

"EYE-TO-EYE MONOLOGUES":
SELF-CONSCIOUS NARRATORS
IN SOME MODERN NOVELS

by

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B.A., University of British Columbia, 1971

A THESIS SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILMENT OF THE
REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF
MASTER OF ARTS
in the Department
of
English

We accept this thesis as conforming
to the required standard

THE UNIVERSITY OF BRITISH COLUMBIA

September, 1975

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Date May 9. 1975

The thesis is a study of a series of modern story tellers and one of their antecedents, the narrators of *The Good Soldier*, *The Great Gatsby*, *The Catcher in the Rye*, *Lolita*, *Despair* and *Great Expectations*. The emphasis is on the "eye-to-eye monologue" (as Hermann calls it), and the central role played by the narrator's imagination in re-creating his life in his story. That story describes the failure of man's attempt to make his life resemble a work of art in which dreams come true. He successfully makes an aesthetic representation that takes on the ironic form and content of his age. The critic's penchant for plotting the aesthetic distance between the author of the book and the fictional character he creates; the concern with the ironic attitude of author towards narrator; the emphasis on the unreliable ignorant guide parodied by an omniscient and omnipresent author—all these conjectural areas are avoided. The thesis, instead of presumptuously ridiculing the inadequacies of the narrator, attempts to concentrate on what he does know and does relate. After all, he knows enough to tell the story; he has the right to tell it in his own way; he demands an audience attentive and alert enough to play a participatory role in the story he tells.

The ironic pattern of frustrated expectations which culminates in the realization that the dream is in fact a fiction in the story that articulates it; the crucial nature of the different kinds of imaginative vision the narrator attempts; the significance of the self-conscious articulation of the attempts as reflected in the form of the novel itself; the external bond with the reader he addresses; the ironies that

the narrator himself creates using the advantages of retrospection to re-create the ironic mythos that constitutes all men's stories—each novel is considered in terms of these basic concepts. Concerns implicit in earlier and representative works of modern fiction become explicit in *Lolita* and *Despair*, in which the narrator asserts that the art and artifice he uses to make sense of his life *are* the essential component of that life. The narrator's and reader's final belief is to believe in a fiction. Believing in each other, they finally see eye-to-eye and, I-to-I, confirm the human capacity for creative empathy and imaginative vision.

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I want to acknowledge here the assistance of my supervisor,
Dr. John Hulcoop.

"EYE-TO-EYE MONOLOGUES": SELF-CONSCIOUS
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Chapter One: Introduction

If I were not perfectly sure of my power to write and of my marvelous ability to express ideas with the utmost grace and vividness . . . So, more or less, I had thought of beginning.¹

Hermann Karlovich, the author of these words, finishes his story by giving it a title, *Despair*, indicating the disparity between initial, self-confident assurance and final, self-conscious failure. This thesis, reproducing Hermann's experience, begins with *Great Expectations* and ends with *Despair*, considering *The Good Soldier*, *The Great Gatsby*, *The Catcher in the Rye* and *Lolita* along the way. This introduction examines the theoretical implications of the four basic ideas which provide the quadripartite structure of all seven chapters.

The first section of each chapter examines the narrative and life of the protagonist in terms of a cyclical movement best exemplified by *Great Expectations*: innocence, great expectations, despair, and higher innocence. In Dickens, innocence is the world of the child; in the modern novels examined, although it remains a term that can be usefully applied to the child-like ignorance or naïveté of the protagonist, innocence is the essential quality of the world he would like to live in, the dream he wants to make manifest, the intensely imagined vision of an ideal existence he wants to create. Great expectations become the hopes he has for carrying out that design. Despair attends his inevitable disillusionment and frustration because the world of experience, in which the dream must be realized, intractably resists all attempts to idealize it. In *Great Expectations*, the protagonist's newly-acquired self-knowledge, the healing influences of the virtuous part of the world,

and the tentative triumph of love and compassion provide for a movement away from despair towards a hopeful, albeit ambivalent, conclusion. But Pip's twentieth century counterpart learns the nature of his own impotence in a cruel world that is antipathetic to human desire. The relationship he tries to create with whomever he loves seems destined to be a failure. Despair seems to be man's permanent condition. Since he cannot realize the dream in a world that, by stubbornly insisting on its own reality, prevents him from imposing his design upon it, he attains a higher innocence in the world he *does* create, in the words of the story he tells. The articulation of failure is a qualified success, and the only possible end for his life because his dream is a doomed attempt to invest life with the form and perfection of a work of art. That is, his illusory hopes for success in the real world can only be realized by the aesthetic redemption in the world his imagination does create.

The second section of each chapter involves a discussion of the protagonist in terms of his role as narrator. He is important because, however else he fails, he does tell the story, and creates a form of words that gives meaning to what he experiences. Again the contrast with *Great Expectations* is instructive. Phillip Pirrip, the middle-aged businessman who describes a series of events, is relatively unimportant. His modern counterpart, on the other hand, is conscious of his own role as creator and aware of its implications. The narrator's role as artist and his preponderant concern with the nature of art and illusion becomes increasingly explicit as each narrator is examined. The central role of the imagination that determines how and what he sees and the way in which

he re-creates it becomes increasingly apparent. The movement reaches its culmination when the creator of the final fiction under consideration tells the reader that, were it not for the narrator's power to imagine and articulate, the events he is about to describe would never have occurred. The first person narrator, once a fictional device used as a means to convey the all-important event, becomes the *sine qua non* of the story, and the creator of his own reality.

The narrator is a divided self: he always is both spectator and actor, and often a combination of lunatic, lover, and poet.² These last three selves of the narrator are "of imagination all compact" because they all use the imagination to get outside themselves. In the harsh world described by the narrator, the lunatic and lover fail in their attempts to make impossible dreams come true. But the poet accepts, and incorporates into his creation, the world the lunatic rejects. He succeeds where the lover fails because the imagined artifice he dedicates himself to is more permanent and reliable than the perishable breath of the lover's ideal. The poet loves words, the only things he needs to articulate the vision.

He actually requires something else as well: a sympathetic response from a single member of his audience as proof of the possibility of genuine communication. The dream that cannot be shared in his own world can be imparted to the ideal reader. The consequent importance of the external relationship between author and audience complements the significance of the internal fictional relationships of the characters themselves. The third section of each chapter involves an

attempt to account for this phenomenon by appropriating a vocabulary for the formal analysis of first person narrative from a book once called the *vade mecum* of graduate students, Northrop Frye's *Anatomy of Criticism*. The existence of a relationship between creator and auditor is a defining characteristic of what Frye calls the "thematic mode." When the first person narratives in question are viewed in terms of this and other traits they share with works in that mode, they display some surprising literary affinities. As one half of this relationship the reader plays an increasingly participatory role because the narrator becomes more and more conscious of his need for a sympathetic response. Finally, as both Humbert and Hermann intimate, the story cannot exist unless the reader co-operates by using his own imagination to make the narrator's tenuous existence a reality.

The final section of each chapter is devoted to a discussion of irony as it applies to the content and form of the story each narrator tells. Traditionally, the aesthetic distance between author and narrator has been the domain of critics in search of the ironic disparity between what the narrator sees and says, and how things "really are."³ This highly conjectural area is avoided. Instead, after the novels are briefly considered in terms of their resemblances to the literary modes and *mythoi* of comedy, romance, and tragedy, they are studied as representations of the form and content of an ironic age. The description of human aspiration and failure in an anti-human and absurd world is the definitive ironic mythos. The corresponding ironic mode involves characters who live in a world controlled by some superior power. The

narrator's concern with cosmic irony or fate is natural enough since as story teller he applies his own shaping principle and power to his material. In keeping with the increasingly aesthetic emphasis of the stories in the modern century, the narrator begins to see himself as an agent of a shaping power that is a fellow artist as well as an inscrutable malefactor. Because irony implies some external significance, something typical of the human situation as a whole, the reader once again plays an integral role by ascertaining just what that significance is. Though all this may seem an inordinately large undertaking, a little book on a big subject might, as David Worcester notes, be welcome, considering the current academic tendency towards the reverse.⁴

In the beginning is innocence: Pip at Joe's, assuming the Biblical injunction to "walk in the same" all the days of his life requires him to go forever through the village in one particular direction; Dowell, blissfully ignorant—and forgivable ignorance is a form of innocence—of the rottenness blighting his "goodly apple." Innocence may be a form of self-protection for those who don't know or don't want to know about things as they are; but innocence is also having a mind sufficiently open to confront those things without judging them. Thus Nick insists on "reserving judgments," because such restraint represents an eternal hope that man will turn out all right in the end. Innocence is a state of being that belongs in a static, absolute, timeless world, the kind of world Holden constantly recalls, exemplified by the permanence of "things in glass cases" and contrasted to the one he lives in. For Humbert and Hermann, innocence is the dream of perfection; the ideal

creation made permanent by the artistic sensibility that shapes it.

Time passes, and a growing awareness of the tick of the clock threatens the timeless worlds the characters yearn for. Originally, great expectations, whether created by unconscious desires, or imposed upon man as a passive victim of fate's designs, are the result of his dissatisfaction and thrust the protagonist into the world of time and death. Lucifer is the archetype of this process: sin is born full-blown out of his head as soon as he can imagine himself different and greater; and Adam is everyman, Lucifer's human counterpart. A displaced version of the myth informs *Great Expectations* and survives in the other novels in a veritable plethora of gardens and paradises, haunted and stolen by daemonic figures and diabolic designs. Simple, naive expectations, like those of Dowell and Holden, are enough to drag the innocent into the world of experience; great expectations, like the very different ones of Pip, Gatsby, Humbert and Hermann, seem to offer a dream world, but actually disguise a nightmare.

Dreams are private, not public. They cannot be shared. One can only stay in Paradise alone. The fall comes with the attempt to wed one's "unutterable visions to [another's] perishable breath."⁵ Pip chooses Estella; Dowell dreams of enjoying perpetual perfect communion in an ideal society that is actually disintegrating around him; Gatsby embodies dreams of success in Daisy, the culture's golden symbol for that success; Holden chooses to love an innocent like Allie or Phoebe, vainly hoping that their breath is not "perishable"; Humbert's ideal Annabel is reincarnated (or "reincarnated") in Lolita; Hermann

identifies Felix as the means by which a pure and private fantasy is committed to the public as formal work of art.

Investing another with all the passion and promise of the vision makes an abstraction tangible but constricts it in the process. Verbalizing the unutterable is a difficult proposition. The creator who attempts it commits the innocent vision to the world of experience, and commits himself to writing, like Hermann, "Despair" across the first page of his work when the vision fails. Despair is often associated with the actual, ritual or potential death of the protagonist or the character most explicitly linked with him. As examples, consider Pip's fever, delirium, and loss of identity after the death of Magwitch; Dowell's numb non-existence with the remnants of Nancy after Edward's death; Holden's contemplation of suicide and imagined murder by gangsters; Humbert's irrevocable loss of Lolita which leaves him free to destroy Quilty, his "brother"; Hermann's horrified discovery of the flaw in his work of art that makes him just another careless murderer and momentarily destroys his belief in his own perfection as an artist. The best summation of the basic attributes of despair is Carlyle's in *Sartor Resartus*:

Have we not seen [Teufelsdröckh] disappointed, bemocked of Destiny, through long years? All that the young heart might desire and pray for has been denied; nay, as in the last worst instance, offered and then snatched away. Ever an 'excellent Passivity'; but of useful, reasonable Activity, essential to the former as Food to Hunger, nothing granted; till at length, in this wild Pilgrimage, he must forcibly seize for himself an Activity, though useless, unreasonable.⁶

To despair is to feel trapped in a perpetual present, unable to imagine anything different from the present situation, and to see the future as an endless repetition of the hopeless now. It is to be self-conscious and dissatisfied in a world that seems as static and unchanging as the innocent's world. Tom Stoppard's *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead* provides an instructive example. Its two principals are the self-conscious inhabitants of, and actors in, a work of art that exists in a perpetual present, and which consequently provides them with no future and no escape. They cannot imagine themselves in a different situation because there seems to be no point in conjuring up alternatives. When the imagination stops functioning, the world exists only as an external thing, made up of uninspiring, untransformable fact. The stoic Epicurus observed: "It is not things themselves that disturb men, but their judgments about these things."⁷ But when those judgments alienate man from every thing around him, his imagination refuses to function; his capacity and desire for communication are thwarted; his vision becomes demonic; life is hell on earth.

Reason demands that man, trapped in despair, recognize the futility of every endeavour. But, like Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, he does have a choice. Even though every exit is only an entrance to another stage where he may be just as perplexed by the tortuous course of events, man can choose to take that exit, in preparation for his final one: he can come to terms with his own death. He can make an assertion when faced with despair and death by refusing to act, making the Existentialist's crucial choice, saying "No. I will not." The impossibility

of action need not paralyze the functioning of the imagination, and may even facilitate it. In Virginia Woolf's *The Waves* Bernard wants "to embrace the whole world with the arms of understanding, impossible to those who act."⁸ Taking his cue from the useless and unreasonable world he sees around him, man can choose, as the "useless, unreasonable" activity Carlyle suggests, to create a work of art. Only by embracing the useless world of the artist can man most fully realize his potential as creator of meaningful alternatives to meaningless experience.⁹

If death is not a dead end, despair will retreat before the life-sustaining power of the creative imagination. That which is analogous to the divine in man creates and immortalizes him and his subjects by removing both from the world of temporal sequence and reassembling them in a continuous present. The first person narrator, by telling his own story writes out, and writes himself out of, his despair.

The modern authority on the life of the imagination, Wallace Stevens, contends that the imagination offers two kinds of vision: the first involves the wrong kind of illusion, an escape back into false ignorance, and a mock redemption.¹⁰ Here he "shrinks" from the ABC of being, "the vital, arrogant, fatal, dominant X," the quality of life that must be confronted if man is to be wholly alive, as opposed to being merely titillated by "the exhilarations of changes." To use the imagined world as an escape or refuge from "reality" is to be deluded by the wrong kind of illusion. Only an imagined order that accommodates both the vital and fatal aspects of the X, life as unknown quantity, can create the redemptive illusion.¹¹

The alternative order of existence to be forged must make life a combination of the imagined and the real, a manifestation of the revelation that "the imperfect is our paradise."¹² With no illusions about the illusory nature of the imagination, man can comprehend "reality." The acceptance of unhappiness, ennui, absurdity, and despair frees him to create something human in an inhuman world. The old heaven is renounced as an absurd attempt to idealize reality; the new heaven of higher innocence is discovered within, created by newly-discovered faith in man's own vision. In an age of unbelief, poetry must take the place of religion.¹³

The abhorrence of death, the most ignoble thing man must submit to, makes him seek not the sham salvation of a nonexistent heaven but the vitality of art. "Every poet begins (however 'unconsciously') by rebelling more consciously against death's necessity than all other men and women do."¹⁴ Consequently, the narrator realizes that the only way innocence and paradise are to be regained is by the sharing of the dream which lost him his innocence in the first place. If it is made public privately, shared with those few who are willing to listen, its original object may be realized after all. Humbert's ultimate assurance reveals this attempt to overcome death and isolation by inventing a new end for an old story. He tells Lolita: "this is the only immortality you and I may share"¹⁵—"this" being the "artifice of eternity" he has offered her.

A society which thrives on and owes its existence to conformity ostracizes and silences those who refuse to acknowledge the primacy of its own anxieties. The lunatic is institutionalized for his refusal to

share "the normal prejudice in favor of external reality."¹⁶ Sanity becomes a conspiracy of the majority, which insists that the only important world is the lowest-common-denominator, average reality available to everyone. The poet demonstrates "the sanity of genius and the madness of the commonplace mind" because, looking at the world through the inward eye, he rejects the consensus of the mediocre as the meaningless cliché that exists until the "imagination animates a subjectively perceived texture."¹⁷ Art offers an instructive parable to illustrate the phenomenon: one man sees a unicorn; a second confirms the sight, changing it from a possible fancy to a genuine experience. But with every additional corroboration, the symbol of fantastic possibility becomes more reasonable, "until it is as thin as reality, the name we give to the common experience" and finally resolved as "a horse with an arrow in its head."¹⁸

Only by dissociating himself from the material, the mediocre, and the mundane can the artist escape the repressive anxiety structure society represents. His art which makes the imagined world manifest implicitly criticizes society's fear and ignorance of the unreal. Science usurps art's position as an oracle of the real if man fails to keep faith with his imagination. His knowledge assembles facts to illustrate theories that compel him to attribute an independent existence to an external world. If he attempts to adjust himself to it, "moral law imitates natural law, and human life takes on the predictable characteristics of nature as science reveals it."¹⁹ Behaviour becomes a series of conditioned, mindless reflexes, devoid of any human value, and essentially

absurd.

Because increasing importance is ascribed to the detached and objective qualities of the mind, civilization becomes "the apotheosis of the analytic tradition," and in an analytic civilization art "may consistently become life itself."²⁰ But art cannot redeem life if it is subordinated to life and replaced by it. It must instead supply man with the vision necessary to re-imagine the real, and assume a central place in the "synthetic civilization" it helps to create by being both "decorative and illustrative." The rediscovery of higher innocence in the form of art is the means by which the first person narrator makes sense of his own world; the body of readers which constitutes his audience must decide how that form applies to their own lives. The metaphysical implications are profound: if man believes there is no spiritually existential world which is not a human creation, then art, by embodying the height and depth of imaginative vision, is not only the informing power for his life on earth, but the maker of heaven and hell as well.²¹

A world remains of which man is the sole master. What bound him was the illusion of another world. The outcome of his thought, ceasing to be renunciatory, flowers in images. It frolics—in myths to be sure—but myths with no other depth than that of human suffering and, like it, inexhaustible. Not the divine fable that amuses and blinds, but the terrestrial face, gesture, and drama in which are summed up a difficult wisdom and an ephemeral passion.²²

The creator of the human fable is a divided self: first person narration presents an "I" who is principal actor and an eye-witness

who is also chief spectator. The actor acquires his "difficult wisdom" by learning the ephemeral nature of passion, love, and life. The eye that determines both what and how he perceives is an instrument of the inward eye. Whatever flashes upon it is contemplated in the aesthetic bliss of solitude, the consolation of the first person narrator. Therefore alienation becomes a positive aspect of isolation because it provides an improved perspective, unobscured by the opacities of cultural compromise. For example, Pip can realize his genuine life only by leaving London and its corruption and gaining a clearer view of himself. Dowell finally rejects a more genteel version of the same society, just as Nick, by remaining a spectator, refuses to be seduced by the city's tawdry attractiveness. In the "real" world, a place for Holden exists only in sanatoria, because he is guilty, like Humbert and Hermann, of harboring the insane desire for perfection in his poetic soul.

The trio of lunatic, lover, and poet is increasingly useful as a means of describing the varying roles of the first person narrator. Pip is really only a lover. Madness does visit him in the delirium of illness, but only to signify the purging of an old self and the sanity of his new life. In *The Good Soldier*, Dowell repeatedly refers to the madness of the world he lives in and watches as that world gives the roles of doomed lunatic and lover to Nancy and Edward. In *Gatsby*, Nick is the poet who sees the vitality at the heart of Gatsby's imaginative vision as lover.²³ In these first three novels the protagonist is a member of the established order, or fervently wants to be. He pursues his ideal within that society, and his vision is informed by the values

he learns from it. When he realizes the false and hollow nature of what he has so zealously sought, he is isolated from society and forced to find solace in solitude. In the last three novels, *The Catcher in the Rye*, *Lolita*, and *Despair*, the protagonist attempts to realize a dream away from a society whose values he scorns. The conflict between him and a world which isolates and persecutes the outcast produces the madness that afflicts Holden, Humbert, and Hermann. As poets they all articulate the imaginative visions that they conjure up as lunatic and lover. The impossible dreams of the imaginary world are transmuted into the potentially therapeutic accounts of the imaginative world.²⁴

The bliss of solitude becomes the pain of loneliness unless the "I" manages to identify with someone outside himself. The inevitable failure of the attempt to escape permanently "solitary confinement" inside his own skin for the duration of his life is compensated for by his immersing himself in an imaginative attempt at creative order.²⁵ Telling the story of failure, the narrator sings "of human unsuccess,/ In a rapture of distress."²⁶ The muse supplants the lover as the means of attaining the ideal. The palliative effect of art consists of the meaning rediscovered in the form the teller makes out of his bewildering experience, and the potentially creative bond between the first person narrator and his reader which that form implies. Alternately imploring, cajoling, admonishing, and even insulting the reader, the narrators under consideration here all demonstrate a profound need for a sympathetic listener. "Pause you who read this," Pip demands, before inviting the reader to compare his own life with the one he watches unfold.

Dowell can only tell his story by assigning a wise silence to the man he imagines sitting across the fireside. Nick pleads with the reader to understand the implications of Gatsby's fall for everyone. Holden wistfully regrets the second-hand means by which the reader experiences events and describes the ideal relationship between author and audience: "God," he says, "I wish you could've been there." Because the story *is* the narrator's life, the bond with his audience is life-sustaining. "Imagine me," Humbert appeals at one point, "I shall not exist if you do not imagine me." The reality of his own existence is an illusion which only the faith of the reader allows him to sustain. Hermann attests to the same symbiotic relationship when he remarks that fictional characters are nourished by the life blood of the reader. In turn, the response of the reader, and his ability to fulfill the obligations he undertakes, confirm him in his own role. A sympathetic response, a verdict of "Not Guilty" from Humbert's jury, is an attempt to see and understand events distilled rather than distorted by the humanity of the story teller.

The novelist proper is primarily of interest as an artist who looks in the fictional mirror and draws the imagined portrait he sees there: he creates a creator. By relinquishing the stage to the protagonist, he becomes the mechanism by which the manuscript is made public and he is then forgotten:

The arrangement contains the desire of
The artist. But one confides in what has no
Concealed creator.²⁷

Outside the work of art, in the world of experience, the reader knows that the narrators are the inventions of their authors and have no control over the worlds they inhabit or appear to have created. But cynicism and disbelief imply a despairing view of fallen man. Art demands the willing suspension of that disbelief and the affirmation of faith. Encountering a work of art requires that the reader forego the world of experience and reaffirm his innocence by behaving as if he did believe in the creative powers of the narrator. The reader also knows the world of absurdity, futility, and death but he chooses not to believe in it. Knowledge acquired in the experiential world is temporarily forgotten, because he knows that "the final belief is to believe in a fiction, which [he knows] to be a fiction, there being nothing else."²⁸

The ineffable becomes an utterable vision, wed to the perishable breath of the audience which can then enjoy imaginatively the timeless and innocent qualities of the work of art. The reader confirms the vision of the unreal, the reported sighting of the unicorn. The narrator talks to only one person at a time and seeks to convince him that the voice he hears and the events he sees are the work of a free and responsible man, not the constrained gestures of a marionette. Like Gatsby's smile, the reader's faith illuminates the narrator, telling him that his audience believes in the narrator as the narrator would like to believe in himself.

The evolution of the nature of fictional forms illuminates the importance of the individual creative act in the modern century. Discussing "the literary Platonism of the high mimetic period" in the

Renaissance, Northrop Frye notes that

the *dianoia* of poetry represents a form, pattern, ideal, or model in nature. "Nature's world is brazen," says Sidney: "the poets only deliver a golden." He makes it clear that this golden world is not something separated from nature but is "in effect a second nature": a unification of fact, or example, with model, or precept. What is usually called the "neo-Classical" in art and criticism is chiefly, in our terms, a sense of poetic *dianoia* as a manifestation of the true form of nature, the true form being assumed to be ideal.

With the low mimetic, where fictional forms deal with an intensely individualized society, there is only one thing for an analogy of myth to become, and that is an act of individual creation.²⁹

Sidney's golden world, a unification of observed fact and social model, has, like Paradise, been lost, because the poet does not believe in the possibility of realizing the golden world as a social form. The belief has been transformed into a faith in the individual's power to imagine such a world, even though it will exist only in the imagination: the golden world has become man's power to create it. At one time in fiction the love force was the life force; the fulfillment of men's desire assured their continuity as a communal group sustained by procreation. With the disappearance of that force, man realizes he doesn't have all the time in the world, and that he can only buy time if he uses the creative power of his imagination, in a world that seems farther away from the ideal than ever.

The point becomes clearer when considered in terms of two contrast-

ing views of literature: "the aesthetic and the creative, the Aristotelian and Longinian, the view of literature as product and the view of literature as process."³⁰ According to one view, the work of art is a *techne*, to be studied with detachment; according to the other, it is possible object of identification, to be read with involvement. The first involves a catharsis in which emotions are purged by being attached to objects; the second involves *ecstasis*, absorption, or *Angst*, terror without an object. The difference in emphasis corresponds to Frye's distinction between the fictional mode, in which the internal relationship of fictional characters is of primary interest, and the thematic mode, in which the external relation between author and reader becomes more important. The lyric poem and the essay are the best illustrations of works in the thematic mode; but much of the language used to discuss their characteristics illuminates the concerns and character of the first person narrator, and first person narrative novels can be more fully comprehended when considered as examples of both fictional and thematic modes. The self-conscious narrator in the thematic mode is conscious of the relationship between himself as creator and his audience. The inevitable consequence of this is his concern with the nature of truth and illusion, a basic theme of the thematic mode, in the story he creates.

Literature's stories and forms, or myths and modes, can be separated into four basic divisions: comedy, tragedy, romance, and irony. Every story is given an appropriate shape by its teller, life being "terribly deficient in form," as Wilde points out.³¹ The teller often

deprecates the importance of his role as informing power because the "true story" simply takes on its appropriate form. And as the story itself becomes increasingly important, it becomes the truth, no matter how the "life" it contains is altered. As Hermann says, art contains much more intrinsic truth than life itself. This truth is conveyed in a series of stories that share certain traits of the first three literary forms, but are finally informed by an ironic mythos and exemplify the characteristics of the corresponding ironic mode.

The community and continuity comedy celebrates are mere anachronisms in an "intensely individualized" society which has long since abandoned any coherent teleology. The moment of self-knowledge or the victory of the protagonist and his love once made him a symbol for the rebirth of the society as a whole. Now, it is his recognition of the social construct itself as a constricting and even malignant power that makes him a symbol for the discovery of selfhood. Comedy becomes inadequate as a form in which to express the isolated and extraordinary individual's view of the hostile and ignorant mass. The final act of a comedy is prescribed by its final cause, the applause and assent of the audience. The modern story teller accepts no edicts anent the conclusion of his narrative, and prefers to imagine a sympathetic response, rather than demand a laudatory one.

Still, the comic ending survives as a kind of option for those in the audience determined to adopt the requisite perspective. According to this view, the implied marriage at the end of *Great Expectations* symbolizes and celebrates the triumph of the values of a society which

the novel scorns. *The Good Soldier* and *The Great Gatsby* are studies of the victory of moral decency over dangerous and illicit passion. *The Catcher in the Rye* is the paranoid soliloquy of someone rightfully exiled to an asylum. Nabokov's pair of unrepentant lunatics and murderers are both justifiably excluded from the comic celebration which marks the moral resurgence of sanity and justice.

Tragic implications inherent in the same designs are equally apparent. The untimely death of the child, which often characterizes low mimetic tragedy, is suggested by the repeated associations of ubiquitous death with characters like Pip and Holden. The inevitable and inexorable drift towards death and alienation, countered by a movement that represents a more-than-human greatness, the defining characteristics of high mimetic tragedy, are crucial aspects in the stories of the two heroes loved by Dowell and Nick. Moral anxieties need not exclude Humbert and Hermann from consideration as tragic figures, given the otherworldly intensity of their desire for perfection, which is also their fatal flaw and the cause of their supposed villainy.

The romance, in which good and evil are moral absolutes and the successful quest of the protagonist a symbol of the conflict between them, survives in allusions to, and images of, the mythic world where lost ideals were once realizable. Pip associates with mages, witches, and fairy godmothers. Dowell alludes to Peire Vidal, and connects Edward with the Cid, Lohengrin, and the Chevalier Bayard. Nick describes Gatsby as committed to following a grail, the symbolic goal of the religious quest; *Gatsby* concludes with the paradisaical vision that

confronted the Dutch sailors and, by analogy, Adam and Eve. The romantic paradise recurs in the field which Holden, knight-errant protecting the innocent from danger, imagines himself patrolling. It is peopled by the same children Humbert hears in the climactic vision near the end of *Lolita*, a vision that denotes the inviolable and timeless world of the child. Even Hermann's world, with its identical doubles which confuse good and evil, recalls the magic, mystery, and absolutes of the romance.

