

Ineluctable Modality of the Other:

The Ethical Excess in the Selected Works of William Gaddis, Thomas Pynchon, and David Foster Wallace

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Declaration of Authorship

I, William Shane Tucker, hereby declare that this dissertation and the work presented in it is entirely my own. Any use of the work of other authors, in any form, is properly acknowledged at their point of use.

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Abstract

In his seminal study of postmodern literature, Brian McHale contends that the primary concerns of postmodern fiction tend to be ontologically, rather than epistemologically, dominant. This thesis will challenge McHale's claim by analyzing how three American post-war novelists self-reflexively adopt and subvert various epistemological approaches to understanding the world in order to reveal the pitfalls associated with the reductive impulse to categorize disparate data and make it present-at-hand within epistemic frameworks. The ultimate aim of these efforts is to highlight an ineffable alterity—the ethical excess of the Other—that eludes codification. In doing so these authors indicate how ontological questions and their implications are predicated on the question of the Other, which is not primarily an ontological query but equally—or even more so—an epistemological one.

The first chapter will explore how William Gaddis was one of the earliest post-war American authors to negotiate epistemic closure in favor of an alterity that cannot be totalized within his proto-postmodern novel, *The Recognitions* (1955). Through his aesthetic vision espousing a return to the primordial first idea as well as an ethics of indeterminacy in order to foster an *agape* with the unthematizable Other, Gaddis promotes the ethical imperative of the “self-who-can-do-more” who consequently attempts to “make negative things do the work of positive ones” by maintaining a responsibility to the ineffable Other in a modern world devoid of absolutes.

Gaddis's quixotic attempt to redeem a culturally-vacuous post-war society that is ultimately more ignorant than malicious will then transition to the second chapter exploring Thomas Pynchon's more cynical view in *Gravity's Rainbow* (1973) of a world dominated by malicious epistemic systems of control where active resistance against these systems can become totalizing acts themselves. Pynchon therefore attempts to combat determinate modes of thought through his notion of “illogical negativism” designed to maintain a non-committal, liminal position in order to remain truly open to an “Other Order of Being” by avoiding rationalizing the problem of alterity altogether.

The final chapter will analyze how David Foster Wallace's exploration of a “cohesion-renewing Other” in *Infinite Jest* (1996) attempts to renew cohesion between the different positions previously adopted by Gaddis and Pynchon. Conscious of both the need to adopt an ethical imperative for the Other while also being mindful of the necessity of having to engage with totalizing epistemic frameworks at the expense of alterity in order to convey meaning, Wallace adopts a neopragmatic approach that maintains a faith in language but nevertheless repudiates epistemic foundationalism and acknowledges the radical contingency of language and selfhood as communal constructs dependent on the Other.

Acknowledgements

I would like to begin by thanking Professor Finn Fordham for serving as my supervisor during my research at Royal Holloway. Our mutual interest in the maximalist novels of the twentieth century initially brought us together, which led to a tremendously fruitful partnership of shared academic inquiry over the past couple of years. I also appreciate the opportunity to have been able to serve as a seminar leader for your modernist literature module. Your unwavering support and timely feedback were paramount to the completion of this project, and I am truly grateful and humbled by your unflagging dedication to my work.

Next I want to thank Professor Robert Eaglestone for serving as my advisor at Royal Holloway. Your advice was extremely helpful, and I am greatly indebted to your work, *Ethical Criticism: Reading After Levinas*, for shaping the line of reasoning adopted within my thesis. Furthermore, I am grateful to have been afforded the opportunity to serve as a seminar leader for your literary criticism module, which afforded me the opportunity to continue my development as an educator.

I also want to thank the University of London and Senate House for their resources that were readily available to me. The Crossland Research Scholarship was a huge support financially, and the myriad research opportunities were of great help academically. More specifically, the critical theory reading group at Senate House provided me with the occasion to read and discuss Simon Critchley's seminal work, *Ethics of Deconstruction: Derrida and Levinas*, which awakened me to the potential convergence between ethics, literature, and post-structuralism. This study served as the impetus for the direction taken in my thesis.

A huge thank you to my father for the emotional support throughout my post-secondary education. It was a difficult decision to move away to England for four years in order to pursue my MA and PhD degrees, but it was made easier by your unyielding love and encouragement. You are without a doubt the person who initially sparked my love for literature, and for that I am—and will always be—eternally grateful.

Finally, I am immensely grateful to my beautiful wife, Maia. Your companionship and support were invaluable during my years in England, and I cannot wait to see where life takes us next.

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Introduction

“The list is the origin of culture. It’s part of the history of art and literature. What does culture want? To make infinity comprehensible.”

–Umberto Eco, *The Infinity of Lists*

“We murder to dissect.”

–William Wordsworth, “The Tables Turned”

1.1 Order and the Other

When Melville’s Captain Ahab set off in his monomaniacal pursuit of capturing the elusive white whale, he was not merely attempting to exert his dominance over nature but also striving—in a wholly Faustian manner—to gain unbridled access to a hidden knowledge otherwise inaccessible to mankind. As he explained at one point to Starbuck, “All visible objects, man, are but pasteboard masks” that obfuscate “some unknown but still reasoning thing,” and therefore he wants to “strike through the mask! How can the prisoner reach outside, except by thrusting through the wall? To me, the white whale is that wall” (*Moby-Dick* 136). For Ahab, the phenomena around him obfuscate a sublime truth he felt was his duty to uncover, so he thereby attempted to break through the mask of the whale to reach this ultimate knowledge.

Ahab’s quest to gain transcendental insight as well as to project his vision onto the world around him parallels Don Quixote’s earlier endeavor of attempting to find personal meaning in a world wholly alien to him by becoming a knight-errant while traveling throughout seventeenth-century Spain in his anachronistic search for a chivalric adventure. In order to better situate himself within the world, he projects his romantic narrative onto his surroundings: a decrepit horse became his noble steed, a peasant woman became his damsel in distress, windmills became giants that need to be vanquished, etc. Milan Kundera claims that the impetus for Quixote’s delusions of grandeur—like Ahab’s overzealous pursuit of the whale—is a result of the collapse of grand narratives that formerly imbued the world with order (“Depreciated Legacy” 4). Consequently, this forced Quixote to attempt to order the

chaos arising from a deluge of unarranged, disparate data into a cohesive narrative capable of better situating himself within the world:

As God slowly departed from the seat whence he had directed the universe and its order of values, distinguished good from evil, and endowed each thing with meaning, Don Quixote set forth from his house into a world he could no longer recognize. In the absence of the Supreme Judge, the world suddenly appeared in its fearsome ambiguity; the single divine Truth decomposed by the myriad relative truths parceled out by men. Thus was born the world of the Modern Era, and with it the novel, the image and the model of that world (“Depreciated Legacy” 6).

While this collapse of the “single divine Truth” marked the transition to the Enlightenment that ostensibly empowered characters such as Ahab and Don Quixote to attempt to assuage the “fearsome ambiguity” of the Modern Era through their self-generated relative truths, there are nevertheless pitfalls associated with such an endeavor. For example, Laurence Sterne’s *Tristram Shandy* satirizes the Lockean emphasis on associational patterns as ordering principles while the farcical adventure of the Flaubertian duo Bouvard and Pécuchet illustrates the drawbacks of rigidly adopting various empirical approaches to better understanding their surroundings when such methods are devoid of a form of practical application capable of improving the world around them.

The benefits and consequences associated with the respective epistemological pursuits adopted by various literary characters attempting to cope with the collapse of unequivocal metanarratives through the “myriad relative truths parceled out by man” can be viewed as effectively paralleling the evolution of epistemic frameworks. Michel Foucault’s notion of the *episteme*—similar to T. S. Kuhn’s concept of the *paradigm* (*Structure of Scientific Revolutions* 11)—is described by Foucault as developing from various “epistemological

field[s], [...] in which knowledge, envisaged apart from all criteria having reference to its rational value or to its objective forms, grounds its positivity and thereby manifests a history which is not that of its growing perfection, but rather that of its conditions of possibility” (*Order of Things* xxiii-iv). The episteme is essentially a collective cognitive structure that both fosters and precludes the conditions for epistemological possibilities within a given era. Accordingly, the episteme takes the form of the “fundamental codes of a culture – those governing its language, its schemas of perception, its exchanges, its techniques, its values, the hierarchy of its practices – [...] the empirical orders with which [man] will be dealing and within which he will be at home” (xx). In this sense the evolution of the encyclopedia reflects these underlying epistemic presuppositions and worldviews.

For example, Jed Rasula notes how the original encyclopedic project was burdened by its “enticement to comprehensiveness and mastery” and “tainted by its association with master narratives” (“Textual Indigence” 76). The encyclopedia—a work or set of works that categorize and demarcate data from different branches of knowledge into a single comprehensive referencing system that, as Aude Doody suggests, is a “fluid concept” because “encyclopedism can encompass the aspiration towards universal knowledge or the sum of general knowledge of a particular culture” (*Pliny’s Encyclopedia* 12)—essentially embodies these parceled truths as a means to situating man within the world. Furthermore, Robert Collison suggests that early forms of encyclopedias from classical antiquity, such as Marcus Terentius Varro’s *Nine Books of Disciplines* (116 BC – 27 BC) and Pliny the Elder’s *Naturalis Historia* (79 AD), were conceptualized as repositories of received wisdom imbued by God that reflected His teleological design for the world, and this would be the primary encyclopedic model for the next 1,500 years (*Encyclopaedias: Their History* 42). Like Ahab’s neo-Platonic view of objects being imperfect, derivative forms of the Ideal, Pliny opened his study with a similar sentiment by claiming that “the world of nature, or in other

words life” is a “subject in its least elevated department” that requires the employment of “either rustic terms or foreign, many barbarian words that actually have to be introduced with an apology.”

The view of Pliny’s encyclopedic model as an inadequate reflection of God’s teleological design of the natural world then transitioned to the medieval model in the form of Isidore of Seville’s *Etymologiae* (c. 600-625), Vincent of Beauvais’s (c. 1190–1264) *Speculum Maius* (c. 1190-1264), and Radalfus Ardens’s *Speculum universale* (c. 1200). While these compendia marked significant developments in the arrangement of data through the implementation of more rigid hierarchical structures and delineable categories compared to those of classical antiquity, Collison suggests that these medieval encyclopedias were still subservient to holy books and scripture since spiritual matters were greatly privileged over secular ones (*Encyclopaedias: Their History* 44). Therefore, as Doody contends, the structure of medieval encyclopedias essentially mirrors these theological assumptions:

The desire to structure an encyclopedia around an implicit ideology of what the natural world means is clearly apparent in the Christian compendia produced from late antiquity to the Middle Ages. In this period, we often find a hierarchy of knowledge that has God at its apex, descending either through disciplinary divisions beginning with theology or down the scale of creation to humans and the natural world. These Christian works recycled information gleaned from Pliny and other Classical sources, but placed it in a radically altered structure designed to reflect the natural order of the world (*Pliny’s Encyclopedia* 34).

The medieval encyclopedic model presupposed the presence of a Supreme that anchored the world with a single divine Truth, and it was the duty of the encyclopedia to accurately reflect this design. Accordingly, Petrus van Ewijk argues that these encyclopedists were “convinced

that they could encompass everything in their work. The medieval encyclopedia was written by a single author, who pretended to capture maximal coherence in one single frame. This notion was illustrated by the use of the mirror as an image to depict the encyclopedia” (“Encyclopedia, Network” 208).

However, these medieval, theologically-anchored encyclopedic frameworks were eventually abandoned during the Enlightenment. According to Robert Darnton, Denis Diderot’s *Encyclopédie* (1751-1772)—originally begun as a French translation of Ephraim Chambers’s *Cyclopaedia* (1728)—marked a pivotal transition in the conceptualization of the encyclopedia (*Business of Enlightenment* 7). Diderot’s *Encyclopédie* adopted many recognizable traits of the modern encyclopedia such as ordering information into fixed categories and taxonomies, an alphabetic arrangement of data, and—more importantly—it promoted the view that the encyclopedia is a dynamic rather than static construct that should be constantly updated through collaboration within an open network of scholarship (*Business of Enlightenment* 441). Rather than embracing a model predicated purely on hierarchical order, Diderot’s work prefigured the notion of the *rhizome* that Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari describe as an epistemic structure functioning as a counterpoint to conventional hierarchical models of data representation:

unlike trees or their roots, the rhizome connects any point to any other point, and its traits are not necessarily linked to traits of the same nature; it brings into play very different regimes of signs, and even nonsign states. [...] Unlike a structure, which is defined by a set of points and positions, the rhizome is made only of lines; lines of segmentarity and stratification as its dimensions, and the line of flight or deterritorialization (*Thousand Plateaus* 21).

With regard to this rhizomatic structure, Umberto Eco suggested that the encyclopedia should be conceptualized as a “pseudotree, which assumes the aspect of a local map, in order to

represent, always transitorily and locally, what in fact is not representable because it is a rhizome — an inconceivable globality” (*Semiotics* 83). Likewise, Diderot outlined a similar rhizomatic vision for his work within his self-reflexive entry that describes his notion of the encyclopedia:

Thanks to encyclopedic ordering, the universality of knowledge, and the frequency of references, the connections grow, the links go out in all directions. . . . We perceive either the continuity or the gaps in our system, its weak sides, its strong point, and at a glance on which objects it is important to work for one’s own glory, or for the greater utility of humankind (“Articles from *Encyclopédie*” 22).

By acknowledging “the gaps in our system,” Diderot’s epistemic framework dismisses the medieval notion of the encyclopedia as being a closed, comprehensive entity because, as he claimed, “I do not believe it is given to a single man to know all that can be known, to make use of all there is, to see all that can be seen, to understand all that is intelligible” (22).

Furthermore, unlike the medieval model that attempted to order the natural world as a means to better understanding the nebulous nature of God, Diderot’s model marked a much more secular turn by refraining from directly engaging with spiritual matters.

This is a view Diderot shared with his contemporary Immanuel Kant who dedicated a portion of his *Critique of Pure Reason* to coming up with paradoxical, spatio-temporal antinomies that inevitably arose when human reason—in its desire to drive cognition towards an “idea of absolute totality” (*Pure Reason* 239)—attempts to conceptualize a transcendent reality within the finitude of human reason. This is a phenomenon Kant coined as *onto-theology* resulting from the attempt to infer “the existence of a Supreme Being [...] through mere conceptions, without the aid of experience” (*Pure Reason* A. 631). Kant criticized the onto-theological use of *a priori* logic because it fostered unverifiable pseudo-proofs for the

existence of an infinite being that by its very nature eludes the cogito. For Kant, the Supreme Being's ineffable nature is relegated to the *noumenal* realm—the unknowable dimension of “things-in-themselves” that eludes perception but is still an inextricable dimension of totality that, for example, Captain Ahab boldly attempted to reach by striking through the mask of the phenomenal realm.

Diderot's priority of making readers better informed about secular rather than spiritual matters complements how he viewed his encyclopedia as being a means of challenging the epistemic presumptions adopted by previous encyclopedic frameworks that he felt inhibited free thought necessary for achieving social progress. In the same entry outlining his views of the encyclopedia he continues:

as philosophy today advances with giant strides; as it brings order to all the subjects it embraces; as it sets the predominant fashion under which the yoke of authority and precedent comes to be shaken and to yield to the laws of reason, scarcely one work of dogma survives for which wholehearted approval is felt. Such works come to be perceived as copies of human artifice rather than drawn from the truth of nature (“Articles from *Encyclopédie*” 23).

Accordingly, the epistemic evolution of Diderot's *Encyclopédie* from the monolithic, divinely-anchored models of the classical and medieval epochs to the much more civic and rhizomatic Enlightenment model constructed through the collaboration of numerous contributors would help inform how Diderot's *Encyclopédie* reflected the cultural codes of an emerging democratic spirit that, as Doody claims, would be “instrumental in producing the changes in educated opinion which precipitated the French Revolution” (*Pliny's Encyclopedia* 75). The encyclopedia therefore has the potential to serve as an invaluable medium for both ordering the world and reflecting the prevailing philosophical views that underpin how knowledge is conceptualized. Nevertheless, in the attempt to organize disparate

data into a cohesive and readily-accessible epistemic framework, a fundamental question inevitably arises: is it possible that some significant aspect of reality exceeds the purview of these encyclopedic constructs?

With regard to epistemic frameworks and echoing Ludwig Wittgenstein's famous adage "The world is everything that is the case" (*Tractatus* I), Foucault noted that "to know is to discriminate" (*Order of Things* 55) since the knowable requires articulation and therefore "it is the task of words to translate that truth if they can; but they no longer have the right to be considered a mark of it. Language has withdrawn from the midst of beings themselves and has entered a period of transparency and neutrality" (56). Unlike Ahab, whom Foucault described as attempting to "dig out the ancient Word from the unknown places where it may be hidden," Foucault suggested that the role of epistemic frameworks is instead "to fabricate a language, and to fabricate it well – so that, as an instrument of analysis and combination, it will really be the language of calculation" (62-63). For Foucault, this "language of calculation" necessary for formulating these epistemic frameworks necessitates a type of fabrication since data must be made intelligible through language. More drastically, Foucault viewed Don Quixote's attempt to make the world conform to the language of his chivalric epistemic vision as incriminating him a "hero of the Same" whose "whole being is nothing but language" since, as a result of his unyielding promotion of the romantic epic, he is "constantly obliged to consult it in order to know what to do or say, and what signs he should give himself and others in order to show that he really is of the same nature as the text from which he springs" (46).

While somewhat of a generalization, Hillary Clark contends that—like Quixote's obligation to use signs as a means promoting his worldview—the encyclopedic impulse to categorize and order information ultimately leads to contradictions within the encyclopedic project since "it is necessarily incomplete, yet aspires to be a totalization of knowledge; it is

historically specific, yet aspires to encircle a timeless knowledge; it is ideologically constructed, yet aspires to be an objective mirror of the world” (*Fictional Encyclopedia* 17). Therefore, Clark suggests that “[n]o matter how much faith the encyclopaedist(s) may have in the possibility of mastering and communicating the body of knowledge at hand, the totality of this body is an elusive thing. The desire to comprehend knowledge is an erotics recognizing a loss at the very limit of its reach” (20). While encyclopedism offers a means of ordering the world by reining in the chaos of the modern era, the purported need to comprehend and master knowledge—an impulse that Ann Arnar suggests is an inextricable aspect of encyclopedism that represents an “ontological imperative [...] impelled by the desire to define [our] role in the universe” (*Pliny to Borges* xi)—would become the subject of intense philosophical scrutiny during the late-nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

For example, in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* (1882) Friedrich Nietzsche borrows Isaac Newton’s image of a dwarf standing upon the shoulders of a giant to illustrate the pitfalls associated with epistemic endeavors to understand the world at the expense of respecting the sublimity of the natural realm. When the dwarf attempts to articulate the transcendent knowledge offered to him by Zarathustra, he is then chided as a “spirit of gravity” who attempts “to make things too easy for [him]self!” (*Zarathustra* III.2). Moreover, Martin Heidegger bemoaned how the egocentric impulse of the dwarf-like individual subject inevitably leads to the subject advancing the subject-object distinction as a means to better situating oneself in the world. Heidegger uses the notion of the *present-at-hand* (*Vorhandenheit*), a term denoting the type of abstract thought resulting from ordering and theorizing about objects “ontologico-categorically” (*Being and Time* 71) based on their function as opposed to how they can be used in the present moment (i.e. the *ready-to-hand*), to describe the dominant mode of Western thought that removes the thinking subject (*Dasein*) from having an authentic, primordial relation with the world.

Accordingly, Heidegger warned that with regard to the notion of the present-at-hand, the “[a]dding on value-predicates cannot tell us anything at all new about the Being of goods, but would merely presuppose again that goods have pure presence-at-hand as their kind of Being. Values would then be determinate characteristics which a thing possesses, and they would be present-at-hand” (*Being and Time* 93). In other words, these “determinate characteristics” and subsequent values assigned to objects contribute to what Heidegger viewed as the pitfalls of metaphysics and its overemphasis on the privileged status of presence over absence:

Tradition takes what has come down to us and delivers it over to self-evidence; it blocks our access to those primordial “sources” from which the categories and concepts handed down to us have been in part quite genuinely drawn. Indeed it makes us forget that they have had such an origin, and makes us suppose that the necessity of going back to these sources is something which we need not even understand (*Being and Time* 21).

Heidegger argued that language and metaphysics have obfuscated the primordial nature of Being, and therefore a return to authentic *Dasein* is precluded by these epistemic frameworks. However, the present-at-hand as a theoretical perspective—while removed from an authentic association with the world—is nevertheless necessary for scientific inquiry and, more importantly, the encyclopedic project to be possible.

But while Heidegger laid the foundation for a line of thought geared towards the “*destruction*” of the metaphysics of presence as a means to achieving a more authentic relation with the world (22), he nevertheless failed to properly account for another significant dimension of reality that exceeds the purview of the present-at-hand. One of his contemporaries the Talmudic phenomenologist—Emmanuel Levinas—agreed that Being is obfuscated by these epistemic frameworks, but he also argued that Heidegger’s emphasis on

treating the reestablishment of an authentic *Dasein* as first philosophy—a notion Levinas felt was still burdened in the language of a present-privileged metaphysics—is wholly egocentric and unethical. The problem for Levinas was this type of thinking by the subject unavoidably reduces other Beings into objects of the present-at-hand to foster better self-understanding at the expense of maintaining an ethical relation with other Beings. Consequently, Levinas suggests in his seminal work *Totality and Infinity* (1961) that “the fact of taking [*prendre*] and of comprehending [*comprendre*],” is “the fact of englobing, of appropriating” (*Totality and Infinity* 70)—an act Captain Ahab and Don Quixote are both guilty of engaging in since their quests to order and better situate themselves within the world lead to similar unethical acts of “englobing” the characters around them.

Levinas believed the single most important dimension shared by various ethicists—ranging from Ancient Greek virtue ethics, Kantian deontology, the utilitarian approaches of Jeremy Bentham and John Stuart Mill, and twentieth-century pragmatic ethics—is in their respective ways they all acknowledge that the foundation of ethics rests upon the recognition of the autonomy of the other Being—referred simply to as *the Other*. So rather than adopting Heidegger’s *Dasein*-centric approach, Levinas viewed first philosophy as not a primordial ontology but rather a primordial, epistemologically-foregrounded ethics contingent on *Dasein*’s recognition of the Other: “Metaphysics, transcendence, the welcoming of the other by the same, of the Other by me, is concretely produced as the calling into question of the same by the other, that is, as the ethics that accomplishes the critical essence of knowledge. As a critique precedes dogmatism, metaphysics precedes ontology” (*Totality and Infinity* 43).

It should be noted, however, that Levinasian ethics differs from more traditional ethical approaches because Levinas deals solely with the primordial experience between the same and the Other that, as Patrick Bourgeois explains, occurs prior to “those ethical considerations that attempt to reflect on maxims or judgments in relation to social action and

civic duty, [...] that are derived and distinct from that primordial level” (*Boundary of Reason* xviii). Likewise, in his critique of *Totality and Infinity*, Jacques Derrida claimed in “Violence and Metaphysics” (1967) that “Levinas calls the positive moment which takes itself beyond the disdain or disregard of the other, that is, beyond the appreciation or possession, understanding and knowledge of the other, *metaphysics* or *ethics*. Metaphysical transcendence is *desire*” (*Writing and Difference* 114). Levinas’s emphasis on the transcendence over “possession, understanding and knowledge of the other” is neglected by the Heideggerian cognitive impulse to reduce the Other to the present-at-hand, which perhaps partly informs Levinas’s disdain for Heidegger and why he felt Heidegger was unable to recognize the evil of the Nazi regime he promoted.

But who exactly is the Other? While there are many definitions of the Other relevant to a wide variety of research areas ranging from feminist, post-colonial, to psychoanalytic theory, the Levinasian Other—also referred to as *alterity*—is a radical exteriority that eludes the egocentric impulse to conceptualize and reduce it into the present-at-hand, and therefore for Levinas this “recognition of alterity does not consist in forming an idea of alterity. Having an idea of something belongs to the realm of *I-It*” (“Martin Buber” 22). The encounter between the self and Other—an alterity that can neither be reduced to the sameness of the subject-object distinction nor thematized within language without forfeiting its radical alterity in the process—is for Levinas the very foundation for the condition of understanding the self.

Lawrence Schehr echoes this notion when claiming, “Alterity—the dream world, the Orient—is considered to be the crypt into which is cast what differs from the self of identity, conceived either objectively or as the transcendental subject of knowledge” (*Figures of Alterity* 117). Nevertheless, Andrew Gibson contends that because the Other eludes what Martin Buber—a direct precursor to the alterity-centered philosophy of Levinas—describes as the “I-It” relation (*I and Thou* I.XV), then for Gibson “the other whom I encounter is

always radically in excess of what my ego, cognitive powers, consciousness or intuitions would make of her or him. The other always and definitively overflows the frame in which I would seek to enclose the other” (*Leavis to Levinas* 25).

Moreover, Simon Critchley suggests that Levinas’s “ethics is the critical *mise en question* of the liberty, spontaneity, and cognitive emprise of the ego that seeks to reduce all otherness to itself. The ethical is therefore the location of a point of alterity, or what Levinas also calls ‘exteriority’, that cannot be reduced to the Same” (*Ethics Deconstruction* 5). This exteriority cannot be reduced without the individual subject becoming, like Don Quixote, the hero of the Same by engaging in an unethical practice of conflating the Other with the self. The exteriority of the Other is characterized by Maurice Blanchot—a phenomenologist and close friend of Levinas—as a “sort of being, composed of all that which is excluded from being [...] That which is not seen, is not understood”” (*Thomas the Obscure* 105) and “the absurd being who overflows totality” (107).

