBV 31) is another early reference to the tune with which Ressler will become so strongly associated.

Interest in such attempts to connect the "infinitely dense ecosystem" (GBV 627) and literature has increased over the past few years with the development of ecocriticism, which seeks to explore the ways "by which we might read literary texts with a new appreciation about the complex of relationships that mediate interactions between humans and their environments" (Branch et al. xiii). Given how insistently The Gold Bug Variations foregrounds the "linked biosphere" (GBV 410) and argues that we "must act ecologically" (GBV 326), it is surprising that in recently published books like Reading the Earth: New Directions in the Study of Literature and the

Environment and Writing the Environment: Ecocriticism and Literature Powers does

not receive a single mention although they both include essays devoted to DeLillo's

White Noise observing that: "This novel dramatises, more unsparingly than any other

I know, the impasse between environmental consciousness and the inability of a

culture to change" (Kerridge and Sammells 194). The neglect of Powers while

reference is made to the previously neglected DeLillo is ironic, because Powers's

work has several revealing affinities with DeLillo's.

Although The Gold Bug Variations does not share Underworld's complex

"coordination of loops within loops" (GBV 307), the novels are obviously similar in

their looping structure. A similarity of more significance, however, is provided

through Powers's allusions to the brain in The Gold Bug Variations. Like DeLillo,

Powers also makes reference to hemispheric difference in his novels – Jan reads of

stroke victims "whose right hemispheres didn't know what their lefts were doing"

(GBV 543) – but the novel also makes significant use of the vertical structure of the

brain, a fact that has gone largely unnoticed by the few critics who have written on the

novel.

Perhaps the key event in the plot of The Gold Bug Variations is Ressler's

decision to abandon his research into DNA. It is the mystery from which much of the

magnetic pull that Ressler radiates for Todd and Jan originates. For most critics,

however, it can be simply put down to some sentimental lovesickness following the

loss of Jeanette Koss. Joseph Dewey, for example, summarises the situation by

arguing that "[w]hen [Koss] decides to give up Ressler for the imperfect neutrality of

her husband, Ressler abandons his career and in effect disappears" ("Hooking the

Nose of the Leviathan" 51), while Herman and Lernout, similarly ascribe his

renunciation of science to "personal reasons" (152). To argue this, however, is to

fundamentally misunderstand the fact that one of Powers's key aims in the novel is to

attempt to dramatise the influence of the fear-dominated reptilian brain upon human

behaviour.

Like DeLillo's examinations of "modern terror" (RS 381), The Gold Bug

Variations investigates how the human brain is "[h]ardwired to fear" (GBV 546), and

there are several occasions early in the novel when this interest becomes apparent.

The news of Ressler's death, with which the novel opens, for example, makes "the

veins of [Jan's] neck" thicken "with chemical fight or flight" (GBV 19), while it is the

element of challenge in the cryptographical aspects of DNA that makes Ressler suited

to its study, for he notes that "[d]isguised messages hook him by the brain stem"

(GBV 47). Similarly, when Jan must summon the courage to end her relationship

with Keith Tuckwell a "pro-tem stem of the brain [takes] over" (GBV 225).

Perhaps without Ressler being conscious of it, the reptilian brain is influencing

his behaviour in the early stages of his affair with Jeanette Koss, as he interprets her

actions in terms of her animalistic qualities. Looking for an opportunity to mate he

sees Jeanette "arched, aroused, frozen at the door in fight-or-flight, scared nocturnal

mammal caught in the light" (GBV 238). It is not long, however, before Ressler

begins to reflect on its influence upon his actions. In a key section in the book,

Ressler is playfully teaching young Margaret Blake to box when, apparently

spontaneously, he says "Left, left, left, then come in with the roundhouse. Shake 'im

up, shake 'im up, then knock 'im down" (GBV 273). The appearance of the phrase

startles Ressler:

> Perhaps his father taught him the cadence, but he has no memory of
>
> learning the words. They spring unsponsored from some antiquated
>
> chunk of neurons in the limbic reptilian segment of his brain. He has

always looked on all physical combativeness short of card games as

evolutionary regression. (ibid.)

This sets in motion a train of reflection, where he begins to equate his own work with

the dictates of the reptilian brain, acknowledging that his research "paper is a way of

going twelve rounds with Herbert Koss" (GBV 274). From this he moves to a more

general view of humanity:

he sees that the unique achievement of this species, the thing that

recursive consciousness ultimately permits, is the pretense that one does

not actually manifest a trait even when taking maximum advantage of it.

Everything the hominid branch has achieved . . . came about from

surviving two out of three falls . . . Man will never be anything better

than a clever boxer. Maybe one that wins by footwork rather than

punches, but still a creature always accountable to the win. The

realization sickens him: advantage, self-interest, short-term gain are the

only forces that carve a population. (ibid.)

Ressler's awareness of this influence becomes more acute: in a dispute over the

publication of the paper he hopes will win Koss, he finds himself having to "suppress

the spontaneous fight mechanism" (GBV 354), while he notes that his work only

represents "what any childless male is programmed to do. An alternative means of

replication. Oblique, sublimated, – pencil, paper the international chemical symbols.

But he's definitely after a self-perpetuating, thriving, surviving genome with his name

on it" (GBV 277).

Ressler's great characteristic, Jan reflects, was "the ability to step out of the

food chain and, however, momentarily, refuse to compete" (GBV 165), and it seems

more likely that it was his desire to transcend regressive activity that persuaded

Ressler to abandon his research, rather than his disappointed love. This is consistent
with his belief, summarised later by Jan, that some science has attempted to dismantle
"the biosphere out of fear" (GBV 325), and with his subsequent career move.
Although Ressler ostensibly moves from DNA research to music composition, this
move can be seen as an attempt to ascend to higher regions of the brain and continue
his study of cognition.

Reading a "reasonably up-to-date" (GBV 543) text on the brain in an effort to
find out more about Jimmy's condition, Jan reads of how scans of the brain have
shown the impact music has. Even "the simplest compositional rules" of music, she
notes "are enough to awaken the primitive wonder, release the brain . . . from its
constant dictionary of representation" (GBV 572), and it is via exactly this aspect of
musical composition, the connection between the brain and music, that Ressler
explains his work. Drawing a comparison with John von Neumann, who had tried to
develop a machine that imitated the brain, Ressler says of his attempts to find
"another language, cleaner than math, closer to our insides than words" (GBV 610),
as he produces his musical scores:

> Von Neumann, the cleverest product evolution has yet offered, thought
> that the language of the functioning brain was not the language of logic
> and mathematics. The only way we would ever be able to see the way
> the switches all assembled the messages they sent among themselves
> would be to create an analog to the language of the central nervous
> system. . . . The firmware language of the brain. That's what I have
> spent the last twenty-five years pursuing. (ibid.)[56]

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[56] The allusion here is presumably to the fragmentary end of John von Neumann's posthumously
published The Computer and the Brain whose final section is entitled "The Language of the Brain Not
the Language of Mathematics." Here Von Neumann observes that just "as languages like Greek or

Steven Pinker, who sees the mind as a naturally selected neural computer, observes in

How the Mind Works that art, literature and music are activities that "in the struggle

to survive and reproduce, seem pointless" (521), and it is presumably this freedom

from self-interest that appeals to Ressler. His story, although less dramatic than Nick

Shay's in Underworld, is similarly a dramatisation of the ascent from the primitive

dictates of the reptilian brain, and while the decision to abandon research into DNA in

favour of examining the brain may seem drastic, it is perhaps worth noting that

Ressler's move mimics that of his precursor Francis Crick.

In his memoir, What Mad Pursuit, Crick assigns the date June 1966 as the date

that "marked the end of classical molecular biology, because the detailed delineation

of the genetic code . . . showed that, in outline, the basic ideas of molecular biology

were largely correct" (143). Having found, then, that most of the ambitions he had

held in his scientific career had been satisfied, Crick, at the age of sixty, began to

study the workings of the brain and attack the problem of consciousness. The

outcome of this research emerged in 1994 when Crick published his popularised

account of the mind, The Astonishing Hypothesis. Heavily tilted towards analysing

visual awareness, Crick's book is another accessible study arguing for a materialist

interpretation of how minds work. "The Astonishing Hypothesis," Crick argues, "is

that 'You,' your joys and your sorrows, your memories and your ambitions, your

sense of personal identity and free will, are in fact no more than the behavior of a vast

assembly of nerve cells and their associated molecules" (3). [57]

*

Sanskrit are historical facts and not absolute logical necessities, it is only reasonable to assume that
logics and mathematics are similarly historical, accidental forms of expression" (81).

[57] John Horgan, in The End of Science, argues that this hypothesis is not all that astonishing, being
"just old-fashioned reductionism and materialism" (164).

In his subsequent novels, Powers has continued his explorations of some of these themes. Operation Wandering Soul sees a Gravity's Rainbow-reminiscent victory for multinational companies, with local geography becoming a transnational space, "no country at all and all countries rolled into one" (OWS 30), while Powers's 1998 novel Gain reprises the ecological concerns at the centre of The Gold Bug Variations. "We must be mad," a character argues, "that's the only possible explanation. Thinking we could housebreak life, beat the kinks out of it, teach it to behave. Complete, collective, species-wide insanity" (G 270).

More obviously linked, however, is Powers's apparently autobiographical novel, Galatea 2.2. As noted in chapter one, Galatea 2.2 reiterates an argument for the role of collaboration in artistic creation, but it also continues his fascination with the workings of the brain. Although the novel shows a typically broad range of literary reference, with allusions ranging from Henry James to James Joyce,[58] most of the action in the novel takes place in a Centre for the Study of Advanced Sciences. Detailing the narrator's yearlong appointment as "token humanist" (G2.2 4), the novel draws on work in artificial intelligence as the narrator collaborates with a scientist in an attempt to build a connectionist machine (a mass of interlinked processors that aim to simulate connected brain cells) that can pass an English exam. Interestingly, while this quest explores questions of memory and what constitutes consciousness, it also, like Underworld, narrates its action against a larger outline of the human brain. While Underworld mainly relies on the vertical axis, Galatea 2.2 takes the specialised, interconnected mesh of the cerebral cortex as its backdrop. The research centre, with its "countless discrete and massively parallel subsystems," seems to the narrator like a

"block-wide analog of that neuronal mass it investigated" (<u>G2.2</u> 6), and the novel

itself, in putting forward its argument for collaboration, obviously imitates the brain's

integration of the localised and unique skills of different regions of the cerebral

cortex.

In his most recent novel, <u>Plowing the Dark</u>, there are, again, a number of

significant continuities. The novel details the brain's "fight or flight" instinct (<u>PTD</u>

92),[59] relies on "the encyclopedia" (<u>PTD</u> 138), and outlines how "art and science

conspire" (<u>PTD</u> 64), as the plot features a writer who finds in computer code an

analogue for poetry: "<u>Clean, expressive, urgent, all-encompassing</u>" (<u>PTD</u> 7). Again,

like <u>The Gold Bug Variations</u>, the novel forms a circular structure. The first page

describes "<u>a place that passes all understanding</u>" (<u>PTD</u> 3), while the end of the book

presents "a noise that passed all understanding" (<u>PTD</u> 414). This, of course, echoes

the end of Eliot's <u>The Waste Land</u>, and the end of modernism, is, as it was for Gaddis

and DeLillo, once more a recurring concern. Reference is made to Yeats (<u>PTD</u> 305),

Lawrence (<u>PTD</u> 204), and Joyce (<u>PTD</u> 213, 301), while the novel focuses on the

problems of art since modernism, as "representational art [had] self-destructed" (8).