The frustration of the romantic quest is itself an ironic mythos, one version of which is the movement from great expectations to despair. In the ironic mode, the reader has "a clearer view of the total design" than the internal characters.³² Because that design is the creation of the central character, the reader must be careful about presuming too much: irony always exposes the absurdity of the complacent and the self-assured. As Haakon Chevalier points out, irony is implicit in "any partial or limited view of things," a caveat that obviously includes the reader's own perspective.³³ Of course he can comprehend the limitations that the narrator's knowledge and short-sightedness impose upon him. But much of what the narrator as actor doesn't know, he retrospectively discerns and highlights for the reader while he tells the story. Furthermore, by ignoring or scorning the unknown forces that shape every perception and every life, the reader forgets his own ignorance and, secure in his superiority, becomes smug, insensitive, and ridiculous. (See, as a disturbing example of this, Mark Schorer's Introduction to *The Good Soldier*.)³⁴

Comedy, tragedy, and romance all suggest complete and unified forms. Irony acts to undermine these because it recognizes, and originates in, life's deficiencies and discords. For example, Dowell and Hermann invent and then ridicule "happy endings" for their stories. In irony, the detached quality of comedy remains but Eros, "the power strong enough to force a happy ending on the story in defiance of all probability,"³⁵ is dead, just as the Christian God of love is the frustrated and impotent maker of an ironic human comedy. As psychological archetype, Eros is still the human capacity to love, in conflict with a civilization which can no longer feel anything. Irony undercuts tragic possibilities by insisting on the futility of any noble endeavour, and the delusory quality of greatness. It comments rationally on the world which is "a tragedy to him who feels."³⁶ In tragedy, pity and terror are raised and cast out, sending the audience home subdued but elated by the vision of human aspiration. Irony invokes terror without an object, saying to the audience: "This world of illusion and frustration *is* your home, so you can't go home again."

Irony insists that man see the absurdity of his world by forcing him to dwell on the facts of life and death. The "second nature" the ironic artist creates is no longer a golden world, but an embodiment of nature's most inhuman and ruthless propensities. Man finds the rationale for his own "mechanized, frustrated, and absurd" behaviour in the world where to be human is to be alien: "irony marks the ascendance of a technological society and the tendency of man to imitate the natural law outside him."³⁷ The romance, in which man aspires to

imitate the ideal form of nature implicit in his world, is abandoned and replaced by the ironic vision of a dark world of hidden, unspeakable desire which, if indulged, can bring on the chaotic antithesis of the romantic order. "Irony, in literature, is a sophisticated myth, best understood as a frustration or parody of the more primitive comic and romantic myths in which a quest is successfully accomplished."³⁸

As the inverse of romance, irony describes a world like *1984*, where utopia becomes dystopia and language so debased that good and evil, love and hate (the absolutes of the romance), mean the same things. Yet man still believes in the redemptive potential of language, and dreams of using it to rescue himself from the imminent nightmare that threatens him.

At the same time, irony juxtaposes the vision of the world man wants to escape and a sense of his own detachment from it, because irony involves "a conception of freedom which identifies freedom with freedom of the will. Such freedom is usually thought of as opposed to necessity."³⁹ Man's end is predetermined but there is no order or logic in his progress towards it. The quest to escape necessity, social compunction, or mortal limitation, is articulated by asking the crucial question, "Is there a life *before* death?" The artist asks the question rhetorically by presenting the reader with the accomplished work of art.

Forced to imagine himself as the victim of impersonal powers who shape the ironies of his situation from their own superior vantage point, the narrator invokes old names like "Fate" (associated with tragedy) and "Fortune" (comedy) to account for his ironic predicament. Such forces

possess all the humorous, inscrutable, and malevolent tricks of the diabolic illusionist. In *Great Expectations*, the dark forces of chance and chaos constantly threaten to wrest control from what is left of good in the world. Dowell repeatedly wonders at the pitiless inhumanity of any cosmic scheme that could condone the cruelty he witnesses. In *Gatsby*, T. J. Eckleburg is the god that gazes indifferently down on the violent, careless collisions occurring below him. Holden deplores the same random and needless suffering, represented for him by a world in which Mercutios die poignant and blameless deaths. In Nabokov, the interest in cosmic irony intensifies and man attempts to become a ministrant of the shaping power. Humbert plays elaborate games with McFate, his personal nemesis; Hermann's godless world still conspires to tempt him with chance encounters that fit his lovingly crafted designs.

To discover the nature of cosmic irony is to learn the place of man in a world no longer anthropocentric. New illusions must be found to replace the old knowledge which was "perhaps false but [. . .] true to the desires that brought it into being."⁴⁰ By rejecting his role as a helpless puppet in a mindless universe, man fosters new illusions that commit him to taking responsibility for his own life. As a creator, he can look up to himself as godlike, and look inward for the source of that divinity. "The world out there is real, but if we *deify* its reality, if we make it an object of imitation, [. . .] it belittles] us with its vast size in time and space, contemptuous of our efforts to be free of its colossal machinery."⁴¹ By creating and contemplating his own life and art, the first person narrator invents a new time and space, a still human point in a turning world.

Footnotes: Chapter One

- ¹Vladimir Nabokov, *Despair* (New York: Capricorn Books, 1965), p. 13.
- ²Nick Carroway and Jay Gatsby are discussed as two halves of a divided protagonist. Their relationship is explained in detail at the beginning of Chapter Four.
- ³See, for example, Wayne C. Booth, *The Rhetoric of Fiction* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1961), pp. 348-49.
- ⁴*Art of Satire* (New York: Russell and Russell, 1940), p. v.
- ⁵F. Scott Fitzgerald, *The Great Gatsby* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1925), p. 112.
- ⁶*Sartor Resartus* (New York: The Odyssey Press, 1937), p. 158.
- ⁷Motto for Vol. I of *Tristram Shandy* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1965), p. 1, from Epictetus' *Encheiridion* (Handbook).
- ⁸*The Waves* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1931) p. 114.
- ⁹Oscar Wilde, *The Wit and Humor of . . .* (New York: Dover Publications, 1952), p. 53: "All art is quite useless."
- ¹⁰"The Motive for Metaphor," in *The Collected Poems of Wallace Stevens* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1954), p. 228.
- ¹¹The "redemptive illusion" is a concept taken from Nietzsche's *The Birth of Tragedy*. See John Hulcoop's explanation of it in his "Introduction" to *Phyllis Webb: Selected Poems 1954-1965* (Vancouver: Talonbooks, 1971), pp. 27-29.
- ¹²Stevens, "The Poems of Our Climate," P. 193.
- ¹³Stevens, "Adagia" in *Opus Posthumous* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1957), p. 159: "The relation of art to life is of the first importance especially in a skeptical age since, in the absence of a belief in God, the mind turns to its own creations and examines them, not alone from the aesthetic point of view, but for what they reveal, for what they validate and invalidate, for the support that they give."
- ¹⁴Harold Bloom, *The Anxiety of Influence* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1973), p. 10.
- ¹⁵Vladimir Nabokov, *Lolita* (New York: G. P. Putnam's, 1955), p. 311.
- ¹⁶N. O. Brown, *Love's Body* (Toronto: Vintage Books, 1966), p. 161.

¹⁷Vladimir Nabokov, *Strong Opinions* (New York; McGraw-Hill, 1973), p. 118.

¹⁸Tom Stoppard, *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead* (London: Faber and Faber, 1967), pp. 14-15.

¹⁹Northrop Frye, *The Stubbhorn Structure* (London: Methuen, 1970), p. 51.

²⁰Haakon Chevalier, *The Ironic Temper* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1932), p. 81, p. 81.

²¹Frye, *The Stubbhorn Structure*, p. 173, and *The Educated Imagination* (Toronto: Canadian Broadcasting Corporation, 1963), p. 44.

²²Albert Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, trans. Justin O'Brien (New York: Vintage Books, 1955), p. 87.

²³Perhaps George Wilson, who is explicitly linked to Gatsby, is the "lunatic."

²⁴See Frye's "The Imaginative and the Imaginary," in *Fables of Identity* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, 1963), pp. 151-67.

²⁵Tennessee Williams, "Person-to-Person," the Introduction to *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* (New York: Signet, 1955), p. vii.

²⁶W. H. Auden, "In Memory of W. B. Yeats," in *Collected Shorter Poems: 1927-1957* (London: Faber and Faber, 1966), p. 141.

²⁷Wallace Stevens, "So-and-so Reclining on a Couch," in *Collected Poems*, p. 295.

²⁸Stevens, "Adagia," in *Opus Posthumous*, p. 158.

²⁹Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism* (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1957), p. 59.

³⁰Frye, *Anatomy*, p. 65.

³¹"The Critic as Artist," in *Complete Works*, p. 1034.

³²Frye, *Stubbhorn Structure*, p. 167.

³³*Ironic Temper*, p. 43.

³⁴"An Interpretation," pp. v-xv, in Ford Madox Ford, *The Good Soldier* (New York; Vintage Books, 1927).

³⁵Frye, *Stubborn Structure*, p. 239.

³⁶Horace Walpole, "Letter to the Countess of Upper Ossory," 16 August 1776, in ed. Mrs. Paget Toynbee, *Letters of Horace Walpole* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1903-05).

³⁷Frye, *Stubborn Structure*, p. 53.

³⁸Frye, *Stubborn Structure*, p. 53.

³⁹Frye, *The Critical Path* (Bloomington: Indiana Univ. Press, 1971), p. 132.

⁴⁰Chevalier, *Ironie Temper*, p. 58.

⁴¹Frye, *Stubborn Structure*, p. 52.

Chapter Two: *Great Expectations*: Prototypes and Possibilities

It is particularly appropriate to begin with *Great Expectations*, because Pip's story is an accurate representation of much that is traditional in first person narration. Its emphasis is clearly "fictional" rather than "thematic" and Phillip Pirrip is of relatively little interest as a self-conscious narrator. The narrator who is conscious of the importance of his role as story teller in the recreation of events is essentially a twentieth century phenomenon, *Tristram Shandy* being the exception that proves the rule. But the ironic myth embodied in the stages of Pip's life, and the affinities of the story with the ironic mode necessarily adumbrate the aesthetic concerns of modern novelists and their creations. It is admittedly always dangerous to assume that any author writes with "one eye on his own time and the other confidentially winking at ours,"¹ but some consciousness of the danger should enable one to keep his attention focused on Dickens' concerns rather than modern anxieties.

In the world of innocence, the child is instinctively virtuous. Little Pip forms a sympathetic bond with a fellow sufferer and eschews the worldly, formal title of "Pirrip" for the simpler "Pip;" with its overtones of the natural world ("Pip" as seed).² A "larger species of child" (7), Joe Gargery is a natural in the innocent world, the wise fool contrasted to the knowledgeable men in the world of experience, the simple soul who comments sagely on other's self-deceptions, the embodiment of all the virtue and love left in the world. He is a symbol of permanence in the midst of change, the honest workman always found at the forge, the steadfast friend always ready to forgive the

worst transgressions. The innocent world, once a garden, is now embodied in people like Joe and Biddy who epitomize the ideals it stood for.

Pip, thrust alone and afraid into a rough and inhospitable environment, becomes a symbol of the tenuous and threatened state of innocence in the midst of nature that is now out of control.³ Life is a "universal struggle" (1) and the land surrounding him is a "savage lair" (2) of marshes and fogs which destroys those unable to survive and reclaims them in the graves surrounding Pip. The external, hostile, inhuman world is a monument to destruction and death. All this marks Pip's first awareness of the "identity of things": what things are and what they resemble. The antipathetic nature he confronts means that he must fight to maintain his own identity and to avoid becoming one of the "things" which first impose themselves on his consciousness.

The innocent sees the world as beneficent and tries to accomplish in his own actions the good he perceives outside him. In contrast, Orlick and Drummle, human imitations of nature's violence and cruelty, are examples of how man models his life on the destructive aspects of the world. But to use people as "things" is to be implicated as a part of the darker side of human nature, and Pip, Miss Havisham, Magwitch, and Jaggers are all guilty of this. As T. S. Eliot notes, "so far as we do evil or good, we are human: and it is better, in a paradoxical way, to do evil than to do nothing: at least, we exist."⁴ Inhumanity is indifference, the inability to feel or desire anything. Pip's passivity, exemplified by his life in London as a bored young wastrel waiting for another to shape his life for him, is as insidious as the

positive evil of violence and cruelty which threatens the innocent in experience. The refusal to take responsibility for one's own life results in a concern with the pretence and appearance necessary to disguise an insignificant existence. Hence the snobbery and phoniness that characterize so much of what Pip does.

Action in *Great Expectations* has specific moral implications, and the desire to do good creates a world that is tentatively triumphant in the end. This is principally a world of light, symbolized by the "bright sun of [the] life" (275) shining on and from Joe's face, and a world of "healing influences" (385) that shadows, prisons, and Satis Houses shut people away from. The natural light cannot penetrate the malignant darkness hovering over the city: Joe is "wrong" in London as a result. The absence of its curative powers can produce the moral lassitude described above. The movie version of *Great Expectations*, in which Pip tears down the curtains of Satis House that hide Estella from the light of day, makes this point in a rather melodramatic way. The evils that lurk in the darkness—on the marshes, in the corner of the forge, at the foot of Pip's stairs—are part of the same image pattern.

Pip's journey from innocence to great expectations is marked by similar imagery, set out as a recurrent guide for the reader as well as Pip: the distant, permanent, inscrutable light of the stars. At first they symbolize the hostility of the external world from which he is still protected by an innocence that insulates him. Before he leaves Joe, and the life-sustaining light and heat of the forge and hearth, Pip looks up at the stars and sees them as a cold, pitiless, glittering

multitude staring down on the blackness outside, where he imagines men freezing to death. In contrast, ignorant inexperience will soon cause him to idealize all he sees. The freezing death is actually coming towards him through the night he gazes out on, in the form of Miss Havisham's invitation to come and play in the adult world. He commits himself to following the cold and distant light of Estella, which comes towards him "along the dark passage like a star" (56). This light misguides and blinds him, causing him to lose his sense of awe and his ability to wonder, changing him from the small self watching the mystery of life to a deluded victim of his own self-aggrandizement, scorning the fateful objects associated with his destiny as "poor and humble stars for glittering on the rustic objects" (139) of his youth.

His meeting with Estella produces the inflated notions of self-importance and the shame and disgust with which he views his own rusticity. In describing the moment of his fall into self-consciousness, Pip says: "Her contempt for me was so strong, that it became infectious, and I caught it" (57). Interestingly enough, Dickens' friend Carlyle associates the same image with self-consciousness, noting that it is the beginning of disease, the point at which the human being becomes morbidly aware of himself as an aggregation of parts, and consequently loses an essential wholesomeness.⁵ Pip's diseased imagination produces distorted notions of both self and surroundings. Accompanying these is the sin of pride: having lost a part of his own human value, the snob insists on denying the human value of others.⁶

He joins a society which espouses the same kind of selfishness and

exemplifies the same deluded devotion to appearance. The acquisition of financial wealth becomes synonymous with good fortune, love of money being at the root of so much of the evil in Pip's new world. Any sense of genuine community is impossible when one's neighbour is always a potential adversary in the conflict for more wealth. A spurious common bond holds together a society which organizes its relationships in terms of the cash nexus at its heart: everyone shares an abiding and exclusive self-interest. The Bible (and Sarah Pocket) says that everyone is to love his neighbour as himself, but Raymond Pocket, the archetypal toady, has a ready answer to that apothegm: "if a man is not his own neighbour, who is?" (77) Having created a world where people are no more than things or assets, the mass proceeds to deify the sordid ideals their creation presents them with. The ability to feel sympathy or love becomes irrelevant. Even murder and robbery have nothing to do with personal animosity, as Wemmick points out to Pip, initiating the naive boy into the harsh practicalities of existence. Wemmick's schizophrenic organization of business and private affairs is an attempt to perpetuate the division between the human and inhuman selves discussed above. Still, he evinces considerable regret when Magwitch's "portable property" (Wemmick's guiding star) is lost, while remaining phlegmatic about its owner's demise, people being subject to life's vicissitudes even though property is not.

Reliance on external things as a means of making one's fortune produces the kind of passivity implicit in a phrase like "great expectations." The characteristic attribute of this extended stage of Pip's journey is

a reliance on the future to bring about what he regards as his rightful due. The anonymity of life in an inhuman society enables him to avoid taking responsibility for everything he does and to consent to being used as a mere tool. Thus Estella reminds Pip: "'We are not free to follow our own devices'" (255). But he is harshly disabused of his acquiescence to this sentiment by Miss Havisham's withering perspicuity. "'You made your own snares,'" she tells him. "'I never made them'" (347). She redeems herself by recognizing the truth of the assertion applied to her own wasted life of self-pity.

When Pip finally discovers he has no future but the one he must make for himself, and that he must endure it alone, he is plunged into despair. Having cut himself off from his past, he loses the false identity he has assumed and is left with nothing.⁷ His personal nadir is marked by the assimilation of objects from the external world into a nightmare of chaos and darkness. In his illness, he dreams of the vapour of a "lime kiln" (447) which obscures his vision and causes him to lose his bearings in the mists that have confused him since his first encounter with Magwitch on the marshes. The imminent death at the hands of Orlick that the lime kiln recalls would have left him embalmed in a permanent state of nothingness: unforgiven, untraceable, and "misremembered," at one with "the lonely marsh and the white vapour creeping over it," (413) a transparent spectre returned to the lonely graveyard where he began. That beginning emphasizes Pip's isolation in the vast and hostile world around him; this end ironically finds him united with it, his identity lost in the process.

His delirium in the dead of a "dark night of the soul" dissociates him from the temporal and spatial realm: "I often lost my reason [. . .] the time seemed interminable [. . .] I confounded impossible existences with my own identity" (447). The nightmare consists of the threat of permanent identity with the "things" he has embraced as externals. Society's constricting structure reappears as the house wall in which Pip imagines himself as a brick arbitrarily imprisoned, a single unit whose function is defined by the larger whole. Alternately, in a symbol which evokes the mechanistic scheme of the universe, Pip sees himself as "a steel beam in a vast engine," pleading to be disconnected from the meaningless motion that grinds itself out above an abyss.

After the final no there comes a yes
 And on that yes the future world depends.
 No was the night. Yes is this present sun.⁸

The "present sun" destroys the darkness and nightmare of the past for Pip and illuminates the fourth and final stage of his journey, emanating from the face of Joe whom he sees on awakening. The mists which seem to be rising when Pip sets off "for London and greatness," (142) the obscure spectral vapour of the lime kiln which threatens to make him a homeless, wandering ghost—both these dissolve, along with his great expectations, "like marsh mists before the sun" (454). The protagonist discovers a higher innocence by renouncing vain desires and accepting forgiveness for his transgressions. The "thousand natural and healing influences" (385) still existing in the world cure the diseased and divided self, making it sane and whole. Joe's love and the seasonal change

from cold, cruel spring to abundant, peaceful summer combine to restore Pip's health.

The best of the human and natural worlds exists in a combination ordained by "the appointed order of their Maker" (385). His order still abides in the midst of chaos, maintained by those who exist independently of the corruption that so permeates the established society. A dramatic representation of the difference between the individual and the establishment occurs during the trial of Magwitch, when he, having made his own life coherent by sacrificing all for another, is illuminated by a ray of sunlight, associated with God's beneficence, while he acknowledges the universal sentence of death which supersedes man's interventions. The mass of people remains unforgiving and unenlightened in the darkness that fills the rest of the room, enjoying the spectacle of blind justice and its cruelty. (The facts of Magwitch's case are, like all "facts" in Dickens, anti-human and irrelevant.) Every individual must seek his own redemption by rediscovering the divine ability to love and forgive. If, as Blake says, the most sublime act is to put another before you, Pip truly reaches a zenith of sorts when he learns to love and forgive Magwitch *and* Miss Havisham, his two prodigal parents; he is forgiven by Joe and Biddy, for whom he has been the prodigal son.⁹ Accordingly, he reclaims his own world in its "private and personal capacity" (282). When he comes home to the place of his origin he finds Joe only a "little grey," just slightly marked by time. As a symbol of the eternal recurrence of the child's innocence, he sees a new little Pip by an old fireside.

This completes the fourth and final stage of the cycle which provides so many important comparisons and contrasts when applied to modern narratives. But the self-conscious first person narrator is principally a creature and creator of the twentieth century; and Philip Pirrip, a self-effacing, successful businessman, is hardly a suitable prototype.¹⁰ His low profile requires a compensating emphasis on what happens, rather than on how he reacts to or recreates what he recalls: in other words, *Great Expectations* is primarily in the fictional mode. The emphasis is on the actor, not the spectator. But to ponder aspects of the identity of the first person narrator is to recognize a relationship between the internal characters that is of a distinctly different order from the one in *David Copperfield*, for example. It adumbrates the curious "doubling" of identities that is so integral to the novels examined below and suggests the complex nature of imagination and illusion, the primary theme of the thematic mode.

Characters become variations on a central theme; events are symmetrically patterned to represent displaced versions of a series of primary events. Both character and events are ultimately reflections of the first event, the startling awareness of one's self confronted by life and death. The relationship between Pip and Magwitch is an instructive example. Both begin as outcasts, alone in an alien universe. Pip's sympathetic act, the theft of food, cements the implicit bond between the child and the criminal because Magwitch, in order to survive, steals food as a child. But Pip soon aspires to the ideals of a society which creates, persecutes, and dehumanizes the criminal; therefore, he carries

the criminal within him, "the concretion of his potential guilt."¹¹ The actual taint of criminality pursues him relentlessly. The night he is identified by Wopsle with George Barnwell, a fictional parricide, his own "mother" is attacked. On hearing the news, Pip assumes that he must be responsible. This is the first of a complex series of associations which causes him to recall the footsteps of his dead sister, when he hears Magwitch, risen from the grave and the other side of the world, ascending the stairs on the night when Pip's true destiny is revealed. Pip dismisses the association as insignificant but it is hardly that, nor is it caused by "nervous folly" (303). Pip has freed the feet making that sound by supplying the means to cut the leg iron that bound them; the same instrument strikes his sister a mortal blow; Pip is soon to abhor the "monster" (Pip's word for Magwitch) he has created. He unconsciously associates his supposed complicity in the attack on his sister with his genuine culpability in Magwitch's case.

The complexity of the interwoven identities of Magwitch and Pip, two victims of frustrated expectations, is only suggested by the above examples. And they are linked to four other characters, who represent sinister mutations of Pip's growth and development. Arthur Havisham's wasted life ends with the same kind of nightmares and murderous visitations which Pip endures in his delirious dreams. Compeyson, a "gentleman" who aspires to the same fortune Pip does, shadows him "like a ghost" (372), and shares Pip's fear of and abhorrence for Magwitch. Drummle, an "amphibious creature" (195) who nonetheless scorns Pip for his humble origins in the marshes, seeks to satiate his own brutal desires with

the girl of Pip's dreams. The last and most elaborate example of a "demonic double" for Pip is Orlick.¹² He lusts after Biddy, the other object of Pip's affection. Rising up from "the ooze," his course imitates Pip's progress from the forge, to Satis House to London. Orlick forms evil alliances with both Drummle and Compeyson, and (implicitly) with the Devil who lives "in a black corner of the forge" (108).

The enchantress of Satis House is the "witch" who casts a spell on this fantastic group of creations, charming some by her wealth and some by Estella. Miss Havisham's shadowy and unreal presence produces another confluence of the delusory and displaced event for Pip. He foresees her death at their first encounter when he imagines her hanging from a beam. But the blaze of apocalyptic light which finally destroys her is the appropriate end for a witch. The gallows which Pip's imagination twice erects for her clearly links her to Magwitch, the fairy godfather, "the pirate come to life down off the gibbet" who returns to it "to hook himself up again" (5). The same instrument threatens Pip, in his dreams, and both of Estella's genuine parents.

Criminal connections associate almost every character in the book, pointing up the fallen nature that binds one man to another, fallen as in "fallen short" of the ideal life he might create for himself were it not for the false things he aspires to. He has swindled himself out of Paradise and made a compact with the devil for his soul in exchange for the fleeting pleasure of ill-gotten wealth. Joe properly identifies this Devil as the "father of lies" (67), the self-deceptions that divide man from his true nature. The structure of the novel itself suggests

Pip as Everyman with a variety of possible ways of making it to the grave. There is still enough innocence, love, and compassion in the world to save him before he succumbs to the abyss threatening those who delude themselves about their own loss of innocence and its attendant dehumanization.

The irony defined by "the terrible gap between aspiration and fulfillment"¹³ is operative any time art emphasizes the contrast between the world man lives in and the one he would like to live in. Those without an imagination simply equate the two; those gifted with imagination are immediately faced with another irony: how can man be responsible for changing his world and destiny if that destiny is ineluctable? Cosmic irony is particularly significant in *Great Expectations* since the novel (and Pip's life) has two endings. These illustrate the way in which the comic and ironic impulses conflict and thus anticipate the aesthetic concerns of future creators, less certain than Pip (or Dickens) of an almighty God and his beneficence, but equally sure that the order a human being creates is his only escape from the inscrutable fate that binds him.

From the moment Pip feels the coldness which torments Magwitch "riveted" to his leg like the criminal's leg iron (again note the crucial importance of the first event), images of things that ensnare, trap, lock, and imprison serve as symbols for the forces which bind a man to a certain course and compel him to pursue it. The future, like the past, apparently cannot be bent "out of its eternal shape" (441). "Pause you who read this," says Mr. Pirrip, inviting the reader to make the

necessary connections with his own life, "and think for a moment of the long chain of iron or gold, of thorns or flowers, that would never have bound you, but for the formation of the first link on one memorable day" (68).¹⁴ Here Pip is referring to the fateful meeting with Estella, despite the fact that his chain is iron and binds him to the day he meets Magwitch, himself bound by iron and torn by thorns. This chain represents both tragic inexorability and comic coincidence ("thorns or flowers"). Lear's first act assures his fate; the complex series of events set in motion by something as "inconsequential" as Tom Jones' midnight tryst with Molly Seagrim secures his fortune.

The impotence of a man unknowingly committed to a predetermined course makes him also an ironic figure. Until Pip is willing to take responsibility for the present and to stop gazing dreamily at the future he remains "Fortune's fool." The links in the chain binding him are, like those of Jacob Marley's ghost, his own. At the same time he must acquire the mature stoicism of one who can submit to time's inexorable flow without being fatalistic. As Magwitch tells him: "we can no more see to the bottom of the next few hours, than we can see to the bottom of this river what I catches hold of. Nor yet we can't no more hold their tide than I can hold this. And it's run through my fingers and gone, you see!" (423) The use of the natural image as an illustration is suggestive here, because time, like nature, both heals and destroys. Man cannot change its course but he can choose which route he takes to arrive at his predestined end.

Man trapped in time and subject to fate is a potentially tragic

figure. The tragic implications of *Great Expectations* involve seeing Pip as fallen man, guilty of pride and falsehood. He is explicitly compared to Adam, whose "fall from liberty into the natural cycle also started the movement of time as we know it."¹⁵ Pip experiences a point of ritual death during the dark night of the soul, the culmination of a tragic movement analogous to what Northrop Frye calls the "fifth phase" of tragedy, in which the protagonist's "lost direction and lack of knowledge" are dramatized in "the world of adult experience."¹⁶ But tragedy requires a contrary movement, a more-than-human greatness that refuses to submit to an implacable fate. Pip's humanity, emphasized by a narrator who invites the reader to compare his own life with the one he is reading about, undercuts the tragic structure.