Levinas therefore strives for a primordial ethics exemplifying “a wisdom older than the patent presence of a meaning [...] a wisdom without which the message buried deep within the enigma of the text cannot be grasped” (“Translation of Scripture” 27).

Furthermore, in his study of alterity with Jean Baudrillard, Marc Guillaume attempts to articulate the impossibility of ascribing meaning to the Other by claiming how “[r]educing the Other to others is a temptation made even more difficult to avoid in that absolute alterity is unthinkable and is therefore destined for reduction” (*Radical Alterity* 25). To avoid this temptation of reducing alterity into the present-at-hand, Gibson outlines the imperative of maintaining an ethical relation with the Other and what it might look like in practice:

The ethical relation takes place in an immediate realm where the relation to or encounter with the other is antecedent to knowledge, and brings with it the burden of responsibility to the other. [...] This appropriation as denial of the

ethical relation emerges as what Levinas calls “ontological imperialism”, in the expression of the naive, arbitrary, spontaneous dogmatism of the self which directs the understanding at its thitherto obscure object as a clarifying “ray of light”, delivering being out of secrecy – out of its heart of darkness – and thus neutralizing in encompassing the other (*Leavis to Levinas* 56).

Nevertheless, Levinas’s attempt to avoid engaging in a form of “ontological imperialism” that thematizes the Other through language while simultaneously attempting to articulate the ethical endeavor of pursuing a pre-ontological subjectivity that respects an ineffable alterity is in a sense self-defeating because of its contingency on the same language that totalizes the Other.

This notion of *totalization* is a primary preoccupation of Levinas who uses the term to signify an act of violence by which the radical alterity of the Other is denied by being codified into a set of rational categories Levinas describes as a “transmutation of the other into the same” (*Totality and Infinity* 111) similar to the Heideggerian present-at-hand. Linda Hutcheon claims that totalization “does not just mean to unify, but rather means to unify with an eye to power and control” (*Poetics of Postmodernism* xi) even “at the risk of doing violence” to the phenomena being totalized (62). Moreover, Fredric Jameson—in his analysis of Jean-Paul Sartre’s *Critique of Dialectical Reason*—defines totalization as a “summing up, from a perspective or point of view, as partial as it must be” to secure “fragile control or survival of an even more fragile subject within a world otherwise utterly independent and subject to no one’s whims or desires” (*Postmodernism* 333).

Language is inextricably linked to the act of totalization, which allows the subject to maintain a tenuous level of control by making phenomena present-at-hand to better situate oneself in the world at the expense of maintaining an ethical relation with the Other. This view of language as a totalizing agent reflects Heidegger’s call for a *destruktion* of the

metaphysics of presence that the post-structuralists later adopted in their polemics against *logocentrism*: a catch-all term for the tendency of Western thought to presume that logic and reason is grounded by an unequivocal signified that anchors signifiers with stable meaning. R. Radhakrishnan argues logocentrism is diametrically opposed to alterity because “the history of Western philosophy has been the story of the hegemonic naturalization of meaning. Whatever has fallen virulently outside of the orthodox parameters has been designated as the ‘other’” (“End of Logocentrism” 55). Furthermore, Kevin Vanhoozer examined the notion of logocentrism in his study of postmodern hermeneutics:

Logocentrism is the belief that there is some stable point *outside* language—reason, revelation, Platonic Ideas—from which one can ensure that one’s words, as well as the whole system of distinctions that order our experience, correspond to the world. It is the desire for a center, for a point of reference, for an ultimate origin—anything on which we can non-arbitrarily hang our beliefs and values. In short, *logocentrism* stands for the fundamental presupposition that it is possible to speak truly (*Meaning in This Text?* 53).

Similar to Wittgenstein’s picture theory of language—a subset of the correspondence theory of truth advocating how the only meaningful propositions that can be made are those that can accurately picture atomic facts about the world through language (*Tractatus* 2.16-2.17)—the logocentric emphasis on this unequivocal point of reference necessary for legitimizing one’s beliefs, facts, and values is ineluctably situated against an alterity that eludes thematization.¹

Furthermore, Levinas proposes that the attempt to represent the Other through what he refers to as the totalizing logocentrism of the “ontological said” causes the Other’s radical

¹ Nevertheless, it should be noted that despite the austere formal logic adopted in the *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, Wittgenstein was also deeply interested in the nonsensible that eludes the picture theory of language and how therefore philosophy comes to “signify what cannot be said, by presenting clearly what can be said” (4.115). This interplay between signification and ineffability was mentioned in a letter by Wittgenstein in 1919 in which he states how his “work consists of two parts: the one presented here plus all that I have *not* written. And it is precisely this second part that is the important one” (*ProtoTractatus* 16).

alterity to be forfeited (*Otherwise than Being* 44). This is a notion also outlined in Blanchot's essay, "Literature and the Right to Death" (1949):

A word may give me its meaning, but first it suppresses it. For me to be able to say, "This woman" I must somehow take her flesh and blood reality away from her, cause her to be absent, annihilate her. The word gives me the being, but it gives it to me deprived of being. The word is the absence of that being, its nothingness, what is left of it when it has lost being - the very fact that it does not exist (322).

Blanchot's view of language as a medium that essentially deprives the Other of its alterity is also promoted by Adriaan Peperzak who argues about the irreconcilability between alterity and logocentrism:

the Other cannot be integrated or "sublated" into any consciousness, spirit, or other form of interiority. Such a relation is not possible unless its two terms are in a very strong sense of the word exterior to each other. Their separation from one another must resist all attempts at fusion or totalizing. They are not and cannot become two moments of one union. This implies their independence (*To the Other* 120).

Levinas therefore seeks a non-totalizing, ethical language capable of fostering a communion between the self and the Other while also respecting the Other's radical alterity. He therefore suggests in *Totality and Infinity* that a conversation between the self and the Other must be one without reciprocity and "held over two points which do not constitute a totality" (96).

This discourse, however, is not a dialogue but effectively a conversation *preceding* conversation, or as Jill Robbins argues:

it is prior to language conceived of as a system of signs. Of course, it is difficult to conceive of a presemiotic language. This is, we recall, a primordial

language (and that is why, ultimately, this language cannot have any content) [...] which signifies only with reference to itself and thereby escapes the referrals inherent in sign systems, and thereby escapes the play of immanence (*Altered Reading* 8).

For Levinas, this purported primordial, “presemiotic” discourse with the Other takes the form of the transcendent *saying* as opposed to the logocentric *said*. In a notion similar to what Wittgenstein describes in the *Tractatus* as the philosophical interplay of “signify[ing] what cannot be said, by presenting clearly what can be said” (4.115), Levinas describes the saying rather nebulously as being essentially otherwise than being:

the beyond being is posited in doxic theses, and glimmers in the amphibology of being and beings—in which beings dissimulate being. The otherwise than being is stated in a saying that must also be unsaid in order to thus extract the otherwise than being from the said in which it already comes to signify but a being otherwise (*Otherwise than Being* 144).

Gibson argues that this attempt to embrace the saying as a means of interrupting the ontological said reflects Levinas’s call for an ethical “relation to infinity rather than the thought of totality [...] precisely as the other in its infinity exceeds my representation of it, in the faltering or failing or ‘ruin’ of representation” (*Leavis to Levinas* 57). Nevertheless, there are considerable problems associated with Levinas’s attempt to rupture the logocentric said in favor of the ethical saying that overflows the totality of language but is also impossible to conceptualize.

For example, Robert Eaglestone contends that Levinas’s treatise about the ineffable Other eluding logocentric closure is complicated by the fact that speaking about alterity “demands a methodology, protocols of reading, and engagements with the said” (*Ethical Criticism* 169), and therefore only “a language that was not a philosophical language could

possibly go beyond the limits which are both from language and put upon language, but all language, at least in the west, partakes of Greek philosophical concepts” grounded by the *logos* (132). To speak about the transcendent saying counterproductively necessitates that it must be thematized by the ontological said to have meaning, and thus per Eagleton the primordial nature of the saying is lost because, “It is impossible to say the saying because at the moment of saying it becomes the said, betrayed by the concrete language which is the language of ontology. The saying, which is unthematisable, impossible to delimit, becomes limited, thematised, said” (147). Derrida further elaborates about the philosophical impasse Levinas faces when attempting to communicate about an infinite alterity that transcends the concrete language of ontology:

there is no way to conceptualize the encounter: it is made possible by the other, the unforeseeable “resistant to all categories.” Concepts suppose an anticipation, a horizon within which alterity is amortized as soon as it is announced precisely because it has let itself be foreseen. The infinitely-other cannot be bound by a concept, cannot be thought on the basis of a horizon (“Violence/Metaphysics” 95).

It should then come as no surprise that this aversion to the logocentric said and the correspondence theory of truth would also extend to those epistemic frameworks—exemplifying what Derrida derides as the Western impulse to order “the totality of research into onto-logico-encyclopedic fields” (“Ulysses Gramophone” 48)—underpinned by this notion of a central point of reference necessary for codifying disparate data into categories. Radhakrishnan argues that Derrida’s “onto-logico-encyclopedic” impulse is wholly incompatible with alterity because the impulse is a means of buttressing the “logocentric self [...] ineluctably implicated and sustained by and within a system of concentric hierarchic levels, a system that will not participate in its self-destruction” (“End of Logocentrism” 44),

which runs contra to a sublime alterity because, as Rasula claims, “Insofar as the sublime is an anti-representational concept, it appears antithetical to the encyclopedic impulse” (“Textual Indigence” 76).

But is this epistemic impulse to categorize and order the world, which conflicts with Levinas’s ethical call for maintaining a primordial, pre-semiotic relation with the Other, also applicable to literature? Levinas seldom spoke of literature and its relation to alterity because he saw literature as also being guilty of endorsing the logocentric said at the expense of the Other. Like the pitfalls associated with epistemic representation, Eaglestone contends Levinas had an antipathy for aesthetic representation because he “rejects ontological claims for art as something which can give us knowledge of the absolute [...] or which claim for art a transcendent role beyond ethics and truth” (*Ethical Criticism* 99). Gibson expanded on this by claiming that because novels are fictional constructs, such “texts are haunted by the question of epistemological closure, of the epistemological limits of their project, of the grounds for their representational authority” (*Leavis to Levinas* 66).

However, Eaglestone also notes that Levinas’s later work—especially *Otherwise than Being: Or Beyond Essence* (1978)—reluctantly acknowledges language as a necessary means to representing the ethical imperative of respecting alterity as exemplified by how “Levinas abandons his previous position which demanded ‘true representation’ and instead offers a way of understanding ethics philosophically through representation, through the phenomenon of language” (*Ethical Criticism* 135). In one of the rare instances in which Levinas discussed the implications of his philosophical views on literature, his essay “The Other in Proust” lauds Marcel Proust’s *À la recherche du temps perdu* (1913-1927)—a gargantuan multi-volume work of encyclopedic breadth that details the life of the protagonist, Marcel—for its portrayal of how the egocentric impulse to situate the self within the world through the ordering and categorizing of phenomena comes at the expense of alterity. For Levinas, the

search for the Other amidst the ostensibly endless deluge of sensory data in Marcel's narrative demonstrates the liminal nature of a Proustian reality situated between the totalizing interiority of the egocentric self and the ethical exteriority of an ineffable alterity:

This is the true interiorization of the Proustian world. It is not the result of a subjective vision of reality, nor even of the inner coordinates to which events, disdaining all objective points of reference and seeming to spring out of nowhere, [...] It arises from the very structure of the appearances, which are at once what they are and the infinity of what they exclude (101).

Levinas further noted that despite Marcel's best efforts to create a microcosm of his life in Combray in order to understand the underlying shadows of alterity that permeate his childhood memories, this is ultimately counterproductive because his work illustrates how the "failure of communication is the failure of knowledge" (104), and thus "the mystery of Proust is the mystery of the Other" (105). Proust's preoccupation with the Other and his negotiation of epistemic frameworks would help foreground future novels with similar themes.

This project will therefore focus on a distinct group of Proustian descendants preoccupied with both the possibility of representing an ineffable alterity as well as the epistemological limitations associated with the impulse to establish order within their respective colossal novels. As a comprehensive novel of ideas that both structurally and thematically explores how epistemic order is created and maintained, the work of these authors is described in many ways: what Lawrence Buell refers to as "sprawling performances of encyclopedic scope with multiple agendas from ethnographic to the metaphysical, [...] imagining forms of possible and/or balked 'democratic' collectivity" (*Dream* 349), what Frederick Karl describes as the "Mega-Novel" favoring indeterminacy by "decentering or deconstructing" ("Mega-Novel" 250) the epistemological closure of "vast, intricate systems" (256), what Tom LeClair's coins as the "systems novel" that reveals the

pitfalls associated with a “hierarchy of abstraction” (*In the Loop* 5), what Franco Moretti suggests is the “modern epic” exemplified by its attempt to negotiate the “discrepancy between the totalizing will of the epic and the subdivided reality of the modern world” (*Modern Epic* 5), what Stefano Ercolino names the “maximalist novel” that functions as an expansive, culturally “paradigmatic” work (*Maximalist Novel* xiii), or—perhaps with regard to American authors specifically—an example of John William De Forest’s ever-elusive idea of the “Great American Novel.”

More specifically, it will be argued that the implications associated with this epistemic preoccupation with alterity are especially noteworthy in the selected works of three post-war American novelists—William Gaddis, Thomas Pynchon, and David Foster Wallace—who self-reflexively adopt and subvert various epistemological approaches to understanding the world in order to illustrate the pitfalls associated with the reductive impulse to categorize disparate data and make it present-at-hand within epistemic frameworks. The ultimate aim of these efforts is to highlight an ineffable alterity—the ethical excess of the Other—eluding codification. Thus, just as Levinas describes Proust’s multi-volume work as a comprehensive catalog of phenomena in order to reveal “the infinity of what they exclude,” the expansiveness and proliferation of information by these novelists become subservient to its own Other: the exteriority incapable of being represented or—to put it in other terms—the excess that eludes totalization within the novel of excess.

It should be acknowledged, however, that this is by no means the first study aiming to document the problems associated with literary representations of alterity. Schehr, for example, previously explored how the nineteenth-century French realists attempted to demonstrate that the “representation of the other is in reality the extension of discourse to the unrepresentable or to that which was previously unrepresentable. That the unrepresentable is perceived as oppositional is the result of the structuring of discourse by hierarchies and by

metaphysics” (*Figures of Alterity* 26). Moreover, Matthew Raese’s study of post-war encyclopedism and the novel adopts Edith Wyschogrod’s notion of *heterology*, which describes the ethical imperative the historian must adopt to amend authoritative historical accounts that do not acknowledge the voiceless Other (*Ethics of Remembering* 165). This notion is borrowed from Julian Pefanis’s earlier study that suggests heterology is synonymous with the “*thought of nonidentity*,” which attempts “to preserve the difference of otherness, resisting the totalizing and totally compromised tendency of civilization” (*Heterology and the Postmodern* 5). While Raese does not necessarily adopt a strictly Levinasian view of the infinite Other that eludes representation, his study of encyclopedic elements in the post-war American novel is nevertheless sympathetic to such a view:

Heterology is a key concept to understanding the contemporary encyclopedic novels because it draws together the recognition that an authoritative logic may not be adequate to accurately understanding the world. It carries an ethical imperative to represent that which is not represented – or to point in the direction of the unrepresentable – and it also works to democratize knowledge by breaking the top-down model of knowledge that authoritative discourse depends upon (“Contemporary Encyclopedic Novel” 56-7).

Complementing Raese’s promotion of the ethical imperative associated with rejecting the hierarchical order of epistemic frameworks so as to represent the unrepresentable, this project will serve as one of the first comprehensive studies dedicated to examining how Gaddis, Pynchon, and Wallace typify this ethical impulse to undermine the closure of epistemic frameworks in favor of the excess that cannot be codified.

But to embark on a quest of encountering this radical Other while avoiding thematizing alterity within the finitude of language necessitates attempting to paradoxically embrace a post-Enlightenment position predicated on a non-comprehensible, non-foundation

of thought. To this end Tony Tanner suggests in his study of the post-war American novel how the Menippean satire may allow for such an anti-hierarchical non-foundation to be maintained because “the aggregate textual effect of Menippean satire is one of difference, strangeness, or the Other,” which is capable of leading “to a new orientation or a state of non-orientation; both are to open up the possibilities of a new freedom which is unavailable within the existing categories” (“Games Writers Play” 113-14). However, like the pitfalls associated with conceptualizing a saying that cannot be said, this ethical-orientated task must also take into consideration the paradox that inevitably arises when attempting to respect the Other without totalizing its radical alterity in the process.

So rather than seeking to reduce alterity to a series of signs—a notion at the heart of Levinas’s polemic against the totalizing nature of logocentrism—this project will venture to show how these three novelists reveal the violence inherent in language that leads to an erasure of the Other. Furthermore, while Levinas’ wariness for literature should certainly be taken into consideration, it can also be argued that his antipathy is already presupposed in the self-reflexive epistemological skepticism constituting the anti-foundational stance adopted by these novelists. It will therefore be argued that despite the often satirical, perhaps even nihilistic treatment of epistemic frameworks, these novelists nevertheless adopt a profoundly ethical vision in favor of the Other. But before delving into the respective works of these authors, the epistemic and philosophic presuppositions of their literary precursors will first need to be explored.

1.2 Epistemic Frameworks and Menippeanism

The convergence between encyclopedism and the novel was popularized by Edward Mendelson’s notion of the “encyclopedic narrative” in his seminal essay, “Encyclopedic Narrative: From Dante to Pynchon” (1976). Mendelson describes this type of expansive, eclectic narrative as being concerned with both encircling the totality of information as well

as serving as a microcosm that reflects the complete collective consciousness of a given culture. Mendelson argues the original objective of early encyclopedic narratives—including Dante's *Divine Comedy* (1320), Rabelais's *Gargantua and Pantagruel* (1532-64), Cervantes' *Don Quixote* (1605), Goethe's *Faust* (1808), and Melville's *Moby-Dick* (1851)—was to reflect the zeitgeist of their respective cultures.

Mendelson suggests these writers endeavor to offer a comprehensive microcosm of their society's prevailing ideologies by attempting to “render the full range of knowledge and beliefs of a national culture, while identifying the ideological perspectives from which that culture shapes and interprets its knowledge” (1269). In his study of literary depictions of encyclopedism, Ronald Swigger suggests that this attempt to create a genre of comprehensiveness reflects a “desire to grasp the truth, to comprehend and articulate a unified and total vision of the world” (“Fictional Encyclopedism” 352) through the adoption of what Clark describes as the impulse “to represent, to fix and order knowledge, [...] to organize disorder, counter entropy, and make complex information available” (“Encyclopedic Discourse” 104). However, Mendelson's vision of the encyclopedic narrative is problematic for a variety of reasons.

The most glaring issue with Mendelson's concept is that it subscribes to the idea that the encyclopedic model itself is capable of comprehensively unifying data within a single epistemic framework. Consequently, Mendelson appears to adopt a pre-Enlightenment conceptualization of the encyclopedia as a closed entity capable of encircling a totality of data rather than the Enlightenment model as an incomplete yet dynamic network of information. Mendelson's view is criticized by van Ewijk who claims how “Mendelson's definition of the encyclopedic narrative underscores this remaining dream of capturing totality and exercising control through rigid categorization” but it “overlooks the encyclopedic tension between totality and open-endedness first outlined by Diderot”

(“Encyclopedia, Network” 213). Arnar further suggests that Mendelson’s antiquated view of encyclopedism is at odds with readers who “no longer presume that encyclopedias include information in all fields, nor do we expect them to present a method to interpret knowledge. Rather, our relationship is detached: we simply consult the encyclopedia for isolated facts. Yet we should recognize [...] that there is no such thing as ‘impartial’ information” (*Pliny to Borges* 57).

It is then perhaps ironic that some of the novelists Mendelson champions as exemplifying his view of the encyclopedic narrative actually end up revealing in their respective ways the consequences of engaging in the monomaniacal knowledge-quest for unequivocal truth. For example, *Tristram Shandy* satirizes John Locke’s “An Essay on Human Understanding” (1690) by exploring the pitfalls associated with the attempt to foster meaning and order through a purely empirical understanding of the world. Rather than being tempted by the impulse to achieve a completely comprehensive account of a given subject, Sterne implements endless digressions and a deluge of information within his novel in order to highlight the impossibility of such an effort. More nefariously, the fallout that Goethe’s Faust experiences from compromising with Mephistopheles, like the demise of Captain Ahab by the white whale, is a direct result of his hubris exemplified by his attempt to gain access to a sublime knowledge that transcends the cognitive capacity of the finite mind. Likewise, Dante’s *Inferno* describes how many of Hell’s inhabitants are punished for having “foregone the good of the intellect” in their attempt to render a comprehensive understanding of the world without acknowledging how such an endeavor contributes to the glory of God (III.18).

With these examples in mind, other critics shifted the concept of the encyclopedic narrative away from Mendelson’s antiquated emphasis of the encyclopedia as a static, comprehensive compilation of data to instead aligning with a more modern interpretation of the encyclopedia as a rhizomatic system that is constantly accounting for new information.

For example, Clark suggests that the purported encyclopedic novel should instead be viewed as a type of “memory-system” that self-reflexively:

reflect[s] upon its own selection and ordering of knowledge. In doing so, however, it must ultimately come up against the limitations built into its own totalizing project; [...] any text (fictional or not) that we would call encyclopedic must speculate on its own discursive processes of discovery and arrangement, and on the limitations of these processes, given the fact of time and change (“Encyclopedic Discourse” 105).

Moreover, van Ewijk adopts a similar position by stating how in embracing the Diderotian encyclopedic model, this type of novel “seems to situate itself on a sliding scale between an urge for totalization and complete control, on the one hand, and the awareness of open-endedness and constant dynamic, on the other” (“Encyclopedia, Network” 212). This self-reflexive awareness with regard to recognizing the totalizing impulse of the encyclopedic project along with the need to maintain a dynamic, open-ended structure free from epistemic closure was also addressed by Luc Herman:

By processing an enormous amount of information from a variety of fields, a few big novels produce the illusion on the part of the reader that they have encyclopedic proportions and perhaps even manage to impose some form of order on the wealth of material. [...] The encyclopedic novel, too, serves to highlight the illusionary basis of “total knowledge”, even as it manifests the totalising impulse also associated with the project of encyclopedias (“Encyclopedic Novel” 138).

But while many encyclopedic narratives react against the same pre-Enlightenment encyclopedic model Mendelson presupposes in his essay, one significant question that arises is why do some of these writers feel the need to undermine this vision in the first place?

In his analysis of Flaubert's satirical work, *Bouvard and Pécuchet*, Leo Bersani suggests that the failure of the eponymous characters to foster any significant intellectual revelations despite engaging with different branches of knowledge ultimately illustrates how the work is preoccupied with exposing the consequences of a "civilization devoted exclusively to the use of knowledge to bridge the gap between human consciousness and its environment. [...] intelligence itself is finally irrelevant to the boundlessly energetic will to make human mind ideally consequential, to *realize representation*" ("Flaubert's Encyclopedism" 143). The duo's inability to do anything more with their knowledge than merely categorize data into the present-at-hand, as evident by their strict adherence to the sentiment "*le besoin de la vérité pour elle-même*," reveals the sterility associated with the pursuit of knowledge solely for knowledge's sake.

More importantly, Irene de Jong contends that Flaubert's novel engages in "an accumulation of facts and theories from the most diverse fields of knowledge in order to discredit the claims of art to any epistemological validity whatsoever," which suggests "that the effect of our inclination to represent the real is, by virtue of an ontological necessity, to alienate us from objects of representation" ("Epic" 143). This notion is shared by Hutcheon who questions if "we have ever known the 'real' except through representations" (*Poetics of Postmodernism* 33). So rather than embodying Mendelson's assertion regarding how the encyclopedic narrative strives to represent the complete range of beliefs within a given culture, Flaubert's novel instead undermines the value of these epistemic pursuits.

Flaubert's satirical approach to totalization helps illustrate why many of these writers negotiate the purview of epistemic frameworks within their novels in order to reveal their limitations. Accordingly, this playful rejection of hierarchical thought highlights how many of these works are Menippean satires—a type of work that attacks mental attitudes rather than specific people—which Northrop Frye argues is a genre typified by how rather than "see[ing]

evil and folly as social diseases, [...] the Menippean satirist sees them as diseases of the intellect, as a kind of maddened pedantry which the *philosophus gloriosus* at once symbolizes and defines” (*Anatomy of Criticism* 309). Frye suggests that the Menippean aversion to the *philosophus gloriosus*—a type of pedant whose enterprise is built upon abstracting knowledge from its practical application in the real world to present a totalizing “vision of the world in terms of a single intellectual pattern” (309)—is castigated by these writers.

Moreover, Frye cites writers such as Rabelais, Sterne, Swift, and Voltaire as engaging in an “encyclopedic farrago” that attacks the *philosophus gloriosus* in order to self-reflexively undermine “intellectual themes and attitudes [...] by piling up an enormous mass of erudition about his theme or in overwhelming his pedantic targets with an avalanche of their own jargon” (310). Likewise, Richard Hardack suggests that these writers depict the pitfalls associated with “the genre of the inherently male encyclopedic travel narrative” in which “male protagonists undertake reflexive and often doomed journeys seeking some form of chivalric or absolute knowledge. [...] here the literalized, somatic pursuit of encyclopedic knowledge is epistemically conflated with the pursuit of unattainable origins and thwarted by the impossibility of male self-containment” (“Going Belly Up” 131). Accordingly, Mikhail Bakhtin suggests these writers demonstrate how the Menippean satire belongs to “the realm of the serio-comical” (*Dostoevsky’s Poetics* 106) that promotes an “atmosphere of joyful relativity” to weaken “one-sided rhetorical seriousness, its rationality, its singular meaning, its dogmatism” (107). Likewise, Philip Holland outlines reasons as to why the Menippean satire is typically stationed as a counterpoint to “monological” discourses and worldviews:

seriocomic genres, by contrast, are dialogical; they deny the possibility, or more precisely, the experience of such integration. As tragedy and epic enclose, Menippean forms open up, anatomize. The serious forms comprehend man; the Menippean forms are based on man’s inability to know and contain

his fate. To any vision of a completed system of truth, the menippea suggests some element outside the system (“Anatomy of Melancholy” 36-7).