Although Powers's novels are sceptical towards naïve defences of art, he includes a

painter in the novel, and while it is doubtful how satisfactory her work has been at the

end of <u>Plowing the Dark</u>, it is notable that, like Gaddis's artists, she finds a way

forward by refusing to "do original work" (<u>PTD</u> 10). Like the novel itself, which

braids its originality with references to earlier works by classic writers like Melville

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[58] The mention of "Isabel Archer" (<u>G2.2</u> 255), of course refers to the tragic heroine of James's <u>The Portrait of a Lady</u>, while his reference to "Stephen, gazing at the girl in the water" (<u>G2.2</u> 229), alludes to the moment of Stephen Dedalus's recognition that art is his vocation in <u>A Portrait</u> (<u>P</u> 185).

[59] Although the novel frequently refers to the brain (<u>PTD</u> 72, 79, 89, 115, 130, 195, 199, 247, 276, 402), it is perhaps worth noting that there is the odd error. Powers's reference to "the most significant jump in human communication since the bulking up of the cerebellum" (<u>PTD</u> 267), mistakes the cerebellum, an outgrowth at the back of the brain which mainly controls motor co-ordination, and which is actually relatively small in the human brain (in the brain of a fish, by contrast, the cerebellum can take up to 90 per cent of the brain's total mass [Greenfield 17]), for the highly developed cerebrum.

(PTD 294), she performs an encyclopedic collaboration between her own creativity,

art history, and the specialist knowledge of different intellectual disciplines.

CHAPTER FOUR

"IMMANENT DOMAIN": DAVID FOSTER WALLACE'S <u>INFINITE JEST</u>.

"Influence," wrote Richard Ellmann in his study of literary relations, <u>Eminent Domain</u>, "is a term which conceals and mitigates the guilty acquisitiveness of talent":

> Writers move upon other writers not as genial successors but as violent expropriators, knocking down established boundaries to seize by force of youth, or of age, what they require . . . [b]ecause language is common and literature is continuous, the words in a book are coded records of successive impositions of eminent domain. The best writers expropriate best, they disdain petty debts in favor of grand, authoritative larcenies. (3,8)

Ellmann goes on to trace patterns of influence amongst the likes of Yeats, Joyce and Eliot through personal meetings, common subject matter, and use of language, but, as the millennium approached, the coded literary history he outlined was called into question by an increasingly technological world. Sven Birkerts, for example, argued in 1994 that the "printed word [was] part of a vestigial order that we are moving away from . . . [t]his shift is happening throughout our culture, away from the patterns and habits of the printed page and toward a new world distinguished by its reliance on electronic communications" (<u>Gutenberg Elegies</u> 118). The escalating rate of change, the ubiquity of television, the bewildering interconnectedness of the world-wide web, and the reduction of attention spans in the face of a soundbyte society are symptoms of electronic evils that, in Birkerts's eyes, have dire consequences for the continued reading and writing of great literature. Faced with an increasingly atomised society, and an array of electronic entertainments, literary ambitions have, according to

Birkerts, diminished since the demise of the modernists Ellmann studied. "No one,"

he argued, "thinks any longer about writing the Great American Novel" (207).

While these complaints echo some of the nervous responses to television from

the sixties that were discussed in chapter one, Birkerts has not been alone in his

pessimistic survey of fiction in the 1990s. In fact, it is a considerable irony that, as

writers like Gaddis, and DeLillo have gradually received more critical recognition,

their new found prominence has been used to provide unflattering comparisons with

an emerging generation of writers. John Aldridge, while attributing much of the

blame to the influence of creative writing schools,[1] similarly announces the end of

the big, ambitious book in his survey of young writers, Talents and Technicians.

Reviewing the literary scene in the nineties, Aldridge laments the end of the:

> great tradition of technical innovation and experiment that, from Joyce
>
> and Eliot to Pynchon, Gaddis, and DeLillo, produced the imperial and
>
> apocalyptic poem and novel of rich intellectual complexity . . . that
>
> embodied the ambitious view that literary works can and should become
>
> artistic microcosms of a whole society or the modern world. (33)

The work of younger writers – Aldridge selects writers like Raymond Carver, Lorrie

Moore, T. Coraghessan Boyle, Jay McInerney, and Brett Easton Ellis – offers instead

a "limited realism . . . that is not used in the service of any idea about the nature of

human experience or society . . . It is a fiction that looks soothingly pretty on the

page, can be read without effort, would indeed not nourish, offend, or excite anyone,

and is fashionably uniform and without point" (35). The short story is, according to

Aldridge, the "dominant fictional form" in this age of "the greatly shortened attention

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[1] It is perhaps worth noting that, although Aldridge draws a distinction throughout his study between affiliation with creative writing programs and the more avant-garde postmodern writers, he includes Pynchon and Barth in the second group, writers who have both had strong connections with creative writing schools.

span of the generation of readers brought up on television" (56-57). These new

writers, he concludes, "possess nothing like the vast literary erudition of Gaddis,

Pynchon, and Mailer" (157).

Aldridge's suggestion that literary innovation had its final flourish in the work

of the ageing postmodernists, and that young writers favour instead a pared down

realism, seems to be borne out by Granta's 1996 map of the "Best of Young American

Novelists." Nationally judged by Robert Stone, Anne Tyler, Tobias Wolff and Ian

Jack, Granta's selection of twenty novelists includes neither Richard Powers nor

David Foster Wallace, but foregrounds instead, what Wolff calls, "well-behaved"

(qtd. in Jack 13) novels. The works collected are generally well made, but tame

works, on well-established themes like growing up and family relationships, told in a

conservative idiom. In the project's introduction, Stone elaborates on this choice:

> I think the selections reflect a number of things which have taken place
>
> in American writing over the past twenty or thirty years. The principal
>
> one is probably the resurgence of realism that, during the late sixties,
>
> seemed to overcome the postmodernist experiments of writers like John
>
> Barth, John Hawkes, Albert Guerrard, the Barthelmes etc. (ibid.)

He adds later, defensively, "[i]n a way, some of these modest writers are vastly

ambitious" (qtd. in Jack 14).

David Lodge, however, reviewing the collection for the New York Review of

Books, disagreed. While conceding that there was "no bad writing," he found

"nothing very startling or ambitious . . . a certain sameness, and tameness" alongside

"a high standard of technical competence" ("O Ye Laurels" 20). Ascribing this

meekness, like Aldridge, to the proliferation of creative writing programs, Lodge

concludes by concurring with Stone on the absence of the influence of the elder

postmodernists: "There is not a trace to be seen of the influence of John Barth,

Richard Brautigan, Donald Barthelme, Thomas Pynchon, or other luminaries of the

'renaissance' in American writing" (20).

Perhaps confirming Frederick Karl's perception in 1985 that the Mega-Novel,

as practised by Gaddis, Pynchon, Gass, and Barth was coming to its end, John Barth

has himself underlined the waning of scale outlined by Birkerts, Aldridge and Granta.

For Barth, minimalism was "the most impressive phenomenon on the current . . .

literary scene" (Further Fridays 65, emphasis Barth's) and the encyclopedic novel was

now an "endangered species" (87). "At so leanly perceived an hour of the world,"

Barth asks, "is not the big fat novel . . . an anachronism, even an aesthetic

embarrassment?" (76).

While this thesis might read like an instalment of Ellmann's coded record of

"successive impositions of eminent domain" running from James Joyce to David

Foster Wallace, the aim of this chapter is not to suggest that Wallace is guilty of

"grand, authoritative larcenies" from his precursors.[2] Rather it is to highlight that

Wallace's 1079 page Infinite Jest, like the work of Powers (who has expressed his

admiration for Wallace's novels),[3] demonstrates the continuing vitality into the

nineties of the encyclopedic novel that Birkerts and Aldridge fail to find in their

nostalgic surveys, and the continuing influence of the "luminaries of the 'renaissance'

in American writing" absent from Granta's selection. Although the sometimes

complicated specifics of Wallace's relationship to his precursors are discussed in

detail later in the chapter, his sympathies with Gaddis are immediately obvious in the

ambitious length and scale of his novels, his preference for long stretches of

---

[2] A suggestion that would be particularly inappropriate considering Infinite Jest's parodies of "Professor H. Bloom's turgid studies of artistic studies of artistic influenza" (IJ 1077n366).
[3] Powers praises Wallace, along with Vollmann, for "widening the boundaries of where a novel can exist" ("The Last Generalist" 37).

unattributed dialogue,[4] and Wallace's numerous comments on his work; his work

recalls Gass's through his variation of typographical presentation and his use of

metafictional techniques; he explicitly echoes Pynchon several times in Infinite Jest;

and DeLillo's use of neuroscience is paralleled in one of Infinite Jest's film

descriptions, whose title is teasingly similar to Ellmann's. The film "Immanent

Domain," attributed to one of the characters in the novel, features the heroic fight of

three memory-neurons "in the Inferior frontal gyrus of a man's . . . brain" to "prevent

their displacement by new memory-neurons as the man undergoes intensive

psychoanalysis" (IJ 987n24). It is significant that the film opposes the twentieth

century's two major attempts to discover the workings of the mind – Freudian

psychoanalysis and the neuron based science favoured by DeLillo – however, while

the Freudian approach is confined to the level of a human activity, the neuronal

explanation is privileged as an explanation of the actual working of the mind.

*

The son of a philosophy Professor and an English teacher, David Foster

Wallace was born in Ithaca, New York in 1962. Wallace graduated summa cum laude

in 1985 from Amherst College before receiving an MFA in creative writing from the

University of Arizona and doing graduate work in philosophy at Harvard University.

Prior to the publication of Infinite Jest he had published a novel, a collection of short

stories, numerous essays (later collected and published as A Supposedly Fun Thing

I'll Never do Again), and co-authored a study of rap music (Signifying Rappers: Rap

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[4] One of the most noted characteristics of dialogue in Wallace's novels is the insertion of blank sections
(e.g. "…" [IJ 40]) to denote a character's speechlessness, or significant facial expression, in
conversation. This technique, however, was also employed several times in The Recognitions (R 192,
716, 798, 822).

and Race in the Urban Present, with Mark Costello). Although Wallace's work appears to be part of a straightforward lineage from Joyce – Wallace acknowledges Joyce as an important influence in one of his interviews ("The Salon Interview" 27), one of his short stories is based around the "Wandering Rocks" chapter of Ulysses,[5] and Infinite Jest is marked by Joyce's legacy in several places[6] – the more significant relationship is to the work of the American postmodernists. As Aldridge was apparently looking for erudite writers who continued the legacy of Gaddis, DeLillo, and Pynchon it is surprising that he chose not to include Wallace, as he has been quite explicit in a number of interviews about the influence these writers have had upon him. Wallace has outlined how Donald Barthelme's "The Balloon" was "the first story [he] ever read that made [him] want to be a writer" (ibid.), spoken highly of DeLillo ("An Interview with David Foster Wallace" 139), and praised Gaddis for his prophetic treatment of television ("Transcript" 24). While some of the few reviewers and critics who have written on Wallace[7] have noted that his short-story "Westward the Course of Empire Takes its Way" is "written in the margins of John Barth's 'Lost in the Funhouse'" (Girl copyright page), what has been less remarked upon is how close a relation all his work has to his postmodern precursors.[8]

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[5] "Order and Flux in Northampton," which, as detailed in the introduction, includes a number of references to Joyce.

[6] Infinite Jest shares with Dubliners an interest in "moral paralysis" (IJ 782), like Portrait of the Artist it begins in the first person and ends in the third, like Ulysses it begins with "telemachry" (IJ 249) centred around a young prodigy before shifting to concentrate on a character with more humble human gifts, and, as discussed later, the novel is preoccupied with Ulysses's twin obsessions of Hamlet and metempsychosis.