Of course the story ends, not with death and despair, but rebirth and a comic conclusion. But *Great Expectations*, with its godfathers, godmothers, images and witches can be examined first as a possible romance. The theme of "mysterious parentage," one of Dickens' favorite devices, and a conventional feature of the romance, is the indirect cause of everything that happens in the novel.¹⁷ Miss Havisham resembles the "celebrated cruel stepmother" of the romance, whose victim is "usually female." In the same mode the "true father is sometimes represented by a wise old man or teacher." Although Magwitch loses his daughter, he is Pip's "second father" (309) and teaches him wisdom and compassion. But just as irony undercuts the potentially tragic, it disqualifies the romance as a possible mode as well. The successful quest of the protagonist redeems his society in the romance. In *Great Expectations*,

Pip's quest saves only himself, and the girl who escapes the ruins of a dead world with him.

Irony would seem to militate against a glorious reunion between them at the end of this phase of their lives, but the muted comic conclusion is appropriately tentative and ambiguous. Both have been sinners: Estella's supernatural coldness is not "in nature"; Pip's pride is a transgression against human nature, and thus he must suffer from the same indifference that he himself is guilty of. But suffering becomes self-knowledge which discards the false from the past and keeps what doesn't change. As a guiding star, Estella is "disasterous" (Tristram Shandy's word) for Pip, a symbol of all the things he has wrongly aspired to; as a bent and broken human being, divested of her jewels, she can escape with him from the false Paradise which has imprisoned both of them for so long. She is a part of him, as he so eloquently tells her (350), and a part of Magwitch, the man who has created them both. Having extended his hand to practically every character in the book, Pip's final gesture must unite him with the figure destined for him (although not in the way he thought) from the outset.¹⁸

The temperate alternative to the comic festival is a moonlit meeting in a ruined garden. The moon's reflected natural light recalls the image pattern associated with the vital and virtuous. The natural world asserts its continuity by growing over the ruins of man's inadequate structure. Their encounter is not an impossible coincidence, a "violent connection of the unconnected," because it is in the cards (or stars) from the time that Estella opens the gate for Pip, letting him into

Heartbreak House and the stale dreams it encourages.¹⁹ Their final resolve sustains the subdued comic movement: Estella's last words reaffirm their separation; Pip's "I saw no shadow of another parting" (470) cautiously denies it.

It is, admittedly, a long step from here to the bleaker, more ironic, visions of Pip's twentieth century counterparts, who are forced to find their solace in solitude. But Pip is at least as far away from David Copperfield, whose own conclusion provides an instructive contrast with Pip's.²⁰ As the day's light fades for David, heavenly light supplants it, manifested in the angelic form of his soul mate. Estella relinquishes her stars, the cold jewels that glitter on her breast; Agnes lives perpetually among them, "above and beyond" all faces. David dismisses both the day's light and the creations of his story as mere "shadows," because divine light precludes any dark recesses, and his story ends with an earthly version of the bliss presumably awaiting everyone when their own stories are written. The creations of Pip's story are essential for the light they cast on the complexities of human identity. And, as a final contrast, the shadows are lengthening outside paradise at the end. Pip, though he says he sees no shadows threatening his earthly love, must trust enough to walk off into the darkness, illuminated only by the moon's reflected light, and the old illusion of a new innocence:

When over the houses, a golden illusion
Brings back an earlier season of quiet
And quieting dreams in the sleepers in darkness—

The moon is the mother of pathos and pity.²¹

Footnotes: Chapter Two

¹Northrop Frye, *Fearful Symmetry* (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1947), p. 12.

²See *Great Expectations* (New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, 1972), p. 170, for Herbert's prophetic response to the name "Philip." All future references are to this edition. Page numbers are included in the text.

³Compare the first event of Pip's conscious life with dreamy conventionality of David Copperfield's first impressions in *David Copperfield* (New York: Signet, 1962), p. 24.

⁴"Baudelaire," in *Selected Essays* (London: Faber and Faber, 1932), p. 429.

⁵"Characteristics," in *Critical and Miscellaneous Essays* (London: Chapman and Hall, 1839), IV, p. 2.

⁶Dorothy Van Ghent, *The English Novel* (New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, 1953), p. 135.

⁷In the long night that Pip endures after his second confrontation with Magwitch he refers explicitly to his lost identity: "I thought how miserable I was, but hardly knew why, or how long I had been so, or on what day of the week I made the reflection, or even who I was that made it" (316).

⁸Wallace Stevens, "The Well Dressed Man with a Beard," in *The Collected Poems of . . .* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1954), p. 247.

⁹*The English Novel*, p. 136.

¹⁰Robert Partlow, Jr., "The Moving I: A Study of the Point of View in *Great Expectations*," *College English*, 23, No. 2 (1961), 122-31, is a good example of how dull an investigation of such a narrator can be.

¹¹*The English Novel*, p. 133.

¹²Julian Moynahan, "The Hero's Guilt: The Case of *Great Expectations*," *Essays in Criticism*, 10, No. 1 (1960), 60-79.

¹³Harold Bloom, *The Ringers in the Tower* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1973), p. 114.

¹⁴Compare Pip's revulsion for the "wretched gold and silver chains" Magwitch has "loaded" onto him (311).

¹⁵Northrop Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism* (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1957), p. 213.

¹⁶Frye, *Anatomy*, p. 222. The quotation is an apt description of Holden Caulfield's plight as well.

¹⁷Frye, *Anatomy*, p. 198, 199, 199.

¹⁸The first bonds symbolized by the handshake are false. Pip shakes hands absurdly with Pumblechook (148), dishonestly with Joe (275), reluctantly with Magwitch (305). Then he extends his hand in forgiveness to Miss Havisham (385) and as a pledge to Magwitch (432). Before linking hands with Estella, he accepts Joe's hand and forgiveness (448).

¹⁹*The English Novel*, p. 132.

²⁰*David Copperfield*, p. 870.

²¹Wallace Stevens, "Lunar Paraphrase," *Collected Poems*, p. 107.

Chapter Three: *The Good Soldier*: "Incalculable Simulacra"

At the end of *Great Expectations*, Pip and Estella begin their mature life by leaving the remnants of a fool's paradise. Dowell's adult life begins in one, and he is blissfully ignorant there. Innocence is child-like ignorance of the world in *The Good Soldier*. Great expectations involve the misguided belief that the tenuous fool's paradise in which Dowell wants to live will continue to exist forever. The victim of great expectations hopes to enjoy heaven on earth, realizing too late that, in Dowell's words, "there is only hell" (234). The lunatic and lover, in their own private hells, must succumb to despair; the poet, the man who knows that a creative act is as optimistic as man can be, tells his story and reaffirms the redemptive power of illusion. Dowell is a fool but he admits it, persists in his folly, and becomes wise.

He constantly denies possessing any wisdom, because he is an unself-conscious *eyron*, the self-deprecating man who knows more than he thinks he knows, and explains more than he thinks he can. Before the reader accuses him of imbecilic, inexcusable ignorance he must, as Dowell insists, "consider exactly the position" (106).¹ Dowell's first position resembles that of January in *The Merchant's Tale*: both are so happy they fear Heaven itself will be an anticlimax. Dowell wants to know nothing, believing things are what they appear to be. The deceivers surrounding him treat him like the baby or innocent child he is. Only Maisie Maidan is as innocent: "you knew the world and I knew nothing" (74) she writes to Leonora, just before becoming the first character to die of the heart disease endemic to the world that Dowell soon discovers.²

Almost all the main characters in his story are compelled to cope

with a vast, unknown realm of experience that is suddenly revealed to them. Both Leonora and Nancy come to this world of repressed desire, deception, and delusion from the institutionalized innocence of a convent. Even Edward Ashburnham is so naive that he has to be instructed in "the facts of life," and strives to maintain a child-like simplicity in a complicated world, even worrying about the effect of the least intellectual development on his polo-playing abilities. Dowell is totally caught up in the other games a gentleman plays, and is sheltered by them from the harsh realities they disguise. But remarks like "I guess that I was a sort of convent myself" (122) hint at the dual nature of Dowell's innocence. Having been forced out of the insular, unhurried, untroubled world which protects him, he becomes a haven for others subject to the same plight. Both Edward and Leonora finally confide in Dowell, and he becomes responsible for explaining the lives of everyone.

Dowell is one of a series of people whose innocence is lost and whose great expectations are confounded when they discover the lies, pretence, and frustration at the heart of human life. Like Pip and Gatsby, he dreams of permanently realizing an ideal existence within the prevailing social context. But the sickness at the heart of society leads him to the despairing revelation that man is fated to dream his dreams alone, and to realize them only in the world he creates for himself. *The Good Soldier* is a treatise on afflictions of the individual's heart in a sick society, but diagnosing the disease and prescribing a cure is complicated by an epistemological problem: "who in this world can give anyone a character? Who in this world knows anything of any other heart—or of

his own?" (155) On the first page of his story Dowell announces that he has known nothing of the depths of the human heart, although he has known the shallows. Because the act of writing is also and always an act of discovery, by the end of the story he has seen those depths and seen ... nothing. The abyss at the heart of darkness, the central shadow, makes Dowell's inward voyage perilous. In *Gatsby*, Nick initially resists the stories men tell him, because they offer undesired "privileged glimpses" into human hearts. In *The Good Soldier*, such stories are the only means of discovering what goes on in those hearts. Otherwise, the barriers are insurmountable: nine years of "extreme intimacy" with the Ashburnhams is the same as knowing "nothing at all about them" (3).

Dowell moves from innocence to experience when he realizes that the relationships of "good people" in "good society" merely perpetuate the permanent isolation of the human soul. And when secrecy dictates a schizoid split between public decorum and private indulgence, good people become isolated from themselves.³ The acting, public self dominates in some of these people. Florence has a "personality of paper" which represents "a real human being with a heart, with feelings, with sympathies, and with emotions only as a bank note represents a certain quantity of gold" (121). (It is interesting to note, given the critical myopia that insists on his inability to feel and his cold intellectuality, that for Dowell the possession of feelings and sympathies is the defining characteristic of a human being. Mark Schorer incomprehensibly claims that Dowell "has no heart at all, and hence no mind." John Meixner opts for "psychic cripple.")⁴ Florence pretends to be a heart

patient but is actually a heartless, "cold sensualist," for whom life is a series of dishonest, selfish, vain roles she aspires to play: lady of the manor, erotic woman of history, "heroine of a French comedy" (119). One even senses a stage-like, melodramatic quality about the "decorative arrangement" of her suicide, the stock response of the scorned lover who conceives of death as a theatrical gesture.

The absolutes of the innocent world crumble as Dowell begins to understand the horrors that have replaced them. His discovery of secret lives, agonies, and passions behind the proper facades is a frightening revelation for him, because it poses unanswerable questions about what should be, and have been for him, the most reliable things in the world. One of these is the decency of women, the central pillar in the once stable structure that disintegrates around him. Leonora's heart-rending description of her attempted affair with Rodney Bayham invokes the same two metaphors which finally inform Dowell's own vision of society: the "endless acting" which life's drama requires, the "blight" such pretence inflicts on any attempt to stray from one's prescribed role. Morality and civilization tremble in the balance while Dowell ponders whether Leonora's act makes her a harlot or a typical, decent woman. As the story unfolds, he learns to resist such convenient categories, glib antitheses, and easy answers. Instead, he begins to question the position of society, and its morality, as the first things of the world, and finally ascribes pre-eminence to individual desires which society seeks to frustrate.

What was once coherent becomes chaotic, and Dowell plunges into

despair, the state of being unable to imagine order when surrounded by chaos. In the darkness at the centre of a world turned inside out, he discovers the frustrated feelings which have been repressed and locked up. Leonora's attempt to control all emotions with an effort of her indomitable will typifies the inversion occasioned by self-denial. Thwarted in its attempt to love, the human heart feeds on hatred. Such hatred knows no bounds: finally Leonora even hates Edward for his forbearance with Nancy, the very virtue she wishes to inculcate in him. She learns to enjoy his desires vicariously by forming a compact with their object, thereby replacing the communion which Dowell supposed to have existed between these good people with a hideous parody of it: a "communal solidarity" which permits Nancy and Leonora to persecute the faithless male by flaying him until his "mind bleeds," his will breaks, and his soul surrenders.

The distinction between appearance and reality, and the antagonism between the individual and the community are both direct causes of the narrator's despair and the ironic dichotomies which he is forced to ponder. Dowell often articulates this despair in the form of the unanswerable question, variations of which he repeatedly poses for himself in an attempt to elicit some meaning from the welter of painful data before him. Such questions are doomed to remain unanswered and unresolved by his insistent response: "I don't know." This admission represents a new kind of ignorance for Dowell. Uncertainty and doubt strip the spectator of the complacency which hides so much of the world from him. He knows how much he doesn't know, and that all claims for the absolute

nature of any knowledge are specious.

Dowell's despair is the existential predicament: he knows that "there [is] nothing to wait for. Nothing" (105). Without the capacity for the wonder that accompanies innocence or the hope that characterizes great expectations, there is only the tedium that no action alleviates. He resembles Vladimir and Estragon, who also wait for Nothing, wait for Godot, because there is "Nothing to be done."⁵ The absurd situation described at the beginning of their play makes all action meaningless in the end. To know this is so terrifying that most men refuse to dwell on it and prefer not to know it: they choose to become ignorant and see with an ignorant eye. Yet in the midst of darkness comes a glimmer of hope for one man. The artist writes for the ignorant, unprejudiced eye, and sees with the same eye, one that finally refuses to contemplate the meaningless and concentrates instead on a form which it creates out of nothing. Citing the fictions men share about the significance of their lives, Dowell remarks: "surely, surely these delusions are necessary to keep us going" (47). To apply the same principle to his own role as spectator and story teller is to discover the rationale for his own story, a determined attempt to illuminate the darkness.

The lunatic, the lover, and the poet entertain their own illusions to make a meaningful Something out of Nothing. Nancy mindlessly repeats the one phrase that affords her an escape from the horrors she has seen. Edward, the lover, forces himself to believe each new affair will be the one to make his life stable and complete. But madness makes Nancy a mere simulacrum, and love, when frustrated, is equally

self-destructive for the simple, sentimental soldier. The poet, the third member of the trio, must use his imagination creatively if the imaginative compact formed by the lunatic, lover, and poet is to redeem life rather than provide an escape from it. But is Dowell sufficiently involved with the people in the story he tells to make sense of their lives? He is often accused (even by himself) of lacking the requisite passion. He cannot love Florence, whom he considers a fragile, undesirable object. The imagined coldness of Leonora's skin on his lips is sufficient to dull any craving for her. But the genuineness of his love for Nancy can hardly be doubted, given the tenderness and poignancy of his descriptions of her: "And to think that that vivid white thing, that saintly and swanlike being—to think that . . . Why, she was like the sail of a ship, so white and definite in her movements. And to think that she will never . . . Why, she will never do anything again. I can't believe it . . ." (128).⁶ Dowell has seen the world wreak havoc on those who don't understand the nature of sexual desire, its transience, its minimal importance in a "really great passion." His ignorance of the "sex instinct" hardly prevents him from seeing its dire effects, caused by the attempt to make permanent what is by its very nature a transitory phenomenon.

In *Great Expectations*, Pip loves Estella because she is a part of him, and the union is both spiritual and transcendent. In *The Good Soldier*, the narrator's identification with the two people he loves is a means of replacing the superficiality of false bonds with the permanence of genuine love. Thus Dowell becomes one with the good soldier: "I loved Edward Ashburnham—and [...] I love him because he was just myself" (253).

The present-tense reiteration here attests to the permanence of Dowell's commitment. Death need not separate the spectator from the actor whom he watches, analyzes, identifies with (love being a craving for identity with its object), and immortalizes by living on in the harsh world to tell the hero's story.⁷ Dowell's claim is not just blind egotism but a genuine avowal of love, the validity of which is supported by his ability to feel and share the "absolute, hopeless, dumb agony such as passes the mind of man to imagine" (20) that Edward endures. Dowell not only does imagine it, but also convincingly recreates it by empathizing with a fellow-sufferer.

Confined to the roles of the spectator who watches and records, and the artist who re-creates, Dowell aspires to the role of principal actor as well. The self-conscious narrator acknowledges an unconscious self which stores up the desires he represses. Dowell articulates the notion in explicitly Freudian terms: "It is as if one had a dual personality, the one I being entirely unconscious of the other" (103). Thus Dowell can imaginatively participate in Edward's child-like exploits and enjoy them vicariously, "watching him robbing the orchards, from a distance" (254). But Edward, the actor, cannot cope with extended suffering or the malevolence that occasions it and death is his only respite. Similarly, Nancy is ignorant of and unequipped for the torments in store for her. The spectator, on the other hand, can detach himself from the suffering and attempt an explanation for it. Dowell compassionately pieces together the destiny that seems so inexplicable, and admits that his own desires are fated to remain unrealized. Here again he

resembles Edward: Dowell's professed desire to marry Nancy, while he is still too numbed by Florence's death to feel anything, or understand what he's saying, is explicable only as an unconscious desire, exactly like the complete "unconsciousness" of Edward's own declaration of love for her.

The lover insists on the impossible attempt to become the object of adoration in order to shore up his own uncertain sense of self: "we are all so afraid, we are all so alone, we all so need from the outside the assurance of our own worthiness to exist" (115). The fear of losing one's own identity prompts one to lose it by becoming one with another, making a whole potentially flawed by its incomplete parts. The imperfection of the one chosen as a means of self-definition and self-discovery resides in the fact that he or she exists in a realm that inexorably resists any attempt to make something permanent. In the artifice of eternity, the lover as poet ultimately realizes his desire; outside it, things will "pass away as the shadows pass across sundials. It is sad, but it is so. The pages of the book will become familiar; the beautiful corner of the road will have been turned too many times. Well, this is the saddest story" (115).

The poet *qua* poet must see even the saddest stories as gay, "gaiety transfiguring all that dread./ All men have aimed at, found, and lost."⁸ Yeats describes here the ironic cycle as the pattern of the lives of everyone. The "ancient glittering eyes" of the Chinamen are gay because the poet imagines them looking down from above on the tragic scene, enjoying the protection of the lapis lazuli, an aesthetic object on which

they are permanently carved. Dowell, like Holden Caulfield, looks for a place which will seclude him from the dread and allow him to contemplate it with serene composure. Unable to transfigure successfully that dread in his own life, he must dissociate himself from it by telling the story of his own failure to account for or escape from the horrors he describes. Dowell himself is necessarily somewhat ambivalent about the effect of his story and his reasons for telling it. Irony requires this indefiniteness, born of the disparity between hope and despair, between the kind of "heaven" the poet's eye aspires to and the "earth" it must transmute to get there.

Even when Dowell's efforts at identification fail, he can still enlist the help of an imagined, ideal listener, a "sympathetic soul" sitting across from him in front of "the fireplace of a country cottage" (12). Thus he extends the dimensions of his work to include what Frye calls the "thematic mode," in which the relationship between the author and his readers is of paramount importance. The self-conscious narrator is conscious of his auditors and can even identify with them, because Dowell's story is the saddest he has ever *heard*, as well as told. Teller and listener enjoy what Hermann calls "an eye-to-eye monologue,"⁹ the latter's perfect silence enabling the former to imagine the ideal sympathetic response, and, alternately, frustrating him when he desperately needs assent or corroboration, something to help him hold on to the pieces of his own disintegrating self. (The reader who is constantly trying to piece together his own version of some imaginary ur-text consisting of the facts which supply clues to the "reality" existing independently of Dowell's

perceptions of it, is not fulfilling his vital and essential role.)

The unanswerable question which expresses Dowell's bewilderment and horror when faced with his own loneliness is finally referred to the listener. Asking the fundamental "why?", Dowell despairs of ever finding the answer that will illuminate the darkness: "I don't know. I leave it to you" (245). The hope that the reader, who sees mirrored in the story the illusions which he needs to make sense of his own life, will be able to answer the unanswerable is all Dowell has to go on. Because his story is one of the "real stories" of human failure, "told best in the way a person telling a story would tell them" (183), the affirmative gesture of the creative act is negated for Dowell by the emptiness of the life he faces when the fire dies down, the hearth grows cold, and the reader shuts up the book:

From time to time we shall get up and go to the door and look out at the great moon and say: "Why, it is nearly as bright as in Provence!" And then we shall come back to the fireside, with just the touch of a sigh because we are not in that Provence where even the saddest stories are gay. (12)

Dowell's only guide to what the reader will learn from the story is the way in which the people surrounding him react to the stories they read: the internal fictional relationships illuminate the external relationship between reader and narrator. Leonora has no time for novels and Nancy gets an inadequate sense of life from them. But Edward, interestingly enough, has learned enough from the sentimental novels he reads to talk "like a very good novelist [. . .] if it's the business

of the novelist to make you see things clearly" (109). He tells his own story twice, compelled, like Dowell, to talk to someone. The first time, talking to Nancy in the park, "the very words that he spoke, without knowing that he spoke them, created the passion as they went along" (116). The second time, with his own silent listener in front of a fire, Edward guarantees a kind of permanence for that passion by entrusting his story to another: "Poor devil—he hadn't meant to speak of it. But I guess he just had to speak to somebody [. . .] He talked all night" (250). Ford Madox Ford provides the last level of the fictional matrix and completes the pattern of teller and listener in his Introduction to the novel: "the story is a true story [. . .] I had it from Edward Ashburnham himself and I could not write it till all the others were dead" (xx).¹⁰

Dowell's art imitates life in the sense that it compels him to ask questions about the story itself that resemble those posed by the life contained in it. The hope that his tale is not, like the mad Nancy Rufford, just a picture without a meaning leads Dowell to wonder what his readers will learn from the story: "It is not unusual in human beings who have witnessed the sack of a city or the falling to pieces of a people to desire to set down what they have witnessed for the benefit of unknown heirs or of generations infinitely remote" (5). As spokesman for an entire culture, Dowell hopes to enlighten posterity if it is astute enough to comprehend the significance of such events. In the thematic mode, "the poet may devote himself to being a spokesman of his society, which means [. . .] that a poetic knowledge and expressive

power which is latent or needed in his society comes to articulation in him."¹¹ The temporal proximity of his immediate audience, trapped in the same world he depicts, presumably prevents it from fully understanding the implications of Dowell's vision. But whatever the final outcome, all eyewitnesses at a catastrophe must write, if only "to get the sight out of their heads" (5).

In *Lord Jim* Marlow tells his story as if "the obscure truth involved were momentous enough to affect mankind's conception of itself."¹² When Dowell remarks that "the death of a mouse from cancer is the whole sack of Rome by the Goths" (5), he is making the same point, though somewhat less splendidly, and demonstrating an awareness of the symbolic relationship between the insignificant and the monumental. Everything is potentially identifiable with everything else. The responsibility Dowell shifts to his audience in regard to comprehending such identities and their significance reaffirms the importance of the relationship between narrator and reader. Furthermore, it implies a conjunction between the thematic and ironic modes, best illustrated by a quotation from Frye:

Irony presents a human conflict which, unlike a comedy, a romance, or even a tragedy, is unsatisfactory or incomplete unless we see in it a significance beyond itself, something typical of the human situation as a whole. What that significance is, irony does not say: it leaves the question up to the reader or audience.¹³

Dowell himself establishes the difference between irony and other modes

by discussing the form of his own work, in which irony undercuts possibilities implied by comic, romantic, and tragic aspects of the events he narrated. It is the reader, though, in the last act of the role the self-conscious narrator demands of him, who supplies one tentative answer that Dowell, the ironic victim of events and a limited perspective, has articulated in connection with other's occupations but neglected to apply to his own, the concept of the "necessary delusion." The story teller makes the crucial distinction between two kinds of illusion: the wrong kind, the pretence of good people, which makes life an ironic process of disillusionment; and the right kind, manifest in the accomplished work of art, the illusion that the possibility of a creative order exists, whose function is "the Time Being to redeem/ From insignificance."¹⁴

Dowell wryly suggests the comic possibilities of the story as it nears its end: "I see that it has a happy ending with wedding bells and all" (252). He is alluding to Leonora's marriage to a man "who is rather like a rabbit" (238), a fruitful union which has replaced her sterile marriage. Comedy does celebrate this kind of continuity, but the laughter here is painful and the idea of human breeding debased and faintly ridiculous. And although Edward is variously Lohengrin, the Cid, the Chevalier Bayard, and the knight in tarnished armour who quests for love, the story is not a romance cast in a modern setting either. He is not a feudal lord, just a good soldier, who doesn't get the girl in the end. Because Dowell has no sense of black and white, right and wrong, hero and villain, the magic simplicity of the romance

seems finally inappropriate: "all this may sound romantic," he says, "but it is tiring, tiring, tiring to have been in the midst of it" (234). He rejects *The Ashburnham Tragedy* as an inadequate and erroneous title: there is "no current to draw things to a swift and inevitable end [. . .] none of the elevation that accompanies tragedy [. . .] no nemesis, no destiny" (164).

The inability to see any distinct mode in the tangle of reported events is a result engendered by the obscurity created by the ironic, in which the audience gets "a clearer view of the total design than the actors."¹⁵ Of course, when one of the actors (and "speech is act") is the means by which the audience acquires its view, the reader must "enter the ironic gap, shake hands with Dowell, and say 'I don't know either.'"¹⁶ The spatial metaphor implied in Conrad's "before all, to make you *see*" locates the ironist in the position he aspires to, that "point of vantage to which nothing else is superior."¹⁷ But bound by space and time, man must concede that position to "God" or "Fate," whichever name he uses to represent an external and inscrutable power.

In the ironic mode, the human world is "inferior in power and intelligence to a superior power which controls it."¹⁸ Dowell's relative impotence stems from an initial inability to differentiate between surface and substance. Time, one of the powers that controls the human world, makes some manifestations of the ironic disparities in Dowell's world more clear to him. A society held together by pride, reserve, and ruthless attempts to repress emotion disintegrates as time passes; Dowell's "goodly apple" is only good while its rottenness remains

unperceived, hidden beneath the surface. When the decay and imminent death of the whole become apparent, only those with an instinct for self-preservation survive. Leonora, who has locked up her "instinctive desires" (203) and thus transmuted them into hatred and vindictiveness, is the kind of "sheer individualist" (146) strong enough to maintain decorum while fighting for her life. Nancy's rigid code produces a similar disparity between appearance and reality. She regards herself as worthless and tainted by the desires that eventually drive her insane; but in her well-mannered madness she still defers to social convention, becoming the blank image society requires.

When its own façade threatens to collapse, society demands literal self-sacrifice from those who adhere to public virtues and one straight line of conduct. It can tolerate Edward's series of clandestine affairs but when the sentimentalist, who ascribes a primacy to the emotions, espouses a belief in the possibility of a pure and ideal love, he is sacrificed for "the greatest good of the body politic" (238). Leonora and Nancy repress their own desires and suffer the consequences; Edward indulges his and finally realizes that man cannot live by impulse alone. But for appearance's sake his genuine passion must remain unrealized. In short, the good soldier does his duty, and sides with the society against himself.¹⁹

Dowell's metaphor for the decorous appearance society maintains is "the minuet," an empty social form which hopelessly binds its participants, forcing them to go through the motions when "it would have been better in the eyes of God if they had all attempted to gouge out

each other's eyes with carving knives" (249).²⁰ But the minuet is more than mere meaningless appearance and ritual. When it is divorced of all its trappings and pretence, and the "white satin favours" are put away in the cupboard to rot, the minuet becomes an eternal form, the sublime artistry of music and dance combined, realized by the power of the imagination, a manifestation of a genuine desire for an ideal communion: "The mob may sack Versailles; the Trianon may fall, but surely the minuet—the minuet is dancing itself away into the furthest stars" (6). The ideal vision of a timeless form that exists apart from society's ill-fated and inadequate attempts to embody it is an ironic contrast with the sight confronting Dowell, who sees the minuet as a constricting redundancy performed on a hundred thousand stages. This dance is a symbol of the false community of the bored leisure class, a congeries of social assumptions that are, like the people who hold them, taken for granted.

The narrator's ironic perspective enables him to isolate himself from the group in order to see the truth about it and himself. But society has no use for the isolated outsider or the story teller who reveals the truth, preferring instead its own "slight deceits." Dowell, who sees these lies for what they are, and admits in the end that he doesn't like society much, concludes: "Society must go on, I suppose, and society can only exist if the normal, if the virtuous, and the slightly deceitful flourish, and if the passionate, the headstrong, and the too-truthful are condemned to suicide and to madness (253)."