But while these satirists are deeply skeptical of the totalizing “vision of a completed system of truth,” some of these writers still attempt to formulate a cohesive narrative while nevertheless repudiating the notion of epistemic closure.

For example, Clark suggests that in “the menippea, an encyclopaedic range of topics is usually kept within the boundaries of a narrative which, even if fragmented, is still operative” (*Fictional Encyclopedia* 9). Swigger likewise suggests that despite their irreverent attitudes, these writers nevertheless attempt to hold onto the vestiges of order:

The menippean approach seems most appropriate for the modern writer, who is likely to stress the carnivalization of knowledge, the outlook which, through relativizing parody, exposes the vacuity of official or fashionable “current thinking.” [...] However, along with the parodies, all these encyclopedic writers display at the very least a nostalgia for the comprehensive, unfragmented view, for the vigor of thought or the flexibility of understanding for the qualities of knowledge which have so often informed literature (“Fictional Encyclopedism” 363-64).

It is then curious that Mendelson would publish his essay during a time when many American writers were aggressively exposing this vacuity associated with authoritative accounts about knowledge that he was presupposing in his conceptualization of the encyclopedic narrative. Hutcheon describes this post-war American literary epoch as embodying the “American paradoxical desire for and suspicion of totalization” or an “anti-totalizing totalization,” which led to the publication of a specific subset of Menippean novels that, in addition to undermining the validity of epistemic frameworks, “install and subvert the teleology, closure, and causality of narrative” (*Politics of Postmodernism* 63). Likewise, Stephen Burn argues

that the encyclopedic narrative during this period embodied “a heightened self-consciousness about the limitations of the encyclopedic impulse” that, in a Lyotardian manner, rejected the notion of grand narratives and the “dream of total knowledge” (“Collapse of Everything” 60-1). There are various reasons for this ideological shift.

The decades immediately following World War II marked a tumultuous period for an American nation that was trying to reassess its collective identity. Gerhard Hoffmann suggests that the immediate post-war American sensibility became fractured and nebulous, which led to intense epistemological perplexity (*Modernism to Postmodernism* 27). For example, in terms of politics the lauded notion of democracy and free speech that was so deeply cherished by Americans during World War II also influenced post-war political upheaval in order to protect these democratic virtues through patently fascist movements such as McCarthyism. Furthermore, Frances Saunders notes that radical avant-garde aesthetic movements such as abstract expressionism—ostensibly opposed to the dogmatism of authoritative institutions—were being secretly funded and politicized by the CIA as propaganda in order to promote America’s free thought as an ideological counterpoint to the USSR (*Cultural Cold War* 218).²

As for academia, the explosion of continental philosophy and critical theory in American universities during the 1960s—heavily grounded in the dissident aesthetics of abstract art and the ideological apparatus of the Frankfurt School—created new theoretical frameworks that supplanted traditional studies. Perhaps paradoxically, from the 1960s until the 1980s the same universities that were long deemed ivory tower institutions became the center of political action against a perceived bourgeois sensibility. However, Terry Eagleton notes that critical theory’s unyielding promotion of cultural relativity and pluralism during

² This initiative became known as the Cultural Cold War program led by Secretary General Nicolas Nabokov: Vladimir Nabokov’s cousin (*Cultural Cold War* 79).

this time elevated the marginalized into such a level of prominence that many academics were just as guilty of succumbing to the same “elitist, monolithic viewpoint” that they so readily lambasted conservative thinkers for adopting (*After Theory* 13). Eagleton further suggests that post-war American academia paradoxically adopted a “postmodern fetish of difference” while simultaneously obfuscating the boundaries between “image and reality, truth and fiction, history and fable, ethics and aesthetics, culture and economics, high and popular art, political left and right” (46).

These paradoxes permeating the academic, aesthetic, and political post-war American cultural landscape helped set the stage for the innovative literary trends that helped form the American postmodern epoch during the 1960s and 1970s. Brian McHale argues that as a simultaneous continuation of and rebellion against the fragmentary and dissident practices of the modernist tradition and Nouveau Roman, the incipient postmodern epoch embraced its own ideological liminality (*Postmodernist Fiction* 5), which Hutcheon refers to as *paradoxical postmodernism* “that at once inscribes and subverts the conventions and ideologies of the dominant cultural and social forces of the twentieth century western world” (*Politics of Postmodernism* 11). But if, for example, the avant-garde attempted to subvert authoritative economic, political, religious, and social institutions by challenging their authority on the basis of their epistemological validity, McHale contends that postmodern novelists rechanneled this epistemological skepticism into a deep-seated ontological skepticism that challenged the validity of the world itself (*Postmodernist Fiction* 10). Consequently, McHale suggests that the concerns of postmodern fiction became ontologically dominant because, “although it would be perfectly possible to interrogate a postmodernist text about its epistemological implications, it is more *urgent* to interrogate it about its ontological implications. In postmodernist texts, in other words, epistemology is *backgrounded*, as the price for foregrounding ontology” (11).

In this sense Hoffmann suggests this ontological skepticism that backgrounds epistemological concerns is the result of postmodern writers creating “a new mode of experience, a new consciousness, a new intellectual style, and above all, new playful possibilities for the imagination unhampered by the frustrations of existential alienation and the over-serious devotion to awareness” (*Modernism to Postmodernism* 14). Aided by the growing influence of post-structural theory, postmodernism’s “dominant concerns have changed from epistemological to ontological ones [...] the ontological preoccupation of postmodern fiction is concerned not so much with truth, but with being and the existence of autonomous worlds” (18). However, this ontological emphasis advocated by Hoffmann and McHale, while not necessarily misguided, inevitably implicates postmodern literature in the same unethical pitfalls Levinas accused of Heidegger’s Dasein-centric philosophy. It also ignores monumental epistemological concerns explored by many postmodern writers. For example, black humorists such as William Burroughs, Joseph Heller, Philip Roth, Gore Vidal, and Kurt Vonnegut simultaneously provoked serious thought, amusement and disgust by challenging the epistemological foundation of social taboos while metafictionists such as John Barth, Donald Barthelme, Robert Coover, and William H. Gass self-reflexively confronted not only the ontological but epistemological foundation of the novel itself.

But it is perhaps Vladimir Nabokov—a writer McHale champions as exemplifying the purported postmodern preoccupation with ontological instability (*Postmodernist Fiction* 18)—who offers one of the most salient reflections with regard to the fractured epistemological sensibility of post-war America. Following the publication and critical acclaim of *Pale Fire* (1962), Nabokov was interviewed by Alvin Toffler for *Playboy*. Nabokov was notorious for giving enigmatic responses to interviewers, so when asked during the interview if he believed in a higher power he responded, “I know more than I can express in words, and the little I can express would not have been expressed, had I not known more”

(“Nabokov’s Interview” 45). In this statement Nabokov not only addresses the limits of what is knowable but also the limits of what is capable of being expressed. This interplay between the ineffable and intelligible would be a major concern for many post-war American writers.

Moreover, Peter Cooper argues that this sentiment reveals how in “recognizing that each person must forge his or her own version of reality, Nabokov parodies all such attempts in order to show his knowledge of the insufficiency of any one version and also to save himself from getting immured in his own constructions” (*Signs and Symptoms* 37).

Nabokov’s statement also complements what Richard Rorty notion of *ironism* in which the ironist acknowledges how truth is contingent on mercurial vocabularies that mankind generally fails to recognize as lacking unequivocal validity when they employ them “to justify their actions, their beliefs, and their lives” (*Contingency* 73). He accordingly praises Nabokov’s epistemological skepticism arising from Nabokov’s awareness of the impossibility of a perfect “final vocabulary” when Rorty suggested, “Nabokov’s best novels are the ones which exhibit his inability to believe his own general ideas” (*Contingency* 168). Like Levinas’s language-oriented approach to negotiating epistemic totality and Rorty’s call for recognizing the radical contingency of language as a communal construct and its tenuous relationship with truth, a significant facet of Nabokov’s fixation revolves around the need to understand the theoretical boundaries separating the realm of comprehensible and conveyable knowledge from that which is unknowable and/or inexpressible.

While working as an English professor at Cornell University, Nabokov would eventually cross paths with a young Thomas Pynchon in one of the courses Nabokov taught. Pynchon, whose magnum opus *Gravity’s Rainbow* (1973) was lauded by Mendelson as best exemplifying his notion of the encyclopedic narrative, was just beginning to cultivate an interest in literature at the time he took Nabokov’s course. According to John Krafft, Pynchon initially studied engineering physics at Cornell before leaving early to serve in the navy

during the Korean War, but he eventually returned to Cornell in 1957 in order to pursue a writing career (“Biographical Note” 10). While it is unlikely that any significant interactions between Nabokov and Pynchon ever came to fruition—although Elizabeth Sweeney notes that Pynchon mentioned his working relationship with Nabokov in a grant application submitted in 1959 to the Ford Foundation requesting subsidies for an opera libretto that Pynchon wanted to compose (“V-Shaped Paradigm” 178) and Nabokov’s wife, Vera, recalled marking Pynchon’s eccentric essays written in a combination of printed and cursive script (175)—the influence of Nabokov’s epistemological preoccupation with language is apparent throughout Pynchon’s oeuvre. So rather than embodying the encyclopedic characteristics Mendelson ascribed to Pynchon’s novel nor the ontological emphasis suggested by McHale, *Gravity’s Rainbow* promoted a similar wariness towards epistemic foundationalism.

In many ways Nabokov’s and Pynchon’s preoccupation with the interplay between ineffability and epistemic order is partly owed to James Joyce’s late-modernist, or perhaps proto-postmodern work, *Finnegans Wake* (1939). Complementing Nabokov’s diatribe against the pitfalls associated with epistemic foundationalism, Len Platt describes *Finnegans Wake* as attempting to undermine the epistemological presumptions of the *Encyclopedia Britannica* by self-reflexively questioning “the order and authority embodied in a text exemplifying the very idea of the encyclopedia” (“Unfallable encycling” 107), which the *Wake* accomplishes by amounting to:

a text that has apparently swallowed or “digested” vast amounts of information only to return it in ways that seem outside all reasoned discussion, [...] The *EB* is a text that achieves certainty in areas where the *Wake* “fails,” performing in ways the *Wake* simply cannot. For this reason, it plays a precise part in framing what it is that the *Wake* articulates against the knowledge the world claims to have of itself (107).

Whereas Mendelson argues that the encyclopedic narrative legitimately attempts to reflect the guiding ideological principles of a given culture, Platt argues the *Wake*—as is also evident in some of the episodes within Joyce’s earlier novel, *Ulysses* (1922)—instead reveals “the fragile edges of epistemology where old knowledge becomes undermined not just by better science but by the internal contradictions that collapse ‘knowledge’ into crude ideology” (112) through “an astonishing refutation of any kind of epistemological order [...] hierarchy, centrism, and progressivism and seems specifically designed not to extend knowledge to the ignorant but, rather, to render the idea of knowledge infuriatingly impossible” (108).

Typifying Hutcheon’s notion of paradoxical postmodernism, these traits are also apparent in many American post-war novels that simultaneously lampoon the notion of epistemic totality while also thematically serving as a cultural microcosm of post-war America by reflecting the fractured epistemological mindset of the postmodern age. Complementing the anti-foundationalist views espoused in *Finnegans Wake*, the following maximalist works depict aspects of reality as being far too complex to be fully integrated within even the most expansive of novels: Gaddis’s *The Recognitions* (1955) and *J.R.* (1975), Pynchon’s *Gravity’s Rainbow* (1973), Joseph Heller’s *Something Happened* (1974), Robert Coover’s *The Public Burning* (1977), Joseph McElroy’s *Women and Men* (1987), Richard Powers’s *The Gold Bug Variations* (1991), William Gass’s *The Tunnel* (1995), Wallace’s *Infinite Jest* (1996), Don DeLillo’s *Underworld* (1997), Leon Forrest’s *Divine Days* (1996), and Mark Z. Danielewski’s *House of Leaves* (2000). These extensive works create an illusion of comprehensiveness by flooding the reader with an excessive amount of information and fragmented perspectives, which makes it nearly impossible for the reader to assimilate the information into a single comprehensive account. Accordingly, van Ewijk notes that despite the surfeit of information offered in these novels, the narratives are often frustratingly left open-ended:

the massive amount of information cannot be grasped by the reader in its totality. As this reader progresses through the narrative network, he can impose temporary orders, but the constant appearance of new material and the reoccurrence of elements lead to either the falsification or the temporary strengthening of that order, resulting in a flux of imposed structures (“Encyclopedia, Network” 220).

For van Ewijk, this overload of information leaves the reader yearning for a structure capable of ordering the chaos that many of these novelists purposely withhold. Moreover, these novels reveal how the delineation of information can never be comprehensive and, perhaps more nefariously, necessitates a significant sacrifice when this information is made present-at-hand within epistemic frameworks. For example, in John Barth’s *The End of the Road* (1958) the protagonist, Jack Horner, contemplates about how “turn[ing] experience into speech—that is, to classify, to categorize, to conceptualize, to grammarize, to syntactify it—is always a betrayal of experience, a falsification of it; but only so betrayed can it be dealt with at all, and only in so dealing with it did I ever feel a man, alive and kicking” (119).

The value of negotiating the purview of epistemic frameworks within these post-war novels, however, is not without its detractors. For example, James Wood famously coined the term *hysterical realism* in his critique of Zadie Smith’s *White Teeth* (2000) to refer to the negative function of what he denotes as the “Great American Social Novel” that includes Wallace’s *Infinite Jest*, DeLillo’s *Underworld*, and Pynchon’s *Mason & Dixon* (1997). He contends that the attempt by these novelists to explore epistemological issues ends up counterproductively obfuscating reality while also leaving their work devoid of an emotional and moral acuity:

The conventions of realism are not being abolished but, on the contrary, exhausted, and overworked. Appropriately, then, objections are not made at

the level of verisimilitude, but at the level of morality: this style of writing is not to be faulted because it lacks reality [...] but because it seems evasive of reality while borrowing from realism itself. It is not a cock-up, but a cover-up (“Human, All Too Inhuman” 2).

In addition to accusing the purported Great American Social Novel of betraying some essential part of reality, Wood further argues that this type of expansive novel co-opts the dynamic network of Diderot’s encyclopedic model in a wholly negative manner by becoming a “perpetual-motion machine” (1) of glib stories that reveal the mania inextricably linked to the rhizomatic interconnectivity of post-war life. As a result of this frenetic form of representation, Wood decries how these novels incorporate bloated structures that disfigure reality and, as a result, fundamentally fail to assuage the societal hysteria that these novelists ostensibly seeks to rectify. In other words, Wood suggests these types of novels are marred by the fact that in their pursuit of being able to reflect the chaotic nature of reality, they essentially neglect what Wood views as the fundamental duty of literature in being able to maintain an interlocutory role with the reader.

However, what Wood, Hoffmann, and McHale all fail to recognize is that the thematic exhaustion of data by some of these novelists foregrounds epistemological concerns as a means of helping promote a profoundly ethical pursuit. The hysterical proliferation of information in these novels undermines the closure of epistemic frameworks in favor of a latent alterity that cannot be reduced to the present-at-hand. While this subversive treatment of epistemic order may at first appear to be symptomatic of an unethical, nihilistic form of postmodernism that promotes the proverbial “anything-goes” attitude of indifference, consumption, and moral relativism, it will instead be argued that these novels advance an ethical postmodernism that respects multiplicity and acknowledges an infinite alterity that is impossible to thematize within the novel. The project will therefore examine how this view of

postmodern literature is inextricably linked to the question of the Other, which is not primarily an ontological question as Hoffmann and McHale might suggest but equally—or even more so—an epistemological one as is evident in the alterity-oriented, epistemically-foregrounded, and ethically-driven designs of three seminal post-war American novels: Gaddis's *The Recognitions*, Pynchon's *Gravity's Rainbow*, and Wallace's *Infinite Jest*.

1.3 The Ethical Excess in the Novels of Excess

While Mendelson praises Pynchon for being the first American novelist to write “an encyclopedic narrative that emphatically calls attention not only to its own structure but also to the social and psychological processes that give books like his their cultural position” (“Encyclopedic Narrative” 1275), this praise is misattributed since *Gravity's Rainbow* is not the first post-war American novel to adopt such a vision. Instead, the first chapter will argue that it is in fact Gaddis who serves as one of the earliest post-war American authors to self-reflexively negotiate its own epistemic structure in favor of an ineffable alterity that cannot be totalized. *The Recognitions*, a 900-page sprawling work that Zoltán Abádi-Nagy refers to as a “*postmodern variation on the Künstlerroman*,” which investigates the role of the artist within an ever-evolving post-war society inundated by information and rampant consumerism (“Art of Fiction” 59), serves as a transitional work between the modernist and postmodernist epochs. Joel Black, for example, suggests that Gaddis's initially unsuccessful debut novel “has eluded critical reception because it is a type of literary monstrosity that is neither modernist nor postmodernist, but a ‘Janus-faced’ text that looks back to the classic works of high modernism [...] while it looks ahead to the schizoid text of writers like Pynchon, Coover, and DeLillo” (“Review” 1121).

In many ways Gaddis espouses the same epistemological wariness towards institutional authority previously sustained by modernists such as T. S. Eliot, James Joyce, and Wallace Stevens. In fact, Peter Koenig notes how at one point Gaddis wanted to make

The Recognitions a pastiche containing all the lines of Eliot's *Four Quartets* ("Recognizing" 67), and critics have routinely compared the work to Joyce's *Ulysses*. Nevertheless, academics such as Hoffmann consider *The Recognitions* to promote a proto-postmodern sensibility by using black humor and self-reflexivity as a means of deconstructing hierarchical order and highlighting the cultural vacuum of the post-war milieu (*Modernism to Postmodernism* 43). For example, towards the end of the novel a book critic is seen carrying a "thick book" resembling *The Recognitions*, and when asked by another character if he is reading it the critic responds that he does not plan to do so in its entirety because he is "just reviewing it" and all he needs "is the jacket blurb to write the review" (936).

By self-reflexively addressing the arbitrary nature of aesthetic judgment as well as anticipating the critical reception his novel would initially receive upon its publication, Gaddis moves away from the clear modernist delineation of high and low culture by instead emphasizing how cultural hierarchies are unstable and ultimately groundless. Furthermore, John Johnston suggests that the primary theme of forgery in *The Recognitions* highlights Gaddis's preoccupation with attempting to present the unrepresentable and undermine the Platonic privileging of the original over the copy, which is reflective of the postmodern condition and thus helps the novel to "legitimately lay claim to being the first American 'postmodern' novel" (*Gaddis* 136).

One significant aspect of Gaddis's novel as it relates to the attempt to subvert the original-copy distinction is that it effectively allows Gaddis to mount a concerted effort on a linguistic level against the totalization of alterity by the logical positivist: one who subscribes to an austere branch of analytic philosophy and subset of the correspondence theory of truth espousing the notion that statements can only be meaningful if they avoid needless obscurantism by being as precise and empirically verifiable as the scientific method it attempts to emulate. Accordingly, the rigid epistemic presuppositions advanced by logical

positivism will be explored throughout this study in order to show how it is incompatible with alterity. For example, Theodore Kharpertian illustrates why some postmodern writers took exception to this type of formal logic:

there exists the linguistic impasse facing postmodernism that derives from the positivist conception of literature as a degraded use of language. In positivism, the representative or referential use of language in science is privileged and proper; it is the means by which knowledge is communicated. On the other hand, implicit in positivism's banishment of metaphysics and poetry to the expressive domain of language is the belief that the expressive use of language lacks empirical content; such a use of language is not a form of knowledge, and therefore, no knowledge is communicated in or by it (*Hand to Turn* 51-2).

The positivist overemphasis on empiricism and reason effectively marginalizes aesthetic, ethical, and spiritual concerns due to how they cannot be quantified within systems of formal logic. This would become a target of criticism by Gaddis who attempts to resist logical positivism in *The Recognitions* through his call for the artist to strive to “make negative things do the work of positive ones” (590)—a notion akin to John Keats's concept of *negative capability* (*Letters* 277) that essentially strives to recognize an ineffable, and by positivist standards a nonsensical, excess eluding codification within epistemic frameworks.

But while Gaddis's work can be viewed as one of the first post-war novels to exemplify the irreverent, carnivalesque freeplay of the American postmodern literary tradition, *The Recognitions* refuses to adopt a completely nihilistic stance towards the acquisition of knowledge. Clark suggests that this characteristic aligns Gaddis with those epistemically-preoccupied novelists who maintain an:

ironic perspective [that] coexists with a nostalgic attitude toward knowledge and its possibility, this combination of irony and nostalgia evidencing an

uncertainty towards the encyclopaedic project. Both irony and nostalgia presuppose an awareness of a gap between an ideal, full state of knowledge or identity and an actual lack or alienation; this gap stimulates the writer and the reader to attempt to fill it in, to turn back, a goal which can never be fully realized (*Fictional Encyclopedia* 37).

Like Captain Ahab's attempt to strike through the pasteboard masks of the visible order in order to gain access to a sublime knowledge that eludes the present-at-hand, Gaddis approaches this gap by endeavoring to rediscover this "ideal, full state of knowledge" in the form of what Wallace Stevens refers to as the primordial "first idea" (*Necessary Angel* 329) capable of salvaging post-war America from its cultural vacuity and moral relativism. This idea takes the form of what Gaddis in *Agapē Agape* refers to as "some significant Other [who] will burst out of the bushes and redeem any shred of value hidden" within the "grand hallucination" of an ordered reality (88).

In order to accomplish this task, Gaddis attempts to eschew the differentiation that predicates epistemic frameworks by instead promoting the notion of a primordial first idea in the form of a sublime universal unity of total unconditional love for the Other that cannot be totalized. Through his vision of re-cognizing the negative aspects that logical positivists associate with indeterminacy in order to foster an *agape* with the Other, Gaddis promotes the ethical imperative of the "self-who-can-do-more" (*Recognitions* 253) who must simplify life by rejecting the egocentric attempt to situate oneself within the world. By avoiding the urge to make the world present-at-hand at the expense of alterity, Gaddis suggests that post-war America, a landscape he feels is more burdened by stupidity rather than malice ("Mothers" 136), can be ultimately redeemed.

Gaddis's optimistic attempt to resist totalizing modes of thought in order to enter into a communion with the Other will then transition to the second chapter exploring Pynchon's

more cynical view of a world dominated by nefarious groups who use malicious epistemic frameworks of control as a means to securing power for themselves. This is a concern shared by Wittgenstein who, while initially a champion of logical positivism, nevertheless understood the pitfalls associated with an uncompromising devotion to reason:

It isn't absurd, e.g., to believe that the age of science and technology is the beginning of the end for humanity; that the idea of great progress is delusion, along with the idea that the truth will ultimately be known; that there is nothing good or desirable about scientific knowledge and that mankind, in seeking it, is falling into a trap. It is by no means obvious that this is not how things are (*Culture and Value* 56).

Likewise, Pynchon views technological advancement as dehumanizing and exacerbating what Krzysztof Ziarek describes as “the problem of domination, violence, and the forgetting of alterity characteristic of what Heidegger, but also Adorno, describes as the technological worldview” (*Inflected Language* 6-7). Accordingly, Pynchon maintains a level of paranoia throughout his oeuvre towards this technological worldview revolving around the possibility of a malicious explanation and ulterior motive underlying every connection that can be made between data. Deborah Madsen refers to this technologically-grounded episteme as being the ultimate embodiment of the “totalizing logic of Reason” that “radically circumscribes human freedom by limiting access to alternative discourses” (*Postmodernist Allegories* 94), and Elizabeth Hinds describes this world as being predicated upon the “Enlightenment mandate to redesign the natural world in light of intellectual categories” (“Introduction: The Times” 5).

In response, George Moore contends that Pynchon therefore uses paranoia to “deconstruct the notion of science as absolute authority by showing how it reduces human experience to unresolvable contradiction” (“Aesthetics of Chaos” 204). But while Pynchon shares Gaddis’s wariness with regard to how language can become a means of epistemic

reductionism by various systems seeking to categorize and order disparate data, he nevertheless refuses to subscribe to Gaddis's more optimistic vision of one day being able to make negative things do the work of positive ones. Instead, for Pynchon even ethical imperatives can become totalizing agents that promote absolutist thinking at the expense of the Other.

Consequently, Kathryn Hume suggests at the end of her essay on Pynchon's alternative worlds that while "Pynchon evidently would like that, another world, another chance," he realizes this is an impossibility and is therefore left "to focus on what we can do if nothing else is there, just the world that is all that is the case" ("Attenuated Realities" 30). Nevertheless, it would be wrong to suggest that he merely accepts the positivist notion that the world is all that is the case at face value. Rather, he adopts a more bellicose view towards the austere rationalism of these systems and their fixation on control. For example, in response to the positivist relegation of aesthetic, ethical, and spiritual concerns to the realm of the nonsensical, Pynchon becomes empowered by the nonsensical through his notion of *illogical negativism*. So whereas Gaddis attempts to re-conceptualize indeterminacy in a way that allows him to find a place for radical alterity by making negative things do the work of positive ones within an epistemic framework—a pursuit that while ethical also risks totalizing alterity through its rationalization within the novel—Pynchon's illogical negativism is more extreme as it attempts to respect the enigma of the Other by maintaining a non-committal, liminal position in order to remain truly open to an "Other Order of Being" in *Gravity's Rainbow* (222) by avoiding rationalizing the problem of alterity altogether.