[7] Outwith sharing a special edition of the Review of Contemporary Fiction in 1993 with two other writers, very little critical work has been devoted to Wallace. There have been only two published essays, Tom LeClair's "Prodigious Fiction," and Frank Louis Cioffi's "An Anguish Become Thing," although Wallace also receives a few incidental mentions in Joseph Tabbi's 1995 study Postmodern Sublime (77-78, 108, 201n16). There have been a few dissertations examining Infinite Jest made available on the internet, but these are of uneven critical value.

[8] The relationship of "Westward" to Barth is noted in the only full-length essay on Wallace's short fiction – James Rother's "Reading and Riding the Post-Scientific Wave" – and in numerous reviews, such as Bharat Tandon's review of Girl with Curious Hair in the Times Literary Supplement, and A. O. Scott's long review of Brief Interviews with Hideous Men in the New York Review of Books. Joseph Tabbi, in his critical study Postmodern Sublime, also briefly notes this connection (78).

Wallace's first novel, <u>The Broom of the System</u>, for example, is a

Wittgenstein-influenced thwarted mystery tale frequently related, like Gaddis's

novels, in stretches of unattributed dialogue. Concerning the legacy of a disappeared

grandparent that apparently entwines the novel's central character in a conspiracy,

<u>Broom</u>'s search recalls Oedipa Maas's strange bequest from Pierce Inverarity in

Pynchon's <u>The Crying of Lot 49</u>. The names of several characters are suggestively

resonant of characters in other postmodern works,[9] and even the title carries an

oblique allusion to DeLillo.[10] Towards the end of <u>Americana</u>, DeLillo's first novel, a

character remarks: "Systems planning is the true American artform. More than Jazz

for godsake. We excel at maintenance. We understand interrelationships. . . . We

know exactly where to put the nail that holds the broom" (265).

Wallace's flair for encyclopedicism comes out in his short story collection

<u>Girl With Curious Hair</u> which includes references that range from Kekulé to

Beckett,[11] and appropriately, features a girl spellbound by the "mystery of total data"

(<u>Girl</u> 28), who has memorised an entire encyclopedia. The stories examine such

subjects as American political history, a writer who wants to be "the first really great

poet of technology" (155), the American gameshow <u>Jeopardy</u>,[12] and the phenomenon

of self-referential TV chat-shows (a fascination Wallace elaborates upon in his

essays). The collection refers to postmodernists like Cynthia Ozick, John Ashbery,

Joseph McElroy, and Donald Barthelme, but the book climaxes with "Westward the

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[9] The receptionist Candy Mandible, for example, perhaps owes her name to the teacher in Donald
Barthelme's short story "Me and Miss Mandible".
[10] As one of the characters in the novel notes, the title also refers to a Wittgensteinian word game
(<u>Broom</u> 149-50), but Wallace's titles are typically multivalent. <u>Infinite Jest</u>, for example, encircles
<u>Hamlet</u>, Georg Cantor, and, of course, big jokes.
[11] The reference to "the nothing-new sun" (<u>Girl</u> 347) is an allusion to the opening of Beckett's <u>Murphy</u>:
"The Sun shone, having no alternative, on the nothing new" (<u>Murphy</u> 5). Friedrich August Kekulé, the
nineteenth-century chemist who dreamed the structure of the Benzene ring, is referred to on page 313.
[12] Despite having written a story that bitterly satirises <u>Jeopardy</u>, in May 2000 one of the show's
questions in the category "Middle Names" was: "Author and Infinite Jester, Foster." This is

Course of Empire Takes its Way," a 142 page story which takes its title from George

Berkeley and describes, with detailed reference to "Lost in the Funhouse," John

Barth's attempts to open a "Funhouse" chain of restaurants in association with

McDonalds. It is perhaps typical of Wallace that, as James Rother notes, "Westward"

is "nearly six times as long as its source text" (218), but Wallace describes his story as

an attempt to "do with metafiction what . . . DeLillo's Libra had done with other

mediated myths. . . . I wanted to get the Armageddon-explosion, the goal

metafiction's always been about, I wanted to get it over with, and then out of the

rubble reaffirm the idea of art being a living transaction between humans" ("An

Interview with David Foster Wallace" 142).

This fascination with the writers of the preceding generation is continued in

Wallace's essays,[13] which almost constitute a manifesto for young American writers.

Viewing his contemporaries as a coherent generation who have "been born into an

artistic climate as stormy and exciting as anything since Pound and Co. . . . the would-

be heirs to a gorgeous chaos . . . Postmodernism, Metafiction" ("Fictional Futures"

50-51), Wallace is specific not just about the divide between generations, but also

about distinctions within the preceding generation. In John Updike, Philip Roth, and

Norman Mailer, for example, Wallace sees little of relevance to younger writers.

Viewing them collectively as "the Great Male Narcissists" ("Updike" 1, Wallace

abbreviates this to G.M.N.), Wallace critiques them for their repetitiveness, misogyny

and particularly for the narrowness of their perspectives: "the major reason so many

of my generation dislike Mr. Updike and the other G.M.N.'s has to do with these

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particularly ironic in the light of Wallace's critique of the assimilative powers of television discussed
later.

[13] Wallace's essays are particularly relevant to a discussion of his fiction because, outwith the interest
the essays possess themselves, there is also an interesting interplay between his fiction and his essays.
A number of his non-fiction observations are also applied to a number of his fictional characters – for

writers' radical self-absorption, and with their uncritical celebration of this self-absorption both in themselves and in their characters" (21).

Updike's contemporaries, the encyclopedia-creators Gaddis, Gass,[14] Coover, DeLillo and Pynchon, by contrast, are singled out for their importance. In an era where, as Gaddis presciently pointed out "[i]mages surround us" (R 152), the postmodernists' view of "television as corrupting tragedy" (R 601) was particularly important to the younger writers. DeLillo's television-saturated critique White Noise, for example, is described by Wallace as having been "a kind of televisual clarion-call" to younger writers (Fun 47).

As Wallace is at pains to point out, however, a more complicated response is necessary for writers of the next generation. While it may have been feasible, even necessary, for older postmodernists to treat television with distant contempt, the situation is different for younger writers who have grown up with TV. Wallace notes:

> the American generation born after, say, 1955 is the first for whom
>
> television is something to be lived with, not just looked at. Our parents
>
> regarded the set rather as the Flapper did the automobile: a curiosity
>
> turned treat turned seduction. For us, their children, TV's as much a
>
> part of reality as Toyotas and gridlock. We quite literally cannot
>
> "imagine" life without it. ("Fictional Futures" 36)

This relationship is further complicated, according to Wallace, by the parasitic relationship television encourages. As successive generations are conditioned to be passive receivers more and more fiction writers adopt techniques rooted in their:

---

example, Wallace's autobiographical note that he was a "near-great" tennis player between "the ages of twelve and fifteen" (Fun 3) is afforded to James Incandenza's father in Infinite Jest (IJ 158).
[14] Wallace discusses most of these writers in relation to television, with the exception of William Gass whose Omensetter's Luck he includes in his essay "Overlooked."

experience as consumate watchers. E.g., events often refracted through the sensibilities of more than one character; short, dense paragraphs in which coherence is often sacrificed for straight evocation; abrupt transitions in scene, setting, point of view, temporal and causal orders; a surfacy, objective, "cinematic" third-person narrative eye. Above all, though, a comparative indifference to the imperative of mimesis, combined with an absolute passion for narrative choices that conduce to what might be called "mood." (41)

While this situation may seem to suggest that television offers a number of benefits, perhaps almost a symbiotic relationship, for young fiction writers, in his key essay "E Unibus Pluram: Television and U. S. fiction"[15] Wallace outlines why television's "hagiography of image" (IJ 389) remains the major cultural issue for American writers to struggle with. Reportedly consumed at an average rate of six hours-a-day by Americans, television's lure of engagement without demand was critiqued by the leading postmodernists via an irony that, Wallace argues, "wasn't just credible as art; it seemed downright socially useful" in a wider context:

> Pynchon reoriented our view of paranoia from deviant fringe to central thread in the corporo-bureaucratic weave; DeLillo exposed image, signal, data and tech as agents of spiritual chaos and not social order. . . . [while] Gaddis's exposure of abstract capital as deforming exploded hypocrisy [and] Coover's repulsive political farces exploded hypocrisy. (Fun 66)

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[15] It is perhaps worth noting that Wallace's essay bears a few similarities with Neil Postman's Amusing Ourselves to Death. For example, as Postman begins from the premise that most critics "do not take television seriously enough" (17), so Wallace also explains that "[o]ne big claim of this essay is going to be that the most dangerous thing about television . . . is that we don't take it seriously enough" (Fun 27).

However, it has been the achievement of television to incorporate this criticism, and therefore to render itself invulnerable to these ironic assaults. By adopting various techniques pioneered by postmodernism – especially in its metafictional strands – television draws attentions to its limitations. By overtly encouraging viewers to "[e]at a whole lot of food and stare at the TV" (Fun 41) television invites the viewer to feel that, in their knowing superiority, they have transcended the limitations of television, and are involved in an intellectual activity rather than passive spectation. Wallace explains:

> Television has pulled the old dynamic of reference and redemption inside-out: it is now television that takes elements of the postmodern – the involution, the absurdity, the sardonic fatigue, the iconoclasm and rebellion – and bends them to the ends of spectation and consumption. (Fun 64)

Given this assimilative strength of television, then, and the largely negative role that irony, according to Wallace, performs[16] it becomes necessary for young writers to seek a different path forward from their precursors. Having detailed and critiqued the various responses of writers like William T. Vollmann, A.M. Homes, and especially Mark Leyner to late-twentieth-century television, Wallace concludes his essay by outlining a possible way forward. Discussing a number of issues that feed directly into the concerns of Infinite Jest,[17] Wallace argues:

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[16] Wallace argues: "irony, entertaining as it is, serves an almost exclusively negative function. It's critical and destructive, a ground-clearing. Surely this is the way our postmodern fathers saw it. But irony's singularly unuseful when it comes to constructing anything to replace the hypocrisies it debunks" (Fun 67).

[17] While Infinite Jest obviously shares an interest in "U.S.A. image culture" (IJ 739), Wallace's essay on TV also covers the ground of different varieties of addiction (even to the extent of imagining Toblerone addiction [Fun 37], an addiction suffered from by Prince Q ---, the Saudi Minister of Home Entertainment in the novel [IJ 33]); media futurologist George Gilder's suggestion that the "telecomputer" (Fun 72) will replace televisions; and an interest in the American habit of "absolution via irony" (IJ 385).

The next real literary "rebels" in this country might well emerge as some

weird bunch of <u>anti</u>-rebels, born oglers who dare somehow to back away

from ironic watching, who have the childish gall actually to . . . treat of

plain old untrendy human troubles and emotions in U.S. life with

reverence and conviction. Who eschew self-consciousness and hip

fatigue. These anti-rebels would be outdated, of course . . . [m]aybe

that'll be the point. Maybe that's why they'll be the next real rebels.

Real rebels, as far as I can see, risk disapproval. The old postmodern

insurgents risked the gasp and squeal: shock, disgust, outrage,

censorship, accusations of socialism, anarchism, nihilism. Today's risks

are different. The new rebels might be artists willing to risk the yawn,

the rolled eyes, the cool smile, the nudged ribs, the parody of gifted

ironists. (<u>Fun</u> 81)

In his continuation of the encyclopedic tradition Wallace begins to enact this –

<u>Infinite Jest</u> is earnest and straightforward in its discussions of addiction and

depression – but, as the novels of the older postmodernists looked back to their

modernist precursors as they moved forward, Wallace's novel, seeking to move

beyond postmodernism, continues to look back to the work of writers like DeLillo and

Gaddis.