Although society's "slight deceit" ensures its continuity, it also

implies the ineradicable disease at its core. The "whole round table" made up of the DOWELLS and ASHBURNHAMS is a microcosm for society, and an echo of the ideals of the romance, which, in DOWELL's world as in Tennyson's *Idylls*, are compromised by falsehood. DOWELL remarks that civilization's disease accounts for "the cock that the whole of this society owes to Aesculapius" (37), but the culture which once believed in a god of healing has languished, and that particular god no longer exists. He was killed by a thunderbolt because Zeus feared he might learn the way to immortality. The superior power which controls man's destiny in the ironic mode would sooner destroy him and his false community than use its power to heal. Society tries to cure itself by assigning blame for its inherent defects to scapegoats like Edward and Nancy, "the villains" (252), or to Edward and Florence, two rotten pillars that bring down the total structure.

The ironist avoids such glib answers, preferring instead to delegate attempts to assign culpability to those with a superior perspective which enables them to perceive an order or supply answers not immediately apparent to him. God occupies an ideal position in this regard and his Last Judgment should presumably resolve all unanswered questions. But DOWELL's vision of that judgment, and the paradise awaiting those who escape an earthly hell, takes a rather enigmatic form. He sees two figures sharing an intense embrace while another, observing the embrace, remains "intolerably solitary" (70). DOWELL identifies Florence as the lonely onlooker, but the image has additional implications for the reader. It adumbrates the scene in which Leonora

takes Nancy in her arms while Edward, who has restrained himself from doing the same thing and thereby possessing her forever, listens alone in the night. It is also a symbol for Dowell's irrevocable separation from the only people he ever loves, and for the embrace of Rodney Bayham and Leonora, intent, now that Edward is gone, upon breeding like the rabbits that infest the lawn, while "life peters out" (254) for the absurd American down the road.

If agonizing solitude exists even in heaven and the cruel and demoniacal working of some unknown power persists on earth, then, Dowell is forced to conclude, "there is only hell" (234). The "kissing-kindness land" (76) version of heaven, and the "terrestrial paradise" (237) envisioned as a garden of realized desire, are both rejected because the poet's eye can no longer distinguish between the heaven and earth it moves between: both look like hell. The eyes of people like Edward and Florence dramatize this by looking hopelessly to heaven while they commit suicide, reclaimed by the darkness. With no heaven to appeal to or anticipate, man must create his own. The shadows that lengthen outside the garden at the end of *Great Expectations* are even darker now. But a new paradise can be dreamed by one solitary dreamer, trapped in the deepening darkness.

In the ironic mode, the dream is subject to a malevolent destiny which Dowell describes as "blind," "inscrutable," "monstrous," "atrocious," and "incomprehensible." Being concerned about informing principle and power, he is curious about how "the half-jocular and merciless proceeding of a cruel Providence" (77) has ordered events. For

example, the coincident horrors of August 4 may be the work of the devil who "pays attention to this sweltering hell of ours" (211), or simply the result of human superstition and unconscious motivation. But if man himself is responsible for his own destiny, why are these particular people chosen to be the object of irony's painful and derisive laughter and, once chosen, what alternatives do they have? In the ironic mode the random victim is innocent in that "what happens to him is far greater than anything he has done provokes" and guilty because "he is a member of a guilty society, or living in a world where injustices are an inescapable part of existence."²¹ The reader, seeking in his own world the final significance of the story that irony implies, begins by acknowledging, like Dowell, the fact of this injustice. But in the end, he reserves the right to imagine things differently.

Footnotes: Chapter Three

¹Ford Madox Ford, *The Good Soldier* (New York: Vintage Books, 1927). All future references are to this edition. Page numbers are included in the text.

²John Meixner, *Ford Madox Ford's Novels* (Minneapolis: Univ. of Minnesota Press, 1966), pp. 157-58, notes that "Basil," the name of another of Edward's mistresses, means "innocence".

³Cf. Wemmick, in *Great Expectations*, a comic representation of the same phenomenon.

⁴Schorer, in the Interpretation which introduces the Vintage edition of *The Good Soldier*, p. xv.; Meixner, p. 159.

⁵Samuel Beckett, *Waiting for Godot* (New York: Grove Press, 1954), p. 7.

⁶Cf. Richard Cassell, *Ford Madox Ford* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1962), p. 201: "Dowell himself is merely a chaste eunuch, emotionally and sexually sterile."

⁷The relationships between Dowell and Edward, Nick and Gatsby, Horatio and Hamlet, are clearly analogous. Hamlet's story must be told to make sense of all the suffering: "Report me and my cause aright/ To the unsatisfied"; "And in this harsh world draw thy breath in pain/ To tell my story;" in ed. G. B. Harrison, *Shakespeare: The Complete Works* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1948), 5. 2. 350-51, 359-60.

⁸W. B. Yeats, "Lapis Lazuli," in *Selected Poetry* (London: Macmillan, 1962), p. 181.

⁹Vladimir Nabokov, *Despair* (New York: Capricorn Books, 1965), p. 69.

¹⁰Cf. the Introduction to *Despair* where Nabokov is reluctant to condemn his fictional character to permanent aesthetic oblivion: "I do not remember what happened to him eventually. I cannot even recall if that film he proposed to direct was ever made by him" (10).

¹¹Northrop Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism* (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1957), p. 54.

¹²Joseph Conrad, *Lord Jim* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1958), p. 69.

¹³*The Stubborn Structure* (London: Methuen, 1970), p. 169.

¹⁴W. H. Auden, "For The Time Being: A Christmas Oratorio," in *Collected Longer Poems* (London: Faber and Faber, 1968), p. 196.

¹⁵Frye, *Stubborn Structure*, p. 167

¹⁶Robert Scholes and Robert Kellogg, *The Nature of Narrative* (London: Oxford Univ. Press, 1966), p. 277; the parenthetical quotation is from Robert Browning, "Red Cotton Night Cap Country," *The Works of . . .* (New York: Barnes and Noble, 1912), VII, l. 3277, p. 378.

¹⁷Preface to *The Nigger of the "Narcissus"* (London: Dent, 1945), p. 5; Haakon Chevalier, *The Ironic Temper* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1932), p. 47.

¹⁸Frye, *Anatomy*, p. 34.

¹⁹D. H. Lawrence, "Study of Thomas Hardy," in *Selected Literary Criticism* (New York, Viking Press, 1932), p. 184, makes this point and uses it to explain the actions of both Tess and Jude.

²⁰Cf. William Blake, "The Marriage of Heaven and Hell" in *Complete Writings* (London: Oxford Univ. Press, 1957), p. 152: "Sooner murder an infant in its cradle than nurse unacted desires.

²¹Frye, *Anatomy*, p. 41.

Chapter Four: *The Great Gatsby*: "Unutterable Visions" and
"Perishable Breath"

In *The Great Gatsby*

the story of the protagonist becomes the outward sign or symbol of the inward story of the narrator, who learns from his imaginative participation in the other's experience. Since the imagination plays the central role, the factual or empirical aspect of the protagonist's life becomes subordinated to the narrator's understanding of it.¹

The novel has, in effect, a "divided protagonist." The choice of his dual role solves "the old tragic problem of presenting a character with enough crudeness for *hybris* and *hamartia* but enough sensitivity for ultimate discovery and self-understanding."² *The Good Soldier* features an analogous pattern, although the emphasis on Dowell's role necessarily brings him into sharper focus than Nick who as narrator seems initially less important than Jay Gatsby, the actor. The combination of "the simple, stark actor and the complex, sensitive sharer" makes for two differing but interrelated journeys which move from innocence, through great expectations and despair, but finally "[turn] out all right at the end" (2).³ Nick's supporting roles involve him as actor, listener, spectator, and finally the "poet" who comprehends the significance of a "lover" who pursues an elusive dream. The second section of the chapter discusses these roles. The third section, concerned with the "thematic" aspects of *Gatsby*, concentrates on the similarities between both halves of the divided protagonist and the typical thematic poet. The ironic mode which supersedes the comic, romantic, and tragic modes; the images of nothingness and absurdity which the narrator's ironic

perspective reveals to him when the superficiality and pretence of the world is stripped away; and the external significance of the story that irony suggests—these subjects comprise the section on irony which concludes the chapter.

Nick establishes his innocence on the first page of his story. It consists of his open-mindedness and an upbringing which insulates him from the world of experience. The first enables him to reserve all judgments which is "a matter of infinite hope" (1); the second ensures a wide-eyed perspective which is both all-inclusive and informed by a genuine wonder at all he sees. Nick is the half of the divided protagonist that is genuinely innocent. Gatsby's "infinite hope" is his total dedication to the world he wants to live in, a world conjured up by his imagination because the one he *does* live in is incommensurate with both his ideals and his destiny. In other words, Jay Gatsby begins with "great expectations." Pip rejects life as an innocent to search for an illusory greatness; Gatsby rejects life as a nobody, a person of no consequence, to become the person his imagination creates. As a dreamer, spinning gaudy conceits with a fancy that is tainted by the crass and materialistic, he is innocent of the dire consequences of seeking literal manifestations of his own creations in the externals which finally do become real to him. But these are the only things he knows. Unable to create *ex nihilo*, he aspires to the supreme achievement of social man, a "vast, vulgar, meretricious beauty" (99). Blinded by the glitter of wealth, he invests it with the power, to acquire his dream-world for him, and thus reveals the limitations of any vision that

idealizes society's symbols of success.

In his forgivable ignorance, Gatsby is appropriately hazy about what the future holds, assuming, like Pip, that time is a benevolent force working to accommodate human desire. In the world of experience, unconcern becomes passivity and the reluctance to take responsibility for the moral implications of every act. The intense "self-absorption" characterizing his rise to power (he is contemptuous of the ignorance of the woman he uses and discards) suggests a selfishness which recalls Pip's snobbery and self-centeredness. Nick's journey from the security of the provinces, which he comes to view as "the jagged edge of the universe," to the big city where he goes to seek his fortune, is reminiscent of Pip's path and perspective. As one part of the divided protagonist, Gatsby goes through the inevitable stages of the cycle that leads to despair, acting out his role by equating fortune with dollars. As the other part, Nick manages to remain detached enough to report on the action, and concerned enough to learn the ramifications of equating fortune with destiny. Gatsby goes through the cycle; Nick endures a lesser version of the same one by sympathizing with Gatsby and pondering the reasons for, and implications of, his fall. Nick acquires knowledge, granted to him in the form of "privileged glimpses into the human heart" (2). And since, as Dowell learns, the record of humanity is a record of sorrows, the knowledge Nick desires must reveal to him those sorrows recorded in the world of experience.

The first task of the spectator (and here again Nick resembles Dowell) in this world is to see what hides behind its façade: the

sordidness hidden by the glitter of Gatsby's parties, the tawdriness of Tom Buchanan's clandestine affairs, the cynical smirk that Daisy's vitality disguises, the amorality at the heart of Jordan's insolent self-possession. Without anything substantial to serve as an ethical guide or a basis for conduct Nick, like Holden Caulfield, is on his own. Only his complete honesty distinguishes him from the others and makes him a reliable witness; he records what he sees accurately.⁴ In contrast, Gatsby's single-minded devotion to his attempt to discover outward symbols for inner visions precludes for him any superfluous moral framework. The dream makes its own rules.

Committed unknowingly to the world of experience and its inevitable cycle, Gatsby tries to reverse that cycle. Choosing Daisy as a physical embodiment of the dream is an attempt to effect an artificial innocence, removing from the world the one person who is to share paradise with him. His recurrent desire to bring back the past, to re-realize it, attests to his determination to make time move backwards, to reclaim the perfect moment, and make it timeless. On an autumn night, alone among fallen leaves under the moonlight, he experiences this moment and commits his "unutterable visions to her perishable breath" (112). But Daisy is too much of this world to escape it in order to become part of Gatsby or his dream and "there is no such thing as innocence in Autumn."⁵ When Gatsby tries to recapture this one instant of bliss, he wants to recover "some idea of himself" (111), to bestow an order on his chaotic life which he has dedicated to getting Daisy back. As the incarnation of his dream, she is an earthly substitute

for the heaven he aspires to. The *poet* can see that "Two paradises
"twere in one/ To be in paradise alone," but the inarticulate dreamer
must learn that hard lesson by discovering the disappointment attend-
ing all time-bound desires in a fallen world.⁶

The tawdriness of the world of experience, so different from what
he expected, relentlessly reasserts itself because Gatsby the criminal
tries to reconstruct the world of the romantic soldier by acquiring
the "things" that represent the zenith of earthly attainments. He
sounds distinctly like Tom showing off his house to Nick. The sleaziness
of his business dealings gradually becomes more intrusive, symbolized
by the metallic ringing of the phone, which always portends unpleasant-
ness in *Gatsby*. Because he is so committed to the fantasies created
in his reveries as a child, the actual objects he acquires never seem
quite real to him. He acts like an outsider in his own house: with an
uncanny sense of detachment he watches himself walk with his golden
idol around the temple he has built for her. Unlike Adam, who really
was in Paradise, Gatsby awakes from his golden world to find his dream
false.⁷

But everything is sacrificed to attain it. Gatsby uses people
as means to achieve his own ends, but once these ends are realized he
has sacrificed his own innocence for a different girl, at a different
time, in a different world. All he can insist on then is repeating the
past, and the impossibility of this becomes more and more apparent.
Even before Daisy finally rejects him, there is a "pervading harshness"
in the air at his parties, the seasonal cycle acting as an imitation

of the human one. His despair at her inability to understand or accede to his desires hints at the final despair which claims him when she leaves him forever.

Nick's creative passion is less freely indulged and more firmly controlled than Gatsby's, and like the relationship between Dowell and Edward Ashburnham, Nick's career imitates Gatsby's in a "fainter way." Jordan Baker's initial appeal for him involves the same attraction of opposites that makes Daisy such a mystery for Gatsby. In their first appearance in Daisy's house both women are "cool as their white dresses and their impersonal eyes in the absence of all desire" (12), in striking contrast to the "sheer nervous dread of the moment itself" (13) which characterizes the social gatherings where Nick comes from. Nick admires Jordan's coolness and the artificial world of the East which insulates its occupants from the one he knows, where those unable to be at ease with the passing of time live in a state of "continually disappointed anticipation" (13). (Both Gatsby and Nick, Westerners, are disturbed by time's inexorable flow, unlike people like Daisy and Tom who have become established members of Eastern society.) Nick is unwilling to pursue very strenuously the money which buys this insulation, being more curious about the secret smirking society and the weary cynicism uniting Tom and Daisy, and the secret that Jordan hides behind her cool contempt. Like Dowell, he learns that enviable style disguises aimlessness and amorality in the world of experience. Attempting to become a part of that world means loving Jordan, and trying to see through her mask. "A mask tells us more than a face," but to

see the nothingness beneath the mask and the incurable dishonesty of living in one sustained and studied pose makes Nick radically reassess his notions of human personality.⁸ After seeing the casual disregard for human life of both Jordan and Daisy, the two bad drivers who so impress him initially, Nick realizes he is in the wrong world. The boy from the West, who was once "unutterably aware of [his] identity" (177) with the country must go home and find that identity again.

He takes Gatsby with him by finally exempting him from the condemnation with which he dismisses the others. Nick intuitively feels from the first that Gatsby is "a person of some undefined consequence" (64), although his meaningless ostentation obscures his actual significance. He is "reborn" for Nick when what at first seemed like mere coincidence, Gatsby's buying the house across the sound from Daisy, is revealed as the work of a human agency and evidence of an underlying form that makes their proximity more than the chance workings of an impersonal fate. But Gatsby can only force the world of things to conform to his desires for so long, because it is an inadequate substitute for his vision. When his powers finally fail him, Nick sees him as the tawdriest and most corrupt actor in the miserable world of experience, and both he and Gatsby are plunged into "despair" by their respective visions. Gatsby seems the epitome of evil to Nick; a world without Daisy seems meaningless to Gatsby.

"Great expectations" in *Gatsby* are represented by the dream; "despair" is conveyed by the dream turned nightmare. For Nick, the nightmare is formlessness, seen in a "grotesque" and "fantastic" dream

vision as "a night scene by El Greco" (178). (The adjectives are the same ones used to describe Gatsby's childhood dreams.) El Greco is chosen as an example of how the very unconventional artist images the horrors of "conventional" reality. The drunken, homeless, nameless woman and her four unconcerned escorts, the larger-than-life figures in the foreground, are symbols of the decadence that pervades the futile merrymaking Gatsby presides over. The hundred houses in the background convey the visionary's terrifying sense of the ordinary, its numbing monotony and stultifying familiarity. In this world Nick begins the "decade of loneliness" (136) which his thirtieth birthday introduces him to, a day that marks the death of an old decade, an old dream, and the first of two accidental victims.

Gatsby is the second victim, but his actual death is really just a formality. Without the vitality of his dream, he is plunged into a world unanimated by any kind of imaginatively informed perspective. He is exposed for the first time to the rawness of life, its frightening unfamiliarity, its "scarcely created" (162) quality. Having lived so long in the world the dream makes real for him and believing he has almost achieved it, Gatsby cannot comprehend any place for himself in a realm of existence created by another. Nick can empathize here too, being unable to perceive any meaning in the same world: "After Gatsby's death the East was haunted for me like that, distorted beyond my eyes' power of correction" (178).

Nick must leave the East to regain the clarity of vision necessary for writing the story and thus overcoming his own despair. It must be

written because Gatsby's life is an enigma, a potential work of art requiring a gloss to reveal its structure. The first clue to its meaning involves seeing personality as "an unbroken series of successful gestures" (2), an uninterrupted performance by an actor totally dedicated to his role. The ultimate unsuccess of those gestures is less important than the fact that Gatsby invests his illusions with such vitality that he can create a viable role for himself in a play where he begins as a "Nobody." "Higher innocence" in *Gatsby* is aesthetic redemption: Nick's despairing view of Gatsby as the epitome of evil is transformed into a vision of his ultimate greatness as a symbol of the creative power of the human imagination. To the end Nick has nothing but revulsion for the immoral means Gatsby uses to attain his ends, but he does recognize the absolute and unwavering quality of the imagination that differentiates Gatsby from the other inhabitants in his garish golden world. Tom's love for Daisy is "just personal," and adequately expressed by a string of pearls appropriately relegated to the wastebasket. Gatsby's conception of himself and his love is "Platonic," denoting the unearthly essence of a self and a passion both timeless and eternal.

As the man responsible for Gatsby's posthumous redemption, Nick recognizes a hero who, however tainted, has risen from the ashes of the wasteland. Only "Those who love illusion/ And know it, will go far":⁹ Gatsby loves, but doesn't know the illusory and elusive quality of that love; Nick's love is compassionate and sympathetic, and he knows the illusion of Gatsby's greatness for what it is. A faith in the

human potential for dreaming great dreams is all that Nick has, and needs, to go on.

As first person narrator Nick is more like Pip than Dowell, not really conscious of himself as a story teller or concerned about the implications of his mode of discourse. Some of his story is retold, fashioned from the stories he hears from Jordan, Michaelis, and Gatsby himself. When Gatsby tells his own story Nick is singularly unimpressed by the tired clichés he uses to convey it: "the very phrases were worn so threadbare that they evoked no image" (66). Nick is rightly left to do the talking, by re-creating and locating strategically inner narratives to comment on, or provide background for, the action.¹⁰ When the images are Nick's and the vision Gatsby's, the unutterable trembles toward genuine articulation.

Nick's function as narrator is best described by the word "eye-witness," because of the importance of both how and what he sees.¹¹

The whole notion of seeing evokes the astonishingly complex matrix of visual metaphors and allusions which informs his story, and he sees his own function in terms of maintaining the single perspective appropriate for accurately perceiving what happens and what it means. At his first direct contact with the revelry of the East, Myrtle's party, he ponders his position: "high over the city our line of yellow windows must have contributed their share of human secrecy to the casual watcher in the darkening streets, and I was him too, looking up and wondering. I was within and without, simultaneously enchanted and repelled by the inexhaustible variety of life" (36). Without, Nick sees the mystery inherent

in any set of lighted windows and can imagine all sorts of exotic activity going on behind them. Within, he sees the drunken aimlessness and senseless violence which the elevation hides from the onlookers. He loses his ability to wonder when repeatedly confronted with the superficiality and disorder of society, but remains enchanted by those who maintain an inviolable solitude in the midst of chaos. Gatsby, for example, grows "more correct as the fraternal hilarity increase[s]" (50) because, having created the scenes he watches, he can gaze down on them like a god, unaffected by and unconcerned with the riotous course they take.

Nick must learn to see the same scenes through Gatsby's eyes and to overcome the obstacles preventing that kind of perceptual empathy. Firstly, "it is invariably saddening to look through new eyes at things upon which you have expended your own powers of adjustment" (105). Secondly, the relative nature of vision and truth compels him to record a variety of impressions before attempting to piece them together coherently. Thus he reveals the accuracy of his own gnomish utterance: "life is more successfully looked at through a single window" (4): Nick, the "well-rounded man," has a 360° range of vision from the single window he chooses. The more tangible obstacles clouding his vision are particles of dust and ash, swept up by the ghostly figures in the valley of ashes and floating in the wake of Gatsby's dream. Even Tom Buchanan cites this dust as the cause for Nick's romantic view of Gatsby: "'He threw dust into your eyes just like he did in Daisy's'" (180). But that is magic dust, enabling Nick to see privileged vistas opening on other

worlds. The "foul dust" that pursues Gatsby, and prevents others from seeing him, is a residue from the "impenetrable cloud" (23) surrounding every "ash-gray" man, trapped in no-man's-land, fighting the "hot struggles" of the poor, caught in the deadening cloak of anonymity that suffocates the average and obscures the mediocre. Because Gatsby's roots are here among this dust, he never quite feels worthy of Daisy. In the end one of his kin from the dead world of the living, a "nobody from nowhere" impersonated by George Wilson, returns as an "ashen, fantastic figure gliding toward him through the amorphous trees" (162) to reclaim him. The lunatic, whose own pathetic dreams have been reduced to ashes, destroys the lover.

Gatsby is saved from permanent oblivion by the relationship he forms with one gifted enough to perceive his uniqueness. He singles out Nick from the beginning, one of the few to receive an invitation and the last to leave the party. By confiding in Nick, Gatsby unwittingly chooses the one who is to report his cause aright. The crucial moment in Gatsby's life, the night of the paradisaal vision and the transcendent kiss, becomes the story teller's most significant event. On being told of Gatsby's attempt to make his dream manifest, Nick also struggles with the ineffable, and almost articulates it, "a fragment of lost words" (112) that he nearly recovers being the closest he can get. The final and permanent reconciliation between spectator and actor is anticipated by their meeting on the first night, in the form of the smile with which Gatsby illuminates Nick, isolating him from "the whole external world," and taking him inside himself: "it understood you just as far as you wanted

to be understood, believed in you as you would like to believe in yourself" (48).

But because Gatsby is "an ecstatic patron of recurrent light" (90), absorbing and regenerating the light of a dozen suns, he is difficult to see. When Nick can differentiate Gatsby from the extraneous externals surrounding him, he has learned something about himself: the first person narrator "learns from his imaginative participation" in the experience of the protagonist.¹² He can believe in himself, because Gatsby's smile is the best of all possible mirrors. Self-discovery comes before any other kind of discovery. Nick shows himself capable of making a crucial distinction when he meets Gatsby for the last time: "'They're a rotten crowd,'" he says. "'You're worth the whole damn bunch put together'" (154). This remark provokes a second smile which, unlike the first, does not vanish to reveal a "roughneck," but confirms the permanent bond between the two of them, in "ecstatic cahoots" finally and forever. The divided protagonist finally comes together.

The first person narrator is a character in the fictional mode; in the "thematic mode" he speaks to an audience. Nick resembles the poet of that mode who "writes as an individual, emphasizing the separateness of his personality and the distinctness of his vision."¹³ Nick's complete isolation from everyone but Gatsby confirms him in this role, the only one to keep the faith, believe in Gatsby, and see his significance. Implicitly, the community of his readers, the select society he addresses, are potential sharers of the vision, if only Nick can make them see the power and promise of illusion. The rebirth of

the imagination necessary to save the world from the waste land that threatens and to envision alternative orders of existence is exemplified by the narrator as "thematic poet": "a poetic knowledge which is latent or needed in his society comes to articulation in him." The bleak alternatives society represents make the need to communicate a vision of man's potential for genuine life all the more urgent. Again, the external relationship between the writer and his society, a characteristic of the thematic mode, becomes an essential part of his story.

As the other half of the divided protagonist, Gatsby illustrates the traits of the thematic poet as hero, who becomes "what the fictional hero was in the age of romance, an extraordinary person who lives in a higher and more imaginative order of experience than that of nature. He creates his own world, a world which reproduces many of the characteristics of fictional romance."¹⁴ Gatsby exemplifies this aspect of the thematic poet; *Gatsby* incorporates enough allusions to the romance to establish a context for the "poet's" exploits. For example, his quest for "a grail" (149) should ideally end with the conquest of evil, the rescue of the captive maiden, and the freeing of the waters. But the girl is a willing captive, and the vision of the grail is a cruel deception that prompts the hero to take the wrong road. The wasteland must remain barren. The "sacredness of the vigil" (146) Gatsby keeps outside the palace is flawed by the mirage-like quality of what he sees: he is only "watching over nothing." An enchantress whose voice is a siren's song, she waits for him "high in a white palace [,] the king's daughter, the golden girl" (120). The eternal attraction of her

deathless song will always make men desire the impossible. In Boito's *Mephistopheles*, Faust's "*Arrestati, sei bello*," voiced in an effort to detain a vision of unearthly beauty, violates the earthly necessity of time's inexorable movement. Gatsby's analogous desire to stop time, to "repeat the past" gains him the timeless world of the romance only momentarily, "in between time" (97) at his reunion with Daisy.

But the black and white qualities of the romance are finally resolved as an indeterminate gray in *Gatsby*. The absolute requirements of comedy make it, too, inadequate as a possible mode. The revitalized marriage of Tom and Daisy, the purging of society's criminal element, the "beautiful little fool[s]" (16) who are the projected inheritors of the culture—all these are hardly sufficient as symbols of a society in harmony with the continual rhythm of life, or the ingredients of a festive comic conclusion.¹⁵ As potential tragedy, *Gatsby* is more plausible, containing both the sense of man's being trapped in time while heroically struggling against it, and a more-than-human greatness confronted by an ineluctable drift towards death. Tragic figures are not tragic to themselves, only to the spectators who invest their fall with a significance the protagonist himself is ignorant of.¹⁶ But the vulgar, misguided, and corrupt aspects of Gatsby's aspirations underscore his flawed humanity. Unlike the tragic hero who shapes events, Gatsby is shaped by them. The tragic process that begins when the heroic protagonist sets it in motion becomes in *Gatsby* an ironic destiny that he is powerless to change.

The world in the ironic mode is dramatized by images of nothingness and absurdity. The god who gazes down on the violence and pointless

energy of men in the valley of ashes is the God of Nothingness, T. J. Eckleburg. His dead eyes decompose a dead world, as though parodying those of Berkeley's god whose perception creates the world he sees. His malevolence singles out "Mr. Nobody from Nowhere" (130) for punishment, because he has killed a man, James Gatz, and invented fantastic histories to cover up the fact that he really is nobody. Tom exchanges a frown with this god; Wilson affirms his omniscience. Consequently, both act as his agents: Tom supplies Wilson with the unknown man's identity; Wilson, who doesn't "think any harm to nobody" (159), completes the "holocaust." On either side of the Valley of Ashes is an egg, once the symbol of rebirth. But because the journey through the wasteland is "a shortcut from nothing to nothing" (108), the egg is rotten and becomes a symbol for the aridity and infertility of everything.

Like Dowell, Nick ponders the significance of this kind of ironic vision for humanity as a whole. But Dowell leaves the audience to find the answers, while Nick, by providing the narrative with both prologue and epilogue, supplies a context that hints at the universal implications of one man's rise and fall. Gatsby's story becomes a version of the one that details the magnificent failure of American culture, ontogeny recapitulating phylogeny. This added dimension of the story is informed by the dialectic of East and West—Eggs, country, continent. East Egg is settled, established secure; West Egg, desperately trying to simulate the grandeur of its counterpart, is raw, coarse and energetic. Gatsby is permanently marooned on the latter, gazing across the water at a world he can never claim for his own.