But while Pynchon's non-position may seem much more cynical compared to Gaddis's sanguine attempt to foster a place for the ineffable Other within his novel, a hope nevertheless remains in Pynchon's work of an encounter with a "magical Other" (*Crying Lot* 136) taking place within a world dominated by a malicious form of technological

determinism. This possibility of encountering the magical Other complements John Miller's argument about how Pynchon's various Californian landscapes represent "neither an exemplar of postmodern 'exhaustion' nor a 'promise' (even if only mythic) but a symbol of open possibilities [...] in which the historical struggles that shaped the experiences of the characters in the longer works remain ongoing and unresolved: a 'realm of the Subjunctive'" ("Present Subjunctive" 227). The prospect of fostering an *agape* with the Other is a beacon of hope for many of Pynchon's characters—as is apparent in the respective trysts between Roger Mexico and Jessica Swanlake as well as Geli Tripping and Tchitcherine—because, as one character observes, through love "isolation is overcome [...] Through the machineries of greed, pettiness, and the abuse of power, *love occurs*" (*Gravity's Rainbow* 440).

The second chapter will therefore illustrate how *Gravity's Rainbow* responds in a variety of ways to several key aspects that make up Gaddis's ethical pursuit of fostering an alterity-oriented *agape* in *The Recognitions*: Gaddis's self-who-can-do-more who attempts to cull one's egocentric impulses in favor of the Other transitions to Pynchon's Other Order of Being that displaces any position of sameness altogether; Gaddis's view of a world inundated with stupidity transitions to Pynchon's world overrun with malice; Gaddis's quixotic pursuit of indeterminacy transitions to Pynchon's radical nonsense; and Gaddis's attempt to make negative things do the work of positive ones transitions to Pynchon's notion of illogical negativism.

The final chapter will then examine how Pynchon's nonsensical non-position shifts to Wallace's exploration of a "cohesion-renewing Other" within *Infinite Jest* (384) who attempts to foster a renewed cohesion between the different stances adopted by Gaddis and Pynchon with regard to tackling the problem of the ethical excess eluding totalization within epistemic frameworks. Conscious of both the need to adopt an ethical imperative for the Other while also being mindful of having to engage with epistemic frameworks in order to

convey meaning, Wallace adopts a Rortyan, neopragmatic approach that maintains a faith in the signifying capacity of language while nevertheless repudiating epistemic foundationalism and acknowledging the radical contingency of language and selfhood as communal constructs predicated on the Other. In this sense Wallace's alterity-oriented negotiation of language throughout *Infinite Jest* complements Ziarek's attempt to establish a purported "hermeneutics of nearness" with the Other by examining whether it is possible for language to be a means of achieving an ethical relation with alterity despite being "bound to violence, not only as a result of specific cultural and discursive settings but, as Levinas puts it, by virtue of a 'natural' allergy to otherness" (*Inflected Language* 11), which leads to "the pressure of thematization and the inevitable erasure of alterity that the process of signification and representation entails" (10).

Wallace's effort to identify a place for alterity within epistemic frameworks is owed to the fact that rather than adopting Gaddis's and Pynchon's irreverent treatment of logical positivism and logocentrism, Wallace was in fact a devout scholar of analytic philosophy. For example, while Gaddis mocked logical positivism by having a character claim to be a "negative positivist" or "positive negativist" (*Recognitions* 178) and Pynchon lambasted it through his notion of illogical negativism, Wallace wrote in a letter to a friend about how Wittgenstein's first proposition in the *Tractatus* was "the most beautiful opening line in western lit" (*Fate, Time, Language* 13). Nevertheless, Wallace also acknowledged the consequences of living in a *Tractatus*-based world because a world that "is nothing but a huge mass of data, of logically discrete facts that have no intrinsic connection to one another" ("Empty Plenum" 225) is necessarily an austere one due to how it "admits exactly nothing of ethics or moral value or questions about what it is to be human" (228). Wallace instead opted to attempt to respect alterity through the adoption of dynamic, neopragmatic, communally-

constructed fictions capable of bringing the Other into the public sphere without totalizing alterity in the process.

In their respective ways the selected works of Gaddis, Pynchon, and Wallace—separated from one another by roughly two decades—each offer a multifarious approach to respecting alterity emanating as a form of informational entropy—an ethical excess—that cannot be totalized within epistemic frameworks. Accordingly, their epistemically-driven, rather than ontologically-foregrounded, efforts provide a possible model for what Gibson’s rather nebulous “narrative ethics” could look like in practice:

what would a narrative ethics look like if it turned away from an established model of narrative that always structures the latter in terms of a distancing of an observing subject from its object? [...] What if, instead, I start to imagine narrative in the move of *excedance*, as a movement outwards, a relation, an engagement or composition with an exteriority in which interior, exterior and the boundary between them do not “stay the same,” but are ceaselessly renegotiated? (*Postmodern Ethics* 49).

Consequently, this passage helps inform why these three novelists privilege epistemological concerns over ontological ones because achieving an alterity-oriented narrative ethics is essentially contingent on undermining the totalizing ontological impulse to distance the observing subject from its object and, by extension, the Other.

So in addition to offering distinct approaches to establishing a narrative ethics in *The Recognitions*, *Gravity’s Rainbow*, and *Infinite Jest*, it can be further argued that these authors also engage in a dialogue with one another within their subsequent works. For example, despite publishing *The Recognitions* 18 years prior to *Gravity’s Rainbow*, Gaddis’s second novel—the National Book Award winner *J R* (1975)—followed the publication of *Gravity’s Rainbow* by only two years while Pynchon’s *Mason & Dixon* was published the year

following *Infinite Jest*. Moreover, at the turn of the twenty-first century each novelist offers a critique of the evolution of epistemic frameworks with Gaddis's posthumous novella *Agapē Agape* (2002), Wallace's posthumous novel *The Pale King* (2011), and Pynchon's latest novel *Bleeding Edge* (2013) reflecting upon the interplay between alterity and epistemic order in the Information Age.

In *Ulysses*, Stephen Dedalus at one point ponders over Aristotle's treatise about the nature of experiential knowledge: "Ineluctable modality of the visible: at least that if no more, thought through my eyes" (III.1-2). The concept posits how man can only observe the pure form of an object rather than its underlying substance, which reveals the pitfalls associated with a purely empirical understanding of the world since perception is incapable of faithfully representing an independent reality fully in its own right. As a result, the "infinite possibilities" of reality are in the end "ousted" (II. 50-1). With this in mind, the title of the thesis alludes to Stephen's contemplation over the possibility of an ineluctable modality that cannot be perceived, and therefore this project will analyze how these authors ruminate about these ousted infinite possibilities taking the form of an infinite alterity that cannot be assimilated within epistemic frameworks without being totalized in the process. In this sense Levinas promotes the ethical imperative of responsibility to alterity by attempting to rupture the logocentric boundaries of sameness because "what is signified by the verb *to be* would be *ineluctable* in everything said, thought and felt" (*Otherwise than Being* 4) despite how the Other is incapable of being articulated and made comprehensible within such a "modality of cognition" (48).

To speak of the Other while respecting the Other's radical alterity is an ostensibly paradoxical, albeit requisite act necessary for addressing the aporia at the heart of these novels. But despite the ineffable nature of the ethical excess that eludes totalization within epistemic frameworks, Lisa Guenther suggests that to discuss the Other is not necessarily

“incompatible with a certain universality which entitles us to use a phrase like ‘the Other’ without contradicting or diminishing the singularity of *this* Other who faces me here and now. This universality is precisely *not* a generality which effaces distinct singularities by subsuming them all indifferently under the same category” (“Nameless Singularity” 170).

Likewise, Levinas expressed a similar sentiment when he claimed, “To approach the other in conversation is to welcome his expression, in which at each instant he overflows the idea a thought would carry away from it. It is therefore to receive from the Other beyond the capacity of the I, which means exactly: to have the idea of infinity” (*Totality and Infinity* 51).

Let us converse.

Chapter Two:

The Re-Cognition of the Other:

Agapistic Ethics and the “Self-Who-Can-Do-More” in William Gaddis’s *The Recognitions*

“Science is based on data supplied by a small corpus of knowledge. Perhaps it doesn’t apply to all the rest that we don’t know about, which is much more vast, and which we can never understand.”

—Gustave Flaubert, *Bouvard et Pécuchet*

“The fate of our times is characterized by rationalization and, above all, by the *disenchantment of the world*. Precisely the ultimate and most sublime values have retreated from public life either into the transcendental realm of mystic life or into the brotherliness of direct and personal human relations.”

—Max Weber, “Science as a Vocation”

2.1 Ordering the Chaosmos

It seems fitting that a study of epistemic order and the Other within three post-war American novels should begin with the work often credited with, perhaps unintentionally, introducing a proto-postmodern American sensibility: Gaddis’s *The Recognitions*. Upon being initially panned by critics when it was published in 1955, Gaddis did not publish another novel for twenty years. However, due to the success of his second novel the National Book Award winner, *J R*, critics such as Steven Moore came to realize how *The Recognitions* was actually a prescient work that “pioneered the Menippean satire of the seventies” (*Gaddis* 1), and therefore a renewed critical assessment was applied to the novel that had up until that point been largely ignored.

Born in 1922, Gaddis grew up in New England and then went on to study English at Harvard while serving as president of the university’s satirical magazine, *Lampoon* (*Gaddis* 2). After being expelled from the university during his final year due to a confrontation with local police, Gaddis became a fact checker for *The New Yorker* before leaving the job in 1947 to travel around Europe and northern Africa while working on the manuscript for *The Recognitions* (3). Following the novel’s initial failure, Joseph Tabbi notes that Gaddis then took up a series of corporate writing jobs for companies such as IBM, Ford, and Pfizer (*Nobody Grew* 109). The critical success of *J R* eventually led to Gaddis being awarded with

a MacArthur Foundation Fellowship that Moore argues provided him with the financial assistance necessary to be able to finally commit to writing full-time (*Gaddis ix*). While his later novels *Carpenter's Gothic* (1985) and *A Frolic of His Own* (1994) would be his most commercially-successful works, *The Recognitions* remains one of Gaddis's most important literary contributions by functioning as an intermediary work influenced by early twentieth-century writers such as John Dos Passos, T. S. Eliot, James Joyce, and Sinclair Lewis while also serving as a precursor for the post-war American black humorists and metafictionists such as Barth, Coover, DeLillo, and Gass.³

Notorious at the time for its erudition and verbosity, *The Recognitions*—borrowing its name from the *Clementine Recognitions*—is an expansive novel that explores the nature of epistemic order by examining the validity of various systems of thought ranging from aesthetics to physics, alchemy to chemistry, Calvinism to Mithraism, and history to mythology. But like Nabokov's ironist adage regarding the impossibility of epistemic certainty in the post-war age, Gaddis suggested in an interview with Abádi-Nagy that he attempted to expose the shortcomings of these disparate systems featured within his novel in order to promote:

the courage to accept a relative universe and even one verging upon chance, certainly at least in its human component, since these absolutes are essentially childish, born out of fear of a purposeless existence. [...] Of course all this leads us into the sketchy refuge of situation ethics, old foes with new faces, because looked at another way, this collapse of absolutes going on around us

³ Some critics have been particularly keen on noting the similarities between Gaddis and Joyce. For example, there are many parallels between Joyce's *Ulysses* and *The Recognitions* (e.g. the failed artists Wyatt Gwyon and Otto Pivner in Gaddis's work parallel Stephen Dedalus, and these characters are juxtaposed against the Prufrockian character Mr. Pivner and Leopold Bloom respectively). Despite this, Gaddis was particularly impatient with the critics who claimed that his work was indebted to Joyce. He argued that while having read little Joyce and constantly denouncing claims that said otherwise, "why bother to go on, anyone seeking Joyce finds Joyce even if both Joyce & the victim found the item in Shakespeare" (*Letters Gaddis* 297).

may be simply another form of entropy, a spiritual entropy winding down eventually to total equilibrium, the ultimate chaos where everything equals everything else: the ultimate senseless universe (“Art of Fiction” 78).

Such a relativistic position “where everything equals everything else” is explicitly reflected in Gaddis’s *Carpenter’s Gothic* when, for example, a character becomes fascinated with “books that erode absolute values by asking questions to which they offer no answers” (96) thereby suggesting how the proliferation of questions over answers is perhaps better than the accumulation of knowledge itself.

Accordingly, this preoccupation with the loss of absolutes due to the collapse of the transcendental signified (e.g. God) as well as the moral relativism left in its wake coincides with the postmodern theories of philosophers such as Levinas and Lyotard. This is ironic though when juxtaposed against the novel’s epigraph, “*Nihil cavum neque sine signo apud Deum*” (“In God nothing is empty of sense”), which ostensibly promotes what Foucault referred to as a pre-Enlightenment episteme that presupposed the presence of a divine order capable of unifying the disparate information of the novel into a single cohesive framework of meaning (*Order of Things* 326).

This episteme, however, is fundamentally at odds with Gaddis’s view of an order-less world where the seemingly endless amount of information available is incapable of being arranged—a sentiment he outlined in a letter he wrote in 1964 to John Kuehl when claiming, “Though I weep for order I still live in a world of scrawled notes on the backs of envelopes” (*Letters Gaddis* 256). This view also helps inform the meaning of another note discovered by Koenig where Gaddis reflected upon how his novel “should be ‘apparently’ broken up, because that is the nature of the problem it attempts to investigate, that is, the separating of things today” (“Yew Tree” 102). Likewise, Stephen Burn suggests that Gaddis’s preoccupation with fragmented information led Gaddis to a “heightened self-consciousness

about the limitation of the encyclopedic impulse” that eventually culminated in a self-reflexive dramatization of the “limitations of the encyclopedic urge” in his later works (“Collapse of Everything” 60). Burn also tracks the evolution of epistemic frameworks throughout Gaddis’s oeuvre from *The Recognitions* to *J R* to Gaddis’s posthumously-published novella *Agapē Agape*, which reveals how Gaddis “traces the movement from the collapse of the divine pattern of knowledge in the Middle Ages, through the proliferation of information that transformed the eighteenth-century encyclopedia, to the melancholy collapse of the encyclopedic dream in his last work” (59). Accordingly, this notion of fragmentation and its relation to the complex treatment of disparate data and profound epistemological questions within *The Recognitions* reveals how Gaddis’s work is a post-war Menippean satire par excellence that lambasts the impulse to order reality in favor of an ineffable alterity eluding totalization.

But while it will be shown how *The Recognitions* is ultimately designed to subvert the notion of a comprehensive epistemic framework by instead opting for an “order of things abandoned” (*Recognitions* 560), Gaddis nevertheless refuses to forfeit all vestiges of order because, as he mentioned in an interview with Tom LeClair, “This idea of imposing order on chaos continues to be of central interest to me” (“Interview” 25). It will therefore also be explored how, like the narrator in *Carpenters Gothic* who echoes the “East Coker” section of Eliot’s *Four Quartets* when attempting “to recover what had been lost and found and lost again and again” (155), Gaddis uses *The Recognitions* as a medium for exploring whether or not an ethical imperative can be maintained in a neoliberal, culturally-vacuous world devoid of universal absolutes and mired in what he referred to within a letter as a “sense of loss overreaching any sense of fulfillment” (*Letters Gaddis* 392). Consequently, this endeavor focuses on an overly-commodified post-war society where profound aesthetic, ethical, and spiritual truths have been replaced by a myriad of advertising slogans—an epistemic

evolution summed up succinctly by an adman: “We’ve had the goddam Age of Faith, we’ve had the goddam Age of Reason. This is the Age of Publicity” (*Recognitions* 736).

More importantly, in its navigation through the seemingly endless proliferation of fragmented data, *The Recognitions* attempts to foster what is essentially Other to the differentiation that epistemic frameworks fundamentally require: a universal unity of total unconditional love that codifies all differentiation of the world into a single recognition of sublime oneness that cannot be ordered and totalized. Consequently, the preoccupation with a chaotic society combined with the quixotic pursuit of a sublime love capable of providing order in the form of an ethical imperative for establishing a communion with the Other helps foster what is essentially a type of modern chaosmos in Gaddis’s work. Moreover, Gaddis’s inversion of the Platonic model and preoccupation with the concept of the simulacrum—i.e. a copy that obfuscates the original to the point of being “part of a series of an original that never existed” (*Recognitions* 534)—will be analyzed in order to suggest how *The Recognitions* mounts a self-reflexive subversion of the representational nature of various epistemic frameworks in favor of an un-representable alterity that cannot be codified.

The novel itself, heavily imbued with a Faustian mythos, is a *kunstlerroman* that follows the once aspiring minister turned artist, Wyatt Gwyon, as he attempts to capture an unadulterated vision through his art within the spiritually hollow, overly-commodified post-war American milieu. But after his paintings receive poor reviews from critics, especially after he declines an influential Parisian art critic who accosts him for a bribe, Wyatt paradoxically attempts to pursue an authentic aesthetic vision through the production of counterfeit works. The antagonist, Reck tall Brown—a capitalistic, Mephistopheles-type character—makes a deal with Wyatt by bankrolling his forgeries of Dutch and Flemish Old Masters in exchange for being able to profit from the works when passing them off as genuine paintings at art auctions. This relationship between the Faustian pursuit for unbridled

knowledge combined with the notion of forgery functions as the thematic foundation of *The Recognitions*. As Gaddis noted in an interview with Abádi-Nagy:

The Recognitions started as a short piece of work, quite undirected, but based on the Faust story. Then as I got into the idea of forgery, the entire concept of forgery became—I wouldn't say an obsession—but a central part of everything I thought and saw; so the book expanded from simply the central character of the forger to forgery, falsification and cheapening of values and what have you, everywhere ("Art of Fiction" 58).

On a semiotic level, one of the key aspects of forgery in *The Recognitions* to be discussed as it relates to the pursuit of sublime insight unblemished by this "cheapening of values"—especially ethical values—is how forgery effectively undermines the notion of a transcendental signified. Without the transcendental signified, Foucault suggested discourse becomes an imperfect means of facilitating power within epistemic frameworks: "a discourse can be both an instrument and an effect of power, but also a hindrance, [...] Discourse transmits and produces power; it reinforces it, but also undermines and exposes it, renders it fragile and makes it possible to thwart" (*History of Sexuality* 100-1). With the collapse of the transcendental signified, signifiers—which in a Platonic model would be considered copies or, for the purpose of this chapter, forgeries of the Platonic Ideal—are left to perpetually defer to other signifiers without ever being able to represent an unequivocal truth.

What further complicates the issue of truth in the novel is that Wyatt's forgeries are not simply reproductions of works by the Old Masters but in fact originals that are marketed as newly discovered paintings—i.e. *original* counterfeits complementing a world where various aesthetic, economic, moral, political, religious and scientific doctrines lay claim to truth but nevertheless obfuscate man's primordial relation with the world. For this reason Klaus Benesch suggests *The Recognitions* was the "first American novel to deal at length

with the quandaries of assessing originality in a cultural environment predicated on an abundance of copies, representations, and simulacra” (“Diaspora of Words” 30-1).

Originality, while a somewhat nebulous concept to define, in this sense suggests a novelty that is not overly-derivative of other concepts and ideas that came before it. Therefore, the thematic preoccupation with forgery and its role in the conflation of the original with the counterfeit—or in a semiotic sense the conflation of the signifier with the signified—where they can no longer be distinguished from one another is paramount to understanding the breakdown of order in Gaddis’s novel due to how the authority of these systems is contingent on the ability to clearly distinguish the real from the fake.

There are many instances of this type of conflation throughout the text. For example, Wyatt begins his career as an artist after stealing his father’s original painting of Hieronymus Bosch’s *The Seven Deadly Sins* that his father claims he acquired from Conte di Brescia’s estate while he was staying in Italy. Wyatt’s father smuggled it through customs by claiming the painting was merely a copy of the famous work, and then Wyatt eventually replaces the stolen work with a copy he forges. However, Wyatt comes to realize that the stolen painting was a counterfeit all along and as a result he never had direct access to the original. This epiphany about how the Bosch painting, which served as the impetus for Wyatt’s journey into the world of art, is merely a copy leads to Wyatt’s eventual mental breakdown when he concedes:

—Copying a copy? is that where I started? All my life I've sworn it was real, year after year, that damned table top floating in the bottom of the tank, I've sworn it was real, and today? A child could tell it's a copy [...] Now, if there was no gold? . . . continuing an effort to assemble a pattern from breakage where the features had failed. —And if what I've been forging, does not exist? And if I ... if I, I ... (381).

This idea is developed further when it is revealed that Wyatt's art teacher, Herr Koppel, secretly sells to Brown a portrait Wyatt painted in the style of Hans Memling as an undiscovered Memling that is then copied and stolen by Basil Valentine: an art critic and Brown's accomplice whose name Elaine Safer claims is an allusion to the fifteenth-century alchemist, Basilius Valentinus ("Ironic Allusiveness" 85). As opposed to the copy of *The Seven Deadly Sins*, the pseudo-Memling painting is without an original and therefore Wyatt's painting is a simulacrum, which John Johnston contends is "neither an imitation nor an original but a simulation of a Memling or a simulacrum. It is not an imitation or copy because there is (was) no original, but it is not an original either since it was not painted by Memling himself [...] Instead it is an attempt to (re)produce" (*Carnival of Repetition* 11). Thus, Wyatt's Memling painting effectively re-conceptualizes the notion of forgery that underpins the concept of originality in *The Recognitions*.

The role of the simulacrum is then taken to its most extreme when the aspiring playwright, Otto Pivner—while passing off a story as his own that he initially overheard from Wyatt—tells the character, Esme, about a forged Titian painting that was painted over another work presumably to recycle the old canvas in order to make the forgery harder to detect. However, after scraping away both the forged Titian and the other painting it is discovered that there was in fact an original Titian underneath both works leaving Otto to conclude, "underneath that the original is there, that the real...thing is there, and on the surface you...if you can only...see what I mean?" (451). The implications of this type of simulacrum is explored even further when Wyatt—while being paraphrased, or essentially having his words copied, by Esme within a letter she writes to him—extends the convolution of the copy/original distinction to his own complicated sense of selfhood:

Painting, a sign whose reality is actually, I, never to be abandoned, a painting
is myself, ever attentive to me, mimicking what I never changed, modified, or

compromised. Whether I, myself, am object or image, they at once, are both, real or fancied, they are both, concrete or abstract, they are both, exactly and in proportion to this disproportionate I, being knowingly or unknowingly neither one nor the other, welded as one (472).

The multiple levels of the Titian forgery and their effect on the notion of originality therefore come to serve as a prescient metaphor anticipating the postmodern preoccupation with the notion of the simulacrum.

Moreover, the implications of the Titian simulacrum is further reinforced by another symbol in the novel: the masquerade. At the beginning of the novel Wyatt's mother, Camilla, is said to have "enjoyed masquerades, of the safe sort where the mask may be dropped at the critical moment it presumes itself as reality" (3). However, the episteme that shapes Camilla's views is typified by how the symbolic can be discarded whenever it begins to threaten the original is quite different from the post-war, simulacra-laden society she leaves behind. This is apparent when, for example, Mr. Pivner experiences an "intense quality of immediate realization" regarding the complicated nature of the masquerade that is at odds with Camilla's view:

real no longer opposed to ostensible but now in the abrupt coalescence of necessity, real no longer opposed to factitious nor, as in law, opposed to personal, nor as in philosophy distinguished from ideal, [...] but real filled out to embrace those opponents which made its definition possible and so, once defined, capable of resolving the paradox in *the moment when the mask and the face become one* (561; italicized for emphasis).

For Mr. Pivner, appearances essentially "fill" reality to the point where the original can no longer be clearly distinguished from the fake. Thus, he comes to recognize that rather than being like Captain Ahab who can strike through the pasteboard mask in order to reveal the

true nature of reality obfuscated by it, the removal of the mask merely reveals yet another mask in its wake.

In Levinasian terms, these masks prevent the self from being able to experience a non-totalizing, authentic face-to-face relation with the Other—a primordial, ethical appeal for the self to be responsible to the Other whose “face is a living presence” (*Totality and Infinity* 66) that “opens the primordial discourse whose first word is obligation” (201). This is because the masks essentially symbolize the epistemological layers that preclude the possibility of an uninhibited encounter with alterity. The Levinasian face of the Other cannot be “contained [...] comprehended, that is, encompassed” (194) since it eludes totalizing attempts to be ordered into the sterile sameness of the present-at-hand. As Levinas claims:

Although the phenomenon is already an image, a captive manifestation of a plastic and mute form, the epiphany of the face is alive. Its life consists in undoing the form in which every entity when it enters into immanence, that is, when it exposes itself as a theme, is already dissimulated. [...] His presence consists in divesting himself of the form which, however, manifests him. His manifestation is a surplus over the inevitable paralysis of manifestation (“Trace of the Other” 351-352).

The Other’s face, which as Robbins claims possesses “a power of autosignification that is in language wildly impossible” (*Altered Reading* 59), is the ethical impetus for challenging the self’s totalizing insularity since the face cannot be made present-at-hand. Furthermore, the relationship between the masquerade and the ethical imperative of responsibility to the face of the Other is perhaps complemented by the epigraph to the third chapter of the final part of *The Recognitions*. The epigraph references the dramatist Lope de Vega’s work, *Amar sin saber a quién*, roughly translated as “To Love without Knowing Whom [to Love]” (769). Moreover, Mr. Pivner’s son—Otto—realizes how these masks fundamentally hinder

communication with the Other during his failed attempt to articulate the extent of his love for Esme:

The brief strokes of anxiety and sharp strokes of detail broke the fragments of expression on his face, and he seemed able to catch none of them and fix it congruent upon that image of original honesty which he clutched at so desperately beneath the surface, and the second surface, with each instant more confused in the succession of mocking streaks of parody which he could not control (451).