*

"What this country's really all about," a character in Gaddis's last novel

remarks, "tens of millions out there with their candy and beer cans and this

inexhaustible appetite for being entertained" (<u>F</u> 468). For DeLillo, fiction is "created

as a mystery" ("An Interview with Don DeLillo" with LeClair 80). Between these

two poles – Gaddis's diagnosis of the American appetite for entertainment and

DeLillo's mystery – the plot of <u>Infinite Jest</u> is worked out. Wallace's new map of the

world is outlined in ninety clearly defined sections[18] and is strongly centred around

mystery. While multiple readings of the novel reveals a certain amount of obliquely

presented information,[19] there remain large areas of ambiguity.

Although the novel is chronologically scattered, a fifty year span is covered,

from winter 1960 (the earliest section covering this period begins on page 157) to

November 2010, the only section from which is used to begin the novel (<u>IJ</u> 3-17).

Most of the action takes place in the year 2009 during a period from 3rd to 20th

November. However, even this information is partially hidden in the novel. Years

are no longer designated according to the Gregorian calendar, but rather are named

after the highest bidding sponsor with certain fringe benefits, thus in 2009, the "Year

of the Depend Adult Undergarment" (<u>IJ</u> 17, abbreviated in the novel to Y.D.A.U.), the

Statue of Liberty is outfitted in an "enormous adult-design diaper" (<u>IJ</u> 33). While a

list of the nine sponsored years ("SUBSIDIZED TIME" [<u>IJ</u> 223]) is given after two

hundred pages, the date that sponsorship began is not explicitly given anywhere in the

novel and can only be divined by cross-referencing two endnotes referring to the same

event.[20]

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[18] I take as a sign of a clearly defined break in the narrative either a capitalised heading, a beginning after a clear break (e.g. on page 223 after a list, or on page 666 after a letter), or a section headed by a circle. There are other breaks, especially in the last hundred pages, where the action shifts, unheralded, between paragraphs, but I assume it was Wallace's desire to maintain exactly ninety sections that persuaded him to relegate some sections of the narrative (see, for example, 787n324) to the endnotes. The number is perhaps significant because in the novel James Incandenza "spent the whole last ninety days of his animate life" creating the film "Infinite Jest" (<u>IJ</u> 838).

[19] While Thomas Mann's comment, in the afterword to <u>The Magic Mountain</u>, that his book must "be read not once but twice" (724) might be seen as a key to a large portion of twentieth-century fiction, there are surely few novels that it could be more aptly applied to than <u>Infinite Jest</u> where the chronologically most advanced section (and much crucial material) is presented first.

[20] One endnote describes "the M.I.T. language riots of B.S. [before subsidisation] 1997" (<u>IJ</u> 987n24), while a second, footnoting a section covering Y.D.A.U., refers to "the so-called M.I.T. Language Riots of twelve years past." (<u>IJ</u> 996n60), therefore subsidization began with 2002, and Y.D.A.U. is 2009.

The geography of North America has also changed. In <u>Infinite Jest</u>'s

reconfigured map, the United States has subsumed Mexico and Canada, the leaders of

these countries becoming "secretaries" (<u>IJ</u> 384) in the larger entity ONAN – the

Organisation of North American Nations. The internal map of the US has been

similarly redrawn, with much of New England being forcibly ceded to Canada on the

proviso that the US is allowed to dump all its waste there.²¹ This waste is launched

towards New England by a series of giant catapults, while massive fans have been

erected to redirect toxic fumes away from the US Politics, then, is ironically cast as a

kind of ONANism, and there is every sign that the culture's dependency on

entertainment has increased, as the US president is, once more, an ex-performer: the

former singer Johnny Gentle.

The main plot of the novel is worked out in two parallel narrative strands

detailing the former burglar Don W. Gately's recovery from substance dependency

and the descent of the tennis and lexical prodigy, Hal Incandenza, into substance

abuse and, eventual withdrawal. Hal, born in June 1992 (<u>IJ</u> 27) and 17 years old in

Y.D.A.U. (<u>IJ</u> 49), is the youngest of the three sons of James O. Incandenza – a

prodigiously talented filmmaker, tennis player, and optical physicist born in 1950 (<u>IJ</u>

159) who lapsed into alcoholism and committed suicide on 1 April 2005 at the age of

54 (<u>IJ</u> 64) – and French-Canadian Avril M. Incandenza (née Mondragon), an authority

on prescriptive grammar born in 1953. A "bona fide bombshell-type female" (<u>IJ</u> 64)

in her youth, Avril remains, even at the age of 56 in Y.D.A.U. (<u>IJ</u> 766), very attractive

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This is consistent with the sixth year of subsidized time celebrating the "Year of the Yushityu 2007" (<u>IJ</u> 223). By contrast Tom LeClair, in his article "Prodigious Fiction," dates the action as "about 2015" (31). While LeClair is to be applauded for bringing early attention to Wallace's novel, his article makes a few other factual errors, such as mistaking Hugh Steeply's father for Don Gately's (32 see <u>IJ</u> 638-48).

²¹ The area "NORTH OF LINE FROM SYRACUSE TO TICONDEROGA, NY, . . . TO SALEM MA" (<u>IJ</u> 399) is ceded. In an oblique pun, having one's "map eliminated" in <u>Infinite Jest</u> refers to the street jargon for being killed, which subtly suggests the violence ONAN's gerrymandering has committed on other lands.

and has carried on a number of affairs, one of which was (in one of the novel's many Hamlet allusions)[22] with Hal's uncle. Hal has been resident at the Enfield Tennis Academy, founded on top of a hill in Boston, Massachusetts by his father, and run by his mother and uncle, since he was seven. His parents are sometimes referred to by their nicknames – "the Moms" and "Himself" – but, there is also some more elaborate lexical play with their names. Avril's initials, A.M.I., spell out the French for "friend," while James's suggest the French "joie": "joy." In light of Avril's many affairs and James's suicide these are, of course, bitterly ironic.

Literally and metaphorically at the bottom of this hill is Ennet House, a drug recovery residency where, in the second main string of the novel's narrative, Don Gately is continuing his recovery from "Demerol and Talwin" addiction (IJ 55). Brought up by a brutal stepfather and an alcoholic mother, the huge Gately (he is "the size of a young dinosaur" [IJ 55]) turned to enforcing gambling debts and burglary to fund his drug habit. Having already been through Ennet House in an attempt to purge himself of his habit, Gately is, in Y.D.A.U. working as a live-in staffer at Ennet House helping newcomers recover. Gately, however, is still being pursued by a remorseless North Shore Assistant District Attorney whose house he once robbed, violating a number of toothbrushes. At the novel's end when, following a brawl where Gately had to defend an Ennet resident, Gately is shot and hospitalised, he lies drifting in and out of memory and consciousness while the Attorney apparently waits outside.

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[22] While the title is, of course, a reference to Hamlet's address to the skull, the theme of the usurping uncle is clearly present, as is gravedigging, and specific references to Hamlet recur throughout the text (IJ 171, 238, 832, 900, 1076n337). The bird, "[l]ike a wren, maybe," that falls from the sky into Orin's jacuzzi who notes that "no way could it have been a good sign" (IJ 44), may be intended as an echo of Hamlet's reflection that there is "special providence in the fall of a sparrow" (5.ii.165-66). It is even tempting to consider Horatio's plea, "[i]f thou hast any sound, or use of voice, speak to me" (I.i.109-10), as a sort of epigraph to the first section of Infinite Jest.

At the heart of this is the entertainment that is rumoured to be fatally compelling: "Infinite Jest." Created by James Incandenza to facilitate inter-generational dialogue with Hal, his aim was to try to "contrive a medium via which he and the muted son could simply converse. To concoct something the gifted boy couldn't simply master and move on from to a new plateau. Something the boy would love enough to induce him to open his mouth and come out – even if it was only to ask for more" (IJ 838-39), but in Y.D.A.U. the film is now in circulation entangling countless characters in its web, most notably (in two important subplots of the novel), the duplicitous Canadian insurgent Rémy Marathe and ONAN agent Hugh Steeply, who are searching for a duplicable master copy of the entertainment, and Joelle Van Dyne who appeared in the film. The whereabouts of the film are unclear. It was apparently to be buried with James Incandenza, however, it first appears in the novel on 1 April Y.D.A.U. – the anniversary of James's death – having been mailed, with the inscription "HAPPY ANNIVERSARY!" (IJ 36), to the Saudi Minister of Home Entertainment's medical attaché, who Incandenza believes his wife to have been "cavorting" with (IJ 30).

It is at this point that critical events in the novel begin to be shrouded in mystery. It is possible, but difficult to confirm, that Hal's eldest brother, Orin, posted the film to the medical attaché as revenge for cuckolding his father – he, after all, refuses to have any contact with Avril. This is, at least, what the Canadian insurgents believe (IJ 723), but there is also the possibility that Orin is jealous of his mother's lovers as one character claims he was involved in an incestuous affair with her (IJ 791). Hal's place in this is also unclear. Suffering from progressively greater

marijuana-withdrawal and anhedonia[23] as the novel reaches its end, Hal begins to

"perceive things very intensely" (IJ 896), becomes increasingly lethargic,[24] and to lose

control over his facial muscles – the beginning of the problems that he is still

suffering from a year later, at the novel's start, where he "cannot make [him]self

understood" (IJ 10). It is intimated that Hal may have taken the "temporally-cerebral

and almost ontological[ly]" disturbing drug DMZ that "grows only on . . . mold"

(IJ 170) – hence the relevance of his early flashback to eating "a large patch of mold"

(IJ 10) during the novel's opening scene – or, it is possible that Hal has watched

"Infinite Jest." Again, during the opening section, set in 2010, Hal thinks back to

"John N. R. Wayne, who would have won this year's WhataBurger, standing watch in

a mask as Donald Gately and I dig up my father's head" (IJ 16-17) where a cartridge

was apparently buried. This event, however, is not alluded to anywhere else in the

novel – although it is implied that Wayne is working for the Canadian insurgents (IJ

726) – and Hal and Gately do not meet anywhere else in the novel. There does,

though, remain the possibility that they meet in the hospital where Gately is

recovering at the novel's end, as another of Hal's memories in 2010 is of the last time

he was in an "emergency room . . . almost exactly one year back" (IJ 16). However,

none of this is confirmed and so, the entire plot of the novel hinges on events that take

place in the missing year between November 2009 and November 2010.

While, in <u>Girl with Curious Hair</u>, a character notes that "limitations of space

and patience [were] a constant and defining limitation, these quick and distracting

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[23] "Anhedonia" is described in the novel as a form of depression that often "afflict[s] extremely goal-oriented people who reach a certain age having achieved all or more than all than they'd hoped for" (IJ 693).

[24] Comparing Hal's condition at the end of the novel with earlier sections, his torpor might be viewed as fulfilling his expectation that succeeding the "modern hero of action" (IJ 140) and the "'post'-modern hero . . . [of] compromise and administration" (IJ 141), would be the "'post-post'-modern . . . hero of non-action, the catatonic hero, the one beyond calm, divorced from all stimulus" (IJ 142). It is tempting to view this as Wallace writing himself into a tradition of twentieth-century art as an inevitable climax.

days" (Girl 357), Wallace's refusal to acquiesce to these limitations in writing the

oblique epic Infinite Jest brought predictable rebukes from some reviewers.