An analogous dichotomy confounds the national consciousness. The nervous energy that developed the West, and extended the frontiers of civilization, loses its direction and becomes frustrated. The dissatisfied come East, reversing the original direction of the explorer, to rediscover an old frontier by pretending it is "new." They find it in the fairy-tale world of the city "seen for the first time, in its first wild promise of all the mystery and the beauty in the world" (69). This city is a creation of romance, "white heaps and sugar lumps all built with a wish," and an extraordinary manifestation of the pastoral world that the American wilderness can never quite imitate: "I wouldn't have been surprised," says Nick on his first visit to New York, "to see a great flock of white sheep turn the corner" (28). But time changes this world and Nick's view of it. The last time he comes to the city it seems "overripe" and decaying, the freshness of summer declining into the "weedy refuse of the dog-days" (118). By the time Nick is completely disillusioned with the East, the impending harshness of a cruel winter is in the air, in stark contrast to his idyllic memories of childhood winters in the West. The West subscribes to an idea of order: Gatsby's boyhood schedule, Nick's determined resolution to tidy up his love affairs. Therefore the carelessness of the East makes him feel displaced; and he longs for the solidity of his staid Middle West, where at least the old virtues still flourish. Nick's last look at the place which once seemed so promising reveals it as a random series of meaningless details, "distorted beyond [his] eyes' power of correction" (178).

Before he leaves he recalls a time when the East *was* the West,

and the Dutch sailors came there, seeking a new future, hoping to build a new country. They were the first of a new wave moving constantly farther west, finally running out of land and dreams. Nick conjures up their paradisaical vision and ponders the implications of its not being realized. They had rediscovered the garden, "the green breast" (182) of the new world, and sought a union with that female image of the earth to produce the ideal culture. Coming after that dream was lost, Gatsby sees "a green light" on the edge of the water, but the woman it symbolizes is incommensurate with "his capacity for wonder" (182). He fails because they failed, because they built an imperfect model which he has had to use as a construct for his own desires. He comes East, against the current, trying to recapture the dream that is permanently behind him, spatially and temporally. The current constantly pulling him into the past makes escape from that past impossible. The "orgiastic future" is merely a repetition of it and both future and past ultimately elude their pursuers. The old ironic myths of the fall become the new stories of human failure. Gatsby's power to dream, and Nick's ability to comprehend, visualize, and recreate that dream, affirm the imagination's central role in overcoming the effects of that failure. The first person narrator imagines a world where "even Gatsby could happen" (69), and the reader agrees to believe in him.

Footnotes: Chapter Four

¹Robert Scholes and Robert Kellogg, *The Nature of Narrative* (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 1966), p. 261.

²*Nature of Narrative*, p. 261.

³F. Scott Fitzgerald, *The Great Gatsby* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1925). All future references are to this edition. Page numbers are included in the text.

⁴Cf. John F. Callahan, *The Illusions of a Nation* (Urbana: Univ. of Illinois Press, 1972), p. 52: "Finally, Nick Carraway, individual, is not our concern. Our focus must be historical"; p. 61: "In *The Great Gatsby*, Fitzgerald would have us regard Carraway's absolute finalities and closed prophecies with Yeats' 'cold eye.'"

⁵Wallace Stevens, "Like Decorations in a Nigger Cemetery," *The Collected Poems of . . .* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1954), p. 150.

⁶Andrew Marvell, "The Garden," in *Collected Poems* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard Univ. Press, 1952), p. 51.

⁷In an epilogue to his book on innocence, tragedy, and tradition in nineteenth century American fiction, *The American Adam* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1955), p. 197, R. W. B. Lewis notes: "In *The Great Gatsby*, the Adamic anecdote retains a singular purity of outline; the young hero, follows the traditional career from bright expectancy to the destruction which, in American literature, has been its perennial reward."

⁸Oscar Wilde, "Pen, Pencil, and Poison," in *The Complete Works of . . .* (London: Collins, 1948), p. 995.

⁹W. H. Auden, "Many Happy Returns," in *The Collected Poems of . . .* (New York: Random House, 1945), p. 84.

¹⁰The director of the recent movie version of *The Great Gatsby* committed an egregious error in allowing Gatsby to borrow some of Nick's lines. Even Gatsby admits his inability to articulate his feelings: "'I can't—when I try to—'" (93), he says when he tries to explain his wonder at finally realizing his dream.

¹¹See the section in *The Nature of Narrative* for definitions of "eyewitness" and other terms relating to first person narration, pp. 256-65.

¹²*Nature of Narrative*, p. 261.

¹³Northrop Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism* (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1957), p. 54, p. 54.

¹⁴Frye, *Anatomy*, p. 59.

¹⁵Susanne Langer, *Feeling and Form* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1953), p. 333.

¹⁶Northrop Frye, *Fools of Time* (Toronto: Univ. of Toronto Press, 1967, p.

Chapter Five: *The Catcher in the Rye*: "I wish you could've
been there"

Thirty years go by, and the decay implied in *The Great Gatsby* produces the world of Holden Caulfield. In *The Catcher in the Rye*, innocence is the timeless world of the child. Holden's expectations involve the dream that he will somehow recover this world, but he is trapped in experience, the adult world that refuses to become the pastoral idyll he wants it to be. Holden's confrontation with insensitivity and death in the fallen world results in despair, recurrent attacks of which adumbrate his final mental and emotional collapse. Although innocence once lost is irrecoverable, some kind of higher innocence is implied by the potentially therapeutic effects of communication, not with the ignorant psychiatrist who asks irrelevant questions, but with the innocent reader who listens. Holden's role as narrator is prepared for by the events he describes: the goal of his quest is to find somebody to talk to. As the lunatic who can no longer cope with the "sane" world, and as the lover of all things and people that are a part of the innocence he wants to recover, Holden fails to realize the dream he is searching for. As the "poet" who writes the spiritual autobiography describing that failure, he succeeds in creating a vital link with an audience. Holden's reliance on that audience firmly locates the story in the thematic mode. His identification with the ironic victim in the literature he reads and the nature of his own plight suggest the ironic mode as the story's other context. Irony suggests some external significance, something that makes the work of art typical of the human situation as a whole. Holden's story implies man's obligation to re-imagine the spiritual and religious significance of his own existence

in order to overcome the desecration of the spirit that threatens to make the world a wasteland.

In *The Catcher in the Rye*, innocence is wistfully relived, re-created by a retrospective musing about the irreconcilable difference between things as they once were and things as they are. The private and solitary world of the child in D. B.'s "The Secret Goldfish" embodies the essential qualities of the innocent vision. The boy's refusal to share his secret exemplifies the inviolable aspect of the child's self-created world. For Holden, the story is doubly significant because D. B. has compromised his own innocence by adapting an individual talent to the demands of mass culture. He has shared his secret. Every child Holden meets recalls for him the potent magic of the secrecy. As an adult, he realizes that he is now an intruder in the play world of the innocent; therefore he always understands the child's desire to exclude him and thus maintain an essential solitude.

Holden's innocence is defined in the visions he creates as potential means of escape from the antipathetic world of the adult. As in *Great Expectations* and *The Great Gatsby*, the external symbol of this world is the inhuman and impersonal city man has built to conduct his business. Holden's impassioned plea to Sally Hayes invokes a pastoral existence as a plausible alternative to life in the city. His words and the moment itself create a passion for the scene his imagination conjures up, but his manic insistence on recovering innocence by escaping the world blinds him to the hopeless inadequacy of the perishable breath to which he intends to wed this particular vision. Because the

dream cannot be shared, he will take pains to ensure the essential solitude of the innocent by becoming a deaf mute, and finding seclusion in self-imposed loneliness. (So often in the story it is language, the debased and meaningless dialect of the tribe, which repels Holden.) The would-be hermit's ideal retreat is a cabin: "right near the woods but not right *in* them, because I'd want it to be sunny as hell all the time" (199).¹ But the naive definition of uninterrupted bliss is quickly dismissed as an impossible dream. Holden "can't ever find a place that's nice and peaceful, because there isn't any" (204).

The search for such a place is an attempt to recover something from a past which, as Gatsby learns, is irrecoverable. Holden repeatedly considers phoning Jane Gallagher but does not, intuitively realizing that their relationship is a symbol of something permanently lost to him. His remembered intimacy with her is more than physical, uncomplicated by the sexual desires that continually confuse, change, and frustrate him. Before that desire becomes incomprehensible and uncontrollable, the innocent paradise can be shared. The unaggressive aspect of innocent love is symbolized by Jane's preference for leaving her kings on the back row in their checker games. Aesthetic contemplation (she just likes looking at them), and Holden's understanding response to her need for it, supplant conquest.² The game can be played by one's own rules.

Intruders who threaten the untainted innocence of this particular union are potential destroyers viewed with horror; things rank and gross in pristine nature possess it merely. The suspected illicit interest of Jane's stepfather anticipates the more tangible and frighten-

ing (even if Holden only imagines it) assault by Stradlater. The former provokes Jane's tears and Holden's desperate but ineffectual attempt to comfort her (later re-enacted with Holden as sufferer and Phoebe as helpless onlooker). The latter is the direct cause of Holden's odyssey, and a distressing mirror image for him of his own desires for others. Holden's revulsion at the prospect of the destruction of his most cherished and secret world is further compounded by his antipathy towards the "experienced" phonies who would steal it from him. Stradlater's repulsive, egotistical self-esteem makes him typical of the other conceited, insensitive slobs Holden encounters.

The conflicts occasioned by his inability to understand sexual desire, together with time's indifference to the individual's attempt to live in a timeless world, force the innocent Holden into the world of experience. (The same causes play a similar role in initiating the very different but equally innocent John Dowell.) Although critical caution prescribes restraint lest adolescent phenomena be overloaded with exaggerated significance, Holden's dilemma in that world *is* an attempt to effect a union between the physical and the spiritual, the two qualities which in the innocent world are one. He has great expectations for regaining the harmonious, peaceful security of the realm where fragmented selves are made whole again, and lost souls reunited with innocent bodies. But first he must find some order in the spiritual chaos caused by his quest for answers in the adult world. Part of his confusion is caused by the fact that Holden, unlike Dowell, can not discriminate between temporary sexual desire and love. The ~~conf-~~

complexities involved will hardly submit to the "sex rules" (63) Holden formulates, but his naïveté is infinitely preferable to the portentous clichés of Dr. Thurmer about life as a game to be played according to society's rules. No metaphor runs on all four feet, as Coleridge rightly says, and Holden sees the one-footed inadequacy of Thurmer's soon enough: "Some game. If you get on the side where all the hot-shots are, then it's a game, all right—I'll admit that. But if you get on the *other* side, where there aren't any hot-shots, then what's a game about it? Nothing. No game" (8).

Holden ends up playing against everybody, while he tries to discover some rules of his own. The phonies he encounters do offer him some guidance as examples of what to avoid. In the world of experience, private fantasies and preoccupations are grotesquely telescoped in one public display: the college man describes an attempted suicide while feeling up his girl friend under the table. Those who pretend to know the answers Holden seeks are actually deluding themselves. The facile pontificating of someone like Luce is hardly applicable to genuine problems. On being informed that Luce prefers Eastern philosophy because it defines sex as "'a physical and a spiritual experience,'" Holden beautifully deflates a pompous pose: "'So do I regard it as a wuddayacallit—a physical and spiritual experience and all. I really do. But it depends on who the hell I'm doing it with'" (146). What he regards as perverted sex, the "*very* crumby stuff" (62) he can imagine doing with some girl, makes him as uneasy as Mr. Antolini's "flitty pass." His extreme reaction to Antolini is proof of his own profound

sexual anxieties. One of his solutions involves wreaking terrible violence on the pervert who he imagines has written "Fuck you" on the school wall. "I'd smash his head on the stone steps till he was good and goddam dead and bloody" (201). The self-proclaimed pacifist is so torn up inside he can no longer see the obvious: some ignorant child is responsible for the graffiti and words, by themselves, cannot corrupt.³

The disintegrating, increasingly unreal world of experience is made coherent by a single metaphor that conveys its more important manifestations: "the performance." For example, Stradlater uses an "Abraham Lincoln, sincere voice" (49) to complement his carefully maintained "year-book" good looks in order to seduce his women. The professional performer epitomizes the same traits, because conceit, snobbery and phoniness inevitably accompany the desire to impress an audience. Ernie, the piano player, "*sounds* like the kind of guy that wouldn't talk to you unless you're a big shot" (80). But even more importantly, his phony image hides a genuine talent which is disguised by an absurdly ornate performance. His humble bow mimics genuine humility; the showy ornamentation usurps difficult simplicity. The audience, unable to discriminate between the real and the false, encourages such excesses and forces the true performer into permanent solitude, playing in a closet so that his sense of what is genuine remains uncorrupted.

Holden, the very self-conscious story teller, is exempt from such criticism because he is unconscious of his own ability. In contrast, Olivier's Hamlet fails for Holden because "if any actor's really

good, you can always tell he *knows* he's good, and that spoils it" (117). But the problem is even more complicated. Holden admires the genuineness of the human gesture (Hamlet's patting the dog on the head) which only the good actor can convey. And when the stage performance becomes too lifelike because the actors are too good, "too much like people talking and interrupting each other" (126), it fails because "reality" has been introduced where it doesn't belong.⁴ The only performance that succeeds is the one that successfully combines life and art. When Holden melodramatizes himself he is attempting to effect that combination, hoping that he is playing to an audience capable of making the subtle discriminations between the real and the false that any performance requires. Otherwise, the performer thrives on the ignorant adulation of the audience and becomes as phony as the mindless mob who admires him. Between the acts, the mob congregates in the lobby of the theatres, where its affected modish world-weariness perpetuates the performance that represents a fundamental loss of self.

Bad movies are a combination of the worst aspects of both performer and spectator: the slick sentimentality of cliché escapist romance and the spurious response of an audience that sheds tears but lacks compassion. But as vehicles for wish-fulfillment, the movies permit the emotionally maimed Holden to conceal his real injury by imagining himself as the wounded victim in a gangster movie. Significantly, he chooses two moments for his impersonation that both represent some kind of nadir for him: the fight with Maurice and the attempt at drunken oblivion in the bar. Holden's performances are solitary pleas for

consolation expressed in the only kind of terms capable of evoking any sympathy. The imagination supplies a temporary escape. The heroic victim always gets the girl, in the movies.

The performances Holden sees are a metaphor for all that is false and hollow in the world of experience. He has great expectations for escaping this world and replacing it with an ideal one. When these are confounded by his experience, Holden is left with nothing but "despair," the third stage of the protagonist's four-part journey. This despair is manifest in the moments just discussed, in which Holden uses a desperate ploy to escape the horrors he is faced with. Because despair is the inverse of innocence, Holden's innocent vision of a beneficent world becomes a horrified revulsion for a world that is too much with him. The innocent feels the magic of the ordinary thing or event, and sees the "illumination of the commonplace."⁵ Despair obscures that kind of vision and replaces it with a violent distaste for the commonplace. A shouted "Good Luck," laughter in the streets late at night, the reminiscences and advice of a breathless old alumnus searching for his initials on the door of a wash room—these are the stuff bad dreams are made of.

The nightmarish vision is always associated with despair: Pip's delirium and terrifying dreams; Dowell's "horrible pictures of gloom and half lights, and emotions running through silent nights"; Nick's [horrible] dream vision of the night scene by El Greco; Humbert's grotesque and distorted dreams of Quilty once the realization of his own dream has, as he puts it, "overshot its mark—and plunged into a n

nightmare"; Hermann's revulsion for the dead self he sees in the eyeless portrait of his dreams.⁶ In *The Catcher in the Rye*, unconscious fears of the nightmare world of darkness and alienation are disguised by Holden's humour: "' I think I'm going blind,'" he says. "'Mother darling, everything's getting so *dark* in here. [. . .] give me your *hand*. Why won't you give me your *hand*?" (21) This blackness actually arrives when he can no longer see the light brought to him by Phoebe (Phoebus). When he contemplates physical violence against her he has hit rock bottom, the depths of despair, and, as Mr. Antolini predicts, he does not know it.

Holden hopes that the realization of his ideal will rescue him from this despair. By becoming the Catcher in the Rye he proposes to save himself (and the children) from the madness and violence of the world. But higher innocence is not achieved by attempting to stop time and escape the world of experience, the "vital, arrogant, fatal, dominant X" that must be a part of the world man imagines.⁷ Holden imagines a field full of fair folk—archetypal, innocent children—ignorant of the danger awaiting them should they stray. There he will be the only adult allowed, performing his role as saviour without an audience of admirers and thus saved from any phony notions of self-importance. The "crazy cliff" at the edge of the field is the dark abyss of absurdity and madness which one man is willing to confront so that the flock he shepherds will not have to. But Holden cannot escape despair by escaping to an imaginary world, nor can he save others from facing it. The "crazy cliff" is within him: "the mind, mind has mountains; cliffs

of fall/ Frightful, sheer, no-man-fathomed."⁸ Holden must fathom these and thus "admit the void; accept loss forever."⁹ Otherwise he is using his imagination to escape the world, "to shrink from the weight of primary noon" he must reconcile himself to.¹⁰

He admits the void and achieves higher innocence by using his imagination to re-create the story that incorporates his vision of despair and death in the "real" world, the world that remains resolutely "unreal" until the human imagination animates it. Holden sings "of human unsuccess/ In a rapture of distress," the song he learns from meeting one unconcerned, uncomplicated child singing "Coming Through the Rye" just "for the hell of it" (115). Burns' poem continues: "If a body kiss a body/ Need the world ken?"¹¹ The world does not have to know about one man's attempt to find love, as long as another man is willing to listen to the story of his failure.

Like Dowell and Nick, Holden is never really explicit about how the story itself finally transcends even the events it contains, how the gaiety of the artist that transfigures all that dread is ultimately all-important. This recognition must be left to Nabokov's creators. But Holden does resemble Humbert and Hermann as another fragmented self, the lunatic, lover, and poet making up the three parts of his psyche. By convincing the world of his inability to cope, and himself of the impossibility of existence in a world where innocence is impossible, the lunatic ends up in a sanatorium. The lover is temporarily freed by a child's love from his quest for someone who is capable of compassion: Phoebe is the only one willing to listen, but she must grow up

and lose her innocence before she really understands Holden's dilemma. The poet establishes an ideal compact with a sympathetic listener. Having searched the world of experience for someone to share his vision, he writes it out and at last has someone to talk to.

And *The Catcher in the Rye* seems spoken, informed by the rhythm of actual speech, narrated by someone sensitive to the nuances of oral communication. (In contrast, *Gatsby* seems "written," the carefully crafted account of a practiced spectator.) As a self-confessed "terrific liar" (16), Holden has acquired an expertise in story telling. But his motive for telling lies is sometimes exemplary. What seems like just playful prevarication with Mrs. Morrow on the train is actually the saving lie that prevents needless suffering.

You take a guy like Morrow that's always snapping their towel at people's asses—really trying to *hurt* somebody with it—they don't just stay a rat while they're a kid. They stay a rat their whole life. But I'll bet, after all the crap I shot, Mrs. Morrow'll keep thinking of him now as this very shy, modest guy that wouldn't let us nominate him for president. She might. You can't tell. (57)

Holden's search for someone who will alleviate his own suffering is only temporarily successful. His encounters with all innocents—nuns or children—are only brief respites for "the loneliest character in literature." The pattern of Holden's frustrated attempts to communicate culminates with Mr. Antolini. Because he is a classic example of the world's failure to understand the needs of the born story teller,

their encounter merits detailed consideration.

Antolini refuses to let Holden tell his story because he is intent upon giving his own self-conscious performance, saying at one point, "'I may not word this as memorably as I'd like to'" (187). The unbridgeable gap between them is immediately apparent in their respective attitudes to the story teller's inalienable right to digress. For Holden, digression merely signifies the impossibility of completely unifying or simplifying anything. Even more importantly, digression implies that a speaker, in contrast to the owners of the bored snobby voices at the theatre, is genuinely involved with what he's talking about. Holden's attitude differs markedly from the one expressed by the pedantic clichés of his old mentor, who sagely notes: "there's a time and a place for everything" (184). More seriously, Antolini wrongly diagnoses Holden's problem by catching at a ready-made phrase which is hopelessly inappropriate: "'The mark of the immature man is that he wants to die nobly for a cause, while the mark of the mature man is that he wants to live humbly for one'" (188). A glib epigram will hardly assist him in comprehending the reasons for his depression. What cause does Holden want to die nobly for? Nor will he end up hating people who say "between he and I," as Antolini surmises, since Holden himself talks like that. But the worst thing Antolini can possibly tell Holden to palliate his emotional distress is: "'you're not the first person who was ever confused and frightened, and even sickened by human behaviour. You're by no means alone on that score'" (189). This is a particularly insensitive evasion, an attempt to deny the actual pain of a single human being by universa-

lizing and de-personalizing him. Learning to see oneself as a cog in some vast and inexorable historic machine is to adopt the despairing view of human potential. (Pip, Dowell, or Gatsby would hardly be comforted by sentiments like Antolini's.) In his final absurdity, he compares the human mind to a kind of clothes rack on which one fits appropriate ideas, trying on only those that are "becoming." For the reader, this permanently destroys whatever credibility Antolini once had. Holden's defenceless and weary state prevents him from seeing through the vapid banalities of yet another poseur.

Madness is all that is left for the frustrated lover who has no one to talk to. Holden chooses to identify with the lunatic in the bible, whose self-inflicted wounds are Holden's own spiritual lacerations. Christ casts out the devils of that madman, but His name is now taken in vain, invoked by people like Ossenburger the undertaker who worships while he drives his car, "shifting into first gear and asking Jesus to send him a few more stiff's" (17).¹² The lunatic can pretend he is Christ, but by doing so he uses the imagination to escape and evade. Only the poet can discover the kingdom of god within himself:

For Christ plays in ten thousand places
 Lovely in limbs, and lovely in eyes not his
 To the father through the features of men's faces.¹³

This truth is comprehensible only to the creative imagination, man's only god-like power. When the first person narrator realizes that this power allows him to create a timeless world in the story he tells, he abandons the attempt to create that world in the one he lives in and

directs his energies to accomplish what one man can do by articulating what all men cannot.

The third section of this chapter is devoted to the characteristics that locate Holden's story in the thematic mode. In his search for an auditor, Holden suggests the possibility of monologue becoming dialogue by imagining and rejecting possible responses from an audience: "If there's one thing I hate, it's the movies. Don't even mention them to me" (2). Such remarks establish for his story a context of "direct address," a relationship with the reader that, in the thematic mode, "cuts across the story, and which may increase until there is no story at all apart from what the poet is conveying to his reader."¹⁴ As Frye points out, moods of "protest, complaint, ridicule, and loneliness" characterize the mode. It would be difficult to find four words that better describe the content of Holden's story. Frye also places in the thematic mode "the poem of exile, the lay of the *Widsith* or wayfarer," in which "a rejected lover, or a nomadic satirist, normally contrasts the worlds of memory and experience." The world of memory in *The Catcher in the Rye* is that of lost innocence and lost love; the world of experience is that in which he tries to find these. His attempt to make the reader see both is a substitute for the ideal relationship between author and audience Holden wistfully alludes to when describing Phoebe on the carrousel: he says, "God, I wish you could've been there" (213).

The reader can "be there" if he shares Holden's perspective and if the story takes the structure an ironic age dictates, all others being somehow inappropriate. The escapist absurdities of the comedy he watches

at the movies are a trivialization of the comic form. That form contains the progress of a young man towards a moment of self-knowledge. Holden's final realization while watching Phoebe resembles such a moment. Seeing her grab for the brass ring, he knows that the danger he wants to protect the child from is unavoidable. And, like Humbert, he learns that the child's world is inviolable. But the apparent lack of any meaningful community in Holden's world makes impossible the formation of a new and vital society which coalesces around the protagonist in comedy.¹⁵ Instead, Holden dismantles the pretences of an old and dead society.

His response to a play like *Romeo and Juliet* suggests the exclusion of tragedy as a mode for expressing the fall of modern man. He identifies with Mercutio, the man who, like Holden, talks of dreams, "the children of an idle brain,/ Begot of nothing but vain fantasy."¹⁶ But when the wit and the dreamer involves himself and his fantasies in the conflicts of another world, he becomes, like Gatsby, an "accidental burden" there. Holden's view of Mercutio as a random victim, sacrificed for the mistakes of the tragic principals, comes from the heart of an ironic vision. For Holden, tragic greatness is only an heroic pose. He identifies with the Hamlet who is a troubled fellow sufferer, the "sad screwed-up type guy" (117), rather than the Renaissance prince who is the "glass of fashion and the mold of form."¹⁷

Holden's sympathy for Hardy's Eustacia Vye is an empathetic recognition of a victim of life's ironic design as well as an admiring response to a passionate, willful, vital woman. Death claims Eustacia;

Holden confronts death in his attempt to discern the nature of the dark powers which control his world and threaten his life. Allie's death, a grotesque incursion of the macabre into the world of the innocent, is the single event that has turned his world into chaos. As in *Great Expectations*, *The Good Soldier*, and *The Great Gatsby*, the inexplicable capriciousness of some superior power arbitrarily assigns men their cruel and unjust destinies. Holden rejects the chance to cheat that power by committing suicide, because even jumping out a window is a gesture that attracts an audience: "I didn't want a bunch of stupid rubbernecks looking at me when I was all gory" (104). Asked to come up with one thing he likes, Holden thinks of James Castle's suicide, but the act of suicide itself becomes less appealing when he remembers its grotesque result.

"In irony, as distinct from tragedy, the wheel of time completely encloses the action."¹⁸ The museum offers an illusory respite from the turning of this wheel, because Holden sees the museum as life permanently captured in glass cases and as a fixed point in a changing world. He cannot enjoy it as he once did because the world is now too much with him. Only when he guides the two children through the museum does it come alive for him. The timeless world of romance, a "reflective, idyllic view of experience," survives behind the glass.¹⁹ On the outside, irony inverts the image and starts the clock ticking. And the vision of Phoebe, going round and round in the same place, caught for a moment in time and space, recalls the timeless ideal Holden cannot recover.

The child, singing as he walks beside the curb, is oblivious to the world of time and change; the man, stepping off the curb, is beset

by fears of permanent oblivion, conveyed by the images of nothingness that reflect the world in the ironic mode: "I had this feeling that I'd never get to the other side of the street. I thought I'd just go down, down, down, and nobody'd ever see me again" (197). He goes on to plead with Allie, who is a part of Holden which has already died, to save him. He begs for life because death is not an escape. Even in the cemetery he would just be "surrounded by dead guys" (155) who are visited by the kind of phonies who run to their cars as soon as it starts to rain. The natural world remains aloof, omnipotent and indifferent: "the sun only comes out when it feels like coming out" (156); the fish are left frozen in the lake. Imitating nature, man learns ironic indifference. The mystery of the ducks in Central Park remains unsolved, but Holden knows no human agency has acted to save them. When all men learn compassion, the ice on those ponds will melt from the heat humanity generates and irony, the mythos of winter, will succumb to comedy, the mythos of spring.

This will be a divine comedy only if revitalized Christianity saves man by restoring meaning to the rituals he has let die: "Jesus probably would've puked" (137) if he had seen Christmas at Radio City. In *Gatsby*, the link between one man's fall and the failure of the American dream supplies the implications for humanity that irony's incompleteness requires. The religious allusions in *The Catcher in the Rye* serve a similar function. Christ as Love is replaced by the cliques who pretend to believe in his forgiveness, while they piously consign the uninitiated to hell. Thus society institutionalizes its own desires for revenge on the outcast and the alienated. Holden is certain that "Jesus never

sent old Judas to Hell," although "any one of the *Disciples* would've sent him to Hell and all—and fast, too" (100). Just how Christ is to wield his power and what objects he will choose to make the world whole will depend on the genuineness of man's desire to recreate him. But Holden's Christ will return to destroy the self-centredness and idolatry that separates man from himself. D. H. Lawrence, the twentieth century prophet of the apocalypse, describes the spectacle of such a second coming:

But this time, it would no longer be the fight of self-sacrifice that would end in crucifixion. This time it would be a freed man fighting to shelter the rose of life from being trampled on by the pigs. This time, if Satan attempted temptation in the wilderness, the Risen Lord would answer: Satan, your silly temptations no longer tempt me. Luckily, I have died to that sort of self-importance and self-conceit. But let me tell you something, old man! Your name's Satan, isn't it? And your name is Mammon? You are the selfish hog that's got hold of all the world, aren't you? Well, look here, my boy, I'm going to take it all from you, so don't worry. The world and the power and the riches thereof, I'm going to take them all from you, Satan or Mammon or whatever your name is. Because you don't know how to use them. The earth is the Lord's, and the fulness thereof, and it's going to be.²⁰

Footnotes: Chapter Five

¹J. D. Salinger, *The Catcher in the Rye* (New York: Bantam Books, 1951). All future references are to this edition. Page numbers are included in the text.