Like the various levels of the Titian forgery that Wyatt extends to his complicated sense of selfhood, Otto's inner state is obfuscated by the surface expressions of his own face.

This preoccupation with how the simulacrum confounds aesthetic representation and hinders legitimate human connection also helps inform Gaddis's views regarding the mass-consumption of art. For most of his life Gaddis shared the modernist preoccupation with the cultural bankruptcy brought on by technological development. For example, the ramifications of Walter Benjamin's essay, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction" (1936), is present throughout Gaddis's oeuvre.⁴ In the essay Benjamin discussed how the perception and production of art are directly tied with technological innovation. The commodification of art leads to its artifice due to how mass-production entails a proliferation of copies that for Gaddis unavoidably fosters a level of cultural vacuity by exchanging the "things worth being for the things worth having" (*Recognitions* 499). Benjamin's treatise on mass-produced art is also apparent in *J R* when the philistine, Major Hyde, describes his views of art:

⁴ While Gaddis denied having read the essay before writing *The Recognitions*, Tabbi notes that when he questioned Gaddis about it in 1990, "he came to acknowledge Benjamin's 'pertinence' as yet another instance of convergence, not influence. Affinities between Gaddis and Benjamin have more to do with a certain attitude of mind than a shared philosophy, and a style that is not impersonal but rather speaks *through* modern materials, methods, and systems" ("Introduction" xvii).

Get it? Art? You get it where you get anything you buy it....don't try and tell me in this day and age there isn't enough around for everybody great art, picture music books who's heard all the great music there is you? You read all the great books there are? seen all these great pictures? Records of any symphony you want reproductions you can get them that are almost perfect, the greatest books ever written you can get them at the drugstore (48).

The character is unable to comprehend how the mass reproduction of art causes an original work to lose what Benjamin refers to as its "aura" ("Mechanical Reproduction" 219) that the copy lacks due to not having a unique "presence in time and space" (218). This is further elaborated upon by the narrator in *Agapē Agape* who derides the invention of the player-piano as a sign of how "[a]uthenticity's wiped out when the uniqueness of every reality is overcome by the acceptance of its reproduction, so art is designed for its reproducibility. Give them the choice, Mr. Benjamin, and the mass will always choose the fake" (34-5). Thus, the loss of the value and "authority of the [original] object" ("Mechanical Reproduction" 218), exacerbating Otto's and Wyatt's already tenuous sense of selfhood, demonstrates how Gaddis uses simulacra in his novel to help collapse the subject-object distinction predicating epistemic frameworks.

To further complicate this matter, the conflation of the copy and original in Gaddis's novel extends to the field of semiotics. For example, Joel Black suggests the notion of a transcendental logos necessary for generating unequivocal meaning is weakened in *The Recognitions* by an "infinitely proliferating, cross-referenced encyclopedic world [of words] which is eminently profane, deceitful and double-crossing" ("Paper Empires" 168). This sentiment would also be promoted by Gaddis's persona in *Agapē Agape* (2002) who asserts that in post-war society, "Faleshood's the common currency and we're back where we started, not the pure unadulterated falsehood but what Plato calls the lie in the words that's

only sort of an imitation, a shadowy thing” (58). Christopher Knight notes that Gaddis explicitly laid out this understanding of Plato’s Theory of Forms within a failed television proposal Gaddis sent to Keith Bostford in 1957: “Thesis: Platonism [...] the finiteness of man, and the eventual imperfectability of his creations, aspiring toward the (Platonic) ideal which is ever just beyond reach” (*Hints & Guesses* 256-57).

So if, as Plato suggests, the transcendental signified is debased through the mimetic nature of language, then there is merit in Johnston’s suggestion that “for Plato writing itself becomes a simulacrum (a bad copy of a copy) [...] insofar as it presumes to seize upon the *logos* by violence, or by ruse, or even to supersede it completely by not passing through the father” (*Carnival of Repetition* 16). Signifiers would consequently lack unequivocal meaning and instead become a “Diaspora of words” (*Recognitions* 85) because, as Mark Taylor claims, through the play of signs they merely refer to traces “of a real that has always already slipped away without becoming precisely absent” (*Rewiring the Real* 256). As a result, Gaddis is constantly preoccupied with his ultimate inability to “reconcile the ideal with reality” (*Recognitions* 383) due to the proliferation of simulacra.

More importantly, Gaddis’s portrayal of simulacra as inhibiting meaning-making in *The Recognitions* can also be viewed as a way of self-reflexively attacking epistemic frameworks—specifically the Renaissance episteme Foucault asserted is characterized by resemblance and similitude (*Order of Things* 64)—predicated on the correspondence theory of truth where it is necessary for there to be a clear distinction between the referent and its corresponding signifier. For example, the notion of a decentered signifier is explored rather humorously in the text when, for example, the character Herschel explains his use of the nonsensical word *chavenet*: “It really doesn't mean anything, but it's familiar to everybody if you say it quickly. They mention a painter's style, you nod and say, Rather . . . chavenet, or, He's rather derivative of, Chavenet wouldn't you say? Spending the summer? Yes, in the

south of France, a little villa near Chavenet. Poets, movie stars, perfume . . . shavenay” (558). Despite being meaningless, the continual use of *chavenet* throughout the novel by a variety of characters disguises its lack of meaning. Of course, one may argue that the example of *chavenet* merely illustrates how meaning is always contextual and dynamic through communal language-games. However, such a view does not consider how Gaddis uses the word to expose a level of pretentiousness by illustrating how the characters who use the word often do so as a form of chicanery and intellectual posturing at the expense of legitimate human connection.

In a more serious example regarding the pitfalls associated with an unanchored logos, Esme laments how language obfuscates the Ideal she seeks to represent in her poetry and therefore “[f]acts mattered little, ideas propounded, exploited, shattered” (298), so she instead opts to “choose words for themselves, and invest them with her own meaning [...] which was implicit in their shape, too frequently nothing to do with dictionary definition” (299). For Esme, the collapse of the distinction between the signifier and signified necessitates that she attempts to locate—in a notion similar to the Levinasian pre-ontological saying—a primordial point of unequivocal truth in which “nothing was created, where originality did not exist” (299) and where a “poem she knew but could not write existed, ready-formed, awaiting recovery in that moment when the writing down of it was impossible” (299-300).

Consequently, Esme’s pursuit of the unadulterated, ineffable Platonic Ideal is similar to the motive inspiring Rainer Maria Rilke’s implementation of ellipses in the *Duino Elegies* (1923) to indicate what he referred to as “the end of the sayable” (Peters *Rilke* 148)—a point beyond the “imposed accumulation of chaos that [Esme] struggled to move” (*Recognitions* 299). In fact, Esme was so fascinated by Rilke that at one point she ends up copying out the English translation of the first elegy of the *Duino Elegies*. Like Wyatt’s forgeries, the poem itself becomes a simulacrum as Esme’s copy of the work is then misidentified by the

character, Max, as an original poem that he plagiarizes and publishes in a magazine run by his friend, Don Bildow (622).

This quest for an elusive, ineffable point of origin in the form of a transcendental signified capable of anchoring meaning in the world therefore helps inform Gaddis's preoccupation with the counterfeit in aesthetic and semiotic representation, the proliferation of simulacra out of the detritus of the transcendental signified, and the impossibility of unequivocal claims to truth. More importantly, these three issues also contribute to what Gaddis considers to be the ultimate forgery by man: epistemic order itself. Accordingly, Gaddis makes encyclopedias present throughout *The Recognitions* as emblems of epistemic frameworks. For example, Reverend Gwyon possesses the fourteenth edition of the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* and consults "volume eighteen" while muttering "PLANTS to RAYM" (420) as he peruses through different entries. Later, he requests for the Town Carpenter—Wyatt's maternal grandfather—to "Return vol. 18 Plants to Raym Britannica" (442). Additionally, the poet—Mr. Feddle—is at one point interrupted while reading by being "bumped aside by someone looking for an encyclopedia" (597).

Gaddis uses the appearances of encyclopedias in order to reveal his wariness towards the illusion of order in *The Recognitions* since epistemic frameworks are fundamentally incompatible with simulacra because, as Johnston argues, "the overwhelming presence of simulacra would displace all true models or, more radically, imply their nonexistence; in either case, the very possibility of truth would be destroyed" (*Carnival of Repetition* 17-8). In this sense Burn cites a specific example of an encyclopedia in the text that serves as an allegory for the interplay between epistemic frameworks and simulacra when the Town Carpenter, borrowing a volume from the Reverend to learn about Prester John—the mythical Christian king and descendent of the Three Magi who ruled over the mythical Nestorian Christian nation—eventually comes to mistake Wyatt for the legendary figure he reads about

(“Collapse of Everything” 51). The totalization of Wyatt’s identity by the Town Carpenter in order to conform with the encyclopedic entry serves as a fitting symbol for how the acquisition and ordering of data can have unintended consequences due to how some characters, like Captain Ahab and Don Quixote before them, manipulate that information in order to better situate themselves within the world at the expense of the Other.

Gaddis would continue to highlight the pitfalls of encyclopedism in his later novels. For example, in *J R* he depicts a door-to-door children’s encyclopedia salesman who at one point describes his product to a potential buyer:

each volume contains detailed charts, diagrams and graphs to enhance your exciting journeys through these pages of the world's history, culture, civilization, government, history, art and literature and and [sic], and science yes for though written and designed to inspire and reward the child's thirst for knowledge this is in fact no mere children's encyclopedia but the ideal reference work for the casual browser, the armchair traveler, the dedicated scholar alike, the crowning result of many untold thousands of hours of painstaking research (*J R* 602).

The “crowning result” associated with children’s encyclopedism is then dismantled in *Carpenter’s Gothic* when the character, McCandless, speaks bitterly about his part-time job writing encyclopedic entries for school textbooks that leave him feeling guilty and unfulfilled from his labor: “what do you think it is, rich intoxicating prose? poignant insight? exploring the dark passions hidden in the human heart? Rhapsodic, God knows what, towering metaphor? thwarted genius? that little glimpse of the truth you forgot to ask for? It’s a chapter for a school textbook that’s what it is, [...] encyclopedias that’s all it is” (166). Gaddis’s scathing treatment of encyclopedism recalls Walter Benjamin’s suspicion of the commodification of information within a society where “money gives significance to

anything” (*Recognitions* 144) accompanied by technological development that he felt perverted man’s relation with the world.

Such wariness towards encyclopedic and technological innovation positions Gaddis as a type of latter-day Luddite as is evident by his claim in *Agapē Agape* about how the desire to foster order and “eliminate failure because we’ve always hated failure in America like some great character flaw” (13) led to the “computer [that] barricades against this fear of chance, or probability and indeterminacy that’s so American” (50).⁵ Rather than technology being a means of buttressing an epistemic framework to make reality more comprehensible, Gaddis instead felt that technology merely translated data so that it can be better commercially exchanged at the expense of true knowledge—a preoccupation which informs why Gaddis makes allusions throughout *The Recognitions* to the “East Coker” section of Eliot’s *Four Quartets* as both works are skeptical towards austere rationalism and unabashed materialism. This is apparent in *J R* when the physics teacher Jack Gibbs—an allusion to the physicist Josiah Willard Gibbs credited with advancing the correlation between entropy and statistics—bemoans the state of public education that prioritizes a profit-driven approach to knowledge at the expense of student-centered learning:

Since you're not here to learn anything, but to be taught so you can pass these tests, knowledge has to be organized so it can be taught, and it has to be reduced to information so it can be organized do you follow that? In other words this leads you to assume that organization is an inherent property of the knowledge itself, and that disorder and chaos are simply irrelevant forces that threaten it from outside. In fact it’s exactly the opposite. Order is simply a thin, perilous condition we try to impose on the basic reality of chaos (*J R* 20).

⁵ This view can be contrasted with Pynchon’s optimistic perspective on cybernetics because while he agrees with the Luddite view about how there “seems to be a growing consensus that knowledge really is power, that there is a pretty straightforward conversion between money and information,” Pynchon maintains a hope “in the computer’s ability to get the right data to those whom the data will do the most good” (“Luddite” 49).

This “perilous condition” associated with man’s need to assuage the “basic reality of chaos” by making data present-at-hand through the creation of clear, delineable categories was criticized by Gaddis who, in an interview with LeClair, claimed that one of his primary interests was “pursuing the many meanings of communication breakdown in a system that is not under control” (“Interview” 23).

Gibbs then went on to lament how the psychometric machinery used for student testing is an example of the technological drive to reduce informational entropy rather than embrace the chaos and indeterminacy of post-war society. Moreover, Gibbs inadvertently revealed how this technological drive comes at the expense of aesthetics in his unfinished manuscript that ironically attempted to be a comprehensive history of the player-piano, which he described as trying to unite “the beast with two backs called arts and sciences” (289). This project was also adopted by Gaddis himself who spent nearly fifty years researching and collecting notes on the topic but ultimately failed to complete the study during his lifetime, and this failure would be adapted as the central plot of Gaddis’s *Agapē Agape* that Burn argues “seems to mark the point where the mass of data exceeded the synthesizing powers of even his encyclopedic grasp” (“Collapse of Everything” 59). Like the impossible goal of using psychometric machinery to completely eliminate informational entropy, Gibbs realizes the foolhardiness of his attempt to provide a comprehensive history of the player-piano. He therefore concedes, “must have thought I could, like Diderot good God how I ever thought I could do it” (*JR* 588).

To the chagrin of characters like Gibbs, informational entropy eludes systemic attempts to be ordered within epistemic frameworks, and thus with regard to his work Gaddis reveals how “the more complex the message, the greater the chance for error. Entropy rears as a central preoccupation of our time” (“Rush for Second Place” 50). Consequently, the technological drive to categorize disparate information into distinguishable categories comes

at the expense of alterity emanating as a form of informational entropy that cannot be made present-at-hand within these epistemic frameworks. This preoccupation therefore serves as the very crux of Gaddis's treatment of epistemic order throughout his oeuvre, which Gaddis would explicitly outline during an interview with LeClair: "The concept of entropy [...] is present back in *The Recognitions*, a work of fragmented pieces and of a breakdown at a number of levels. I think it is a basic concern of mine and a problem. Words empty of information: that too is where we live" ("Interview" 24-5). This fragmentation would also be addressed by the narrator in *Agapē Agape* who asserts at the beginning of the novella, "that's what my work is about, the collapse of everything, of meaning, of language, of values, of art, disorder and dislocation wherever you look, entropy drowning everything in sight, entertainment and technology and every four year old with a computer" (2).

Nevertheless, Gaddis also concedes that the pursuit of what is essentially Other to epistemic determinism—a sublime point of indeterminacy that eludes totalization—is destined to fail because this ineffable alterity is analogous with an antiquated religious preoccupation with "the supernatural, that which is mysterious, spiritually inhabited, impossible to describe or to understand" ("Old Foes" 2). However, he also contends that the role of the author is fundamentally "in the same line of business" as religion by being charged with "concocting, arranging, and peddling fictions to get us safely through the night" ("Old Foes" 1-2)—essentially what McCandless refers to as crafting a "good serviceable fiction" (*Carpenter's Gothic* 121). Consequently, *The Recognitions* functions as both a cynical subversion of epistemic foundationalism while simultaneously serving as a quixotic work designed to navigate and make sense out of the modern chaosmos. Knight extends this notion to Wyatt who "is drawn to this scenario, wherein the artist almost operates as a superior priest, interested in spiritual or religious questions but not encumbered with the institutional baggage that makes the priest's life appear almost a compromise" (*Hints & Guesses* 48). This

view of art as being an alternative means to truth is also expressed by Esme who at one point ponders:

Could brush strokes make the difference, then? Science in magnitude, biology and chemistry as triumphantly articulate as subordinates are always [sic], offer no choice but abjure it in frantic effort to perfect a system without alternatives, the very fact of their science based on measurement; [...] strokes of creation fed the flames, strokes in whose every instant possibility had been explored for the finality which is perfection, torn apart in the attempt to free it into the delineation of that baffled enclosure of its own medium (*Recognitions* 469).

With this in mind, the role of the simulacrum—what Deleuze argues is inextricably linked to alterity because “If the simulacrum still has a model, it is another model, a model of the Other (l’Autre) from which there flows an internalized dissemblance” (*Logic of Sense* 258)—will now be further explored to show how it allows Gaddis to engage in a dialectical balancing act by undermining what Esme identifies as a “perfect [...] system without alternatives” in the form of totalizing epistemic frameworks while simultaneously retaining vestiges of order offered by the sublime perfection of the Platonic Ideal. The Ideal would ultimately help assuage the ethical relativism inundating post-war American society that some of Gaddis’s characters associate with the “devil-inspired absurdity of indetermination” (*Recognitions* 398)—an ostensibly nihilistic stance precluding responsibility to the Other.

2.2 Forging Faiths and Fakes

Before investigating Gaddis’s negotiation of indeterminacy and order within his novel, it is worth exploring how *The Recognitions* itself functions as a type of simulacrum due to being an amalgamation of various fictions—similar to how McCandless refers to his house’s faux-medieval Gothic architecture as “a patchwork of conceits, borrowings, deceptions” (*Carpenter’s Gothic* 227). Likewise, *The Recognitions* advances the notion of the

simulacrum by obfuscating the extent of its own creative indebtedness. While the novel is imbued with a Faustian mythos, Gaddis noted in an interview with Abádi-Nagy how it developed from the “original *Clementine Recognitions*, which has been called the first Christian novel [...] about his search for salvation, redemption, and so forth. And I had these notions of basing *The Recognitions* on the constant presence of the past and of its imposition of myth in different forms that eventually come down to the same stories in any culture” (“Art of Fiction” 60). The *Clementine Recognitions*—also known as the *Pseudo-Clementine Writings*—is a long, episodic work portraying the young adulthood of Saint Clement who, as Safer suggests, advocates for “apostolic succession against Gnosticism and other heretical beliefs” such as those championed by the magician, Simon Magus: a precursor to Mephistopheles (“Ironic Allusiveness” 77). However, Johnston contends that the work is also controversial due to the questions surrounding its “date of composition, authorship and textual authenticity,” and the book is now generally thought to have been written anonymously instead of its erroneous attribution to Clement (*Carnival of Repetition* 8). Thus, it can be argued that Gaddis’s narrative further confounds the theme of forgery by developing out of a Faustian mythos of dubious origin.

Moreover, Gaddis highlights the problematic circumstances surrounding the *Clementine Recognitions* by having Wyatt and Reverend Gwyon embrace heretical practices in what essentially function as a spiritual inversion of the devout experiences of the early Christian pilgrims. One text that plays a pivotal role in delineating the context surrounding the Reverend’s crisis of faith and gradual shift to pagan practices is James Frazer’s *The Golden Bough* (1890-1915). Initially a controversial publication for its contemporary readers, Frazer’s work provides an encyclopedic survey of various religions by analyzing the pagan beliefs that developed over time into modern religious institutions—especially Christianity. Gaddis mentioned in a letter to his mother that he read *The Golden Bough* while working on

The Recognitions during his years as an expatriate in Spain (*Letters Gaddis* 73), and the study appears on Reverend Gwyon's desk while preparing for his pagan sermons. The title of Gaddis's first novel was also inspired by Frazer's remarks regarding how Goethe's *Faust* developed out of the *Clementine Recognitions*: an observation echoed by Basil Valentine who suggested how Clement's work is "really the beginning of the whole Faust legend" (373). Frazer's exploration of the original pagan undertones within religious institutions therefore provides a fitting lens through which to analyze the instances of religious simulacra that help shape the epistemic foundation of Gaddis's novel by, as Taylor suggests, "leav[ing] behind not only the Age of Faith but also the world of modernity and to dare to enter a thoroughly postmodern world where sign and reality, copy and original are one" (*Rewiring the Real* 62).

For example, when Wyatt questions Reverend Gwyon about the Christian relics he finds in the basilica of Saint Clement in Rome, his father is instead more interested in the "subterranean sanctuary [...] afloat with vapors from two thousand years before" (44). This sanctuary is a Mithraic remnant that had been built over by an iconoclastic copy in the form of the Roman Catholic Church. Mithraism—a three-century-old pagan religion lasting until 400 A.D. that centered on the worship of the Roman sun god, Mithras—was a preoccupation of early Christian apologists. In W. J. Phythian-Adams's study of Mithraism—one of Gaddis's principle sources for *The Recognitions*—he suggests, "To the outward eye the two religions of Mithras and Christ appeared to differ in accidental details only; at many important points they presented the most startling resemblances, which Christian apologists admitted with horror, but could not explain except by a charge of diabolical agency" (*Mithraism* 3). Reverend Gwyon then echoes this observation to Wyatt regarding how Mithraism "didn't fail because it was bad. Mithraism almost triumphed over Christianity. It failed because it was so near good" (57).

Consequently, the Mithraic temple underneath the basilica serves as a fitting symbol of how the simulacrum of the Church has literally enveloped pagan iconography and displaced its original status in favor of the Christian Logos that, as exemplified by the opening to the Book of John (“In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God”), purports to be the original message of God. This exploration of the clash between Christian and pagan influences fittingly anticipates the postmodern philosophy of Baudrillard who was also fascinated by the relationship between religious iconography and simulacra:

But what becomes of the divinity when it reveals itself in icons when it is multiplied in simulacra? Does it remain the supreme power that is simply incarnated in images as a visible theology? Or does it volatilize itself in the simulacra that, alone, deploy their power and pomp of fascination—the visible machinery of icons substituted for the pure and intelligible Idea of God? This is precisely what was feared by Iconoclasts, whose millennial quarrel is still with us today (*Simulacra and Simulation* 4).

Baudrillard’s concern with iconography stems from how it essentially bastardizes the Christian notion of a Neoplatonic *kenosis* of God into the mortal form of Jesus to the point where the transcendental signified is conflated with worldly signs. As a result, this leads to a proliferation of images no longer anchored by an Ideal.

Furthermore, Taylor suggests that Gaddis’s preoccupation with religious simulacra is complicated by how the simulacra are not necessarily ontologically subordinate to the original because, “If, as Gaddis suggests, the saints were counterfeits of Christ and Christ a counterfeit of God, then to imitate Christ would be to counterfeit a counterfeit. A counterfeit counterfeit, however, is not simply a fake. In a world where the real turns out to be fake, fakes can be recognized as real” (*Rewiring the Real* 62). Consequently, *The Recognitions*—an

adaptation of the Faust myth as well as the dubiously-authored *Pseudo-Clementine Writings*—is itself a simulacrum whose “real [is] without origin or reality” (*Simulacra and Simulation* 1). Taylor develops this notion further by suggesting how Gaddis uses the simulacra as a way of “mock[ing] his own literary ambitions” by “freely admit[ting] that his work is not original but is a copy of a work whose author is a fake. His novel, in other words, is a copy of a copy whose origin is unknown” (*Rewiring the Real* 16). Whether or not one chooses to view *The Recognitions* as a derivative work that purposely calls its own originality into question, it is undeniable that Gaddis intended to place his text into a state of creative ambiguity to complement his theme of forgery.

To further complicate matters not only do some characters struggle in various ways with negotiating the notion of originality but in fact actively fight against it as Wyatt learns when he is scolded as a child by his didactic Aunt May for the drawings he sketches during his free time. She believes that to create icons, such as Wyatt’s drawings, is to attempt to supplant the Creator because:

To sin is to falsify something in the Divine Order, and that is what Lucifer did. His name means Bringer of Light but he was not satisfied to bring the light of Our Lord to man, he tried to steal the power of Our Lord and to bring his own light to man. He tried to become original, [...] to steal Our Lord's authority, to command his own destiny, to bear his own light! That is why Satan is the Fallen Angel, for he rebelled when he tried to emulate Our Lord Jesus (34).

This theology of fakery is also expressed by the character Stanley, a devout Catholic and organ composer, who suggests that “the Devil is the father of false art” (464) while Wyatt’s art teacher, Herr Koppel, refers to originality as the “Romantic disease” (89). But despite her pious attempt to emphasize the superiority of the “Divine Order,” Aunt May’s farcical polemic against creative acts ends up counterproductively reinforcing Gaddis’s goal of

evoking an Eliotic Waste Land devoid of a transcendental signified capable of anchoring aesthetic, epistemic, political, and religious belief systems within post-war America.

But despite how *The Recognitions* treats many of these systems askance, Gaddis nevertheless recognizes that embracing them helps mankind to avoid the “devil-inspired absurdity of indetermination” (*Recognitions* 398) in order to “get [one] safely through the night” (“Old Foes” 1-2). For example, the character Mr. Pivner—a disciple of logic and a rather mundane foil to other characters’ more dramatic searches for meaning due to his unrelenting commitment to building a “wall called objectivity without which he might have gone mad” (288)—realizes that despite being submerged in “Reason [...] there were things he did not understand, realms where Science advanced upon the provinces of God, where he felt rather uncomfortable, looking forward, secretly, to the day when Science would explain all, and vindicate the Doubt which he kept hidden in case it should not” (289). This is a character who, for example, views Dale Carnegie’s *How to Win Friends and Influence People* (1936) as gospel—paralleling Leopold Bloom who reads a comparably-facile self-help book, Eugene Sandow’s *Strength and How to Obtain It* (*Ulysses* 833)—which illustrates Mr. Pivner’s pitifulness and complicity in what Gaddis viewed as the commercial degradation of post-war society.