Strikingly similar to the incomprehension with which The Recognitions was received

("[w]hat is 'The Recognitions' about?" wrote Edward Wagenknecht in the Chicago

Tribune. "Really, I have no idea" [qtd. in Green 5]), Infinite Jest was criticised by

reviewers who found their usual reviewing techniques unsuccessful. "Skimming isn't

possible," wrote Lisa Schwarzbaum, "[r]eading the last page first reveals nothing":

> Carrying the 3-pound, 2.7-ounce book to read while commuting is out of
>
> the question; I might as well heft dumbells in my backpack. Propping it
>
> on my knees to read in bed or in the bathtub is tricky: Too much
>
> concentration and left-hand grip strength is needed to prevent the tome
>
> from toppling over while turning the pages (2)

Even in more academic accounts the novel was, like The Recognitions, attacked for

its length and supposed lack of economy. For Dale Peck, reviewing Infinite Jest for

the London Review of Books, Wallace's novel represented "an act of literary sadism"

(14). Criticising the novel as "bloated, boring, gratuitous, and – perhaps especially –

uncontrolled," Peck asserts: "I would, in fact, go as far as to say that Infinite Jest is

one of the very few novels for which the phrase 'not worth the paper it's written on'

has real meaning in at least an ecological sense" (ibid.).[25]

The comparison with Gaddis's novel is apt, not only because Wallace has

acknowledged his example, but also because Infinite Jest is, in a sense, a strange

double of The Recognitions: both novels share an interest in the ways "fathers impact

sons" (IJ 32), follow deluded prodigies, and thematise questions of originality; A. O.

Scott argues that Wallace possesses an unusually "high degree of generational self-

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[25] It is perhaps also worth noting that Peck is casual about the novel's chronology, arguing that "Infinite Jest is set in a US of the near future, . . . it's impossible to pin down when exactly" (14).

consciousness" (39), but as the earlier discussion showed, this was also a key feature

of The Recognitions; and even the much remarked upon endnotes that make up nearly

a hundred pages of Wallace's text was nearly prefigured in Gaddis's work.[26]

Like The Recognitions and the other novels included in this thesis, Infinite

Jest obviously fulfils the demands set by Levin, Kenner, and Adams in its large scale,

dense syntax, oblique narration, and diverse knowledge, as well as the more specific

criteria Edward Mendelson outlines for encyclopedic narratives. Mendelson argues

that the novel should occupy "a central cultural role" ("Gravity's Encyclopedia" 161),

and this is perhaps fulfilled by the novel offering what could be the lengthiest and

most detailed analysis of televisual culture. For media-analyst Neil Postman

"television [has] take[n] its place at the centre" of American culture in recent decades

(30), and while the subject is an important concern in countless contemporary novels,

Infinite Jest offers a thorough anthropology of television advertising, of the banality

and strangeness of its programs, and of characters whose lives have been taken over

by TV shows, that culminates the prophetic warnings outlined in The Recognitions.

Mendelson's requirement for the novel to include an account of a science is met by

the detailed pharmacology in Infinite Jest;[27] an "account of an art outside the realm of

written fiction" ("Gravity's Encyclopedia" 164) is provided in the novel's lengthy

sections on cinematography; the novel might accurately be called an encyclopedia of

literary styles with its inclusion of lists, mini-essays, e-mails, and first person

narratives that range from rambling street language to the complicated prose of Hal

the "lexical prodigy" (IJ 30). Infinite Jest even shares with the works Mendelson

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[26] Peter W. Koenig reports, from having examined Gaddis's notes and drafts for The Recognitions, that "The Recognitions was so heavily documented when Gaddis gave it up to editing that it even had footnotes" (43).
[27] Interestingly, on the subject of incorporating science into novels, Wallace has recently drawn attention to the work of his postmodern precursors, DeLillo and Pynchon, as examples of how a novel

celebrates the dubious distinction of legal difficulties. Mendelson writes of the

problems that faced the exiled writers Dante and Joyce: "To an extent unknown

among other works that have become cultural moments, encylopedic narratives begin

their career <u>illegally</u>" (172), and while <u>Infinite Jest</u> was not banned like <u>Ulysses,</u>

Wallace did face litigation over the resemblance one of his characters bore to a former

professional tennis player who competed on the junior tennis circuit at the same time

as Wallace. <u>The Recorder</u>, a daily legal newspaper, noted in September 1998 that

"Katherine A. Gompert . . . [was suing] David Foster Wallace for libel because his

1997 [sic] novel <u>Infinite Jest</u> portrays a sexually promiscuous, drug-abusing character

with severe psychiatric problems named 'Katherine A. Gompert'" (Elias 4).

    Although Wallace lost the case,[28] his defence, interestingly, lay in his claims

for the special status of the author,[29] and it is his conception of the author in <u>Infinite</u>

<u>Jest</u> that provides another line of continuity with the other writers in this study. As

outlined above, most of the criticism directed at the novel concentrated upon its length

with particular emphasis on the egotism of the author in releasing such a long

complex novel: Wallace is a "literary sadis[t]" (Peck 14), "over-enamoured with [his]

prodigious intellect" ("The Salon Interview" 1).

    As the previous chapters have attempted to show, it was one of the aims of

some postmodernists to critique this modernist conception of the author-god as a

creator of impenetrable elitist works. This theme resonates through much

contemporary fiction, from the critique of originality in <u>The Recognitions</u> and

characterisation of the artist as nothing "but the dregs of his work . . . the human

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can "deploy . . . higher math in interesting and significant ways" ("Rhetoric and the Math Melodrama" 2267).

[28] The novel's disclaimer "[t]he characters and events in the this book are fictitious. Any apparent similarity to real persons is not intended by the author and is either a coincidence or the product of your own troubled imagination" (<u>IJ</u> copyright page) was considered a "taunt" (Elias 4).

[29] Wallace's lawyers claimed that "fiction writers have wide protection from libel claims" (Elias 4).

shambles that follows it around" (R 95-96), to DeLillo's description of the author as

God as "an awful sort of arrogance" (M 36). The irony of these criticism being

directed towards Wallace's novel, however, is that it is one of Infinite Jest's projects

to continue Gaddis and DeLillo's critique, albeit in a sophisticated and oblique

manner.

Infinite Jest is narrated mainly in the third-person, although this is frequently

interspersed with stretches of first-person narrative offering the viewpoints of

characters with greatly varying backgrounds. While some critics may see the

egalitarianism of attempting to portray both sexes, multiple races, social classes, and

even the living and the dead, as being undercut by the presumption of a white male

author attempting to speak for these people, the novel's narration is not comprised

simply of the author putting words in the mouths of his characters, as Wallace's

complicated narration demonstrates.

Eight-hundred pages into the novel, in another Hamlet link, the wraith of the

deceased author and cuckolded father of Hal, James Incandenza, appears before Don

Gately with some explanations and perhaps a call to action. First, he explains to

Gately the details of being a ghost:

> The wraith said Even a garden-variety wraith could move at the speed of
>
> quanta and be anywhere anytime and hear in symphonic toto the
>
> thoughts of animate men, but it couldn't ordinarily affect anybody or
>
> anything solid, and it could never speak right to anybody, a wraith had
>
> no out-loud voice of its own and had to use somebody's like internal
>
> brain-voice if it wanted to try to communicate something, which was
>
> why thoughts and insights that were coming from some wraith always

just sound like your own thoughts from inside your own head, if a

wraith's trying to interface with you. (IJ 831)

This statement is backed up by a number of words and phrases – "LAERTES . . .

POOR YORICK" (IJ 832) – springing unbidden into Gately's mind. The implications

of this for the novel, initially, only seem to relate to certain elements of the plot: it

helps to explain the apparently supernatural help that Stice feels when he plays tennis

against Hal (IJ 637), and the dream Gately has of being "with a very sad kid . . . in a

graveyard digging some dead guy's head up and it's really important, like

Continental-Emergency important" (IJ 934) reveals the mysterious scene Hal

remembers at the beginning of the book ("I think of John N. R. Wayne . . . standing

watch in a mask as Donald Gately and I dig up my father's head." [IJ 16-17]) as

having been instigated by the wraith planting the idea in Gately's head. On a closer

reading, however, the implications of the wraith's statement can be seen to go far

beyond the simple level of plot to profoundly influence the narrative throughout the

book.

Throughout the sections of third-person narration Wallace is careful to note

when the words in the text belong to the character, and when the narrative swerves

from free indirect discourse to present the words of the narrator. "A lot of these are

his own terms" the reader is told of a section covering the young player LaMont Chu

(IJ 388), while in another section an endnote observes that "Pemulis doesn't actually

say 'breath and bread'" (IJ 1025n130).[30] While this may initially seem to be only

another example of the narrative's obsession with careful detail, on a second reading,

in light of the later revelation of the wraith's ability to make words appear in people's

minds, it may alert the reader to a more complicated narrative structure. "Hamlet:

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[30] In an internet essay, Chris Hager discusses the tendency of narrative idiom to attract itself to the nearest character in terms of Hugh Kenner's reading of Joyce.

these words are not mine" Claudius notes in Shakespeare's play. "No, nor mine" Hamlet responds (Hamlet 3.2.96-98), and in Wallace's novel the question of where words are coming from acquires great significance.

Early in the novel, for example, Hal's brother Mario is fascinated by a radio program's backing music. Unbeknown to him, the program is presented by Joelle Van Dyne, one of James Incadenza's favourite actresses, and before Mario attempts to describe the music the "word periodic pops into his head" (IJ 190). Shortly later, the suitability of the word occurs to him: "The background music is both predictable and, within that predictability, surprising: it's periodic" (IJ 191). While on a first reading this scene may appear innocuous, perhaps even an example of the self-indulgent excess that some reviewers criticised Wallace for, knowledge of the ghost's interference adds an extra layer of meaning to the scene. Teasingly, Mario also spontaneously "thinks of the word haunting" (ibid.), and it is clear on a second reading that the ghost of Mario's dead father[31] is close to him here. The ghostly link between the two characters is strengthened here by a piece of tempting word play: the name Joelle broadcasts under is Madame Psychosis – temptingly similar to "metempsychosis."

In light of this, other details of the novel become more ambiguous. For example, the "short strange Himself-influenced conceptual cartridges" (IJ 153) that Mario makes, acquire greater significance. Hal's observation, then, that "Mario gets his fetish for cartridges about puppets and entr'actes and audiences from their late father" (IJ 396) consequently becomes not simply an observation but literally true,

---

[31] Although James Incandenza found it easier to communicate with Mario than with Hal and Orin, it is obliquely suggested in the novel that he is the product of an affair Avril had with her half-brother Charles Tavis. The narrator at one point describes Mario's birth as "the first birth of the Incandenza's second son" (IJ 312), and since it is impossible to be born twice there must be two second sons: Avril's with Tavis (Mario), and Avril's with James (Hal).

with the films appearing less like imitations than collaborations, with the ghost of the forerunner returning to help continue his imaginative project.

While Infinite Jest, then, is a highly original work that critiques weak imitations,[32] by including a fictional co-author who interferes with the straightforward narration of the novel[33] the question of individual originality is problematised. Like Gaddis in The Recognitions, Wallace highlights the problem of belatedness, that, in the words of the wraith, one's "best thoughts were really communiqués from the patient and Abiding dead" (IJ 923). This seems to suggest an acceptance of the inevitability of influence and although Infinite Jest is clearly not derivative of Gaddis's novel, his view of creativity seems to bear a strong family resemblance to the ideal outlined in The Recognitions.