²Cf. Carl Strauch, "Kings in the Back Row: Meaning Through Structure, A Reading of Salinger's *The Catcher in the Rye*," *Wisconsin Studies in Contemporary Literature*, II (Winter 1961), p. 23: "Jane Gallagher's kings in the back row symbolize [. . .] the impotence of Holden's secret world, for kings should range freely over the checkerboard."

³As an example of the hysterical accusations produced by trying to ascertain Salinger's attitude at this juncture, see: Brian Way, "'Franny and Zooey' and J. D. Salinger," *New Left Review* (May-June 1962), p. 80: "Salinger is out of touch with the way children actually react to obscenity; they accept it either with complete matter-of-factness, or with a delighted relish for the forbidden. The one thing they don't do is worry about it. Salinger is not at all in control of his material here. [. . .] by this point in the novel, he is completely submerged in Holden Caulfield and no longer preserving that necessary detachment from his main character." If Salinger must be dragged in, why identify him with a character who is in the middle of an emotional collapse?

⁴See Northrop Frye, *The Educated Imagination* (Toronto: Canadian Broadcasting Corporation, 1963), pp. 36-37: "when literature gets too probable, too much like life, some self-defeating process, some mysterious law of diminishing returns, seems to set in [. . .] Whatever is completely lifelike in literature is a bit of a laboratory specimen there. To bring anything really to life in literature we can't be lifelike: we have to be literature-like."

⁵Theodore Roszak, "The Centres of Consensus: Reconnaissance of the Next Reality," Public Lecture at University of British Columbia, January 30, 1975.

⁶*The Good Soldier* (New York: Vintage Books, 1927), p. 201; *Lolita* (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1955), p. 141.

⁷Wallace Stevens, "The Motive for Metaphor," in *The Collected Poems of . . .* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1954), p. 100.

⁸Gerard Manley Hopkins, "(No Worst, There is None)," in *The Poems of . . .*, 4th ed. (London: Oxford Univ. Press, 1970), p. 100.

⁹N. O. Brown, *Love's Body* (Toronto: Vintage Books, 1966), p. 260.

¹⁰Stevens, "The Motive for Metaphor," p. 288.

¹¹"Coming Through the Rye," in *The Poetical Works of Robert Burns* (London: Oxford Univ. Press, 1904), p. 483.

¹²Luke 8. 27-39, *The Holy Bible* (Cleveland: World Publishing, n.d.).

¹³Hopkins, "(As Kingfishers Catch Fire)," *Poems*, p. 90.

¹⁴Northrop Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism* (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1957), p. 52, p. 54, p. 57.

¹⁵Frye, *Anatomy*, p. 163.

¹⁶William Shakespeare, *Romeo and Juliet*, in *The Complete Works*, ed. G. B. Harrison (New York: Harcourt, Brace, and World, 1948), 1. 5. 97-98.

¹⁷*Hamlet*, 3. 2. 161.

¹⁸Frye, *Anatomy*, p. 214.

¹⁹Frye, *Anatomy*, p. 202.

²⁰"The Risen Lord," in *The Later D. H. Lawrence* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1959), p. 393.

Chapter Six: *Lolita*: "A Maniac's Masterpiece"

The essential innocence of the artist/dreamer/madman and his vision; the great expectations he has for realizing his dream in the blend of mirage and reality that constitutes his world of experience; the hellish despair that attends his inability to establish and maintain an existence in the world he wants to live in and in the one he is confined to; the imagined redemption of higher innocence, eternal bliss becoming a concomitant of aesthetic rather than religious contemplation—all these are concerns of a self-conscious narrator who is alternately lunatic, lover, and poet in *Lolita*. Life is explicitly conceived in terms of the art of the creator who shapes it. In *Great Expectations*, Pip must take responsibility for living his own life. Humbert claims responsibility for the *creation* of his life, *Lolita*, and *Lolita*. Looking retrospectively at that life, he carefully re-creates it so that the reader can share what Humbert experiences by perceiving the aesthetic patterns he uses to represent it. For example, recalling the moment when he learns Quilty's identity, Humbert observes: "Quietly the fusion took place and everything fell into order, into the pattern of branches that I have woven throughout this memoir with the express purpose of having the ripe fruit fall at the right moment" (274).¹ The narrator is explicitly concerned with the conscious creation of a work of art, and repeatedly talks to the audience about the implications of his role as creator, and its role as one of his creatures. His ironic perspective arranges the clues to the mysteries which so baffle him during the events he experiences and seem so transparently clear to him on reflection. To re-create himself as ironic victim, he invents his

own nemesis, McFate, to embody the inscrutable machinations of a malevolent power.

Humbert's innocence is established by his conjunction with Annabel Leigh, *Lolita's* precursor, the incarnation of innocence, and the envy of the "misinformed, simple, noble-winged seraphs" (11). In contrast to *The Catcher in the Rye*, sexual desire in *Lolita* is an integral component of the "private universe" that Humbert inhabits with his first love. By existing unconsummated, desire symbolizes the tantalizingly open-ended, unrealized promise of a timeless, perfect bliss and an innocent, uncomplicated dream world. Love here in the "whitewashed cosmos" is the blend of the "spiritual and the physical" which Holden seeks. When death abruptly steals Annabel, Humbert's desire is permanently arrested. His creative powers enable him to rediscover the innocence he has lost by reincarnating it in another. From his "princedom by the sea" (11) he sails to an "intangible island of entranced time" (19) populated only by nymphets. The by now familiar desire of the dreamer to make time stand still is given a new twist: time, in a spatial metaphor, becomes an area bound by the ages of nine and fourteen, filled with nymphets who are forever young, ironically replenished by demonic seraphs.

Humbert assists them by being one of the few perceptive enough to comprehend the existence of such magic and forbidden regions. His great expectations involve the desire to possess one of the denizens of this enchanted world that his imagination has helped to create. To do this he must, like Gatsby, commit his unutterable vision to another's

perishable breath. But Humbert will avoid the fatal consequences of such an act if he creates the human figure that is to embody the dream. Enter Lolita, whom he has "willed into being" (115); he is always "'with Lolita' as a woman is 'with child'" (109). He proposes to divide her up into two people so that he can enjoy only the one for which he is responsible: "another, fanciful Lolita—perhaps, more real than Lolita; overlapping, encasing her; floating between me and her, and having no will, no consciousness—indeed, no life of her own" (64). In this way he hopes to maintain the innocence and purity of the child, while enjoying the untainted bliss of surreptitious encounters. But the imagination cannot maintain artificial divisions between real and imagined worlds. Only a dreamer would suppose that it can. The poet learns that the nymphet has no timeless ethereal counterpart that can be excerpted from her body. She is a blend of innocence and experience, "tender dreamy childishness" and "eerie vulgarity" (46). Humbert's task as narrator is to differentiate between the two, "to sort out the portion of hell and the portion of heaven in that strange, awful, maddening world—nymphet love" (137).

Initially, it is all heaven: Humbert is alone with his Eve, his Eden being reproduced right down to the red apple he snatches from her, just prior to tasting the fruit of the tree of carnal knowledge.² While the consummation of their union approaches he enters "a plane of being where nothing else mattered," a state of "absolute security, confidence, and reliance not found elsewhere in conscious life" (62). Innocence is still isolation in the private universe sexual pleasure

creates. An artistic ability enables him to prolong indefinitely his moment on "the brink of that voluptuous abyss" (the good lover must be the consummate artist) and to reproduce that suspension in a 159-word sentence which imitates the delayed action. Orgasm is exquisite release into a world where Lolita is safe, Humbert is satisfied, and innocence is enjoyed in the bliss of clandestine delight.

To contrast this with the description of the next orgasm is to understand the inevitable course Humbert's sexual experience must take. At their next sexual encounter Lolita is not only fully aware, but also the instigator, introducing him to "a brand new, mad new dream world, where everything was permissible" (135). Here the paradisaal imagery survives in the form of the snake as tempter, engaged in the violence and horror which is soon to foul Humbert's heaven: "a choking snake sheathing whole the flayed trunk of a shoat" (136) is one of the images Humbert chooses to depict his introduction to the world of experience and its attendant terrors. Similarly, a tiger pursues a bird of paradise in his imagined re-creation of the scene. The ascendance of evil denotes Humbert's dawning awareness of the inevitable consequences and moral implications of loving a nymphet, whose demoniac qualities imperil those who are seduced by her charm. Lolita is more than an incarnation of innocent Annabel. A "haggard angel" visits Adam in Paradise warning him that "the body of some immortal daemon disguised as a female child" (141) will attempt to seduce him, but he does not listen. The boy who discusses solipsism with Annabel becomes the man who attempts to solipsize Lolita, forgetting that she is too much of this world—

its crassness, its vulgarity, its evil—to become a permanent embodiment of an unearthly vision.

In time, she gradually becomes aware of her extraordinary power, which places the helpless victim all the more hopelessly in thrall. Following her first conquest of him, Lolita abandons her role as seductress and plays the innocent victim: she is learning new roles in a world where the false performance is a metaphor for experience. Humbert's greatest expectations have been satisfied, but "the realization of a lifelong dream had surpassed all expectation [. . .] overshot its mark—and plunged into a nightmare" (142). Pip is condemned to the mundane horrors of ordinary existence once his great expectations are lost; Dowell, his ideal world destroyed, submits to the tedium of a humdrum existence, "horribly alone"; Gatsby's world, unanimated by his imagination once his dream has died, is a "scarcely created" world of shadows and sham forms; Holden, unable to realize his ideal vision, shares Gatsby's (and Nick's) disgust for the conventional and the commonplace. Humbert also finds himself in the depressing world of things as they are once his dream is somehow lost while his greatest expectations are being realized. "With the ebb of lust, an ashen sense of awfulness, abetted by the realistic drabness of a gray neuralgic day, crept over me" (139).

Nymphet love is heaven and hell because the desire it engenders yearns for and receives blissful consummation, but once that desire is satisfied the appalling implications of the deed itself must be endured. Humbert must then remake the bed he has lain in, because it resembles

the site of "an ex-convict's saturnalia with a couple of fat whores" (140). But then he must lie in it again, because the tenderness his shame produces inevitably turns to lust. Physical satiation is impossible; therefore, it must never be attempted at all. The dreamer can never successfully make the dream manifest. Only the imagination can supply glorious rapture untainted by taboo because the world of experience is a world of the consequences that exist in a temporal continuum. The lover succeeds only as a poet and the spectator becomes a voyeur. Watching what he imagines is a half-naked nymphet, Humbert summarizes his predicament:

There was in the fiery phantasm a perfection which made my wild delight also perfect, just because the vision was out of reach, with no possibility of attainment to spoil it by the awareness of an appended taboo; indeed, it may well be that the very attraction immaturity has for me lies not so much in the limpidity of pure young forbidden fairy child beauty as in the security of a situation where infinite perfections fill the gap between the little given and the great promised—the great rosegray never-to-be-had. (266)

The end of the first half of Humbert's story is marked by Lolita's sexual conquest. Then he consciously, gently, grades his story "into an expression of the continuous risk and dread" (170) that leads to his final and permanent despair. The heartless cruelty of an adored child and the insupportable burden of unrequited love are the primary causes of Humbert's inescapable nightmare. Just as Lolita grows inside him as his creation, so the knowledge that she will inevitably leave him

unutterably alone slowly develops unacknowledged within him, until it actually surfaces as an "atrocious, unbelievable, unbearable [. . .] eternal horror" (171). Because his bliss is beyond happiness, his anguish is beyond despair. Seeing how much his nymphet has aged and coarsened, Humbert tries to pretend he can recover his innocence by ceasing to love that which is tainted by time and returning to the "island of entranced time" (19) to find another innocent nymphet. But like Gatsby, who is charmed by the siren's song of Daisy's voice, Humbert abandons his dream for the object that makes it superfluous, and is a slave to his own creation.

Life imitates art: Humbert is the poet in Dolly's dell, trapped by the irresistible weaver of spells. In Quilty's play, Lolita supplies an escape from the past for her captors and relegates that past to the world of dream; in Humbert's, she leads her creator from the safe world of dream into the grotesque world of nightmare reality. Quilty's play is called *The Enchanted Hunters*; Humbert's begins in a hotel of the same name. Even as Lolita's captive, he is still a solitary in a world of "total evil," because he is confined to only one kind of intercourse with her. The final cause of his despair is his exclusion from her mind, which he imagines as still innocent just because it is unpolluted by his presence: "a garden and a twilight, and a palace gate—dim and adorable regions [. . .] absolutely forbidden to me" (286). The innocent love that begins as a spiritual and physical blend now resembles unrequited lust, because the dream-Lolita is dead. Once she leaves him forever, though his pederosis lingers, "one essential vision" (259)

withers within him and he loses hope of ever recovering the enchanted gardens—Annabel's and Lolita's—where he finds his innocence, or his role as enchanted hunter where he loses it.

But higher innocence exists for the creator who can make his doomed love timeless by writing it out of himself. Humbert's despair will be eternal unless he can somehow save his soul, his professed reason for writing *Lolita* and presenting his case to an unseen jury. Because his fate is inextricably bound up with Lolita's (she is his soul, as he asserts in the first line of the book), he must ensure her immortality if he hopes to secure his own. His ultimate creation is an attempt to reassemble the pieces of a spirit which has been destroyed by the "soul-shattering" (19) charm of the nymphet. In his penultimate creation, the occasional poem he writes for Quilty's execution, Humbert claims an "essential innocence" (302), a naïveté that allows him to be tricked by the worldly wise. He imagines that Quilty, in connivance with Lolita, has cheated him of an earthly redemption; but Humbert has done that himself, by committing his timeless vision to the world of time. Yet he does it because he has no choice. After all, he loves her: "You may jeer at me, and threaten to clear the court, but until I am gagged and half-throttled, I will shout my poor truth. I insist the world know how much I loved my Lolita" (280). If he convinces the reader of this, he will have achieved the redemption that accompanies the cathartic and palliative effects of "articulate art" (285).

As first person narrator, "Jean-Jacques Humbert" (126) makes his Confession. He uses this and other names to convey the various roles

he must play. Three of these are finally indivisible because, as Humbert says: "You have to be an artist and a madman" (19), as well as lover, to identify a nymphet and crave identity with one. The imagination that organizes the vision of each member of the trio becomes more important than the world it tries to remake. The lunatic is the frustrated lover who retires to the sanatoria that shield him from the anguish of the sane world. (The example of the psychiatrists who diagnose Humbert's case should alert the reader to the dangers of assuming a condescending attitude to Humbert and thus being fooled by the clues he plants to dupe the unwary.) The poet is the frustrated lover who retires to the comparatively sane and orderly world of art to make a credible case for his genuine love. The sexual deviant is the creation of the psychiatrist whom society, because it is perpetuated by "the routine rhythm which shakes the world" (20), appoints as its judge. But the artist defies conventional legal and moral strictures and demands a sympathetic hearing from an audience who will listen to the whole story without categorizing and dehumanizing the teller with convenient labels. Humbert, lurking like an enchanted hunter about to close with his prey on that first night alone with Lolita, is neither criminal nor deviant: "The gentle and dreamy regions through which I crept were the patrimonies of poets—not crime's prowling ground" (133).

In *Great Expectations*, Pip's progress is reflected in the lives of a series of characters who serve as variations on a theme; Dowell declares that Edward Ashburnham is "just [him]self"; Nick and Gatsby form two halves of a divided protagonist. In *Lolita*, the curious

doubling quality recurs in the form of Clare Quilty, whom Humbert chooses as a symbol for all the evil in the world and murders in an attempt to purge that world. To put it another way, Humbert's identity is clarified by the contrast with his fellow artist.

Humbert and Quilty first meet in the parking lot of the Enchanted Hunters, Quilty backing out his car, Humbert pulling into the place he vacates. (In their sexual endeavours with Lolita these roles are exchanged.) Their most extraordinary encounter occurs the same night, when grotesque hallucination and frightening reality combine in their conversation on the porch of the hotel:

"Where the devil did you get her?"

"I beg your pardon?"

"I said: the weather is getting better."

"Seems so."

"Who's the lassie?"

"My daughter."

"You lie—she's not."

"I beg your pardon?"

"I said: July was hot. Where's her mother?"

"Dead." (129)

Drinking from a flask (*à la* Humbert), Quilty is simultaneously a suspicious interrogator, an invention of Humbert's paranoid persecution mania, and an actual manifestation of his own guilty conscience. But, most horribly, he is suddenly transformed by the flame that illumines him into "a very old man," perhaps a vision of the devil himself who arranges the repeated coincidence and nightmarish encounters that char-

acterize Humbert's world. Subsequently, in a twist Humbert says is too fantastic for even a lunatic to believe, Quilty becomes "another Humbert" (219), shadowing his quarry with a patient perseverance. The space between the two men becomes a symbol for the demonic and aesthetic parallels of their two lives, "a zone of evil mirth and magic, a zone whose very precision and stability had a glass-like virtue that was almost artistic" (221). Quilty is alternately brother, cousin, uncle, a "verbal phantom" (253), an "old nightmare" (304), a mischievous shadow hiding in the obscure clues and derisive mocks of the names in hotel registers. He even presides over the play's last scene in his final role, the stage director who artfully organizes his own murder as an "ingenious play" (307) staged for Humbert's benefit.

Yet herein lies the crucial distinction between the two men. Quilty's productions are third-rate, sordidly real and unappealing because uninspired by the gentle magic of Humbert's exotic and erotic visions. Humbert assists him in this last play, and descends to Quilty's level in a reprehensible performance as actor because the play is not his own. Quilty's preoccupation with the macabre and grotesque in life, and the saccharine and platitudinous in art, ensures him approval from a society which shares his tastes. The trite message of his other play is "mirage and reality merge in love" (203); the theme of his life is the aimlessness and squalor that inevitably accompany a quest for the satiation of a goatish lust. Conversely, for Humbert, "sex is but the ancilla of art" (261), a necessary adjunct to something larger and more significant. Temporal lust is only a part of undying love. Mundane

reality is just a necessary component of the world the artist imagines. He exists in a realm apart from this reality: therefore, Humbert, the Poet, is exempt from culpability for his crime since "Poets never kill" (90). Like Conrad's Jim, who cannot be judged and condemned by the "facts" of his case alone, Humbert cannot be blithely dismissed as just a murderer and an "example of moral leprosy."³ After all, he refuses to kill Charlotte, even when the perfection of the crime appeals to his aesthetic sensibility. The pure artist, like Hermann in *Despair*, has no such scruples, of course. But Humbert will not murder to attain his dream, though he does consent to rid the world of a bad imitation of himself, after the dream has died. That death is the real evil he must obliterate.

"In matters of grave importance, style, not sincerity, is the vital thing."⁴ Humbert would ascribe to the truth of this dictum, having cultivated the "fancy prose style" (11) of a murderer in order to describe the "grave" series of events he is involved in. "Well-read Humbert" (72) acquires his sense of style by dedicating himself to his art. He is the most erudite of a series of narrators who are all well-versed in literature. And it is this knowledge that qualifies them to write about their experiences, not the experiences themselves. The imagination's power to recreate is more important than actual experience in the physical world. As D. B. points out to Allie in *The Catcher in the Rye*, Emily Dickinson is a better war poet than Rupert Brooke. The poet, according to Auden, is someone who plays with words. Humbert qualifies, because for him the puns and the prose are everything: "Oh,

my Lolita, I have only words to play with!" (34) He plays with "Humbert," "Lolita," and "Quilty": imaginative language, with all its felicities, is expended on his most important creations. The "Swines" and "Swoons" who populate the environs of Humbert's story are bit players and thus deserving of the insignificance their mock names consign them to; "Coalmount" and "Gray Star" are faded names for an ashen reality that is obscured by the intensity of Humbert's imagined, nameless paradise.

Humbert's Wildean preoccupation with puns and witticisms enables him to mock as narrator the most horrible despair that Humbert the actor endures. And word games are just one of the games Humbert and his people play.⁵ Even Lolita, "so cruel and crafty in everyday life" (234), surrenders to the joys of tennis, a game she plays with "unworldly innocence" and exquisite style, having learned from a mentor who is "especially susceptible to the magic of games" (235). As a game-player, Humbert can perceive the pattern and symmetry that escape his less aesthetically gifted opponent. As a spectator, watching Lolita, he enjoys a temporary respite from the hostile world where games are played for keeps. But language offers a permanent refuge from this world because words swallow it whole and re-create it in another realm. The story articulated is more important than the events it articulates. Words retain their potent magic while everything else disintegrates. Standing at Lolita's door waiting to murder her husband he thinks: "*Personne. Je resonance. Repersonne.* From what depth this re-nonsense?" (271) This kind of verbal play masks a real absurdity, the meaninglessness of a life without

Lolita, the loneliness that comes when Humbert goes on a search for his own soul, knocks on the door, and no one answers.⁶

Humbert's unsuccessful quest is the story of his life. In one sense that life is a preparation for the book that records it. Because he sees things with "the stark lucidity of a future recollection" (88), events take shape according to the way he will remember them. He even develops a theory of time in which the mind is "conscious not only of matter but also of itself" (262), the ideal instrument for the self-conscious narrator who can simultaneously act, record the act by watching himself, and watch himself recording the act. Humbert actually claims to be only a "conscientious recorder" (74). Such self-deprecation recalls Dowell's insistence that his artful digressions are included only because that is the way a man-telling a true story would tell it, and Hermann's claim that his memory, not he, writes the story.

One of the reasons for such modesty is that in the thematic mode the narrator regards his task as a co-operative enterprise in which the reader plays a participatory role. Thus Humbert arranges things so that the reader can share his moment of recognition by experiencing its aesthetic counterpart. His pathetic pleas for an impartial and sympathetic response are directly related to his distress concerning the limitations of what he can do. As artist, he needs the reader, particularly when, as actor, he has his mind on other things. About to essay the delights of Lolita he pleads with what he imagines is an exasperated reader: "Imagine me; I shall not exist if you do not imagine me; try to discern the doe in me, trembling in the forest of my own iniquity; let's even

smile a little" (131).

But the life-sustaining bond between himself and the reader becomes less certain as Humbert approaches the end of his story. The audience whom he constantly apostrophizes are exalted at the outset as "winged gentlemen of the jury" (127). But Humbert, intensely jealous of sharing his intimacies with Lolita, soon regards his readers as a group of lascivious pederasts, eagerly awaiting the graphic details of lurid sexual exploits. At the end he is ambivalent, announcing, "*finis*, my friends, *finis*, my fiends" (271). The reader is a fiend because he is the indirect cause of all the pain Humbert re-experiences by reliving the events. As a friend, the reader plays along with the word games, sympathizes with the anguish, and in this way helps Humbert to create a world where "aesthetic bliss, that is a sense of being somehow, somewhere connected with other states of being where art (curiosity, tenderness, kindness, ecstasy) is the norm."⁷

This bliss is not the norm in the world he lives in because it is peopled by those who are dedicated to the cheap, the vulgar, and the inconsequential. At the heart of the comic vision is a society renewed by its own vitality, a human manifestation of the life-giving rhythm of the cosmos.⁸ But in *Lolita*, the moribund state of the stock characters and their mundane life stories make the world a pale imitation of a reality that the imagination makes real. As long as the world society values is pre-eminent over the one the artist creates, he must ridicule and reject it. The protagonist learns the truth about himself but leaves society to find its own redemption. The comic mode does not

fit, and neither does Humbert: driving down the wrong side of the road he is blissfully, insanely, temporarily at peace. Even if society pardons this and his more serious transgressions, it will never accept him. To be a dandy of the imagination is an unpardonable sin. Those guilty of it are destined to die alone: "Society often forgives the criminal; it never forgives the dreamer."⁹

The dreamer cannot make the world of the romance viable either. Annabel, Humbert's first girl in his first garden is not reborn, and perpetuated in Lolita, because the fall of the garden world into time ensures its decay (even when its inhabitants try to lock time out, as Miss Havisham does in her ruined and decayed house). The aging Humbert can never successfully capture the magic of the child's world. His beloved falls in love with the monster her would-be hero tries to rescue her from. The American wilds can never be the fields of Arcady. The last vision Humbert evokes confirms his permanent exclusion from the world of the romance. He recalls standing on a precipice and hearing below him "the melody of children at play [. . .] majestic and minute, remote and magically near, frankly and divinely enigmatic" (310). The striking similarities with Holden Caulfield's romantic vision of innocence are instructive. Here, another version of his "crazy cliff" separates the adult from the mysterious world of the child. Just as Holden refuses to intercede with Phoebe on the carousel, Humbert recognizes the inviolable quality of the innocent's world in its ideal form. No matter how tender, the adult must be an intruder there. The imagined scene is made manifest by its sound, a divine harmony

transmuting the harsh discords which actually constitute it. (By writing *Lolita* Humbert performs the same function.) Here Humbert's imagination, which has already shown him the depths of hell, takes him to heaven: "Such harmony is in immortal souls,/ But whilst this muddy vesture of decay/ Doth grossly close it in, we cannot hear it."¹⁰ Humbert then returns for a short time to the mud and the discords that give his story its ironic form and content.

Irony undercuts the tragic implications of *Lolita* as well. Tragedy assigns the protagonist to a world of causation, where he accepts the consequences of an initial act and recognizes "the determined shape of a life he has created for himself."¹¹ This certainly describes Humbert's plight, but "an implicit comparison with the uncreated potential life he has forsaken" that should characterize tragedy reveals a void in which Humbert is condemned to the madness of a life without love and *Lolita*. In a tragedy, fate "normally becomes external to the hero only *after* the tragic process has been set going." In the ironic mode, McFate is ubiquitous and omnipresent from the beginning. Tragedy suggests the cosmic implications of a human act, but Humbert is not at all sure that his theft of *Lolita*'s childhood has any permanent significance at all, and "if in the infinite run it does not matter a jot" then "life is a joke" (285). John Ray's "tragic tale" with a "moral apotheosis" becomes an ironic look at the imminence of the absurd.¹²

Irony is immanent, too, embodied in *Lolita* by Aubrey McFate, the "rival devil or influential god" (127) who manipulates Humbert's life. If McFate is merely another of his inventions, the name he gives to the

outward manifestation of his own fatalism, then Humbert does have free will; and, though he chooses not to exercise it, from his ironic perspective he can readily conjure up different possibilities: the "retrospective imagination feeds the analytic faculty with boundless alternatives" (15). But if Lolita is a "fatal consequence" of Annabel, and the encounter with her has fatal consequences for Humbert, then perhaps he does live in a "wrought-iron world of criss-cross cause and effect" (23), arranged by McFate so that Humbert enjoys the illusion of freedom and the jokes McFate plays on him before finally succumbing, an ironic victim of a superior power, to the destiny that was his all along.