This depiction of the tenuous nature of order is also explored in *Carpenter’s Gothic* when McCandless encounters V.S. Naipaul’s *The Mimic Man* and reads, “A man, I suppose, fights only when he hopes, when he has a vision of order, when he feels strongly there is some connection between the earth on which he walks and himself. But there was my vision of a disorder which it was beyond any one man to put right” (*Carpenter’s Gothic* 150). While such visions of order can temporarily combat Gaddis’s devil-inspired absurdity of indetermination, the ultimate inability of these systems to provide unequivocal meaning causes many characters to fall into despair. For example, one of the ways the novel explores

the benefits and consequences associated with forging these visions of order is through the theological debate between Stanley and his more bellicose counterpart the artist-poet, Anselm. Gaddis wrote in a letter that the name *Anselm* is an allusion to Saint Anselm of Canterbury who is best known for his ontological argument for the existence of God: a precursor to Descartes's own ontological argument (*Letters Gaddis* 73). In the third chapter of the *Proslogion* Anselm defines God as a "being than which no greater can be conceived" (28). So if the idea of God can be conceptualized in the finite mind, it follows for Saint Anselm that God must exist because otherwise it would imply that mankind can imagine an idea that is greater than the concept of God that by definition is the greatest thing that can be conceived. Consequently, Gaddis naming his character *Anselm*—who is burdened by existential despair and spiritual uncertainty throughout the novel—is somewhat ironic when juxtaposed against the reason-driven faith espoused by Saint Anselm.

Nevertheless, both Anselm and Stanley—like Reverend Gwyon and Mr. Pivner—are obsessed with the possibility of fostering divine insight in a chaotic world devoid of order and overburdened with simulacra. But whereas Stanley strives to compose music capable of adequately reflecting the perfection of the God of his Catholic faith because he believes "it shouldn't be sinful to want to have created beauty" (535), Anselm is skeptical towards such an endeavor as his poetry instead reflects a Rilkean design adopting a form of Christian mysticism at odds with institutional religion. Accordingly, Anselm is often callous when discussing the modern practice of Christianity that he believes has degenerated into completely affected customs exemplified by a "holier-than-thou Christian Science smile" (531-32). Moreover, when in the middle of one of his religious polemics he is asked to speak reasonably, Anselm responds, "be reasonable! [...] This pose! [...] That's what they called Spinoza your prince of rationalists" after he was excommunicated from the Church "into the darkness of reason" (536).

But while Stanley also bemoans the post-war emphasis on rationalism at the expense of spiritual concerns because “science doesn’t even understand the question” (600)—a notion echoing Wyatt’s earlier sentiment of “Reason! but, good God, haven’t we had enough reason” (86)—he nevertheless ends up drawing Anselm’s ire when he suggests that a transcendental signified is necessary for imbuing the world with order because “even Voltaire could see that some transcendent judgment is necessary, because nothing is self-sufficient, even art, and when art isn’t an expression of something higher, when it isn’t invested you might even say, it breaks up into fragments that don’t have any meaning” (617). For Stanley, art must reflect a teleological design because:

when art tries to be a religion in itself, [...] a religion of perfect form and beauty, but then there it is all alone, not uniting people, not...like the Church does. [...] It isn’t for love of the thing itself that an artist works, but so that through it he’s expressing love for something higher, because that’s the only place art is really free, serving something higher than itself (632).

However, Anselm views the fundamentalist undercurrent of Stanley’s aesthetic theory to be guilty of cheapening the profundity of art.

For example, these two characters end up clashing at a party when Anselm recites a passage from the *Proslogion* in order to criticize Stanley’s attempts to reflect the perfection of God through his art: “The picture before it is made is contained in the artificer’s art itself [...] And any such thing, existing in the art of an artificer is nothing but a part of his understanding itself” (*Recognitions* 535). While Anselm does not deny the existence of the first idea analogous to the Platonic Ideal, he contends that the first idea becomes bastardized by its thematization in art when he claims, “a man who is going to make a box has it first in his art. The box he makes isn’t life, but the one that exists in his art is life” (535). So rather than being like one of the Greenwich Village literati with whom Anselm tends to surround

himself with—those who are often guilty of intellectual posturing and spiritual vapidness by turning God into a “sentimental theatrical figure, [...] a melodramatic device used to throw people in novels into a turmoil...” (438)—Anselm can instead be viewed as a Rilkean figure negotiating the rationalism of a secular, post-war society by attempting to preserve the ineffable order that is essentially at odds with both empirical and religious claims to unequivocal truth.

One of the key ideas that supports Anselm’s stance against the rigid adoption of a rational-driven understanding of the world is the repetition of Saint Anselm’s maxim, *credo ut intelligam* (“I believe so that I may understand”), throughout the novel. The maxim implies that comprehension might not actually be grounded in reason but rather in belief since reason produces doubt, which can lead to incomprehension. This claim appears in the first chapter of the *Proslogion* where Saint Anselm writes, “I do not endeavor, O Lord, to penetrate thy sublimity for in no wise do I compare my understanding with that; but I long to understand in some degree thy truth, which my heart believes and loves. For I do not seek to understand that I may believe, but I believe in order to understand” (6). This sentiment is first paraphrased by Wyatt to Valentine who recognizes it as Saint Anselm’s maxim (382), and then later Stanley mentions it to Max while at a party (458). Stanley, on the other hand, aligns himself with the inverse of this maxim by contending that understanding must precede belief—a reversal of Anselm’s emphasis on belief as an antecedent to understanding. Consequently, Stanley’s outlook complements the medieval, teleologically-grounded episteme predicated on a divine design to generate meaning, and thus for Stanley understanding the world is a means of buttressing one’s belief in God.

Nevertheless, Stanley’s position is often compromised because, as Burn argues, “While characters seek this coherence, however, Gaddis’s novel typically undermines the medieval vision with the informational excess of the Enlightenment encyclopedia,

fragmenting the timeless model” (“Collapse of Everything” 56). The deluge of disparate information and simulacra leads to what Stanley refers to as the “modern disease”—the fragmentation of a once unified order that forces Stanley to concede with regard to modern life how “everything is in pieces” (927) and every “fragment exists by itself, and that’s why we live among palimpsests, because finally all the work should fit into one whole, and express an entire perfect action, as Aristotle says, and it’s impossible now, it’s impossible, because of the breakage, there are pieces everywhere...” (616). Stanley argues that without a transcendental signified, the sublime oneness of the first idea is fragmented and supplanted by palimpsests. The concept of the *palimpsest*—a manuscript that is recycled multiple times in order to allow for new layers of text to be written upon it—is similar to the concept of the simulacrum because in its erasure of the original text, as in the case of the forged Titian painting, the palimpsest can likewise be viewed as being “part of a series of an original that never existed” (*Recognitions* 534). Consequently, Stanley’s attitude of being forced to live among palimpsests therefore typifies what he views as a splintered modern episteme due to the “self-sufficiency of fragments, that’s where the curse is, fragments that don’t belong to anything. Separately they don’t mean anything, but it’s almost impossible to pull them together into a whole” (616).

Moreover, the impossibility of being able to foster a unified vision of unequivocal truth free from fragmentation is discussed at length by Wyatt when he reflects upon his aesthetic theory with Recktail Brown by claiming how there “isn’t any single perspective, like the camera eye, the one we all look through now and call it realism, [...] the Flemish painter took twenty perspectives if he wished, and even in a small painting you can’t include it all in your single vision, your one miserable pair of eyes” (*Recognitions* 251). Therefore, to even attempt to represent a comprehensive vision within an epistemic framework would be foolhardy because as Wyatt tells his wife, Esther, “the discipline, the detail, it’s

just...sometimes the accumulation is too much to bear” (114). Furthermore, Koenig indicates that Gaddis mentioned a similar sentiment within one of his notes where he suggests, “no single imagination is competently aberrant [*sic*] to conceive of the abundance of phantastical horror which exists on all sides as reality” (“Yew Tree” 70). This recognition of the inability to order reality into a single vision due to the sheer amount of disparate data unanchored by a transcendental signified also prefigures Rorty’s concept of ironism contingent on the “*recognition* [...] emblematic of our having given up the attempt to hold all the sides of our life in a single vision, to describe them with a single vocabulary [...] toward an already existing Truth” (*Contingency* xvi; italicized for emphasis).

But rather than adopting an ironist perspective that completely rejects the legitimacy of a comprehensive, unified epistemic framework, Wyatt nevertheless actively engages in the ostensibly impossible pursuit of fostering some form of a sublime knowledge free from fragmentation and the obfuscation of simulacra by “assembl[ing] a pattern from breakage” (*Recognitions* 381) where “everything [is] freed into one recognition, really freed into the reality that we never see” (92). To this end Gaddis wrote in a letter how, like Wyatt, he also felt compelled to maintain a faith in the possibility of being able to foster the Platonic Ideal in his work:

the fact of the inescapableness of forgery as a part of the finite condition—if you will allow forgery to include necessarily imperfect representations of eventually inexpressive absolutes (in Plato’s sense of the “ideals”), but that this is the best we have, the best we can do: what is vital is the faith that the absolute—the “perfect”, etc.—*does* exist (*Letters Gaddis* 233).

Thus, Gaddis’s quasi-religious endeavor forges a faith that combines Anselm’s emphasis on ineffability with Stanley’s neo-Thomist outlook in an attempt to offer a vision of reality free from the fragmented nature of language and rationalism while also conceding that the Ideal

will always elude the possibility of being adequately articulated due to being situated in the realm of “inexpressive absolutes.”

With this in mind, Moore argues that Wyatt’s search for the unthematizable Ideal situates him firmly between mysticism and science where Wyatt is:

as convinced as Melville’s Ahab that all visible objects are but as pasteboard masks, and the novel dramatizes his progress through institutionalized religion and the jejune theatrically of the occult, past the realms conquered and codified by overconfident scientists, to the timeless state beyond the reach of those who would make of God a science, or of science a god (*Gaddis* 16).

Nevertheless, while Wyatt—like Gaddis—remains suspicious of the ever-increasing encroachment of scientism in post-war America, it should also be stressed that he was wary of retreating to dogmas such as Calvinism and Catholicism for respite since they reveal themselves to be merely inauthentic copies of pagan rituals that are no longer practiced. Wyatt views the simulacra generated by these religious practices to be fundamentally incompatible with a world where universal absolutes are absent, and thus he is religious only “in the sense of devotion, adoration, celebration of deity, before religion became confused with systems of ethics and morality, to become a sore affliction upon the very things it had once exalted” (*Recognitions* 311). Wyatt’s more liberal theological views complement Merold Westphal’s argument about how Christian dogma is diametrically opposed to the postmodern emphasis on respecting alterity and pluralism:

it is all too easy for those with postmodern sympathies to see Christianity as the embodiment of everything to which it is quintessentially (however anti-essentialist it may be) opposed. Is Christianity not a prime example of the *logocentric, totalizing, onto-theological meta-narrative* that, on the basis of exaggerated knowledge claims, seeks to impose an illegitimate hegemony on

human thought [...] Is this hegemony not allergic to alterity, reducing all others to the same by means of violence (“Appropriating Postmodernism” 1).

But while Wyatt’s attempt to avoid this hegemony in the form of totalizing belief systems that fragment the ineffable, sublime oneness of an indeterminate first idea represented by the oft-repeated phrase “origins of design” throughout the novel, this endeavor does not go unchallenged.

For example, when Wyatt attempts to explain to Esther the merits of embracing indeterminacy because of how “every instant the past is reshaping itself, it shifts and breaks and changes, and every minute we’re finding, I was right ... I was wrong, until...” (590), he is interrupted by Esther. She taunts Wyatt for his purported moral relativism because, as she claims, he “couldn’t have a world in which the problem of evil could be solved with a little cunning” (590). Rather, she contends that Wyatt should instead believe that the “boundaries between good and evil must be defined again, they must be reestablished” (591). However, Wyatt responds to this rebuttal by claiming that, rather than engaging in moral relativism, he is rejecting moral absolutism by embracing an ineffable ethical imperative of “moral action, [that] isn’t just talk and... words, morality isn’t just theory and ideas, that the only way to reality is this moral sense” (590-91). This inarticulate “moral sense,” what Gregory Comnes defines as the “ethics of indeterminacy” (*Ethics of Indeterminacy* 4), arises from the desire to maintain a non-prescriptive ethics of responsibility to the Other who exceeds the purview of the post-war episteme.

Accordingly, Wyatt believes there is still room for an ethical imperative of “moral action” driven by what he views as a type of transcendent power in the form of love. In this sense Gaddis claimed in an interview with LeClair that a “central theme in *The Recognitions* is the absence of love, the withholding of love, the withdrawal of love” (“Interview” 19). But rather than promoting a sexually-charged Eros, Wyatt’s love embodies a selfless altruism and

responsibility for one's neighbor in the form of the Christian *agape*. Nevertheless, Wyatt initially struggles with this responsibility by reluctantly admitting how "charity's the challenge" (383) because, as the narrator explains earlier, "Tragedy was foresworn, in ritual denial of the ripe knowledge that we are drawing away from one another, that we share only one thing, share the fear of belonging *to another, or to others*, or to God" (103; italicized for emphasis). However, Wyatt eventually triumphs over his fear of responsibility to the Other by committing himself to the ethical task of embracing an *agape* as exemplified at the end of the novel through his adoption of the Augustinian adage, *Dilige et quod vis fac* ("Love and do what you want to") (899).

This type of charitable love is ultimately predicated on a form of *agape* that the narrator in *Agapē Agape* aligns with Benjamin's concept of the unreproducible *aura*. The narrator describes it as the "natural merging of created life in this creation in love that transcends it, a celebration of the love that created it they called *agapē*, that love feast in the early church, yes. That's what's lost, what you don't find in these products of the imitative arts that are made for reproduction on a grand scale" (37). This notion particularly resonates with sections from Eliot's *Four Quartets*: a poem Koenig suggests that "Gaddis at one time planned to parody [...] in *The Recognitions*, and a few such lines do remain. This was, as with all his parodies, to give a humorous sense, but also because he admired Eliot and in parodying him paid tribute to his influence" ("Recognizing" 67). Gaddis's preoccupation with the imperative of maintaining an *agape* with the Other in a fragmented world converges with the narrator's spiritual concerns in Eliot's "Burnt Norton" section who believes:

Love is itself unmoving,
 Only the cause and end of movement,
 Timeless, and undesiring
 Except in the aspect of time

Caught in the form of limitation

Between un-being and being (V.165-70).

Like the convergence of immanence and transcendence in Wyatt's *agape*-based ethical imperative, the love promoted by the narrator in "Burnt Norton" is both timeless and at the mercy of time as well as an ideal that transcends the finitude of being while nevertheless comprehensible. Gaddis's desire for a communal *agape* that frees people from being forced to live among the palimpsests of not only the "imitative arts" but also totalizing epistemic frameworks, which contribute to the fragmentation of a post-war America that is intractably a-gape, complements Levinas's ethical imperative of responsibility to the Other through what Comnes refers to as an "enactment of the vision of agapistic alterity in a world clearly without absolutes" (*Ethics of Indeterminacy* 36).

However, it should be stressed that the *agape* Wyatt attempts to foster in his art in order to reflect the "reality we never see" (92) differs from Stanley's view of how art is "the work of love" (465). In Stanley's dogmatic attempt to make art "serv[e] something higher than itself" (632) by venerating a higher power, he inadvertently neglects understanding how the role of art should attempt to foster love within the immanent world as well. Knight responds to this attempt by suggesting how despite "Stanley's conviction that art must strive to be obedient to the dual, yet singular, demands of love and necessity, he fails to understand how much these demands originate from below as well as from above" (*Hints & Guesses* 32). Anselm also lambasts Stanley for skirting this responsibility in his indictment, "You're the one who refuses to love" (*Recognitions* 678). So rather than art functioning as a means to serving something higher than itself, it will become apparent that Wyatt opts for an ethical imperative of art to instead serve something *Other* than itself.

Gaddis would further elaborate upon this sentiment during an interview with LeClair regarding how art should maintain an ethical function in a fragmented world. Gaddis

references the experience of his character, Edward Bast—who attempted to compose an opera in *JR*—in order to emphasize this point:

From the detritus and trash, he vows to make a whole guided by creativity and art. One still clings to art as order, at the same time that one hopes that art is a destructive force. The threat *JR* runs is: how can I keep the worthwhile activities somewhere in view and not have them devoured by the entropy—and yet create a world in which they are, in fact, being devoured. How to do it without becoming part of the chaos? (“Interview” 26).

One example of such a “worthwhile activity” for art that cannot be “devoured by the entropy” is exemplified by Wyatt’s *agape*-based, ethical stance described as being “the only way we can know ourselves to be real, [...] the only way we can know *others* to be real” (*Recognitions* 591; italicized for emphasis). This statement embodies Ralph Waldo Emerson’s maxim that Valentine at one point sardonically echoes: “[w]e are advised to treat other people as though they were real [...] because, perhaps they are” (264). Therefore, Wyatt’s purported moral action that he attempts to channel through his art—similar to what Stanley describes as “the moment when love and necessity become the same thing” (465)—marks the impetus for his attempt to commune with what the narrator in *Agapē Agape* describes as “some significant Other [who] will burst out of the bushes and redeem any shred of value hidden” within the “grand hallucination” of ordered reality (88).

Nevertheless, this desire to open the self up to the Other is ultimately dependent on what Valentine claims is an “other...more beautiful self who...can do more than they can” (253). The notion of a “self-who-can-do-more” in *The Recognitions* is a phrase echoed throughout Gaddis’s oeuvre such as when Gibbs considers the “self who could do more problem” in *JR* (389) and the narrator in *Agapē Agape* advocates for a “self who can do more yes [...] that transforms you into this Other” (89). Moreover, Koenig mentions that Gaddis

referred to the term in his notes as the “creative self if it had not been killed by the other, in Valentine’s case, Reason; in Brown’s case, material gain; in Otto’s case, vanity and ambition; in Stanley’s case, the Church; in Anselm’s case, religion, &c. &c” (“Yew Tree” 100).

The self-who-can-do-more is inextricably connected to agapistic ethics that—like the Levinasian call for responsibility to the Other—advocates for the egocentric subject, what Wyatt refers to as the “disproportionate I” (472), to accept the lack of universal absolutes in the world and instead attempt to open oneself up to the possibility of establishing a non-totalizing relationship with the indeterminate Other.⁶ Fittingly, Comnes argues how the self-who-can-do-more stems from the decision to live “ethically [which] means remaining perpetually open to the mystery of the other” (*Ethics of Indeterminacy* 33), and thus “*The Recognitions* demonstrates the essential alterity of the world, the meta-ethical virtue of agapistic ethics, by forcing the reader to acknowledge and accept the inherent ambiguity limiting any systematized approach to understanding” (49).

This meta-ethical methodology that attempts to remain open to the mystery of the Other by accepting the epistemological limitations associated with these systematized approaches to understanding the world is reflected in Wyatt’s agapistic-driven, aesthetic-ethico-spiritual method predicated on moral action that transcends words (*Recognitions* 590). Consequently, this approach makes it possible for Wyatt to do more by recognizing something Other than himself. As Knight argues:

In Gaddis’s fiction, there exists an apparent, albeit invisible, relation between individual characters and a numinous, sacred realm, the latter of which speaks of all that requires knowing and compliance, even as it is unknowable and its

⁶ The notion of the “disproportionate I” complements Wyatt’s own confused sense of selfhood due to how he tends to misidentify with, or is often confused by others for, other characters and historical figures throughout the novel including Saint Clement, John Huss, Prester John, Raymond Lully, John Huss, Faust, Hugo can der Goes, Reverend Gilbert Sullivan, Saint Stephen, and Ulysses.

demand asymmetrical. Here, though, the “individual” can be understood in at least two opposing forms: first, as the resident of a democratic and materially advanced society who values autonomy and spatial privacy, and feels no obligation toward any truth larger than self-interest; and second, as one who, intuiting an absence, makes a concerted effort to return to the primacy of felt being, to that rare moment wherein being true to the Other, is paradoxically synonymous with being true to oneself (*Hints & Guesses* 17).

In a world ripe with indeterminacy because various aesthetic, economic, political, mythic, religious, and scientific doctrines can never lay claim to unequivocal truth, Wyatt’s agapistic approach offers a means of returning to the “primacy of felt being” by foregrounding epistemological questions about the absence of the Other over parochial ontological ones bogged down in the language of self-interest. Comnes describes Wyatt’s agapistic ethics as involving “nonconceptual linguistic modes of participation and experience” (*Ethics of Indeterminacy* 6) open to the “concept of alterity, the second-order, meta-ethical component of agapē” (44). This responsibility to that which exceeds the purview of the modern episteme thus serves as an alternative way of generating meaning and value in post-war America.

So if, as Aunt May suggests, creation is the ultimate sin because it developed out of Lucifer’s failed attempt to emulate the Divine Order of God, then Wyatt’s pursuit of an indeterminate, agapistic-based ethics re-conceptualizes the devil-inspired absurdity of indetermination into the devil-inspired *imperative* of indetermination. Taylor suggests that the emphasis on indeterminacy with regard to the epistemological concerns of Gaddis’s novel necessitates re-conceptualizing the notion of *recognition* itself:

On the one hand, if, following Plato and his theological descendants, knowledge involves re-cognition, then truth exists prior to and independent of human knowledge. The transcendence of truth renders worldly appearances

faint shadows of a reality that is never totally present. [...] On the other hand, if, following Nietzsche and his a/theological descendants, knowledge is a human fabrication, then truth is a fiction, which might or might not be recognized as such (*Rewiring the Real* 14).

Wyatt essentially ascribes to both conceptualizations of truth by simultaneously recognizing that, in a notion similar to McCandless's suggestion of humanity's need of a "good serviceable fiction" (*Carpenter's Gothic* 121) capable of allowing man to "get through the night" (157), truth is both a "human fabrication" necessary for insulating mankind from the maelstrom of post-war life as well as something that must be re-recognized in favor of the Other that cannot be made present-at-hand. Consequently, Wyatt's attempt to commune with the indeterminate, un-representable Other that cannot be made present-at-hand within his art endorses Foucault's argument about the pitfalls of the classical and Renaissance epistemes predicated upon resemblance and similitude that eventually found their "fundamental arrangements" modified and "dissociated" to the point that "[r]esemblance, which had for long been the fundamental category of knowledge—both the form and the content of what we know" could no longer make "possible both knowledge itself and the mode of being of what is to be known" (*Order of Things* 60).

Wyatt would more explicitly convey his views about the tenuous relationship between resemblance and truth while in a drunken delirium at the end of the novel when he mentions Descartes's enigmatic phrase *Larvatus prodeo*⁷ that derives from his juvenilia: "Like an actor wearing a mask, I come forward, masked, on the stage of the world" (*Recognitions* 800). Jacques Maritain argues that Descartes's phrase signifies how it "will be for the *masked philosopher* to unmask the sciences and to make their continuity and their unity appear with

⁷ Coincidentally, Steven Moore notes that this phrase was also included in the first draft of *Infinite Jest* as "LARVARDUS PRODEO—a slip for *Larvatus prodeo*": the founding motto for the tennis academy established by the character, James Incandenza ("First Draft" n.32).

their beauty” (*Dream of Descartes* 41). Descartes’s *Larvatus prodeo* is of obvious relevance to a post-war American society burdened with a masquerade of deceptive simulacra that obfuscate the face of the indeterminate Other. It thus becomes apparent that Wyatt—like Captain Ahab who attempts to “strike through the mask” of visible objects to uncover the Platonic Ideal (*Moby-Dick* 136)—strives to unmask totalizing epistemic modes of thought in order to foster an *agape* with an ineffable alterity through his art.

Wyatt’s *agape*-oriented pursuit thereby requires the “disproportionate I” to re-cognize into the self-who-can-do-more—or, more specifically, the self-who-can-do-more-*for-the-Other*. Furthermore, this pursuit also calls for the re-cognition of indeterminacy as being requisite for establishing a non-totalizing *agape* with the Other instead of merely being considered anathema within epistemic frameworks. The philosophical implications of this dual imperative related to the epistemic foundation of Gaddis’s novel will now be explored.

2.3 Re-Cognizing the Devil-Inspired Absurdity of Indetermination

One of the primary philosophical dialectics related to indeterminacy that arises in *The Recognitions* stems from the philosophical optimism advanced in Alexander Pope’s poem “An Essay on Man” (1710) against Arthur Schopenhauer’s treatise on philosophical pessimism. Pope embraces scientific inquiry by asserting that once mankind accepts its place within the Great Chain of Being and acknowledges that “Whatever IS, is Right” (I.292), man will be free to learn about God’s creation through science. The speaker claims:

Go, wondrous creature! mount where science guides,

Go, measure earth, weigh air, and state the tides; [...]

As Eastern priests in giddy circles run,

And turn their heads to imitate the sun.

Go, teach Eternal Wisdom how to rule—

Then drop into thyself, and be a fool! (II.19-30).

However, science is not without its limitations. The sixth chapter of the first part of *The Recognitions* outlines this by quoting a question posed by Pope: “Why has not man a microscopic eye? [...] For this plain reason: man is not a fly” (*Recognitions* 202). By separating man from an omnipresent, omniscient “microscopic eye,” Pope vindicates the nebulous ways of God that cannot be determined by reason alone. As a result, Pope demonstrates how it can also be foolish for mankind to optimistically elevate its own cognitive capabilities to the point of “imitating God” (II.21). Towards the end of his life Gaddis would concede through his persona in *Agapē Agape* how he had likewise been guilty of being this sanguine “wondrous creature” while writing his first novel:

Age withering arrogant youth and worse, the works of arrogant youth and the book I wrote then, my first book, its become my enemy, [...] the rage and energy and boundless excitement the only reality where the work that's become my enemy got done, [...] Youth with its reckless exuberance when all things were possible pursued by Age where we are now, looking back at what we destroyed, what we tore away from that self who could do more (98).

The bold defiance and optimism of the younger Gaddis would gradually be replaced by a deep cynicism and disillusionment with the notion of a Great Chain of Being that instills the world with order.