As it shares these characteristics with the works of older novelists, demonstrating continuities overlooked by Aldridge and Granta, Infinite Jest might also be seen as representing an advance in the encyclopedic form. In 1984 Thomas Pynchon argued that "[s]ince 1959, we have come to live among flows of data more vast than anything the world has seen" ("Luddite" 1), and, even in the twelve years between Pynchon's statement and the publication of Wallace's novel, the weight of data has increased dramatically. The changes that Sven Birkerts outlined in his account of the decline of the novel, for example, detail a society sacrificing "depth to lateral range . . . from intensive to extensive reading" as people try to respond to the bewildering increase in information (The Gutenberg Elegies 72). As the rate of

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[32] For example, the "appropriation artist" who "copied and embellished other art" is parodied in the novel, while elsewhere a character accounts for plagiarism as the result not of laziness, but of navigational insecurity: "congenital plagiarists put so much more work into camouflaging their plagiarism than it would take just to write up an assignment from conceptual scratch. . . . They have trouble navigating without a detailed map's assurance that somebody has been this way before them" (IJ 1061n304).
[33] It may be worth noting that Wallace's contemporary William T. Vollmann – a novelist Wallace listed among the younger writers he admires ("An Interview with David Foster Wallace" 128) – also

technological change accelerates, and new sources of information proliferate, Birkerts

argues that we now understand ourselves amid "an enormous web of imponderable

linkages" (15).

"It is essential to master the data" a character reflects in DeLillo's Libra (L

442), and Infinite Jest responds to this overwhelming accumulation of information by

seeking to approach the infinite of its title through the typically postmodern strategy

of infinite regress[34]: one character has a "tattoo of a huge disembodied hand which is

itself tattooed with a disembodied breast and hand" (IJ 207); making art out of the

accessories of artistic presentation is popular in the novel, resulting in such recursive

works as "framed frames" (IJ 229); and the fictional annular physics, which James

Incandenza helped found, is itself based around an infinite loop – it is "a type of

fusion that can produce waste that's fuel for a process whose waste is fuel for the

fusion" (IJ 572).

Infinity is also evoked in the novel by the repetition of the number eight.

Outlining a short history of infinity, in Infinity and the Mind, Rudy Rucker explains

that in mathematics the "symbol for infinity that one sees most often is the lazy eight

curve, technically called the lemniscate. . . . The appropriateness of the symbol ∞ for

infinity lies in the fact that one can travel endlessly around such a curve" (1). In

Infinite Jest eights recur suggestively: in the novel's opening scene eight people are

present, Orin habitually traces "infinity signs" (IJ 1062n307) on the sides of his

lovers, and his football number is 71 – the two digits, appropriately, adding up to

eight, as do the number of months ("twenty-six" [IJ 229]) he dated the actress from

his father's film "Infinite Jest."

---

dramatises, albeit more explicitly, the struggle between two narrators for dominance in his
encyclopedic novel You Bright and Risen Angels.

[34] Brian McHale, for example, lists infinite regress in his catalogue of postmodern techniques
Postmodern Fiction (114-15).

Alongside the novel's efforts to "become infinite" (IJ 765), Infinite Jest also attempts to respond to some of the new ways of ordering this information. While Gaddis in 1955 may have considered writing an encyclopedic narrative as "writing for a rather small audience" (R 373), in the forty between The Recognitions and Infinite Jest the world, as Birkerts observed, has seen dramatic technological changes that, according to some commentators, will render the novel obsolete. New technologies for ordering and controlling information like the internet, and new methods for structuring narrative like hypertext, have recently questioned the novel's relevance.

Robert Coover, for example, who teaches a hypertext fiction workshop at Brown University, has explored the practical attractions of hyperfiction for novelists, and suggested that it might spell the "End of Books" ("The End of Books" 1). In two essays for the New York Times Book Review,[35] Coover has suggested that printed fiction may now be "a doomed and outdated technology" (ibid.), in the face of hypertext's offer of potential liberation from the unidirectional flow and author-domination of the novel. "Much of the novel's alleged power is embedded in the line," Coover argues, "that compulsory author-directed movement from the beginning of a sentence to its period, from the top of the page to the bottom, from the first page to the last" (ibid.). Hypertext, for Coover, releases us from this: "in place of print's linear, page-turning route, [hypertext] offers a network of alternate paths through a set of text spaces by way of designated links" ("Hyperfiction" 8).

While Coover himself may have adapted the methods of this new technology in some of his more recent fiction,[36] and although there are obviously a lot of

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[35] The apocalyptically titled "The End of Books" and "Hyperfiction: Novels for the Computer."
[36] For example, the description he offers in "The End of Books" of some hypertext's randomized linking being "like the shuffling of cards" (23) is echoed in one of John's Wife's metafictional comments: "while all novels lied about the past, simply by being things whose pages turned in sequence, life, as kept more loosely in memory, was not a random shuffle either, but more like a subtle interweaving of mysteriously linked moments" (30).

postmodern forerunners to this kind of fragmentation,[37] the description Coover offers

of hypertext seems so enticingly similar to the organisation of <u>Infinite Jest</u>, that it may

be possible that Wallace is seeking to replicate some of the techniques of hypertext in

his big book. In part this critique of the author detailed above might be seen as

analogous to hypertext's attempts (however illusory) to seek liberation from

domination by a single author, but, more specifically, <u>Infinite Jest</u>'s use of endnotes

could, in some ways, be seen to function like the hyperlinks in a hyperfiction.

Obviously the endnotes break up the unidirectional flow of a conventional novel, but

alongwith the novel's fractured chronology, the experience of reading <u>Infinite Jest</u>

becomes a little bit like the experience Coover describes of one hyperfiction: "the

reader moves about in the story as though trying to remember it, the narrative having

lost its temporality by slipping whole into the past, becoming there a kind of obscure

geography to be explored" ("Hyperfiction" 9-10). Forced to jump between text and

endnote, and sometimes to follow endnotes within endnotes, or links to other endnotes

the novel becomes a kind of print equivalent of hypertext's complicated web of

linkages.

*

Outwith fulfilling similar criteria, then, the intergenerational continuities that

John Aldridge and <u>Granta</u> were unable to find are underlined in <u>Infinite Jest</u> by a

number of references to older postmodernists. While Wallace has claimed that he is

not particularly interested "in trying to lace the book with allusions to other texts"

("Transcript" 32), John Barth, William Burroughs, Jerzy Kosinski, and Thomas

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[37] Especially Vladimir Nabokov's <u>Pale Fire</u> which, despite its announcement that "footnotes . . . are the rogue's galleries of words" (260), bears some resemblance to Wallace's novel.

Pynchon are all alluded to in the novel,[38] and the novel perhaps bears a more

complicated relation to the work of Don DeLillo.

Of all the writers of the previous generation, DeLillo is the writer who

Wallace has singled out as his most important precursor. DeLillo is for Wallace "a

true prophet" (Fun 47), and Wallace even planned to edit a number of the Review of

Contemporary Fiction devoted to DeLillo.[39] While the poster that one character in

Infinite Jest has of the "paranoid king" who muses "YES, I'M PARANOID – BUT

AM I PARANOID ENOUGH?" (IJ 60, 1035n211) might be a knowing allusion to a

writer who was described as the "chief shaman of the paranoid school of American

fiction"[40] there also exist a number of more specific references to DeLillo's novels.

Some are straightforward surface similarities. Hal's possibly drug resultant problems

at the start of the novel, for example, are reminiscent of the drug given to Bucky

Wunderlick at the end of DeLillo's Great Jones Street:

> It's a mind drug . . . a drug that affects one or more areas of the left
>
> sector of the brain. Language sector. . . . It damages the cells in one or
>
> more areas of the left sector of the human brain. Loss of speech in other
>
> words. . . . You'll be perfectly healthy. You won't be able to make
>
> words, that's all. . . . Sounds yes. Sounds galore. But no words. (255)

Equally, the novel seems to be suggestive of DeLillo's Ratner's Star. Both novels

contrast the elusiveness of language with the precision of mathematics to argue that

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[38] Incandenza's film "Möbius Strips" (IJ 990n24) shares a title with one of Barth's Lost in the Funhouse short stories; William Burroughs is mentioned in the novel (IJ 220); Jerzy Kosinski is parodied in a film (IJ 987n24); and Pynchon is alluded to in the references to "in The Zone" (IJ 242, 256) – the title of the third part of Gravity's Rainbow – Avril's surname Mondragon is temptingly similar to Kurt Mondaugen in V., and Wallace has acknowledged that the reference to "Goethe's well-known 'Bröckengespenst'" (IJ 88) is a reference to the same phenomena in Gravity's Rainbow ("Transcript" 32).

[39] Joseph Tabbi, in his Postmodern Sublime, reveals that DeLillo discouraged Wallace from going ahead with this in August 1992 (201n16).

[40] A much-quoted phrase used by Robert Towers to describe DeLillo in his review of Libra (6).

"[m]athematics made sense" (RS 13),[41] and both are set slightly in the future[42] and

refer to the fictional M.I.T. language riots. In DeLillo's novel the character J. Graham

Hummer is "widely know as the instigator of the MIT language riots" (RS 31), while,

in a sly allusion, Wallace's novel lists a debate between Avril Incandenza and Steven

Pinker as "helping incite the M.I.T. language riots of B.S. 1997" (IJ 987n24), and it is

tempting to note that 97 is a mirror image of 79 – the year Ratner's Star is set. The

novel which Infinite Jest most resembles, however, is DeLillo's sports novel End

Zone.

While Infinite Jest may not be the "drowsy monograph . . . [on] the modern

athlete as commercial myth, with footnotes" (EZ 3) that the narrator of End Zone

imagines, there are a number of similarities between the two novels. Both focus on

college athletes and feature trainee sportscasters,[43] coaches who withdraw to a

position of godlike omniscience overseeing events from a tower,[44] and players who

were lured to the college by promises of self-transcendence.[45] In some ways the

novels even seem to be carrying on an oblique dialogue: the coach in End Zone, for

example, who "thinks in one direction, straight ahead" (EZ 49), is perhaps refuted by

Infinite Jest's coach who argues "[s]traight ahead! Plow ahead! Go! This is myth. . . .

they assume [in America] always the efficient way is to plow in straight" (IJ 80);

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[41] Compare the summation of Infinite Jest's Micheal Pemulis, who has a "tech-science wienie's congenital impatience with the referential murkiness and inelegance of verbal systems" (IJ 154), that "you can trust math . . . whose truth is deductive truth. Independent of sense or emotionality. The syllogism. The identity." (IJ 1071n324)

[42] Like Infinite Jest, Ratner's Star is set in an imprecise future which is not explicitly stated anywhere in the novel. However, the date of the novel's action can be deduced as 1979 (three years after the novel's publication) from a character's observation that "Gottlob Frege produced his first landmark work on the logical foundations of mathematics exactly one hundred years ago. Almost as interesting is the fact that Einstein was born that same year" (RS 273).

[43] Raymond Toon in End Zone, who is taking "a course in sportscasting" (EZ 23), parallels Infinite Jest's Jim Troeltsch who dreams "of a tennis-broadcast career" (IJ 308).

[44] The head coach in Infinite Jest, Gerhardt Schtitt, oversees training from "the Tower" (IJ 452), while the tower that End Zone's head coach, Emmett Creed, has built is one of his "many innovations" (EZ 9).

while, given Marlon Bain's refutation of Orin's football philosophy – "pay no attention to Orin's defense of football as ritualized substitute for armed conflict. Armed conflict is plenty ritualized on its own, and since we have real armed conflict . . . there is no need or purpose for a substitute" (IJ 1047n269) – it is perhaps not impossible that he is meant to have actually read End Zone, where a character reflects: "I reject the notion of football as warfare. Warfare is warfare. We don't need substitutes because we've got the real thing" (EZ 164).

*

Since the publication of Infinite Jest in 1996, Wallace has so far only published one more work of fiction, a collection of partly interlinked stories called Brief Interviews with Hideous Men, published in 1999. However, even working in this shorter form, Wallace makes few concessions to easy-consumption as the stories' range of reference runs from Rabelais (BI 176) to Milan Kundera (BI 125), are syntactically dense, and one story features a two page sentence containing some 730 words.