The reader is a potential victim of Humbert's irony. Should he eagerly analyze the implanted Freudian symbolism, or invent a moral that neatly resolves the dilemmas the story presents, he limits his own perspective and makes himself ridiculous. Still, his task should be simpler than Humbert's, since divining a past destiny is much easier than discerning a "destiny in the making". (213). Patterns of coincidence, the creation of either Humbert's retrospective imagination, McFate's sense of humour, or some higher, nameless power, are an example of the kind of puzzles confronting both Humbert and the reader. For example: Quilty writes a play called *The Lady Who Loved Lightning*. Quilty revisits Humbert in an hallucination during a lightning storm. An electric storm interferes with the "modest off-stage thunder" during the performance of *The Enchanted Hunters*. In order to avoid being a victim of McFate's sardonic sense of humour the reader must tread carefully here. Clearly, lightning and various kinds of illusion are

repeatedly associated together. Perhaps Lolita, who says at one point, "I am not a lady and do not like lightning," is wrong for both Quilty's plays, his film, and his life.¹³ She does have a crucial part in Humbert's play, *The Murdered Playwright*. Another association with lightning—Humbert's mother was killed by a lightning bolt—hints at some mock-Freudian unconscious first event which he consciously ridicules. Is lightning the "Jovian fireworks" (219) of some supreme creator who dazzles and destroys his victims with nightmare visions and death? Humbert records events and juxtaposes images but, as ironist, leaves the reader to decide on the significance of the pattern himself. One lover of illusion who might possibly shed some light on the subject is a friend of Vivian Darkbloom (Quilty's co-author). In the first person novel, he is unavailable for comment.

Humbert, after articulating so much, remains silent too. Afflicted with the heart disease that affects so many of the protagonists under consideration, and gifted with the ability to overcome the pain it causes, he goes to a hereafter that "may be an eternal state of excruciating insanity" (299), having created his own artifice of eternity and immortalized his Lolita in it.

Footnotes: Chapter Six

¹Vladimir Nabokov, *Lolita* (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1955). All future references are to this edition. All page numbers are included in the text. Compare Humbert's interest in the aesthetic correlative with Hermann's in *Despair* (New York: Capricorn Books, 1965), p. 170: "here I am, as you see, twisting and turning and being garrulous about matters [. . .] *then*, i.e. at the precise hour at which the hands of my story have stopped, I had stopped too; was dallying, as I am dallying now."

²Compare this with the scene in which a different knowledge produces a different kind of golden peace after Humbert lets "the ripe fruit fall" (274).

³John Ray, Jr., "Foreword" to *Lolita*, p. 7.

⁴Oscar Wilde, *The Importance of Being Earnest in The Complete Works of . . .* (London: Collins, 1948), p. 371.

⁵Cf. *Despair*, p. 56: "I liked, as I like still, to make words look self-conscious and foolish, to bind them by the mock marriage of a pun, to turn them inside out, to come upon them unawares. What is this jest in majesty? This ass in passion?"

⁶Cf. Bernard's crucial moment, Virginia Woolf, *The Waves* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1931), p. 285: "A man without a self, I said. A heavy body leaning on a gate. A dead man. With dispassionate despair, with entire disillusionment I surveyed the dust dance."

⁷Vladimir Nabokov, "Afterword" to *Lolita*, p. 316.

⁸See Susanne Langer's definition of comedy in *Feeling and Form* (New York: Charles Scribner's Son, 1953), pp. 326-50.

⁹Oscar Wilde, *The Wit and Humor of . . .* (New York: Dover Publications, 1952), p. 199.

¹⁰William Shakespeare, *The Merchant of Venice*, ed. G. B. Harrison, *Shakespeare: The Complete Works* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1948), 5. 1. 63-65.

¹¹Northrop Frye. *Anatomy of Criticism* (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1957) p. 212, p. 212, p. 210.

¹²John Ray, Jr., "Foreword," p. 7.

¹³ Alfred Appel, Jr. "Lolita: The Springboard of Parody," in ed. L. S. Dembo, *Nabokov: The Man and His Work* (Madison: Univ. of Wisconsin Press, 1967), describes Lolita's remark as "involved cross-reference which reveals a capacity for organization and order that is completely beyond the possibilities of Humbert's alleged unrevised 'first draft' manuscript, which has supposedly been composed furiously over a period of less than two months." Carl Proffer, *Keys to Lolita* (Bloomington: Indiana Univ. Press, 1968), easily refutes this by noting that Lolita's remark establishes her collusion with Quilty, because when she makes it she is in the process of leading Humbert to Wace, where Quilty's play is to be performed. Lolita is slyly mocking Humbert's ignorance, and he is doing what he promises here, giving the reader the clues that Humbert himself should have understood but didn't.

The solemn catalogue of detailed refutations of critical predecessors is perhaps the most dreary feature of contemporary criticism, but I propose to indulge in it here because Mr. Appel, one of Nabokov's best-known critics, outlines in his "*Lolita: The Springboard to Parody*," a view of *Lolita* so diametrically opposed to my own in so many fundamental ways that I am obliged to defend my own contentions by questioning his. To start with a seemingly minor detail: "Quilty names his play *The Enchanted Hunters*, adopts an anagram [sic], Ted Hunter, as one of his many pseudonyms, and the married Lolita ends up living in a house on Hunter Road. These coincidences serve a twofold purpose: they at once point to the authorial consciousness that has plotted them, and they can be imagined as coordinates situated in time and space, marking the labyrinth from which a character cannot escape." This is pretentious nonsense. Quilty's sense of humour accounts for the pseudonym. Humbert's consciousness supplies "Hunter Road." Just prior to visiting it he tries 10 Killer Street, and says "I am not going very far for my pseudonyms" (250). But this is just one small detail in Appel's attempt to turn Humbert into a puppet in a magic show presided over by Nabokov.

"Nabokov breaks the circuit of reader-character identification one associates with the conventional novel." The novelist is a "puppeteer in charge of everything," an "authorial consciousness which eventually takes over the novel altogether, involuting it, denying it any reality except that of 'book.'" Appel's view produces some curious revelations. Humbert's assignation of mock identities to the insignificant people around him ("Swines," "Swoons," etc.) becomes evidence of Nabokov's verbal patterning (?). "Maeterlinck-Schmetterling" (German for butterfly) becomes the most important phrase in the complex and long chapter describing Quilty's execution (Appel quotes Nabokov himself to this effect), because Nabokov is a lepidopterist and has planted allusions to butterflies throughout the book. More important than Humbert's poem? than Quilty's death throes? Humbert's plea to the reader, "Imagine me," becomes an attempt to draw the reader into the "vortex of parody."

Because "Nabokov regards with profound skepticism the possibilities of autobiographical revelation," only the "hapless literal-minded reader may embrace [Humbert's ms.] as the most 'sincere' form of self-portraiture." Does "sincere" mean "accurate" here? Is Humbert being insincere? All the "worst propensities of the diarist are embodied in Humbert's rhetoric, parodying the First Person Singular's almost inevitable solipsism and most tendentious assumptions about Self." Appel cites no evidence for this particular claim, but if it is true, does it make Humbert's view of himself insignificant? Who is in a better position to judge what he does? Are the necessary limitations of a single point of view to preclude the possibility of any view at all?

Mr. Appel assures us that if readers will play the games dictated by parody they will be released from worrying about whether Nabokov approves or disapproves of his characters. Can one decline the game and still not worry? He quotes John Shade and blithely assumes that Shade speaks for his creator when he says "Pity is the password." Appel goes on to describe the reader's sympathetic response to Humbert, in a blatant contradiction of his "Parody breaks the reader-character definition" remark. He claims that Humbert "acknowledges guilt in oblique and unexpected ways." See *Lolita*, pp. 285-89, for the most straightforward kind of ruthless, accurate self-condemnation, exactly what we expect from someone who has no reason for deluding himself any longer.

Finally, Appel cautions the reader to be wary of overtly confessional passages because Nabokov parodies the reader's expectations by giving Humbert the parody of a confession. We are to believe in Humbert's love and guilt despite what he says, because Nabokov has parodied "the literary confession that would offer a strident and rhetorical expression [sic] of egotism as a revelation of the soul and has succeeded in suggesting the deepest reaches of that soul." Then he takes the incredibly moving, totally persuasive moment when Humbert pleads for his love and his life ("you may jeer at me, and threaten to clear the court [. . .]") and jeers, hearing echoes of Billy Graham and an ambivalent tone. His ability to respond has so atrophied that he has become a parody of a critic, warily watching out for authorial parodies lest he be fooled into taking anything too seriously. Surely this dehumanized response to Humbert's plea is the most monstrous kind of pedantry. Let us assume the existence of a "pre-critical" response, our experience of literature, and a "critical" response in which we relate everything we've read to everything else we know. (The terms used here are borrowed from Northrop Frye's *The Educated Imagination* [Toronto: CBC, 1963], p. 44.) Appel has hopelessly confused the two, and revealed in his own reaction to *Lolita* an attitude that makes the first kind of response impossible and the second ridiculous.

Do we read *Lolita* to find out about Humbert and his world, his loves, hates, fears, and human fallibility, giving him initial credit for creating them, and Nabokov final credit for creating a creator and his story? Or do we tiptoe through the butterfly allusions, emerging at the end saying, "Look! We have come through—unmoved, unenlightened, but secure in the knowledge that we were never made the victims of authorial parody"?

(One last petty point: "the Hegelian synthesis linking two dead women" (309) that Humbert refers to when his car leaves the road and rides up a grassy slope, does NOT link Charlotte and Lolita, as Mr. Appel claims. It links Charlotte and Humbert's mother, who was killed by a lightning bolt while on a picnic.)

Chapter Seven: *Despair*: "Portrait of the Artist in a Mirror"

To finish a long undertaking is often to feel, like Hermann, despair:

How I long to convince you! And I will, I will convince you!
I will force you all, you rogues, to believe . . . though I
am afraid that words alone, owing to their special nature, are
unable to convey [. . .] (26)¹

Words trail off; the artist cannot be sure that the vision has been successfully communicated; the performer curses his audience for his own inability to make them see. But Hermann's final belief is to believe in his own story, his *Despair*, because it justifies and makes sense of his life. He cannot lose faith in the vision because outside it is *nothing*. The rottenness at the core of Dowell's society, the wasteland in the middle of Nick's, the frozen pond at the heart of Holden's, the decay at the center of Humbert's, these are exposed and escaped by the articulated vision of a possible world that redeems the impossible world in which they live. Hermann's external world is as unsympathetic and insensitive as his predecessors', because it consists of a jeering populace antipathetic to art and the artist. And he provides that populace—his audience—with ammunition by creating one flawed work of art. He writes *Despair* to explain the failure of his first work of art, his perfect crime, to transform "human unsuccess" by singing or writing of it in "a rapture of distress." The heroic effort to perceive an aesthetic symmetry in the raw material of reality is bound to be unsuccessful. Ideal love and ideal doubles are impossible figments of the imagination. The lover and the lunatic fail in their attempts to make their ideals permanent. The poet succeeds, because he uses that failure as a means to create a verbal

re-presentation of the vision. He admits that he lives in an imperfect paradise; he acknowledges the limitations of the language. But "words are everything else in the world," and with them, the narrator tells his story.²

Because the self-conscious narrator always takes his acting self seriously, his despair is genuine. *To him*, his redemption through art seems an uncertain salvation. He still exists in a world where, having moved from innocence to despair, the self is subject to a power that plots the ineluctable course it must follow. As actor in a world of unavoidable consequence he is doomed to failure. He fails because he tries to stop time by wedding the timeless perfection of his innocent vision as lunatic or lover to the perishable breath of a creature who, as a member of the real rather than the imagined world, is not his own creation: "He who runs against time has an antagonist not subject to casualties."³ But as a spectator of the world he acts in, and as narrator of events that take place in that world, he removes himself from one temporal sequence and replaces it with his own by dictating the order in which events follow one another. The helpless victim in the hands of a superior power becomes that power. He now holds the lives of everyone, including himself, in his own hands.

He writes his story to save his life: Dowell, who learns to see through the surface that disguises an abyss, writes to get the memory of what he has seen out of his head; Nick immortalizes Gatsby by reporting his cause aright to the unsatisfied, the people of a culture too blind to realize its own potential for greatness; Holden, oppressed

by the fragmentary and superficial nature of a world that exists in time, tells his story to save his own sanity; Humbert, seeing the impossibility of an ideal love in the world of evil he creates (and destroys by killing his Quilty-conscience), writes his testament to that love in order to save his soul; Hermann, who epitomizes a culmination of the movement towards total dedication to the aesthetic artifact, sees how the ignorant world will misunderstand his first attempt at a work of art and so writes another to save himself from artistic oblivion.

The innocence of the child, an article of faith in *Great Expectations*, becomes a convenient fiction in *Despair*. Hermann creates his own childhood in the lies he tells Felix, Lydia, and the reader. The garden in the Paradise Lost he describes to Felix contains a distinctly un-innocent child, "squelching [] caterpillars that looked like twigs" (93). This garden vanishes as quickly as it is conjured up, but Hermann plans to recover it by building a new garden on "a bit of land on the edge of a lake" (93), the paradise he will regain when Cain murders Abel. The innocence Hermann creates by the stories he tells is a falsehood, an exercise in literary convention. But when his last story begins he *is* innocent in exactly the same way Nick Carroway is. Climbing the hill towards his encounter with Felix, Hermann's "absolutely empty" mind is "comparable to some translucid vessel doomed to receive contents as yet unknown" (18). The innocent always begins with an open mind and a receptive attitude to the world around him which, because he *is* innocent, he assumes is beneficent. But Hermann subtly introduces another dimension to the innocent's world by noting the fatality of whatever circum-

stances beset him. Being "doomed" by a single event to a certain course of action exempts the individual from responsibility for what follows. Hermann is just responding passively to what is pre-ordained.

The perfection of the mirror image he discovers in the face of a tramp suggests the possibility of executing a perfect design. If his own unconscious desire has actually put that perfection there, he is ignorant of it. The artist sees what he wants to see. He takes his cue from fate and supplies a plan for the extraordinary quirk of nature he encounters. Innocence becomes the perfect work of art (in this case that most elusive of successes, the perfect crime), unarticulated, unrealized, Platonic: an ideal existing independently of the world of things and before the artist even knows of its existence. Before the design is actually set in motion Hermann imagines Felix is a corpse. Because the future is indivisible from the present in the timeless world of innocence and art, Felix *is* a corpse, and Hermann, whose heart misses a beat as a sympathetic gesture, is unconsciously anticipating events. The vision gradually becomes clearer: he will realize the artist in himself by performing a triple miracle: plot and execute the perfect crime, witness and record his own death, shed an old soul and acquire a new one. In short, he will give to his own life, and life in general, the miraculous unity of a work of art.

Hermann's decision to act on the marvel presented to him commits him to another plane of existence. He is pricked by the desire to be the greatest artist, a victim of expectations which proceed from the circumstances life presents him with. Pip dreams of being a gentleman,

ignorant of the corruption of the society he aspires to join; Dowell envisions life as an endless minuet to the rhythm of which society keeps time outside time; Gatsby commits his dream to the gold and the "golden girl" that symbolizes the culture's ideals; Holden sees the corruption but dreams of escaping it by reversing time's flow; Humbert tries to build a dream world in the middle of the real, forgetting that anything is possible only in the imagined world; Hermann, the pure artist, tries to make the real conform to his own notions of its aesthetic potential. People refuse to function simply as symbols in the artist's design; nonetheless, he insists on his dream and becomes himself the symbol of one man's imaginative ability to extend the boundaries of human endeavour by realizing the perfect bliss the dream promises.

The act of murder itself commits an unutterable dream to sordid reality, but Hermann structures his plan so that the act that makes the private vision public is just "a link in the chain, one detail, one line in the book, [. . .] logically derived from all previous matter" (132). (Note the recurrence of the chain as an image for how events form unavoidable patterns.) Hermann expects that his meticulous planning will assure him of success in committing the perfect crime. He aspires to be the consummate composite criminal genius: a Conan Doyle who creates the crime according to time-honoured convention, a Sherlock Holmes who deduces the cause and effect of an awesome mystery, a Moriarty who finally confounds his pursuers with his genius. Previous criminals and crime novelists are "blundering fools" (132) compared to him.

Great expectations tempt the protagonist to a delusory self-

apotheosis. He succumbs to temptation and concocts the most elaborate plans and patterns, but things go wrong: Pip's grand schemes are confounded by a ghost from the past; the rituals of Dowell's society disintegrate to reveal the horrors they disguise; Gatsby's goal-directed life is destroyed when its object is revealed to be not gold but gilded; Holden's ideal communion with the world of the child is sabotaged by time and death; Humbert's plans for a different version of the same thing are undone by the contrary desires of the child. Some inherent flaw in the designs of all the protagonists leads to despair, isolation, absurdity, and death. Hermann is no exception. By making the dream public, he destroys it. The errors and misprints in the published work are pounced on by a world of unsympathetic critics who cavil the minor inconsistencies of the attempted masterpiece, while they ignore the magnificence of the artist's conception. They refuse to see as the artist sees and spoil his debut. But more importantly, he momentarily breaks faith with his own vision, and sees himself as they do. The artist himself has blundered. By overlooking the stick in the car he ensures his capture, reveals his fallibility, and plunges into despair: "I fell to doubting everything, doubting essentials, and I understood that what little life still lay before me would be solely devoted to a futile struggle against that doubt; and I smiled the smile of the condemned and in a blunt pencil that screamed with pain wrote swiftly and boldly on the first page of my work: 'Despair'; no need to look for a better title" (213).

At one point Lydia's mystery novel becomes transposed in Hermann's

mind with his own creation. Its two pieces are finally fitted back together and the mystery is revealed to everyone, in keeping with the demands of the conventions of the genre. Hermann falls short in his attempt to escape the rules governing the crime novel, and the pitfalls of his criminal predecessors. It is not just Felix's failure to impersonate him that spoils the performance. Even the greatest criminal always leaves a clue at the scene of the crime.⁴

The imperfections of the first masterpiece require a second to explain them: despair begets *Despair*. The artist imposes a more flexible aesthetic order on intractable reality. The narrator, like his predecessors, tells the story to save himself and describe how a dream goes wrong. The wisdom acquired in the world of experience enables him to write out his *Despair*. The innocence that is just a convenient fiction for Hermann is transposed into the higher innocence that accompanies the creation of an aesthetic artifact, the life-sustaining illusion of a victory over time and death.

As first person narrator Hermann is really a cause for critical despair. As lunatic he is the lover, Narcissus entranced by the possibilities of the mirror image he sees in the "stagnant pool" (182) of reality. Reeling through the house of mirrors Hermann erects for his reflections, the reader finds I's and eyes, minus I's and minus eyes, pools, mirrors, doubles, splits, actors, spectators. The "poet" makes all these into a coherent story; the critic re-creates the illusory order reflected in his own transparent mirror.

Hermann refuses "to share the normal prejudice in favor of external

reality" and is labelled a lunatic, because he sees an aesthetic pattern and purpose where others see nothing.⁵ The madness Dowell sees around him is hidden beneath a surface of acceptable, decorous behavior; Holden's madness is a defense mechanism, the means by which Allie comes alive and the world goes away; Humbert's is the result of the inward ravages of impossible desire; Hermann's is the insanity of the pure artist, the dedicated genius. The reader who has sided with the self-conscious, self-isolating artist against society may rebel at the repulsiveness of Hermann's horrible acts, but he dismisses the insane logic of Hermann's attempt at his peril. The first-person narrator always sees things in relation to himself. Hermann is merely the example of the absolute introversion that represents the culmination of the tendency.

He is a divided self, and one part of him has taken up residence in another body. Felix usurps the body made for Hermann to make use of. All mirror images are a means by which the self facing them makes an aesthetic judgment about the face facing the glass. Felix, on the wrong side of the mirror, is of only incidental concern. Hermann goes through the looking glass and destroys the temporary owner of a soul he needs. Because Felix's life is actually a blemish distorting a natural marvel, the artist naturally does his best to effect the perfection nature suggests. "Nature has good intentions, of course, but, as Aristotle once said, she cannot carry them out."⁶

Hermann modestly assumes the artist's responsibility to take up where nature leaves off. In one sense, he is the easiest of all the protagonists to identify with because he is the most dedicated artist, the

most concerned with the nature of art itself. In his world, the difficult aesthetic judgment always supersedes the easy moral one. However sordid and grisly his career as actor, as artist he can only be responsible for some flaw in the design; its content is irrelevant. Quizzed at his trial about the morality of what he has done, he would quote the words of another great artist on trial for his life: "I cannot answer apart from art."⁷

As artist, Hermann must be judged by the standards of the world he wants to live in, the one he has created for himself. If the reader refuses to do this, he allies himself with Ardalions and authorities, who have their own distorted views of what genius perceives. (Figures as different as Clare Quilty and Dr. John Ray offer equally unpalatable judgments of Humbert's life.) When the sun touches up a scene with sanguine, when the moon is palmed by a cloud, when the wind gives things a sham life of their own, they are asserting the right of the eternal conjuror to toy with the deceptive possibilities of the apparitions inhabiting the world the artist lives in. Narcissus falls in love with one of these deceptions, believing that the image he sees is *in* nature when it is really only a reflection of nature. If its fictional nature is not discerned, the lover dies when he plunges into the water to embrace his beloved. The image dies as well, and nature awaits her next victim with a temporarily blank face. Hermann seeks to confound the natural scheme with his own: by killing the image, one self will be created from two. Death is the only way he can satisfy his artistic desire for perfection. Death's precision, clarity, and finality fix the image perma-

nently; life's uncertainty, obscurity, and transience make the image shimmer and waver on the surface of the pond. As artist, he is beyond reproach and remorse. He fails because he does not take into account the world's antipathy for the imagination's immortal conceptions. Hermann the actor, a cold-blooded murderer, is the means by which the artist carries out his designs.

The secret identity of this villain is revealed in the mirrors that frequent his life and his story. Hermann, the spectator, hates the sight of the actor in the mirror because he does not want to see the face of a murderer. His catoptricophobia is caused by the grotesque distortions of the two-dimensional image on a flat surface; certain "monsters among mirrors" (31) turn men into toads and bulls. Hermann hates these mirrors particularly because, by capturing and revealing man's essence, they tell the same kind of truth the artist tells when he creates an impression rather than xeroxes an exact facsimile. Hermann views man's animality with horror, because it is a crudity he cannot tolerate. The other reason he hates mirrors (he loathes even the word "mirror") is his fear that when he looks in the mirror he will see nothing. Having killed his image, he is terrified that it, and therefore he, will not be there.

Were he a painter, he could sketch portraits to illustrate the perfect symmetry the artist perceives. But he is a writer who has, like Humbert, only words to play with. His attempt to use them pictorially is an absurd failure: "Look, this is my nose [. . .]. And that is his nose, a perfect replica of mine" (26). The story teller

can paint a kind of verbal portrait, one of his projected titles being "Portrait of the Artist in a Mirror." The delicate ambiguity of this title invites the reader to see both the portrait and the artist in a mirror. If the image is done with a mirror, the "Portrait" itself is a translucent and reflective medium. If the picture itself contains an artist reflected in a mirror, it reveals Hermann the monster and, in the mirror, Hermann the artist who transcends the physical self. Ideally, if the artist is successful, he will have shed his old self, the monster/murderer and become Felix, "the happy one," because his transition to a new self has been accomplished.

But Hermann cannot escape the self he hates without killing himself. The lunatic's imagination creates a new self in a new body and successfully effects the transition. But the lunatic's success means the death of the first self, just as the lover only enjoys permanent union with the object of his adoration by diving into the pool. Only the poet's imagination successfully combines lunacy, love, life, and art; spectator, actor and artist. Hermann as first person narrator never tries to evade depicting the monster he has created. On the contrary, he describes him in all his horrible detail. The poet aspires to transfigure the "monstrous" world, not escape it: "The real is only the base. But it is the base":

That I may reduce the monster to
Myself, and then may be myself

In face of the monster, be more than part
Of it, more than the monstrous player of

One of its monstrous lutes, not be
Alone, but reduce the monster and be,

Two things, the two together as one,
And play of the monster and of myself.⁸

The audience can appreciate this combination. But Hermann cannot stand far enough back from the portrait to see all the lines come together. Or, rather, he is so adept at getting outside himself to take a look that he becomes an apparition to himself. The problems inherent in painting his own portrait are those of any artist who is his own subject. The lines of Hermann's drawing, like those of Ardalion's, "slip from under [the] pencil, slip and are gone" (50). Hermann cannot get back inside himself: he has been his own subject for so long that he becomes an object to himself. Finally he can only see a mask reflected in the mirror that watches, records, and reflects all events as they unfold: "the misty and, to all appearances, sick mirror, with a freakish slant, a streak of madness, a mirror that surely would have cracked at once had it chanced to reflect one genuine human countenance" (99).

The same mad mirror, by reflecting the past in the present, causes Hermann's repeated spatial and temporal dislocations. The notion of time as a continuum is subordinated to one that implies a cyclical series of repetitions. Another version of this *déjà vu* involves seeing the future in the present. (Both these notions recall *Great Expectations*.) The yellow post wears a "skullcap" of snow during the summer; Felix asleep seems distinctly corpse-like. Hermann's inability to separate his own past as narrator and his future as character accounts for some

of his confusion. When his story finally brings events up to date it becomes a diary, there being no plausible future to escape to. Time, rushing him towards a *cul de sac*, is escaped only by the artist. The great criminal lives on for centuries by reputation, but only because he is caught and identified. The great artist lives on in the self-portrait he draws of the face he sees in the mirror. His model in the external world is trapped by time but, because mirrors reverse the image they are presented with, the consummate portrait of the subject is reflected towards infinity in the series of mirrors that create it.

Deaths, mirrors, and doubles are all ideas Hermann realizes he should have examined more carefully: "minus x minus = plus. It struck me that perhaps Felix was a minus I, and that was a line of thought of quite astounding importance" (127). He imagines here the ideal equation, since, multiplied together, the two I's equal one positive I, and the minus I's have disappeared without a trace. However $I + -I = 0$: Hermann and Felix together make nothing. By losing himself in his negative self, Hermann is left a homeless soul at the end. He has pursued the course of the leaf that he watches merge with its double as it falls into the water. Narcissus does not recognize the real and perilous depths beneath the glassy surface. Hermann does not realize that a performer without a stage, an artist who consents to act out his most impossible dreams, is left with nothingness and death when the play is over. Furthermore, $I - -I = I + I$: the attempt to eliminate the false double, the negative image, fools nobody, and produces two distinct and different characters. Finally, $I/-I$ is still $-I$: the I negates itself by

identifying with the manifestation of its own destructive desires.

Dividing the I into author and actor separates its positive and negative aspects. As author, Hermann is exempt from responsibility for the events contained in the book because, as he repeatedly insists, his memory has written the book. As in *Great Expectations*, it catalogues a past that cannot be bent out of its eternal shape. For Pip, this quality of the past means he must take responsibility for his own life; for his very different modern counterpart, it provides a convenient escape. But it is Hermann's memory that finally undoes him, of course, revealing the complete failure of his first work of art by dutifully recording the existence of Felix's stick. The power responsible for creating the second work of art destroys the first. Hermann's memory compels him to tell all, and though he reserves the right to digress (as all story tellers must), he resists the temptation to evade: the death throes of Felix, like those of Quilty, are given in agonizing detail. He does admit to having various rhetorical alternatives at his disposal (he offers and comments on various ways to begin a chapter), worries about the spuriousness of Dostoevskian "thumb-screw conversations" (98), and ponders the conventionality of his diary-like entries ("March 31st. Night."): "Connoisseurs will appreciate that lovely, self-conscious, falsely significant "Night" (meaning readers to imagine the sleepless variety of literary persons, so pale, so attractive). But as a matter of fact it *is* night at present" (218).⁹ So all the literary devices are acknowledged but retained, because they are accurate reflections of what happens. The rhetorician's tricks are only trans-

parent and hackneyed when the narrator is as fictitious as the rest of the characters. Hermann insists on his own reality and the truth of what he tells.¹⁰

The grotesque and morbid aspects of this truth are suggested even by the handwriting of the man who writes the manuscript: "the scribble of a hunchback in a hurry" and "a suicide's hand, every letter a noose, every comma a trigger" (90). Significantly, before these and other hands combine in a chaotic "cacographic orgy" that suggests the fragmented quality of their owner, Hermann chooses the "absolutely impersonal" style of the "abstract hand in its superhuman cuff, which one finds figured on signposts" (90). Again the god-like pose makes the artist blameless and his creations sufficient to have stood though destined to fall into the design already made for them. Hermann's God erects a yellow post that marks the road to Hell.