Consequently, Pope’s optimistic assumption of an overarching, albeit not wholly comprehensible divine order can be contrasted with the more nihilistic stance adopted by Schopenhauer in *Transcendental Speculations on Apparent Design in the Fate of the Individual* (1851). In this work Schopenhauer argues against the Great Chain of Being by dismantling the notion of an apparent design through his suggestion that “the systematic connectedness which we believe to have apprehended in the events of our lives is no more than an unconscious effect of our regulative and schematizing fantasy” (23). Schopenhauer’s

work makes an appearance towards the beginning of *The Recognitions* when Wyatt mocks Otto's intellectual posturing:

Did you hear him? [...] You will find that the rationalists took over Plato's state *qua* state, which of course left no room for the artist, as a creative figure he is always a disturbing element which threatens the status *quo* [...] Did you hear us discussing *quiddity*? And Schopenhauer's *Transcendental Speculations on Apparent Design in the Fate of the Individual*? And right into the Greek skeptics... (105).

The relationship between the Thomist concept of *quiddity* and Schopenhauer's anti-Kantian stance on representation further informs Gaddis's preoccupation with simulacra and the collapse of mimetic order in *The Recognitions*. Quiddity—the medieval concept for the fundamental essence of an object that Wyatt refers to as “what the thing is, the thing itself” (125)—is at odds with Schopenhauer's idealist conceptualization of how the thinking subject can only have access to representations of reality rather than its true essence. Mankind is therefore, as Wyatt claims, “all trying to see in the dark” (125).

Wyatt would again bring up *Transcendental Speculations on Apparent Design in the Fate of the Individual* in a much more congenial light at the end of the novel. This is apparent when Wyatt, adopting the transcendentalist philosophy of Henry Thoreau, retreats to Spain to live at Real Monasterio in order “to live deliberately” without absolutes by “simplify[ing]” his life (900) and becoming the self-who-can-do-more. This emphasis on living deliberately would also be echoed within the novel McCandless writes in *Carpenter's Gothic* where his protagonist, Frank Kinhead, makes the commitment about how “from now on he's going to live deliberately” (139). While attempting to simplify and live deliberately at the monastery, Wyatt meets the character, Ludy, who is in pursuit of a bona fide religious experience so that he can turn the experience into the subject of a magazine article. As a subtle sleight against

Ludy's comical attempt to force a spiritual epiphany, Wyatt recommends that he reads Schopenhauer's work (881) while refraining from mentioning how it vehemently resists prescriptive claims to unequivocal truth.

Wyatt then attempts to make this new vision of a deliberate and simplified life into an aesthetic principle exemplified by how he engages in a practice described as "restoring" old Spanish paintings by removing the paint from the canvas so as to reach "the real form which was there all the time" (875). This method aimed at remaining true to the quiddity of Wyatt's subject serves as an extreme example of Wyatt's aesthetic theory that he explains to his father at the beginning of the novel when questioned as to why he refuses to finish his paintings: "There's something about a ... an unfinished piece of work, a ... a thing like this where . . . do you see? Where perfection is still possible? Because it's there, it's there all the time, all the time you work trying to uncover it [...] Because it's there" (65).⁸ Wyatt's attempt to reflect the perfection of the "real form" through the absence of the canvas can be viewed as typifying Foucault's fascination with Diego Velazquez's *Las Meninas* that Foucault felt embodied a new nebulous episteme no longer contingent on representation and similitude:

It may be that, in this picture, as in all the representations of which it is, as it were, the manifest essence, the profound invisibility of what one sees is inseparable from the invisibility of the person seeing [...] an essential void: the necessary disappearance of that which is its foundation – of the person it resembles and the person in whose eyes it is only a resemblance. This very subject – which is the same – has been elided. And representation, freed finally from the relation that was impeding it, can offer itself as representation in its pure form (*Order of Things* 17-8).

⁸ The idea of a perfect form embedded within the medium itself waiting to be released by the artist is borrowed from the Attic sculptor, Praxiteles, and this notion is explored throughout *The Recognitions*. For example, at a party Otto mentions this Praxitelean idea of "removing the excess marble until he reached the real form that was there all the time" (*Recognitions* 124).

When Ludy questions Wyatt about the merits of defacing a painting to restore it, Wyatt launches into a harangue against the foolhardy attempts of science to explain art by satirically claiming, “Art couldn’t explain it, [...] But now we’re safe, since science can explain it” (870) and how Wyatt has now “passed all the scientific tests [...] With science you take things apart and then we all understand them, then we can all do them. Get things nice and separated. Then you can be reasonable” (871). Wyatt’s reasoning for scraping the paint from the canvas and “get[ting] things nice and separated” reflects Schopenhauer’s cynical views regarding representation. Even though Wyatt claims that “[p]aintings are metaphors for reality, but instead of being an aid to realization obscure the reality which is far more profound” (473), he also concedes that “Whether I, myself, am object or image, they at once, are both, real or fancied, they are both, concrete or abstract, they are both [...] welded as one, perhaps not even welded but actually from the beginning one, am also both and what I must, without changing, modifying, or compromising, be” (472). Like Schopenhauer, Wyatt seeks to transcend the subject-object distinction in favor of the un-representable Platonic Ideal.

The Pope-Schopenhauer dialectic regarding the cognitive capacity of man helps prefigure the twentieth-century analytic-continental philosophical divide especially with regard to Anglo-American analytic theory that was beginning to firmly entrench itself within American academia during the publication of *The Recognitions*. Influenced by Bertrand Russell’s series of lectures titled “The Philosophy of Atomism” (1918) and Rudolf Carnap’s *Pseudoproblems in Philosophy* (1928), logical positivism presupposes that philosophy can only be relevant if philosophical language avoids needless obscurantism by being as precise and empirically verifiable as the scientific method it attempts to emulate. One of the leading principles of this methodology includes Wittgenstein’s concept of picture theory he introduced in *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* (1921). Developed out of Russell’s austere theory of logical atomism as well as the correspondence theory of truth that advances the

view of facts being contingent on referential, and by extension, representational statements that mirror reality, Wittgenstein initially believed that meaningful propositions could only be expressed through truth-functions that correspond with accurate pictures of reality.⁹

However, Gaddis's preoccupation with simulacra and their role in the unavoidable obfuscation that comes with representing reality—e.g. Wyatt's claim that "Paintings are metaphors for reality, but instead of being an aid to realization obscure the reality which is far more profound" (*Recognitions* 473)—essentially rejects the validity of the picture theory of language. For example, Gaddis appears to mock the notion of logical positivism in *The Recognitions* while lambasting bourgeois intellectual posturing when, during a cocktail party in Greenwich Village, an unnamed patron can be heard among the cacophony of voices to be incessantly repeating how he identifies as a "negative positivist" or "positive negativist" (178).¹⁰ Later on, Esther accuses Wyatt of being irrational because of how he privileges an ineffable indeterminacy over the correspondence theory of truth as exemplified in his attempts to—in a notion similar to Keats's concept of *negative capability* (*Letters* 277)—"make negative things do the work of positive ones" (590).

Moreover, Gaddis's anti-positivist sentiment complements aspects of the continental philosophical tradition that, while encompassing many disparate disciplines, tends to view the natural sciences—especially their emphasis on empiricism and verifiability—as engaging in a harmful degree of epistemic reductionism at the expense of human agency. For example, at the beginning of *On the Logic of the Social Sciences* (1967) Jürgen Habermas argues that "the positivist thesis of unified science, which assimilates all the sciences to a natural-scientific model, fails because [...] access to a symbolically prestructured reality cannot be

⁹ Wittgenstein would, however, later distance himself from picture theory in favor of a far more dynamic and liberal form of communication theory as outlined in his posthumously-published *Philosophical Investigations* (1953).

¹⁰ This irreverent treatment of logical positivism would be later developed by Pynchon through his notion of *illogical negativism*: a promotion of the nonsensical that cannot be represented in positivist terms. This idea will be explored further in the subsequent chapter.

gained by observation alone” (1). Fittingly, Wyatt feels this indeterminate, prestructured reality that eludes empirical efforts to be made present-at-hand also evades representation in his art. Moreover, in *Agapē Agape* Gaddis would thematically reflect the drawbacks of scientific reductionism when the narrator—while reflecting on the invention of the player-piano—bemoans the marginalization of art due to a technological emphasis not on “the music but how it’s made, tubes bellows hammers the whole digital machine, whole binary system that all-or-none paper roll with the holes in it running over the tracker bar that’s where all of it came from” (8). Gaddis would look for alternatives to the austere rationalism predicating the post-war episteme.

Continental philosophy—especially phenomenology—serves as a significant counterpoint to empirical-based epistemic models because, as Taylor claims, the main task of continental philosophy is “to think what the tradition has left unthought through the phenomenological reduction, which exposes the originary constitution of every form of consciousness” (*Rewiring the Real* 259)—essentially an alterity that cannot be assimilated within epistemic frameworks. For example, Heidegger—an intellectual rival of Carnap—described how an episteme predicated on the scientific pursuit to order the phenomenal world through representation is fundamentally manipulative and totalizing:

This objectifying of whatever is accomplished in a setting-before, a representing, that aims at bringing each particular being before it in such a way that man who calculates can be sure, and that means be certain, of that being. We first arrive at science as research when and only when truth has been transformed into the certainty of representation. What it is to be is for the first time defined as the objectiveness of representing, and truth is first defined as the certainty of representing, in the metaphysics of Descartes (“Age of the World Picture” 127).

Greatly suspicious of a strict adherence to the subject-object distinction, Heidegger resisted the correspondence theory of truth by instead adopting a phenomenological stance which Taylor describes as promoting the view that “the task of philosophy is to think that which eludes reference and resists representation” (*Rewiring the Real* 279). For Heidegger, this un-representable Real that eludes thematization can only be conceptualized through a primordial un-concealment or *aletheia* that is a condition of truth rather than truth itself because it “is the opening which first grants Being and thinking and their presencing to and for each other [...] from which alone the possibility of the belonging together of Being and thinking, that is, presence and perceiving, can arise at all” (*On Being and Time* 68). Thus, Heidegger’s anti-representational notion is essentially divorced from the modal logic of his analytic counterparts who attempt to make the world present-at-hand through the correspondence theory of truth because, as he contends, “the further one moves away from the beginning of Western thinking, from *aletheia*, the further *aletheia* goes into oblivion; the clearer knowledge, consciousness, comes to the foreground, and Being thus withdraws itself. In addition, this withdrawal of Being remains concealed” (52).

But while Gaddis shares similar epistemological concerns with Heidegger and was clearly skeptical of the axiomatic rationality of logical positivism and its unyielding fidelity to the correspondence theory of truth, he was also similarly skeptical of continental philosophy. In fact, in an interview with Abádi-Nagy Gaddis would outright deny the conscious influence of continental trends such as post-structuralism throughout his oeuvre by claiming, “I mean there are fashions—the most extreme, I gather now, being structuralism, deconstruction, what have you, much of which I just read askance. I’m not sure what is going on, but it’s surely not on my mind when I write” (“Art of Fiction” 84). Nevertheless, his work complements certain strands of continental thinking in its attack against the epistemic and semiotic presuppositions associated with Anglo-American analytic theory.

For example, at one point in *The Recognitions* the narrator reflects upon how scientific developments have fostered the “Modernism heresy” (178) due to their rationalistic proclivity to dissect the phenomenal world in order to better understand it. This is akin to logical atomism’s reduction of disparate data into simple facts that cannot be broken down any further which, as Gaddis argues, leads to the “self-sufficiency of fragments” (616) in the form of a purely phenomenally-grounded epistemology at the expense of the un-representable Ideal. Moore notes in his reader’s guide how the heresy alludes to the progressive attempt to establish a type of Catholic Modernism during the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries by promoting a more rational approach to Catholicism in line with Enlightenment thought, which consequently was declared heresy by Pope Pius X in 1907 (n.178.32). Like logical positivism, the Modernism heresy marginalizes the indeterminate—e.g. alterity. Comnes argues the pitfalls associated with the Modernism heresy are a target of criticism in Gaddis’s work since:

The Recognitions gives no warrant for belief in recovering meaning by means of an essential structure. In concept, the collage of the novel presents a linguistic version of the same complementary universe faced by quantum physics. The reader is forced to accept the second order, metaethical tenet of the ethics of indeterminacy: the description of the alterity of reality that intractably resists formulations that claim to be more exact than probability allows (*Ethics of Indeterminacy* 73).

The indeterminacy likened by Comnes to the nebulous nature of quantum physics complements the uncertainty outlined by the narrator in *Agapē Agape* who observes how “probability came in and threw that whole safe predictable Newtonian world into chaos, into disorder wherever you turn, discontinuity, disparity, difference, discord, contradiction, what they’re calling aporia they took from the Greeks, the academics took the word from the

Greeks for this swamp of ambiguity, paradox, perversity, opacity, obscurity, anarchy” (2).

The narrator’s account here regarding the etymological development of *aporia* is particularly significant because its evolution from the Greek notion of a rhetorical impasse into the more contemporary notion of an ineffable paradox reveals the underlying preoccupation throughout Gaddis’s oeuvre with the indeterminate that eludes totalization by the correspondence theory of truth.

Christopher Leise develops the relationship between *aporia* and indeterminacy even further by contending in his essay on Gaddis’s treatment of entropy within *The Recognitions* that:

Gaddis’s novels invite their reader to play an ancient game: the Greek parlor game of *aporia*, wherein the point is to ask questions for which there are no answers, [...] Rather than misunderstandings between languages, his game plays out in irresolvable ambiguities that require his reader to assent to multiple conclusions and thus no single interpretation. These collisions serve to contest the claims to determinacy asserted by society’s most powerful institutions (“Power of Babel” 36-7).

Leise further contends that a single totalizing interpretation is rendered impossible by Gaddis because his novels “suggest that, perhaps, all lexica will be inadequate to express the aesthetic experience; perhaps, the game of *aporia* reminds us, it is the very nature of this inadequacy that makes art not only effective (because affective), but necessary” (49). This *aporia* at the heart of the chaotic post-war milieu would be what Combes refers to as the “second order,” the realm of alterity and ethics, that cannot be articulated through the correspondence theory of truth and is therefore relegated to what Wittgenstein referred to in the preface of the *Tractatus* as the realm lying beyond the line “drawn in language” where the “other side of the limit [is] simply nonsense.”

This indeterminate second order is a central feature within Gaddis's novel because, as Benesch notes, one is "[u]nable to pin down the staggering amount of data and information to a single original design," which leaves readers "with a sobering realization: that the more adroit they have become at deciphering the intricate web of textual doubling, the more confused they are about the epistemological value of origins and originality" ("Diaspora of Words" 31). Without the epistemological and ontological distinctions between the copy and the original along with the absence of faith in the signifying capacity of language to accurately represent reality, a comprehensive epistemic framework cannot be fully realized in *The Recognitions* because, as Johnston argues, Gaddis "relentlessly demonstrates that it is not production or intelligible purpose but the ceaseless movement and proliferation of useless information and objects that define our world" (*Carnival of Repetition* 198).

Consequently, Gaddis's preoccupation with that which resists formulation and resides beyond the positivist correspondence theory of truth puts his work in line with the theory of other continental thinkers regardless of what he claims to the contrary. Thus, it can be argued that Gaddis's resistance against the totalizing nature of epistemic frameworks in favor of alterity reflects Allen Thiher's observation of how post-war fiction is typified by its treatment of language as the "fallen logos or alienated otherness" (*Words in Reflection* 237). It is this semiotic notion of "alienated otherness," situated against logical positivism, that is paramount for understanding Gaddis's attempt to re-cognize the devil-inspired absurdity of indetermination into the alterity-oriented ethical imperative of pursuing the indeterminate Other within *The Recognitions*.

Instead of embracing an epistemic framework predicated on delineable, differentiated categories, Gaddis's indeterminacy becomes a means of moving towards a sublime oneness in the form of a primordial first idea that cannot be represented, subdivided, and totalized within epistemic frameworks. So when Johnston—in a notion similar to the narrator's

fascination with the concept of aporia in *Agapē Agape*—suggests that the “gaps in signification account for [*The Recognition*’s] semantic richness, for only because of such gaps can it appear both excessively full and surfeited with every conceivable thing that could fill a novel and yet incomplete and indeterminate in meaning” (*Carnival of Repetition* 31), these indeterminate semiotic gaps that cannot be totalized within an epistemic framework effectively become a means of fostering the ethically-driven *agape* Gaddis attempts to achieve with the ineffable Other and therefore “make negative things do the work of positive ones” (*Recognitions* 590).

It will now be shown how Wyatt’s aesthetic theory complements this notion of an indeterminate *agape* functioning as a counterpoint to austere epistemic frameworks because, as Leise argues, “In its being co-opted by systemic forces that endeavor to totalize, Gaddis shows the artwork can have a unique type of efficacy that gets to the very center of discursive systems and exposes their edges, their failure to account for everything, their limited and restrictive terms” (“Power of Babel” 42). This space at the periphery of such epistemic “systemic forces” that Wyatt pursues through his paintings constitutes the second order of alterity that is a constituent and inextricable part of reality. With this in mind Taylor contends, “If the real is radically other, it remains irreducibly obscure and cannot be rationally comprehended, scientifically analyzed, or directly communicated; rather, it must be approached indirectly in works that artfully figure what eludes precise language, clear concepts, and transparent images” (*Rewiring the Real* 5). Consequently, in seeking to transcend the egocentric insularity of the “disproportionate I” by disappearing into his paintings and essentially becoming the artists he forges—effectively trading an emphasis on originality for origin itself—Wyatt attempts to become the self-who-can-do-more in order to allow his art to promote an *agape* with the Other in a fractured post-war society that is hopelessly a-gape.

2.4 *Agape A-Gape*

Early on in Wyatt's painting career he encounters a model named Christiane in Paris who awakens him to the possibility of encountering an ineffable, "imperceptible underlying reality" (94) that eludes representation—essentially what his childhood friend, Han, at one point refers to as "something missing [...] if I knew what it was then it wouldn't be so missing" (95). As he gazes upon her for inspiration, Wyatt is eventually able to find "suggestion of the lines he needed, forms which he knew but could not discover in the work without this allusion to completed reality before him" (67). In his study of literary examples of apophaticism, Knight notes how Wyatt's approach to this second order of reality through his art "reflect[s] both his serious need for a Truth that transcends contingencies and his hitherto repressed doubts regarding the surety of such a Truth" (*Omissions* 125). The possibility of fostering a sublime truth may amount to nothing more than a fantasy, but Wyatt nevertheless views his forgeries as a way of fulfilling the imperative of being the self-who-can-do-more since he considers them "work of perfect necessity" that possess a "sense of inevitableness" (144). Therefore, these lines that Wyatt is able to produce with the help of Christiane, while being derivative of the phenomenal reality, are treated as a means to evoking traces of the "imperceptible reality" otherwise impossible to codify.

Accordingly, this episode is paramount for understanding Wyatt's aesthetic theory because his experience with Christiane allows him to have a "near-recognition of reality" (91) that he can otherwise "never see" as it is situated in the realm "beyond a painting" (92) and likewise the correspondence theory of truth. More importantly, this second order also relates to the Other since the model makes it possible for Wyatt to re-cognize the phenomenal reality around him into a phantasmagorical experience where "[i]n the street everything was unfamiliar, everything and everyone [...] was unreal" (92). But just like the post-structural attempt to undermine the metaphysics of presence to account for the perpetually-belated

traces of alterity that elude it, Wyatt's near recognition of the second order can never be fully actualized because it can only emanate in a manner comparable to how he describes one of his dreams: "the sense of recalling something, of almost reaching it, and holding it [...] And then it's...escaped again. It's escaped again, and there's only a sense of disappointment, of something irretrievably lost" (119). Nevertheless, these fleeting, "irretrievably lost" glimpses of a sublime oneness exceeding the purview of epistemic frameworks—what Wyatt refers to as "[c]ompletely consum[ing] [...] moments of exaltation" that occur "when you're working and lose all consciousness of yourself" (112)—come at the expense of the artist's egocentric impulses in favor of the self-who-can-do-more who is open to the possibility of maintaining an *agape* with the Other.

Wyatt's aesthetic theory can therefore be viewed as him attempting to account for a latent alterity excluded from the post-war episteme. He, like Eliot's speaker in "East Coker" and Gaddis's narrator in *Carpenter's Gothic*, strives to "fight to recover what has been lost" by losing consciousness of himself as an artist in the act of producing art. This emphasis on art as a means to an unthematizable alterity, similar to Wallace Stevens's notion of the indeterminate "first idea," reveals Wyatt's wariness for originality at the expense of origin. The notion of an obfuscated first idea is clearly reflected at one point in *The Recognitions* when the narrator describes Esme's epistemological negotiation of the modern chaosmos in her poetry: "It was through this imposed accumulation of chaos that she struggled to move now: beyond it lay simplicity, unmeasurable, residence of perfection, where nothing was created, *where originality did not exist: because it was origin*" (114; italicized for emphasis). So if, according to Wyatt, the moments of exaltation he seeks in order to experience a near-recognition of the first idea requires that he lose consciousness of himself, it follows that the pursuit of originality in art is fundamentally egocentric and at odds with maintaining a selfless, non-reciprocal *agape* with the Other.

This perspective of originality helps inform Gaddis's disdain for the avant-garde and, accordingly, why he spends so much time in *The Recognitions* ridiculing the pomposity of the Greenwich Village literati. For example, at one party Max debuts his work *The Workman's Soul* that consists of "an honest workman's shirt [...] mounted for exhibition" upon a canvas (176). Most of the guests assume that their inability to decipher the meaning of the work is a testament to its sophistication, so many of them end up unjustifiably praising it by paying empty lip service to the working class—what essentially functions as the marginalized Other to their own privileged status—and engaging in vague doublespeak similar to how many of the patrons had adopted the pseudo-word *chavenet* at a party on a previous occasion.

Later on, Gaddis more directly lambasts experimental aesthetic movements such as Dadaism and abstract expressionism when, in a scene lampooning Marcel Duchamp and Jackson Pollock, he ridicules Max's continual efforts to stay innovative such as when he "climbs up a ladder with a piece of string soaked in ink, and [...] drops it from the ceiling onto a canvas on the floor" (940). While Max's methods are certainly creative, the desire to remove oneself from tradition—and by extension distance oneself from the first idea—is at odds with Wyatt's aesthetic principles that Valentine echoes when arguing, "Originality is a device that untalented people use to impress other untalented people to protect themselves from talented people" and how "[m]ost people are clever because they don't know how to be honest" (252). Moreover, Herr Koppel outlines the interplay between origin and originality related to Wyatt's aesthetic theory:

all around we see originality of incompetent idiots, they could draw nothing, paint nothing, just so the mess they make is original . . . Even two hundred years ago who wanted to be original, to be original was to admit that you could not do a thing the right way, so you could only do it your own way.

When you paint you do not try to be original, only you think about your work, how to make it better, so you copy masters [...] for with each copy of a copy the form degenerates . . . you do not invent shapes, you know them (89).

Koppel's emphasis on art being grounded in traditional forms as opposed to the ostensibly degenerate, egocentric methods of the avant-garde—which at one point an unnamed character vehemently denounces with regard to Max's work by claiming, "Did you see his paintings? Crap, all of them, even if he has got a sense of form" (577)—helps inform why Wyatt views characters such as Max with contempt. Max's inability to "know how to be honest" combined with his innovative yet glib approach to art at the expense of the first idea is essentially at odds with the alterity-oriented *agape* Wyatt seeks within his own art.

This attitude towards originality is clearly influenced by Eliot's Impersonal Theory outlined in "Tradition and the Individual Talent" (1921) that calls for artistic creation to be viewed as a process of depersonalization in which the artist undergoes "a continual surrender of himself" and a "continual extinction of personality" in order to "develop or procure the consciousness of the past" Eliot believes is the foundation for all great art (53). This sentiment is a counterpoint to the aesthetic impulses of the various Greenwich Village artists who, as Stanley claims, "have set out to kill art [...] And some of them are so excited about discovering new mediums and new forms [...] that they never have time to work in one that's already established" (*Recognitions* 186). In a manner complementing Stanley's appeal of working within an established tradition, Wyatt's preoccupation with the first idea exemplifies the Eliotic vision of an "ideal order" that encompasses "a sense of the timeless as well as of the temporal and of the timeless and of the temporal together [...] And it is at the same time what makes a writer most acutely conscious of his place in time, of his contemporaneity" ("Tradition" 48). However, this attempt at returning to the primordial first idea proves to be incredibly complicated.

When Wyatt pledges to live a deliberate and simplified life in the Spanish monastery at the end of the novel, he comes to the conclusion that gaining a closer proximity to the first idea is only possible if he eschews his sense of selfhood and quite literally becomes the artists he attempts to emulate. The notion of the first idea and alterity therefore become intertwined, or as Taylor contends, “Paradoxically, by becoming an other, Wyatt becomes himself” (*Rewiring the Real* 52). One specific Other Wyatt attempts to become is the Spanish Renaissance painter, El Greco, whose simultaneous ingenuity and respect for tradition is deeply admired by Wyatt. He therefore attempts to invoke the spirit of El Greco when creating copies of his work by making them so pristine that there is no longer a clear distinction between the original and Wyatt’s forgery.

In fact, Wyatt’s desire to collapse the original-copy and precursor-ephebe distinctions is directly informed by his admiration for El Greco due to how he “learned to simplify” from Titian as a way of safeguarding against “[s]eparateness, that’s what went wrong, you’ll understand [...] Everything withholding itself from everything else” (874). Not only does this aversion to separateness complement the immaculate first idea while contrasting with the differentiation predicating epistemic frameworks that “get lost in details and clutter, and separate everything” (873), but it also attests to Wyatt’s endeavor to eliminate the self-centered impulse of the artist who strives to use innovation as a means of separating oneself from tradition.