Brief Interviews also carries over some of the obsessions of Infinite Jest – two of the stories centre on the influence of television, dead fathers are again a subject, the interviews which give the collection its title recall sections from the earlier book (IJ 1026n145 for example), the text hints at infinite regress,[46] and, as in his encyclopedic novel, the word "cage" (BI 44) is important – but the collection is not merely repetitive, and attempts some interesting innovations in presentation. Brief Interviews

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[45] While Kyle Coyle in Infinite Jest is brought to ETA by "promises of self-transcendence" (IJ 453), End Zone's Taft Robinson is lured to Logos college by the promise of "get[ting] past [his] own limits" (EZ 237)

[46] There are, typically, a lot of footnotes, footnotes within footnotes (BI 134), and even parentheses within parentheses (BI 132).

mixes dictionary definitions, pop quizzes, first person narratives, and dialogue transcripts as different ways of telling stories, but while the collection experiments, it also, as now seems characteristic, balances innovation with a wary critique of originality. "Novelty was old news," one character reflects. "'Creativity' . . . now lay in the manipulation of received themes" (BI 205-6).

It is once more apparent, though, that the received theme that causes Wallace most anxiety is the metafictional reflex handed down from his postmodern precursors. Several of the fictions reflect this uneasiness, but it is most clear in "Octet," a series of connected pieces that breaks down into an essay about metafiction. "Octet" critiques the "highly rhetorical sham-honesty" of the "'meta-type' writer" who wants you to "feel flattered that he apparently thinks you're enough of a grownup to handle being reminded that what you're in the middle of is artificial (like you didn't know that already)" (BI 125), and outlines the co-option of postmodern techniques that Wallace bemoans in his essay on television,[47] but in doing so it is, inevitably, a piece of metafiction itself, and so is caught in a similar uneasy trap to that which is found in "Westward," from his earlier collection of short stories.

The short story "Westward the Course of Empire Takes its Way," of course, takes its title from Berkeley's "Verses by the Author on the Prospect of Planting Arts and Learning in America." While Berkeley had also written an essay on "infinites," his poem describes the Muse's disgust with an old world "[b]arren of every glorious Theme," and looks to America for "a better time":

> There shall be sung another golden Age,
>
> The rise of Empire and of Arts,
>
> The Good and Great inspiring epic Rage (13-15)

---

[47] "Octet" alludes to the series of Scream films, noting how "in the late 1990s . . . even Wes Craven is cashing in on metafictional self-reference" (BI 124).

The search for an American art form, a national literature to demonstrate intellectual independence from the old world, was a pressing concern at the beginning of America's independent history. In 1818 Sydney Smith, writing in the Edinburgh Review, asserted that "Literature the Americans have none . . . [i]t is all imported" (278), and this absence weighed heavily on the country's writers for many years. The anxiety is detectable in Emerson's complaint that "[w]e have listened too long to the courtly muses of Europe" (860), in Whitman's admission that "America has yet . . . artistically originated nothing" (961), and also in Melville's reflection in 1850, perhaps delivered with an ironic eye to the work he was then composing, that "Pop Emmons and his Fredoniad" would have to do "till a better epic came along" ("Hawthorne" 412). While it is unlikely that any of the writers in this thesis would take it upon themselves to defend empire, it is tempting to think that the "epic" distinctive American form might be found in Wallace's "Big Book" (IJ 360) and the other encyclopedic novels in this study. Charles Olson argued that "SPACE" was "the central fact to man born in America" (15), and while other nations have produced individual encyclopedic narratives, it is perhaps as a response to this geographical range and diversity that so many have been produced in America. Artistically ambitious, covering diverse fields of knowledge, crossing geographical boundaries these novels might be seen to represent a climax to what John Dos Passos, in his encyclopedic U.S.A., had claimed would be the American century (21).

CONCLUSION

"AT THE EDGES OF PERCEPTION"

The twentieth century, H. G. Wells argued in <u>World Brain</u>, was in need of a new form of encyclopedia. Faced with the problem of "all the scattered and ineffective mental wealth of our world" (11), Wells proposed the World Encyclopedia as a means of bringing these vast and diverse drifts of information into an effective relation. This project would entail gathering extracts, quotations, selections, and lists from all disciplines, and, being constantly revised and expanded, would make available to all the most up-to-date knowledge. At the same time, it would afford specialists, not just an outlet for their research, but also "an intelligible statement" of work being done outside their field (16). This, Wells argued, would present our only hope of responding to a world that was changing with "ever-increasing violence" (26).

Although the novelists in this study do not offer the kind of universal solution that Wells seems to have had in mind, they have partly undertaken the project he outlined. Synthesising vast floes of disparate data into an encyclopedic form they have made new knowledge available to readers, while, bearing in mind the consistency of their artistic methods, their work as a whole has perhaps made the encyclopedic narrative a distinct new form for the twentieth century. Wells noted that his project would "hold the world together mentally" (14) and, although postmodern writing is often stereotyped as despairingly feeble in the face of the proliferation of information in the contemporary world, to read these novels is to gain knowledge in economics, neuroscience, molecular biology, painting, sport, physics, music, religion,

myth, and literature, while they also carry urgent ecological warnings about the future of the world.

Ironically, as the encyclopedic narratives discussed here critique an overdependence on originality, these two projects are linked as Wells also noted that his program "would not want much original writing" (20). A more significant connection, however, exists as Wells conceived of his scheme as an analogue of the human brain. Being organised around a web of connections, rather than having "a single local habitation," Wells described the World Encyclopedia as "a sort of cerebrum for humanity, a cerebral cortex which (when it is fully developed) will constitute a memory and a perception of current reality for the entire human race" (63).

While this is something like the "collective brain" that Powers envisages in Plowing the Dark (PTD 275), I think the use of the brain by these writers has similarities not just to Wells's project, but also to a larger group of writers contemporary with Wells, but divergent in their artistic practice. More specifically, in another link back to modernism, it can be considered similar to the use of mythic overlays by writers like Joyce, Eliot, Pound, and Lawrence.

In an article responding to Ulysses, Eliot famously outlined how he thought mythic structures functioned in Joyce's novel, noting that the technique had "the importance of a scientific discovery":

> In using the myth, in manipulating a continuous parallel between
>
> contemporaneity and antiquity, Mr. Joyce is pursuing a method which
>
> others must pursue after him. They will not be imitators, any more than
>
> the scientist who uses the discoveries of an Einstein in pursuing their
>
> own, independent, further investigations. It is simply a way of

controlling, of ordering, of giving a shape and a significance to the

immense panorama of futility and anarchy which is contemporary

history (177)

and the use of scientific research into the brain by writers like DeLillo and Powers to

provide a background for their novels obviously fulfils an equivalent role, giving

shape and significance to novelistic action. However, the possibility of the continued

use of such techniques by contemporary writers has recently been dismissed by

Michael Bell in his detailed study of myth and modernism.

In Literature, Modernism and Myth, Bell defined modernist mythopoeia as

one of the key features of modernist writing that, encompassing a complex of human

responsibilities, is fundamentally based around the tension between "recognising a

world view as such while living it as a conviction" (2). In Bell's view this myth-

making flourishes in a gap in scientific hegemony, developing as nineteenth-century

"physical science . . . bec[a]me simply one of the systems by which the human world

is constructed" (166). At its height between 1910 and 1930, Bell argues that such

uses of myth begin to break up as the century continues, progressively losing its

variety of complicated meanings, and fragmenting to encapsulate less significant

manifestations of human belief: "story," "fiction," and, finally, in the postmodern

novels of Thomas Pynchon, "urban legend" (203). This flattening out of myth's

"long-term cultural sedimentations with a usually sustaining meaning" (205-6), to

paranoiac urban legend in Pynchon's work involves, Bell argues, a large shift in terms

of human responsibility, with the loaded question of value being replaced by the more

simplistic question of truth.

However, while I have suggested that the techniques of these writers work in

an equivalent fashion to Eliot's summary of modernist myth, I think the cerebral

overlay can also be seen to fit Bell's much more detailed definition. Firstly, the materialist view of the mind – that consciousness is essentially the product of biological and electrical activity in the brain – that DeLillo, Powers and Wallace include in their novels, could be seen as analogous to the recognition of the relativity of belief in Bell's scheme. It is a view that is essentially separate from humanly held beliefs, an underlying recognition that modifies interpretations of behaviour, casting it in a different light, rather than initiating it.

The materialist position, however, has been critiqued at some length, most famously by Thomas Nagel in his essay "What is it Like to Be a Bat?" where he argues that at present no physical theory of the mind can "account for the subjective character of experience" (445). For commentators like Nagel, there is an insurmountable gap between electrical energy in the brain considered externally, and the qualitative nature of consciousness gained from introspection. The firing of neurons, for these critics, offers an incomplete account of our experience, that can never really tell us what it is like to be a conscious being.

The relation of such critiques to these novels is more complicated than their relation to the materialist theory of the mind, but I think it can be seen to be implicit. Subjective experience is an essential component of most novels, and the loaded question of viewpoint is, in fact, foregrounded by the use of multiple perspectives in these novels. By stressing the individuality of the human viewpoint, and dramatising that there can be no transcendent view from nowhere, these novels make the idiosyncratic subjective experience, interfacing with the world, a central part of their novels.

The essential tension between these two viewpoints is, I think, equivalent to the critical interplay between holding beliefs and recognising the relativity of

worldviews that Bell sees as a defining feature of the modernist novel. In fact, it might even be considered to be a more profound juxtaposition, raising such issues as free will and agency, the nature of subjective experience, and whether there exist phenomena outside the descriptive capacities of the sciences.

*

Outwith the younger writers included in the second half of this thesis, a number of other authors have expressed their admiration for Gaddis's work. Stephen Wright, for example, has called Gaddis "the great unsung hero of American letters" (170), while Jonathan Franzen has made clear in a number of essays the importance Gaddis's work had for him as a young writer who cut his teeth on "The Recognitions and Gravity's Rainbow" ("I'll be Doing More of Same" 36). In his key autobiographical essay, "Perchance to Dream," Franzen outlines his early days as an aspiring writer, "swallowing whole the oeuvres of . . . Coover and DeLillo" (37), and describes how he attempted to follow the example of William Gaddis, who he addresses as a kind of template for the independent writer:

> In 1955, before television had even supplanted radio as the regnant
>
> medium, Gaddis recognized that no matter how attractively subversive
>
> self-promotion may seem in the short run, the artist who's really
>
> serious about resisting a culture of inauthentic mass-marketed image
>
> must resist becoming an image himself, even at the price of certain
>
> obscurity. (50)

This admiration perhaps manifests itself in his first novel, The Twenty-Seventh City, where he makes reference to the problem that The Recognitions introduces in terms of

modernism and postmodernism, and that has also fascinated the other writers in this study: "the problem of originality" (343). "The thought was on your mind," Franzen writes, "and it paralyzed you" (ibid.). Despite this evident recognition of the achievements of the writers of the preceding generation, however, and although his first novel makes reference to Thomas Pynchon (55), and his second, Strong Motion, mentions Barth (239), Franzen's novelistic practice has not been that heavily influenced by their work. Instead, Franzen has insisted that "content and context" will "return as the vectors of the new" ("I'll be Doing More of Same" 35), and his work displays a more conservative aesthetic.

There are, however, several other writers who have clearly assimilated aspects of the elder postmodernists' novelistic practice, and created innovative fictions of encyclopedic scope. Amongst the most notable of these writers are Evan Dara and William T. Vollmann.