But the narrator is responsible for telling *his* story and God is a fairy-tale invented by and for strangers. Hermann's destiny is not complicated by irrelevant world designs since it moves smoothly on its own, implying thereby that all is right with a world in which divine orders are man-made. For Hermann, the natural world, so stormy and chaotic when he is a man without a self, seems godlessly beneficent because it supplies the design which serves him so handsomely: "Why, what is this talk about trouble, when it is the harmony of mathematical symbols, the movement of planets, the hitchless working of natural laws which have a true bearing upon the subject?" (131)

But Hermann does not control those laws and enjoys a delusory

omnipotence in the world of abstractions he describes here. The crushing revelation that the god-like may be a mere mortal after all comes while Hermann rereads the story of the past he has designed, basking in the glow of life "twice irradiated by art" (212). Yet even just before he finds the flaw in it, Hermann is master of his own creation and thinks of the characters as existing only by his sufferance: "I held their lives in my hands" (212). He has this power as artist, but chooses to exercise it as actor. The consequences of insisting on all the privileges of the imagined world in the world he lives in makes him the doomed actor in and the reluctant author of, a book called *Despair*.

He plays both roles so well that his audience (of which he as self-conscious spectator is always the chief member) cannot always trace "a line down the middle where the halves of the picture have been joined" (26). Like Nick, and all the narrators who watch their own lives go by while they recall them, Hermann is the watcher in the darkening streets and the participant in scenes played behind translucent windows and in front of imperfect mirrors. What he sees leaves him alternately "enchanted and repelled by the inexhaustible variety of life," the magic of its designs, the horrors that follow their disintegration.¹¹

Hermann, characteristically, carries his desire to watch himself, to enjoy the thrill of being in two places at once, to the utmost extremes. He marks the culmination of the protagonist's desire to live in his own intensely imagined world, to transcend the physical, to make life a timeless, perfect work of art by the perpetual process of re-enactment and re-creation within the imagination, where anything (and

everything) goes in a perfect, because perpetual, present tense. Pip dreams of possessing Estella and the fortune represented by her star-like jewels: Dowell envisions society as the perfect dance, a minuet "dancing itself away into the furthest stars"; Gatsby reaches out his hand to the stars and his destiny. But these three need someone else to complete their vision. Hermann has himself, two people in one, and he is intent on using his imagination to get to the same stars the others pursue. Consider the example of what Hermann calls "imp Split" (37). Physical pleasure is infinitely less satisfying than watching himself enjoying his sexual performance with Lydia from ever-increasing distances. The farther away he gets from the limited sphere his physical body inhabits, the greater the display of imaginative and artistic power required. Sexual prowess is subordinate to the ability to imagine himself giving a tremendous performance and escaping earthy delights for unearthly visions of them, watching from "some remote upper gallery in a blue mist under the swimming allegories of the starry vault" (38). Hermann actually makes it only to the next room, seeing himself as lover reflected in a mirror, at two removes from reality. Unfortunately, the imagination's spiritual odysseys leave a bored and unsatisfied physical lover behind.

His profound horror for the animal image in the mirror and the attempt to escape the physical here suggest the spectator's disgust with life's crudities. The apparently nonsensical sentence from his dream, "I'm silent before eyes in mire and mirorage" (118), neatly summarizes Hermann's reaction to a direct confrontation with the physical image, seen

in the sordid external world or reflected in a mirror. His great fear, expressed in his anxiety dream, is of losing his sight, of seeing that he cannot see, that Ardalion's unfinished eyeless portrait is a representative image, that the artist in him who chooses Felix as a character is mistaken. Hermann recalls the dream sequence this way: "I saw [. . .] a cart rut brimming with rainwater, and in that wind-wrinkled puddle the trembling travesty of my own face; which, as I noticed with a shock, was eyeless" (61). This vision actually adumbrates the last time Narcissus seeks out his reflection and finds it by gazing down at a corpse, looking at his own grisly "image in a stagnant pool" (182).

Another means of escaping one's own self temporarily is to act a role less sensational than that of the murderer. Hermann carries a "small folding theatre" (100) with him in real life, and plays a variety of roles. But he does have an actual career on the theatrical stage, necessarily short-lived because he insists on rewriting his own parts:

I had to speak only a few words: "The prince bade me announce that he would be here presently. Ah! here he comes," instead of which, full of exquisite delight and all aquiver with glee, I spoke thus: "The prince cannot come: he has cut his throat with a razor"; and, as I spoke, the gentleman in the part of the prince was already coming, with a beaming smile on his gorgeously painted face, and there was a moment of general suspense, the whole world was held up—and to this day I remember how deeply I inhaled the divine ozone of monstrous storms and disasters. (100)

The simple walk-on role and the facile lines of the attendant lord are replaced by the unexpected mockery of a Prufrock who insists that others'

heads be brought in upon a platter. Chaos ensues when the player steps out of character and refuses to sustain the necessary illusions. Life imitates art: Felix's failure to graduate from understudy to star performer leaves Hermann playing himself, a nobody on the dark stage of an unreal, "vainly invented" (220) world.

His penultimate act in this role is to lead the authorities on the obligatory chase, "*de rigueur* in such cases" (214). The play must go on. Even if life is a "mock existence" (221), the only appropriate conclusion is to jest in the face of death. Hermann erects his portable stage and the murderer goes to the balcony, faces his pursuers and attempts the ultimate deception, in an effort to play somebody else for the last time:

"Frenchmen! This is a rehearsal. Hold those policemen. A famous film actor will presently come running out of this house. He is an arch-criminal but he must escape. You are asked to prevent them from grabbing him. This is part of the plot [. . .] *Attention!* I want a clean getaway. That's all. Thank you. I'm coming out now." (222)¹²

The artist's last gesture is his final attempt to deceive, importuning his hearers to become part of another artistic design in which he has the starring role. The work of art is, as Hermann says, "always a deception" (188), and relies for its success on the brilliance of the illusion it creates. Hermann's extraordinary resourcefulness here enables him to conjure up a magnificent deception, but because his audience is unwilling to be deceived and insensitive to the redemptive power of illusion, he presumably fails again.

Hermann appeals to the populace, the critics who refuse to believe in him, in the same way that he pleads with the audience he addresses as narrator. Like Humbert, he cannot exist as actor or artist unless the audience agrees to imagine him, to see him as more than a homicidal maniac. Isolating the external relationship between author and reader as an aspect of the thematic mode, the reader finds himself cast as an adversary. Initially, he is even a potential enemy, and Hermann temporarily refuses to reveal Felix's full name lest a member of the audience turn him over to the authorities. But the reader, however much Hermann suspects him, has a life-giving role to play: "The pale organisms of literary heroes feeding under the author's supervision swell gradually with the reader's lifeblood" (26). Because he is reluctant to cooperate (and the nourishment he provides "not very appetizing"), the reader is vilified and cursed as a swine, cajoled and commanded as a rogue. But familiarity breeds mutual respect and the two become companions, even partners in crime: "The walk we shall presently take will be your rich reward," Hermann assures him, but continues: "These conversations with the reader are quite silly too. Stage asides" (64).

At this point Hermann is still wary of the intimacies implied by "we," the "cosy pronoun" (69) that leads to pity and sympathy, which Hermann indignantly rejects: "Stop, pity! I do not accept your sympathy; for among you there are sure to be a few souls who will pity me—me, a poet misunderstood [. . .]. Any remorse on my part is absolutely out of the question: an artist feels no remorse" (187). Since as an artist he is not guilty of anything he wants no forgiveness.

If he can maintain a decorous aesthetic distance between himself and his subject, the audience should also be able to. But he does need a sympathetic response to the harmony he tries to create. The urgency of this need is readily apparent when, in his excitement, Hermann makes the reader an auditor, and feverishly insists: "'Listen, listen!'" (213) while he explains the fateful consequences of the discovery of Felix's stick. Losing faith in his own vision, he desperately needs someone to reassure him because death, which was to have made Felix's corpse a perfect double, plays a grotesque trick on the artist who attempts to outwit him. Felix's corpse *is* Hermann's double, but not in the way Hermann intended. He remarks with grisly irony: "the stages of its decomposition would have tallied with mine" (196). Slowly falling to pieces as his world disintegrates, he needs the sympathy of the reader to maintain a communicative link that alleviates the most horrible isolation.

The notable affinities between the self-conscious artist as narrator and the poet in the thematic mode persist. Frye observes that the "typical episodic theme" of a work in the thematic mode is "the theme of the boundary of consciousness, the sense of the poetic mind as passing from one world to another, or as simultaneously aware of both."¹³ This would be an appropriate detail to add to the dust jacket blurb outlining Hermann's second creation, or to the "Wanted" poster describing his first. Holden is an example of the narrator who, like the thematic poet, "contrasts the worlds of memory and experience"; Hermann, whose retrospective imagination blurs such distinctions, is not always able to differentiate between the two worlds. One of those coincidences

that "logicians loathe and poets love" marks *Despair's* last link with the thematic mode: Hermann goes walking "on the morning of the ninth of May" (14), taking his unconscious dreams and desires out for a stroll in the world of experience, innocently seeking the vision and inspiration the artist requires. The circumstances of his discovery recall another remark of Frye's about a work in the thematic mode: "The poem of vision, conventionally dated on a May morning, contrasts the worlds of experience and dream."

An examination of the form of the vision occupies this fourth section of the last chapter. Hermann himself explores the comic possibilities of his tale. Parts of it strike him as extraordinarily amusing, but the reader, not yet in on the secret, cannot be expected to share his laughter. Furthermore, the reader is too serious and sophisticated to enjoy Hermann's humour. As Wilde says: "Laughter is the primeval attitude towards life—a mode of approach that survives only in artists and criminals!"¹⁴ Comedy's formal demands are fulfilled in an optional fictional ending that Hermann provides, concocted "according to a classic recipe" (189). He briefly enjoys his "we-lived-happily-ever-after" ending, and then dismisses it as an idle dream, an impossibly insufficient attempt to weave the diverse strands of his real world into an arbitrary fictional design. (In *The Good Soldier*, Dowell takes a similarly ironic view of the comic ending he himself suggests.)

Hermann does describe himself as "the pure artist of romance" (188), and peoples his world with the deceptive look-alikes often associated with that form (Spenser's *The Faerie Queene* and Wagner's *Götterdämmerung*,

for example), the resemblance of two characters on any stage always suggesting some kind of mysterious bond between them.¹⁵ But the ethical dialectic implicit in the conflict of the romance is absent from Hermann's amoral aesthetics. "The romance is nearest of all literary forms to the wish-fulfillment dream," and he would dearly love to write the story that embodies that dream; but as in the cases of *Gatsby* and *Humbert*, "all-too-human" irony sabotages the dream just when it seems about to be fulfilled.¹⁶

Hermann's ironic perspective, exemplified by his attitudes to both life and death, undercuts the tragic implications of *Despair*. "Tragedy, which expresses the consciousness of life and death, must make life seem worth while, rich, beautiful, to make death awesome."¹⁷ But death presents Hermann with no terrors, and therefore he willingly contemplates "the hollow hum of blank eternity" (113). Dead men in his world are just absurd imitations, the "broken, shattered playthings" (193) of nonexistent gods. And, in further contrast to tragedy, life in *Despair* is subordinated to art, an inconsequential adjunct to the artist's designs, a means by which the artist hopes to achieve his own eternity. The arch-villain can be a tragic hero, but Hermann assumes that role only once, when he quotes *Hamlet* and *King Lear* in a paragraph which mocks the notion of paradisaal bliss: "never, never, never, never, never will your soul in that other world be quite sure that the sweet gentle spirits crowding about it are not fiends in disguise" (112).¹⁸ The diabolic sneers from behind the mask of redemption, and scorns those foolish enough to believe in the truth of a delusory image. By ridicu-

ling pity and terror and divesting life and death of their grandeur, Hermann undercuts any tragic expectations the reader might have.

(Similar expectations are mocked in *Lolita* when Humbert, knowing some anticipate the tragic melodrama of the rejected lover murdering his unattainable love, hints at doing just that and then ridicules those foolish enough to ever suppose that he could.)

In the ironic mode, man is an innocent victim, isolated and condemned by a Fate that cruelly punishes those who seek to impose their own patterns on experience. In *Despair*, those who aid Hermann in his attempt to create his own destiny are implicated as well. The little girl who mails the letter for him may suffer for playing a part in his plan: "envious fate with its vast experience, assortment of confidence tricks, and hatred of competition, may cruelly punish that little maiden for intruding" (135). Hermann suffers at the hands of the same power, which seems to promise him a miraculous salvation by arranging the encounter with Felix, while all the time it plans to use him, with his help of course, as the butt of a universal joke. Hermann refuses to dignify this power calling it "God," whether His existence is proved by complacent science, hysterical religion, or the white dog-god haunting Hermann's nightmares: "If I am not master of my life, not sultan of my own being, then no man's logic and no man's ecstatic fits may force me to find less silly my impossibly silly position" (112). Hermann's refusal to believe in God because He is a stranger's "fairy tale" is particularly revealing, because it attests to the artist's insistence on creating his own world. He is attacking the conventional notions of

trembling hysterics who try to place limitations on man's power to change his own world by imagining it differently. But when his most imaginative flights are finally grounded, Hermann acknowledges man's ironic plight, discovering himself to be in "eternal subjection to the circle in which we are all imprisoned" (73).

"Irony presents a human conflict which, unlike a comedy, a romance, or even a tragedy, is unsatisfactory and incomplete unless we see in it a significance beyond itself, something typical of the human situation as a whole."¹⁹ Hermann proposes the Marxist implications of his story, positing his resemblance to Felix as a manifestation of the ideal and essential sameness which is to characterize all lives in "the classless society of the future" (168). But the "mottled tangle of our elusive lives" (30) is what actually makes art, dream, and imagination possible, and Hermann is too dedicated to those ever to close ranks with the dull and ignorant rabble he so despises. Perhaps *Despair*'s irony has psychological rather than social implications. In support of this view, one critic, fooled by a "derisive mirage" planted by one of Nabokov's agents, concludes that Hermann is a latent homosexual with a castration complex and an anal fixation.²⁰ A third alternative for what makes the ironic vision of *Despair* typical of the human situation is "the existential projection of irony," existentialism itself.²¹ But it is the object of another of Nabokov's jeers, and the reader's reluctance to attach a formal body of thought (Marx, Freud, or Sartre) to the story, forces him to look elsewhere for something that gives the conflict in *Despair* a significance beyond itself.

It seems particularly apt that this glance should recall the thematic mode, by focusing on the relationship of the narrator and reader for the last time.

Tum-tee-tum. And once more—TUM! No, I have not gone mad. I am merely producing gleeful little sounds. The kind of glee one experiences upon making an April fool of someone. And a damned good fool I *have* made of someone. Who is he? Gentle reader, look at yourself in the mirror, as you seem to like mirrors so much. (34)

Hermann mocks the reader's attempt to be certain of any connection save the one link that permanently binds the two of them together. The narrator so often becomes what he beholds, hopefully identifying himself with another, hopelessly despairing when the attempt fails, and turning finally to the reader. Here he turns to that reader and invites *him* to become what *he* beholds, to see himself as the willing believer in an illusion. Having learned something about the nature of illusion, the reader need not despair at having been tricked into playing the fool. By believing in a fiction he assures himself of finding an innocent self-image in the mirror that Hermann shows him.

The lunatic who sells himself and his soul for the perfect work of art, a wise fool who outwits himself, welcomes the naive, innocent reader as a co-equal, and a coeval (since they share the timeless present of the work of art). The reader replaces Felix, who is never able to appreciate Hermann's fantastic fictions anyway, and enjoys the "eye-to-eye monologue" (69) that Hermann so desperately wants to share. In

the ideal relationship neither person should ever see the other as they really are. On the contrary, the illusions that the imagination creates are indispensable. Each sees the other as he would like to be seen himself, and neither should ever be disillusioned. The reader admires the pure artist; the narrator gets his ideal auditor, and delivers the I-to-I monologue that establishes every narrator's link with his story, himself, and his reader.

In *The Waves*, Bernard begins a long summing up with the illusion that "something adheres for a moment, has roundness, weight, depth, is completed."²² The same illusion makes a very short summing up possible here. The story teller, mocked by critics as an ignorant and naive "object" of authorial parody and an unreliable guide in a chaotic world, has certain inalienable rights; the "weight" of the thesis falls into a structure that treats the first person narrator as "subject" in an attempt to defend those rights. Firstly, he has the right to tell his story in his own way, Tristram Shandy having made the plea for that right, and set the precedent. (The reader has the right—actually the obligation—to remain silent: his pre-critical experience of the narrator's story gets hopelessly confused if he doesn't initially repress his irrelevant ego and listen for the clear sound of one voice, instead of straining to hear the cacophonous discord of several voices that he himself is responsible for.) Secondly, the narrator has the right to be considered as a creator, one who willingly invests his imaginative energy in the form that makes sense of his experience. Living in a world where the human imagination creates its own reality, he successfully creates an aesthetic

representation of his failure to make his own life a work of art.

Conclusions implicit in the thesis will hardly gain credibility by being belabored here. Patterns like innocence, great expectations, despair, higher innocence, or lunatic, lover, poet and divided self, justify themselves if they illuminate more than they obscure, and serve to demonstrate significant bonds between six very different novels. The demonstrable affinities of the first person novel with works in the thematic mode adds a genuinely new dimension to the criticism of the novels in question. The ironic qualities of the form and substance of what the first person narrator creates further establish the empathetic bond between creator and creature of illusion in the fictional and real worlds.

The thesis avoids the critical wasteland strewn with the corpses of conjectures concerning sources and influences, but is rescued several times by what Benjamin Thumb in *The Pooh Perplex* calls "the handy concept of the analogue."²³ But some kind of movement does seem discernible: the redemptive qualities of art and the imagination are more explicitly alluded to and evoked as the years go by. No attempt is made to generalize absurdly from this about the whole range of modern fiction. Nabokov does seem to have his precursors; or, some tendencies observable in Dickens' "most modern" novel and representative works of the earlier part of the century could be said to culminate in *Lolita* and *Despair*. But the thesis is not an attempt to "prove" either of these contentions. All six stories are notes toward a supreme fiction, one which will articulate the successful conjunction of the dream with reality for all time, because,

once upon a time, that perfect union was a reality. For the *last* time in this thesis, Wallace Stevens asks the crucial question, and supplies man's only answer:

What am I to believe? If the angel in his cloud,
 Serenely gazing at the violent abyss,
 Plucks on his strings to pluck abysmal glory,
 Leaps downward through evening's revelations, and
 On his spredden wings, needs nothing but deep space,
 Forgets the gold centre, the golden destiny,
 Grows warm in the motionless motion of his flight,
 Am I that imagine this angel less satisfied?
 Are the wings his, the lapis-haunted air?
 Is it he or is it I that experience this?
 Is it I then that keep saying there is an hour
 Filled with expressible bliss, in which I have
 No need, am happy, forget need's golden hand,
 Am satisfied without solacing majesty,
 And if there is an hour there is a day,
 There is a month, a year, there is a time
 In which majesty is a mirror of the self:
 I have not but I am and as I am, I am.
 These external regions, what do we fill them with
 Except reflections, the escapades of death,
 Cinderella fulfilling herself beneath the roof?²⁴

Pip dreams his "Cinderella" dreams; Dowell asks his own version of "Am I that imagine this angel less satisfied?"; Nick discovers Gatsby's genuine "golden destiny"; Holden is threatened by the "violent abyss";

Humbert enjoys "expressible bliss" and endures "abysmal glory"; Hermann creates and destroys a majestic "mirror of the self." They all fill the "external regions" with their "reflections," alternately enchanted and horrified by the "escapades of death." Finally, they fulfill themselves as Cinderellas, and become their own fairy godmothers by creating a new self. They realize their dream by writing it out, and transcend the boundary of the "roof" over their heads by becoming a part of the boundless realm of the imagination. The imagined, timeless, perfect world exists until midnight at least. Then the reader closes the book and the story teller becomes an inarticulate dreamer once more.

Footnotes: Chapter Seven

¹Vladimir Nabokov, *Despair* (New York: Capricorn Books, 1965). All future references are to this edition. Page numbers are included in the text.

²Wallace Stevens, "Adagia," in *Opus Posthumous* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1957), p. 174.

³Samuel Johnson, *Life of Pope* (London: George Bell and Sons, 1896), p. 24.

⁴Patricia Merivale, "The Flaunting of Artifice in Vladimir Nabokov and Jorge Luis Borges," in ed. L. S. Dembo, *Nabokov: The Man and His Work* (Madison: Univ. of Wisconsin Press, 1967), p. 221.

⁵N. O. Brown, *Love's Body* (Toronto: Vintage Books, 1966), p. 161.

⁶Oscar Wilde, "The Decay of Lying," in *The Complete Works of . . .* (London: Collins, 1948), p. 970.

⁷Ed. H. Montgomery Hyde, *The Three Trials of Oscar Wilde* (New York: University Books, 1948), p. 133.

⁸Wallace Stevens, "The Man with the Blue Guitar," in *The Collected Poems of . . .* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1954), p. 175. The quotation that introduces the poem is one of the "Adagia," in *Opus Posthumous*, p. 160.

⁹Alfred Appel, Jr., "Lolita: The Springboard of Parody," in ed. Dembo, *Nabokov*, p. 125, implies that Hermann is the victim of Nabokov's parody here, because the diary is not a credible means of confession. But Hermann is on the run when he writes this out, and his description of events is perforce cursory. And, as he says, "it *is* night at present." How else can he convey his situation? He is writing the story. This is how he must do it.

¹⁰Nabokov ultimately sustains the illusion in the Introduction to *Despair*, p. 10.

¹¹F. Scott Fitzgerald, *The Great Gatsby* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1925), p. 36.

¹²It is interesting to compare this ending with that of Nabokoff-Sirin's earlier translation of *Despair* (London: J. Long, 1937), p. 287: "I have peeped again. Standing and staring. There are hundreds of them, thousands, millions. But absolute quiet; only the swish of their breathing. How about opening the window and making a little speech" Hermann's lunacy is never this explicit or crude in the later version.

¹³Northrop Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism* (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1957), p. 57. The two subsequent references to the thematic mode are from the same page; the reference to coincidences is Humbert's in *Lolita*, p. 33.

¹⁴*The Wit and Humor of Oscar Wilde* (New York: Dover Publications, 1959), p. 67.

¹⁵Felix first acknowledges their resemblance; Hermann crosses the border with Felix's passport, on which the epithets are only "slightly different" from those on Hermann's. Therefore, there must be a resemblance between the two men.

The passport, as a means for establishing identity, is the subject of an elaborate pattern of allusions in *Despair*: Hermann tries to describe his resemblance to Felix, but abandons the attempt as "a passport list of facial features meaning nothing" (26). He tries another strategy: "Somebody told me once that I looked like Amundsen, the Polar explorer. Well, Felix, too, looked like Amundsen. But it is not every person that can recall Amundsen's face. I myself recall it but faintly, nor am I sure whether there had not been some mix-up with Nansen" (26). These men were doubles of a sort: both were Arctic explorers, and Amundsen once used Nansen's ship (or was it the other way round?) to try and find the North Pole. Nansen was responsible for what Hermann calls the "Nansensical" passport, which established the identity and nationality of emigrés. Finally, Hermann's projected last chapter is interrupted right in the middle of the word "passport." He manages "passp—" (206), and notes that it rhymes with "gasp" (as in "last gasp") on the next page.

¹⁶Frye, *Anatomy*, p. 186.

¹⁷Susanne Langer, *Feeling and Form* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1953), p. 364.

¹⁸The quotation from *Hamlet*, *Complete Works*, ed. G. B. Harrison (New York: Harcourt, Brace, and World, 1948), 3. 1. 65., is "There's the rub"; "Never, never, never, never, never" is from *King Lear*, 5. 3. 308.

¹⁹Frye, *The Stubborn Structure* (London: Methuen, 1970), p. 169.

²⁰Robert Rogers, *A Psychoanalytic Study of the Double in Literature* (Detroit: Wayne State Univ. Press, 1970), pp. 164-67.

²¹Frye, *Anatomy*, p. 65.

²²Virginia Woolf, *The Waves* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1931), p. 285.

²³Frederick C. Crews, *The Pooh Perplex* (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1965), p. 116.

²⁴"Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction," in *Collected Poems*, p. 404.

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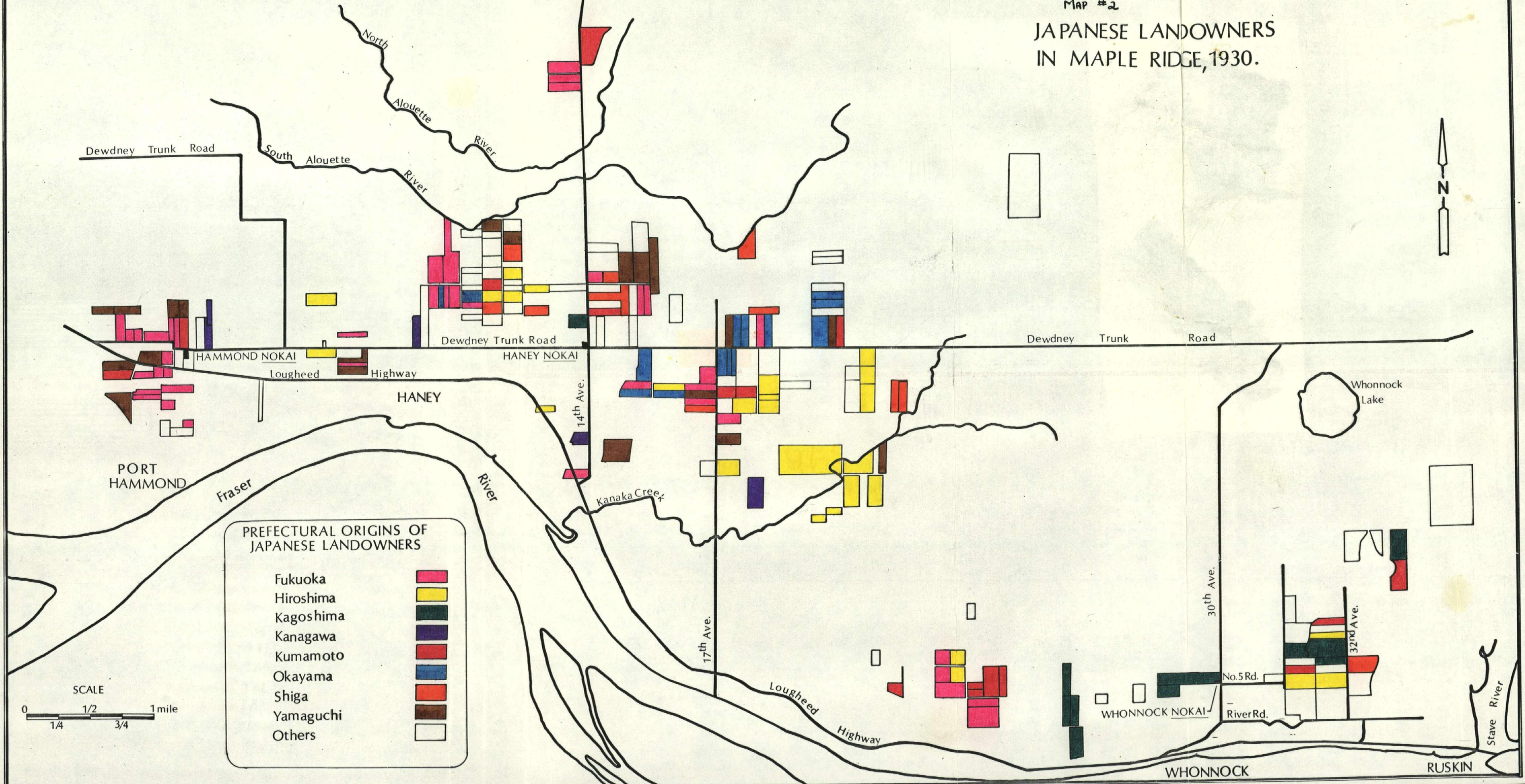
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MAP #2
JAPANESE LANDOWNERS
IN MAPLE RIDGE, 1930.



MAP #3
JAPANESE LANDOWNERS
IN MAPLE RIDGE, 1940.