In an essay entitled "American Writing Today: A Diagnosis of the Disease" Vollmann diagnosed "apathy and misinformation" amongst the major problems facing America (3). In some ways his novels are antidotes to this, packed with detailed information gained from the experience of nearly dying at the North Pole, travelling through war zones, and more conventionally gained knowledge drawn from computer programming, history, art, entomology, and literature. His first novel, You Bright and Risen Angels, draws on some of this knowledge and experience and presents a vast allegorical critique of bigotry and racism, that dramatises the "Whites" against the "Bugs,"[1] and makes its vastness an issue from the very start.

The frontmatter of the novel includes a detail list of "transcendental contents" that purports to help the reader map such a long dense book out over four pages, but

few readers will immediately notice that most of the list is outlining sections that do not exist. Although the portions of the list that cover non-existent parts of the book include warnings to "the impatient Lecteur" (xiv), and promises to include extracts from "the Macropedia," the frontmatter also includes a "social gazette of the personalities interviewed for this book" that is similarly ironic. Again, presenting itself as a useful tool for the reader to find their way through the novel's encyclopedic labyrinth, in actual fact, the first five characters named in the book's narrative are not included in the gazette, and the list degenerates gradually into the absurd, moving from key protagonists of the novel to list polar bears as the "terrestrial managers of the reinsurance syndicate" (xii).

Densely allusive – the book's many epigraphs range through Edison, Carlyle, and the "Encyclopedia Britannica" (119) – and even including mathematical equations (98), You Bright and Risen Angels, makes numerous references to its postmodern precursors,[2] but despite the range of the novel, the clearest example of Vollmann's ambition to write encyclopedic works is yet to be completed, but seems likely to be one of the most intriguing projects to be attempted in recent years. Vollmann has begun a project, entitled "Seven Dreams," that aims to be an encyclopedic survey of a thousand years of American history from the Vikings first encounter with America to the present day, "when everything is sort of concreted over" ("An Interview with William T. Vollmann" 12). However, as Vollmann plans the work to take in seven volumes, and envisages it requiring possibly another ten years work, it is still some way from completion.

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[1] Powers apparently alludes to You Bright and Risen Angels in an aside in his most recent work where he writes the "great interspecies territorial war trickles out in an exhausted armistice, with victory going, as ever, to the bugs" (PTD 186).

Evan Dara has also been the subject of an essay by Franzen[3] but, in contrast to his relatively conservative novels, Dara's The Lost Scrapbook clearly takes the innovations of Gaddis and his contemporaries as a starting point, and attempts to move forward from there.

Evan Dara is the pseudonym of an American writer living in Paris and, to date, The Lost Scrapbook is the only book he has published. The book was a winning manuscript in a competition jointly run by the avant-garde publishing house, Fiction Collective Two, and Illinois State University, and, although the competition had the prestige of being judged by Vollmann, and the book came with an effusive blurb from Richard Powers, its reception was disappointingly muted. In fact, even in the journals that registered the novel's publication, little confidence was engendered by the errors in the reviews.[4]

Although the novel still registers the Joycean legacy,[5] of all the novels discussed in this thesis, The Lost Scrapbook is probably the novel in which the evidence of Gaddis's influence can be most obviously discerned. As is apparent from even a casual inspection of the book, it is clear that the novel is almost entirely made up from transcribed voices, introduced with the trademark dash, and the opening two pages even include several references that could be interpreted as subtle allusions to Gaddis's work.[6] While Dara is perhaps indebted to Gaddis for the presentation of

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[2] Tom LeClair has detected allusions to Pynchon ("Prodigious Prose" 36n1) and, teasingly, one of the locations in the novel is called "Cooverville."

[3] The Lost Scrapbook is an oblique subject for an essay by Franzen in which he also refers to Powers and Vollmann as his "classmates in the Neo-Furrowed-Browist school of American fiction" ("FC2" 116).

[4] Bruce Campbell, for example, reviewing the novel in the Review of Contemporary Fiction listed the novel's second epigraph – "O let me teach you how to knit again / This scattered corn into one mutual sheaf, / These broken limbs into one body" – as being "from Blake" (153), whereas it is actually from Marcus's speech over the dead bodies at the end of Shakespeare's Titus Andronicus (5.3.69-71).

[5] The reference to "love, first verb in the latin primer, the word known to all men" (188), echoes the question that is on Stephen Dedalus's mind all day (U 61).

[6] The line "there is so little time" (7), echoes the variations on T. S. Eliot's "Prufrock" that recurs throughout The Recognitions (R 15, 168, 293, 419, 484, 507, 508, 561, 763, 797, 843, 920, 922, 924, 927), while the narrator's assertion that he wants to be "a forensic epidemiologist and a floorwalker"

dialogue in his novel, he has not been content to merely imitate his work, but has sought to develop this technique. Taking the presentation of the unmediated voice as the basic unit of his novel, Dara's novel weaves these voices into a larger network by suddenly shifting narrator (sometimes in midsentence) to reveal different viewpoints, or to underline a theme. The voices return to a number of key motifs – the loneliness of suburban life, the power of corporations, and alienation – before being skilfully woven towards a crescendo at the end of the book as fear consumes a community faced with environmental disaster.

While The Lost Scrapbook resembles Gaddis's work technically, the novel is also equally explicit about its encyclopedic ambition, as it opens with a character who announces his interest in medicine, the law, forestry, "marine acoustics and quantum biography and psychogeology, not to mention their respective subdisciplines," and complains: "I am interested, almost exclusively, in being interested, and your reductivist probings are only intended to cordon off wings of my mansion . . . it's a bizarre enterprise, this deciding what 'to be': mostly it feels like negotiating what not to be" (6). Beginning with such an encyclopedic statement of intent the novel is obviously committed to the encyclopedic project of "trying to generate infinity within a finite area" (34), and it is unsurprising to find that the novel, like the others discussed in this study, satisfies Mendelson's criteria for encyclopedic narratives. Although I will discuss The Lost Scrapbook's inclusion of a science in more detail below, the novel contains an account of an art outside the literary in its numerous references to film,[7] and the sheer variety of voices the novel contains, make the novel

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(7) recalls the rumours that Gaddis had been a floorwalker that Gass begins his introduction to The Recognitions with (R v). While these might be considered tenuous in another context, I think that, given the many technical similarities to Gaddis's work, it is likely that they were intended as a subtle recognition of his precursor.

[7] While there are numerous references to film in the novel (see 31-32 for example), the references to Eisenstein and "his whole deal about montage, about the productivity of the collision of images . . . all

an encyclopedia of literary styles. Most significantly, however, the novel meets
Mendelson's requirement for an encyclopedic narrative to occupy a position of
cultural centrality in its inclusion of ecological science.

In The Comedy of Survival: Literary Ecology and a Play Ethic, Joseph W.
Meeker poses the question, "[f]rom the unforgiving perspective of evolution and
natural selection, does literature contribute more to our survival than it does to our
extinction?" (4). The novels in this study, however, have examined the different ways
in which literature can contribute to survival by encoding warnings about the
environmental future. Ecological concerns have been a frequent subtext in most of
these novels – from the preoccupation with waste in Gaddis's novels, through
Pynchon's recognition of the earth as a "living critter" (Gravity's Rainbow 590), and
DeLillo's placement of his novel's action within a "planetary context" (UW 88),
down to the warnings in Powers and Wallace's fictions – but there are few that make
ecology as central as Dara's novel aims to.

On a superficial level the plot of The Lost Scrapbook, dramatising the
pollution and destruction inflicted on a community through governmental corruption
and industrial greed, is obviously an attempt to put forward an ecological message, as
is the recurrence of key words like "biodiversity" in the text (181, 291). However, the
work also seeks to reinforce this message through the complex structure of Dara's
novel.

"[P]lants and animals," Darwin noted, "are bound together by a web of
complex relations" (124-25), and Dara's novel stresses ecological interdependence
partly through the structure of his narrative. By organising his novel around a series

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his bit about the viewer's participation in creating meaning" (203) explicitly ties up the novel's method
to filmic techniques.

of voices that are interrupted by apparently arbitrary cuts, but are apparently in some

way connected,[8] Dara forces the reader to try to divine exactly what the connection

between the voices is. In fact, the key point turns out to be in the word connection

itself. Early in the novel, in one of the rare expressions on contentment, a character

reflects with satisfaction that he had "effected a working linkage" (13). Linkage is

what the novel seeks to show, in an attempt to make a "community of isolates" (274)

realise that they are bound together in "a living exchange" (321). While the novel

implies such a recognition would alleviate the sense of something lost that the

characters face, it also spreads out to highlight that people are in turn linked to their

wider environment in a web of complex relations. Attempting to show through these

connections (and the climax of the plot itself) the dangers of interfering in "such

dynamic systems, linking uncountable components" as the biosphere, at the risk of

"unavoidably encounter[ing] elements unforeseen to design" (342), the novel attempts

to show humans, plants and animals as "a single organism breathing as one" (416).

Like in The Gold Bug Variations, with its recognition that we have dismantled

the "biosphere out of fear" (GBV 325), the ecological message of The Lost Scrapbook

is interwoven with Dara's knowledge of the brain. Although the novel shows its

knowledge of the "Freudian framework" (202), it recognises more recent theories of

the mind, noting that "psychology becomes biology" (236), and the novel itself, with

its dramatisation of diverse and competing voices linked together through multiple

connections, might be viewed as an attempt imitate the "crosslinked neural network"

of the brain (180).[9] Viewed in this way, Dara's journey through "THE MODERN

MINDSCAPE" (176) attributes the destruction of the community in the novel, and

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[8] A number of characters appear more than once (Robin, for example, 186, 238), as do some phrases (such as the desperate voice on 175 and 225).
[9] This analogy also seems similar to Dennett's description of consciousness which I discussed alongside DeLillo on page 129.

wider ecological short-sightedness to the destructive, primal instincts of the brain, that fail to perceive the self as existing within a larger context, just as, in <u>Underworld</u>, violence and conflict are traced back to the primitive impulses of the brain.

This use of the brain by these novelists introduces another interesting dimension to the cerebral overlays that I have argued perform a similar role to Bell's mythic tensions. The brain is most frequently used by these writers to depict a character's alienation from a world dominated by fear, and in exploring this they reveal another sense in which they have affinities with modernism. Alienation, as many critics have noted, is the characteristic stance of most modernist novels, and an aura of disaffection and estrangement pervades novels by Joyce, Hesse, Woolf, Lawrence, and Dos Passos. However, when these later writers use the brain to dramatise their characters' alienation, because this alienation is expressed through a biological process, estrangement from the world circles back to situation in the world. In doing so, it combines an exploration of the individual's perspective, with a corresponding move to situate the individual as an entwined part of the complex web of the natural world, circling back to the ecological backdrop that is important in many of these novels.

That this pattern should be circular is perhaps appropriate as, as I have attempted to show in this study, these writers attempt to encompass the circle of knowledge. Although, for many critics this is a project that is fundamentally confined to modernism, in contrast to the subversive strains in postmodernism, each of the four novels included here mix elements from both movements to create sophisticated fictions that are amongst the most innovative and learned works of recent years. While Gaddis, DeLillo, Powers, and Wallace, as I have argued, are somewhat mystifying omissions from most critical surveys of contemporary fiction, there are

signs that their work has been recognised by some younger writers who are now beginning to publish novels.

Although Dara "hasn't even got an entry in the Encyclopedia Americana" (<u>Lost Scrapbook</u> 263), with his artistically accomplished novel, mastering diverse fields of knowledge, and drawing on the legacy of both the modernists and postmodernists, he is, like Vollmann, another example of a writer who has affirmed the vitality of the encyclopedic novel while remaining at the edges of perception.

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