This epiphany regarding the pitfalls of separateness, however, is only revealed after Wyatt becomes cognizant of his complicity in the totalization of alterity. Like Christiane, Esme also plays a pivotal role in Wyatt’s development as an artist by serving as a model for his forgery of Van der Goes’s *Death of the Virgin*. She is selected as a model because she reminds Wyatt of his mother and he recognizes the “lines of completion” (57) in her form necessary for allowing him to complete the forgery. Esme’s does not take her role lightly

since she is described as “fearing close scrutiny [...] as though someone from outside might discover something in her she did not know about herself” (270) as well as being “swept by the wind of terror at exposing one’s self, losing the aggregate of meanness which compose identity” (300). Wyatt, however, does not respect her vulnerability.

For example, the narrator describes how with “each motion of his hand the form under it assumed a reality to exclude them both [...] his motions only affirmations of this presence which projected there in a form it imposed, in lines it dictated and the colors it assumed” (274). The painting is consequently brought into “the perfect moment of the transient violence of life” at the expense of Esme’s alterity—a violence that is a literal antithesis of Levinas’s imperative to respect the face of the Other—causing Esme to observe how in being merely a means to representing the Virgin she has therefore been “dishonored” because the painting is “no longer me [...] for she is dead” (275).

To add insult to injury, Wyatt then decides to deface the painting to make the forgery more authentic, which Esme considers to be a huge betrayal. As a result, she isolates herself and attempts to enter “the uncircumscribed, unbearable, infinitely extended, indefinitely divisible void where she swam in orgasm, soaring into a vastness away from the heaving indignity of the posture she shared” (300). Such a void of radical alterity that eludes the metaphysics of presence is of course impossible for her to actually enter, but her desire to pursue this second order after being heartbroken by Wyatt’s forgery demonstrates the struggle at play between the notion of an unthematizable alterity and the hazards associated with representation in Gaddis’s novel. Knight argues that Wyatt’s unethical treatment of his models is reflective of his inability to maintain an *agape* with those around him:

The damaging of the Virgin’s face [...] represents a very specific betrayal, and makes clear how interconnected are the acts of the forger and the false lover.

So long as Wyatt commits himself to the calumny that is forgery, so long shall

he remain outside the circle of a loving relation, at least to the degree that this relation demands honesty and openness. Actions have a tendency to come full circle, and the dishonesty that is practiced in one realm, art, is bound to manifest itself in another, one's friendship (*Hints & Guesses* 81).

The fractured relationship between Esme and Wyatt, however, eventually becomes the impetus for his complete removal of the face from the Van der Goes forgery in order to attempt to rectify his transgression much to the chagrin of Basil Valentine. Wyatt then acknowledges his guilt after realizing that to “impose one's will upon what it has destroyed takes a steady hand and rank presumption” (359)—an action at the expense of maintaining a non-totalizing *agape* with alterity.

This episode therefore offers a possible reason as to why Wyatt attempts to “restore” the El Greco painting at the end of the novel by scraping off its paint. Wyatt realizes that in order to gain a closer proximity to the first idea he must strive to foster a unity between himself and the aesthetic vision he attempts to capture in his paintings that, like the ineffable alterity he is constantly preoccupied with, is incapable of being represented. This endeavor to merge himself with the El Greco painting is largely owed to Esme's view about how a good poet must strive to become the poem that “exist[s], ready-formed, awaiting recovery in that moment when the writing down of it was impossible: because she was the poem” (300). Wyatt therefore completely removes the paint from the canvas to promote a state of indeterminacy by effectively undermining the separateness between the referent and its corresponding signifier.

Thus, in his attempt to recognize a glimpse of the first idea by conflating himself with El Greco, Wyatt—who at the time of the restoration had adopted the alias, Stephen—reconceptualizes the act of forgery exemplified in the famous epiphany of an artist who shares his namesake: Stephen Dedalus. At the end of *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*

Stephen Dedalus decides to set out and “forge in the smithy of my soul the uncreated conscience of my race” (228). But instead of forging constituting an act of self-creation, Wyatt’s forgery becomes a means of self-effacement in favor of the Other. Thus, in Wyatt’s endeavor to foster an *agape* with an ineffable alterity through this re-conceptualized notion of forgery adopted while living a deliberate and simplified life alone in the monastery, Wyatt also comes to embody Stephen Dedalus’s call of using “silence, exile, and cunning” (238) as a means of pursuing the first idea.

But the significance associated with privileging origin over originality is not solely limited to Wyatt’s aesthetic theory. More importantly, it is apparent that Wyatt’s anti-representational approach to fostering a “near-recognition of reality” (91) in his paintings also extends to the realm of semiotics and, by extension, epistemic models predicated on the correspondence theory of truth. With regard to this interplay between forgery and originality as it relates to the pursuit of fostering a near-recognition of the Ideal in *The Recognitions*, Burn contends:

the novel’s quest for “recognition” of reality dramatizes the Enlightenment encyclopedia’s efforts to locate and select “essential” truth; Gaddis’s detailed critique of originality has affinities with the encyclopedia that, as an assemblage of current knowledge, cannot be too original, but equally cannot plagiarize; [...] the vastness of *The Recognitions* and modern encyclopedias are responses to the proliferation of data, and both are concerned with how that body of information can be encompassed (“Collapse of Everything” 54).

With this in mind, it will now be examined how Gaddis’s subversive treatment of epistemic differentiation in favor of the ethical imperative of indeterminacy is an inextricable part of how his novel pursues a alterity-oriented vision of the sublime first idea at the expense of the immense body of information *The Recognitions* encompasses.

Devoid of a transcendental signified and liberated from the picture theory of language due to its upheaval by simulacra, Johnston contends that *The Recognitions* is “re-enacting the fragmentation and loss of some primal authoritative center or agency predicated on Platonic distinctions” and depicts “a reversal into an emergent multiplicity brought about through the resurfacing and proliferation of simulacra” (*Carnival of Repetition* 21). Consequently, the loss of the “primal authoritative center” symbolically reduces language in *The Recognitions* to a “Diaspora of words” (*Recognitions* 85). In this sense Gaddis claimed in an interview with LeClair that the diaspora of words reflects “the many meanings of communication breakdown in a system that is not under control” (“Interview” 23). This systemic breakdown undermines the authority of various epistemic frameworks, which—viewed more optimistically—affords Gaddis the possibility of remaining open to the ineffable Other by allowing him to “make negative things do the work of positive ones” within his novel (*Recognitions* 590).

2.5 Alterity and the Diaspora of Words

At the end of the novel Stanley visits the church at Fenestrula to play the organ composition he had been composing throughout the novel. However, before entering the church he is met by a priest who gives him the warning, “*Prego, fare attenzione, non usi troppo I bassi, le note. Basse. La Chiesa è così vecchia che le vibrazioni, capisce, potrebbero essere pericolose. Per favore non bassi...e non strane combinazioni di note, capisce...*” (956) which Moore translates, “Please, pay attention, don't use too much bass, and low notes. The church is so old that the vibrations, you see, could be very dangerous. Please, no bass . . . and no strange combinations of notes, you understand” (“Reader’s Guide” n.956.10). Stanley’s inability to understand Italian causes the priest’s warning to go unheeded, and therefore the final episode concludes with the walls of the church crumbling down upon Stanley as he plays his music while the narrator solemnly observes how his composition “is still spoken of, when it is noted, with high regard, though seldom played” (956).

The consequences of communication breakdown are also depicted when the character, Army Munk—while staying in a French hotel—decides to open a window in his room despite a warning being posted right next to the window: “*On est prié de n’ouvrir pas ce fenêtre parce que le façade de l’hôtel lui compter pour se supporter*” (942), which Moore translates, “It is requested that the window not be opened because the front of the hotel depends on it for support” (“Reader’s Guide” n.942.29). Unable to read French, Army disregards the warning and opens the window right before the façade collapses and crushes him to death under its weight. The deaths of both Stanley and Army serve as a fitting metaphor of communication breakdown due to the inability for pertinent information to be distinguishable within a post-war landscape inundated by competing data—an environment Moore refers to as the chaotic “Babel of modern civilization” (*William Gaddis* 61)—that Gaddis attempted to mitigate throughout his oeuvre.

Furthermore, Burn observes how these final episodes reveal a fundamental flaw at the heart of epistemic frameworks:

The absurd death of the pious Stanley at the end of the novel seems to derive more from the Enlightenment understanding of knowledge. The collapse of the church at Fenestrula symbolizes the crushing weight of information [...] because the collapse arises from the inability to process enough data (Stanley is an expert on composition and musical history, but is unable to translate the priest’s warning) (“Collapse of Everything” 57).

Despite the obvious benefits this information could offer the two characters, its obfuscation by a crushing deluge of data that cannot be adequately ordered and made comprehensible reveals the repercussions that a diaspora of words poses on epistemic frameworks. Gaddis addressed this example of communication breakdown in an interview with LeClair by claiming that it is “a basic concern of mine and a problem. Words empty of information: that

too is where we live” (“Interview” 25). This semantic ambiguity, while potentially useful in helping to diminish the logocentric totalization of alterity, nevertheless poses significant problems in terms of the potential for language to foster legitimate human connection.

For example, the consequences associated with how a diaspora of words inhibits an *agape* with the Other is symbolically alluded to during a party when an unnamed character bemoans what he views as the etymological degeneration of words. He at one point implores another character to “[d]erive *venereal*, and see what you get, if you don't call that decay” (*Recognitions* 669). The character's point is that *venereal* developed from the Middle English *venerealle* that itself derived from the Latin *venereus*, which evolves from Venus: the Roman goddess of love. Consequently, the character finds the etymological debasement of the original Latin word for love into a word that denotes base sexual indulgence and/or infection to be wholly unacceptable.

Furthermore, the plights of Army and Stanley arising from their inability to adequately order and comprehend data is further developed in *JR* when Edward Bast fails to have his musical endeavors appreciated by a society barraged by disparate sounds. While Edward does not pay the ultimate price like Army and Stanley for his failure to distinguish and comprehend pivotal information from the myriad fragmented voices around him, he experiences his grandiose vision of composing a complex opera gradually diminishes to a symphony, then to a cantata, and finally at the end of the novel he is left attempting to write a single part for an unaccompanied cello (675). Like Stanley, Edward's musical pursuit is figuratively crushed by a society constantly besieged by noise and unorganized information in the form of incessant junk mail, phone calls, radio jingles, and television advertisements to the point that at the end of the novel he becomes like the music he composes for the sole cello: an alienated, disenfranchised and ultimately insignificant voice in a sea of noise within a post-war milieu that cannot be made intelligible.

Even more tragically, Edward's goal of producing a piece of music that can reach out to the Other as a form of unadulterated communion between himself and the listener—a form of communication that cannot be expressed through mere words due to how music is “not just sound effects there are things only music can say, things that can't be written down or hung on a clothesline” (653)—in the end proves to be merely a pipedream. This is apparent in his conversation with the money-obsessed adolescent, J R, who lacks the liberal humanist views towards art that Edward espouses. When asked to stop talking and listen to Bach's *Cantata 21* in order to “take his mind off these nickel deductions [and] net tangible assets” (653), J R responds that he merely hears the noise but is unable to appreciate the non-commodifiable, sublime timelessness Edward believes music has to offer but is otherwise marginalized within a capitalistic society. As a result, Edward's earnest endeavor to make negative things do the work of positive ones through music is at last reduced to an unstable form of informational entropy that the closed epistemic framework of a commercially-driven, post-war American society will eventually eradicate and subsume.

This tension arising between the pursuit for earnest human connection through the ineffable sublimity of art against the informational entropy emanating as a flood of unfettered voices hindering communication also helps inform the heteroglossic nature of Gaddis's dialogue throughout his oeuvre. The entropic cacophony of voices present in *The Recognitions* is further exacerbated in *J R* and *Carpenter's Gothic* in which the narratives are composed almost entirely of fragmented and often context-less dialogue without explicit cues from the narrator regarding whom is speaking. As Comnes notes, “by eliminating virtually every kind of discursive authorial transition” that is necessary for mediating the proliferation of information offered, Gaddis's work “becomes a lonely and problematic read” because the reader eventually realizes that “meaning and coherence do not constitute intrinsic properties of the text” (*Ethics of Indeterminacy* 89).

The absence of these “discursive authorial transition[s]” creates the conditions necessary for illustrating the epistemic pitfalls associated with a diaspora of words, which consequently helps inform why Gibbs tells one of the elementary school classes he teaches that they “assume that organization is an inherent property of the knowledge itself, and that disorder and chaos are simply irrelevant forces that threaten it from outside. In fact it’s exactly the opposite. Order is simply a thin, perilous condition we try to impose on the basic reality of chaos . . .” (*J R* 20). The “thin, perilous condition” associated with the contrivance of systemic order is then reflected in the school’s failure to properly implement an innovative educational model in which all courses would be taught through “closed-circuit television” (24) that one schoolboard member verbosely describes as “structur[ing] the material in terms of the ongoing situation to tangibilitate the utilization potential of this one to one instructional medium in[to] such a meaningful learning experience” (47). Maintaining this system proves to be impossible, however, as it is constantly interrupted by informational entropy in the form of competing broadcasting systems that accidentally transmit their own messages onto the school televisions and therefore impede a “meaningful learning experience” from occurring.

But while the pluralistic nature of these competing voices that undermine the closed system may appear to support a discursive system that—in its resistance to a single dominating discourse—is open to alterity, this is simply not the case. Gaddis’s dialogue does not reflect a cohesive and reciprocal discourse between speakers. Instead, more often than not only one side of a conversation can be discerned, which forces the reader to attempt to assuage the fragmentation of the dialogue by imagining what is being spoken by the absent voice—essentially making the negative discourse of a spectral Other whose dialogue within the narrative is absent do the work of positive discourses within the text. This is apparent in the myriad telephone calls that take place throughout *J R*. For example, at one point *J R* calls Edward to discuss his business plans:

--Hello Bast? Boy I almost didn't...no I'm out of breath, I had to stay in at...No but first hey how come you didn't call Piscator about this here whole Wonder . . . what? No but where are you at then, you . . . What? What do you [...] No but how was I supposed to know that? I mean I knew the both of them were old, but holy . . . [...] No but what do you expect me to . . . No okay, okay but. . . . (343).

The reader can only infer what is being spoken by the absent speaker, and therefore the fragmented dialogue highlights Gaddis's view about how some information will always elude the purview of even the most comprehensive epistemic frameworks.

Moreover, the various approaches designed to quell the chaos and disorder associated with informational entropy are mocked by Gaddis at one point in *J R* in his description of the fictional company, Frigicom. As a way of curbing the informational entropy emanating as noise pollution pervasive throughout New York City, Frigicom released a press release about their purported "scientific breakthrough":

promising noise elimination by the placement of absorbent screens [...] operating at faster hyphen than hyphen sound speeds a complex process employing liquid nitrogen will be used to convert the noise shards comma as they are known comma at temperatures so low they may be handled with comparative ease by trained personnel immediately upon emission before the noise element is released into the atmosphere period the shards will then be collected and disposed of in remote areas (527).

Frigicom's outlandish claim about freezing sound waves into disposable shards is later described as being "forged by the alliance of free enterprise and modern technology which promises to sever both military and artistic barriers at one fell swoop in the cause of human betterment" (527). Consequently, Frigicom's attempt to produce innovative technology

exposes the drawbacks associated with an unwavering techno-scientific approach that attempts to commodify and order everything within an epistemic framework.

This non-quantifiable alterity in the form of informational entropy is further developed by the narrator in *Agapē Agape* who claimed, “Willard Gibbs showed us the tendency for entropy to increase, nature’s tendency to degrade the organized and destroy the meaningful when he pulled the rug out from under Newton’s compact tightly organized universe,” which as a result “laid the way for this contingent universe where order is the least probable and chaos the most” (5). At the end of his life, Gaddis—like Arny, Edward, and Stanley before him—found himself the victim of informational entropy that “degrade[s] the organized and destroy[s] the meaningful” by figuratively crushing him under the weight of his notes about the comprehensive history of the player-piano that he was never able to complete. Joseph Tabbi suggests in the afterword to *Agapē Agape* that the novella therefore reflects how “[a]fter a career spent imagining in detail the vast systems and multiple voices of an emerging global culture—in works that have themselves been called ‘system novels’—Gaddis at the end would reflect primarily on his own private system of assembling materials and putting words down on paper” (99-100).

Overwhelmed by information, Gaddis’s inability to maintain his private system in order to finish his project attests to a statement he made in 1980 during an interview with LeClair: “One is dismayed and disturbed as one grows up by the difference between the anticipated actuality and the actuality” (“Interview” 19). The “anticipated actuality” he refers to is apparent in the youthful optimism Gaddis once possessed at the time of writing *The Recognitions* that he channeled into his ethical pursuit of promoting a self-who-can-do-more who is able to make negative things to do the work of positive ones within an indeterminate world. However, this endeavor would ultimately fail as Gaddis eventually came to realize how the stark “actuality” of a commercially-driven, rationally-aligned post-war America is in

a sense incompatible with the alterity-oriented vision he sought in his work. While Gaddis spent most of his life attempting to reveal the drawback of positivist reductionism as a means of reining in the chaotic, disparate data within the modern chaosmos, he was never able to pinpoint an alternative model to the determinate epistemic frameworks that he attempted to overcome. In the end the best Gaddis could do was to deliberately simplify—like Wyatt—into a lone voice, like Edward, as a means of remaining open to the ineffable Other while avoiding buttressing epistemic frameworks seeking to totalize alterity.

2.6 Concluding Thoughts on Gaddis’s Self-Who-Can-Do-More

When Goethe’s Faust attempted to achieve total knowledge of the natural world, he was reminded by Mephistopheles that “All theory, my friend, is grey / But green is life’s glad golden tree” (II. 2038-2039) before divulging to Faust the chilling pronouncement, “From dreams of god-like knowledge you will wake / To fear, in which your very soul shall quake” (II. 2049-2050). The attempt to gain “god-like knowledge” through austere “grey” theory that attempts to categorize everything into the present-at-hand ends up preventing the subject from maintaining a primordial oneness with the natural world that once lost can no longer be fully recovered. Gaddis’s *The Recognitions* reveals the consequences associated with the grey correspondence theory of truth that attempts to establish a totalized vision of the world at the expense of a sublime oneness free from differentiation. But unlike Faust’s endeavor to gain unbridled access to a phenomenal reality that is still—for all intents and purposes—capable of being ordered, the phenomenal reality in *The Recognitions* is displaced by simulacra that complicate the subject’s relation with the world.

However, while it may seem that the upheaval of the original by various forgeries may hinder Gaddis from gaining a closer proximity to the first idea, he nevertheless views forgery as a necessary means of pursuing the perfection of a latent second order that cannot be represented within epistemic frameworks. This is evident when, in an interview with

Abádi-Nagy, Gaddis discussed his preoccupation with the relationship between alchemy and forgery in *The Recognitions*:

My early impression was that the alchemists were simply trying to turn base metals into gold. Later I came to the more involved reading and better understanding of it all— [...] the gold in many of the symbolic senses in alchemy is the perfection, is the sun, is a kind of redemption. When at some despairing moment Wyatt says—when he realizes that the table of the Seven Deadly Sins is the original and not his copy—“Thank God there was gold to forge,” that is very much the key line to the whole book (“Art of Fiction” 67).

Wyatt at one point reflects upon Nietzsche’s statement from *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, “For me an image slumbers in the stone” (*Recognitions* 149)—also repeated by the narrator in *Agapē Agape* (12)—which Moore notes Carl Jung adopted as a metaphor for alchemy in his work, *Psychology and Alchemy* (*Reader’s Guide* n.149.4). Similar to the Praxitelean notion of a perfect form embedded within the material world waiting to be released, Nietzsche’s concept focuses on the possibility of the *Übermensch* chiseling away at—or, in the case of Jung, transfiguring—epistemic frameworks in order to parcel out a latent truth. So when Wyatt thanks God for being able to forge gold (*Recognitions* 689), he is essentially realigning art with the practice of alchemy that Comnes argues is capable of providing the hope of one day being able to foster the “esoteric ‘gold’ of truth hidden beneath the ‘base’ values of a contemporary society that embraces the exoteric myths of science and religion [...] Gaddis acknowledges this hierarchy of myth, demonstrating how Wyatt’s esoteric art surpasses both science and religion as a means of providing man with order, purpose, and meaning” (*Ethics of Indeterminacy* 53-4).

But rather than subscribing to Comnes’s claim that art is capable of erecting an alternative framework of “order, purpose, and meaning,” it can instead be argued Gaddis

implements the symbolic notion of art as alchemy within *The Recognitions* in order to emphasize the impossibility of being able to transfigure the cultural baseness of contemporary society into the gold of a sublime truth. Thus, as Gaddis claimed in the same interview with Abádi-Nagy, “What we’re really talking about—what the book is so largely talking about, leaving behind alchemy and Wyatt’s ‘thank God there was the gold to forge’—is precisely this courage to live without absolutes” (“Art of Fiction” 74).

This aversion to epistemic absolutism is apparent at the end of *The Recognitions* when the character Eddie Zefnic, an office boy who befriends his colleague Mr. Pivner, writes a letter to Pivner shortly before Pivner is scheduled to have a lobotomy after being mistaken for a counterfeiter. In the letter Eddie claims, “even the radio I don’t turn on listening just to music but only the news broadcasts, because there is all this I want to learn and the scientists here are real nice about if you want to ask them questions how they’ll explain everything to you, so I keep studying so I can too some day, I mean explain everything” (934). Eddie’s drive to one day transfigure each mystery around him into a “good scientific explanation” at the expense of the Other as is evident by his lack of concern over Mr. Pivner’s lobotomy—in addition to his dismissal of the importance of art, which prefigures the fruitless conversation Edward Bast will one day have with J R about music—highlights Gaddis’s preoccupation with a cultural baseness that deprioritizes aesthetic and ethical concerns.

It is therefore evident that Gaddis’s quixotic endeavor to become the self-who-can-do-more who is capable of maintaining an *agape* with the Other is profoundly optimistic. This vision is perhaps informed by the fact that Gaddis did not view the world as an evil place antithetical to his vision of achieving an alterity-oriented *agape* but rather an intensely myopic one that is ignorant of such a possibility existing in the first place. In this sense Gaddis promoted an adage akin to Hanlon’s razor told to him as a child by his mother (“Mothers” 136) that McCandless echoed when claiming, “There’s more stupidity than there

is malice in the world” (*Carpenter’s Gothic* 118). Viewing the world as being inundated with ignorance rather than malice essentially allows for the possibility of the world’s ultimate redemption. So while Gaddis—like his characters Wyatt, Edward, McCandless, and the narrator in *Agapē Agape*—is never able to mend the cultural fragmentation and vacuity of post-war American society, he nevertheless rejects absolutist and reductive thinking by instead promoting an ethical imperative of indetermination that maintains the possibility of one day being able to foster an *agape* with the Other.

Moreover, Gaddis’s epistemic preoccupation with alterity in *The Recognitions* is an important precursor for another writer whom Gaddis admired later in his life: Thomas Pynchon. Gaddis lauded the defiance he shared with Pynchon regarding their unwavering integrity to their aesthetic visions as demonstrated by their choice to write difficult rather than easily accessible, commercially-viable literature:

We are thousands and they are millions, write the fiction they want or don’t write at all, ruling out Pound’s cry for the new, the challenging or what’s labeled difficult, so when *Gravity’s Rainbow* is being devoured by college youth everywhere and wins the National Book Award, its unanimous recommendation by the Pulitzer jury is overturned by the trustees (*Agapē* 61).

Gaddis felt that the snubbing of *Gravity’s Rainbow* by the Pulitzer board was a massive injustice. Pynchon then payed homage to Gaddis’s influence in the eponymous phrase of Pynchon’s detective novel *Inherent Vice* (2009): an insurance concept for a property defect that cannot be insured due to inevitable deterioration. The phrase is referred to throughout *The Recognitions* by characters such as Otto and Valentine regarding how it can be difficult to insure art because for insurance companies “the only thing they won’t insure against is if something happens to it all by itself [...] As paint ages, it becomes translucent, and work which has been altered occasionally shows through” (234).

More importantly, the two authors are both preoccupied throughout their work with the interplay between an ineffable alterity and the totalizing nature of epistemic frameworks. For example, at one point in Pynchon's detective novella *The Crying of Lot 49* (1966) the protagonist, Oedipa Maas, searches "for that *magical Other* who would reveal herself out of the roar of relays monotone litanies of insult, filth, fantasy love, whose brute repetition must someday call into being the trigger of the unnamable act, *the recognition, the Word*" (136; italicized for emphasis). Like Gaddis's emphasis on re-cognizing indeterminacy and rejecting the correspondence theory of truth to allow the self to open up to the Other, Pynchon's "magical Other" represents the possibility for Oedipa to one day transcend the insularity of her egocentric impulses to be able to have a "recognition" of the sublime "Word"—i.e. the Ideal rendered meaningless within epistemic frameworks.

Pynchon also shares Gaddis's wariness regarding how language can be a means to positivist reductionism and the erection of totalizing epistemic frameworks. Pynchon's preoccupation with the relationship between positivism and power was also an area of interest for Adorno:

"The whole is the untrue," not merely because the thesis of totality is itself untruth, being the principle of domination inflated to the absolute; the idea of a positivity that can master everything that opposes it through the superior power of a comprehending spirit is the mirror image of the experience of the superior coercive force inherent in everything that exists by virtue of its consolidation under domination ("Experiential Content" 87).

Pynchon shares Adorno's cynical attitude towards the more nefarious aspects associated with logical positivism. So unlike Gaddis's optimistic, quasi-spiritual vision of one day being able to make negative things do the work of positive ones and thus find a place for an ineffable alterity in a fractured, culturally-vacuous, but ultimately redeemable world, Pynchon views

ethical imperatives—including Gaddis’s own devil-inspired imperative of promoting an alterity-oriented indeterminacy—to be just as totalizing as the absolutist thinking Gaddis railed against. Rather than subscribing to Gaddis’s more optimistic view of a world that is more ignorant than malicious, Pynchon maintains a level of paranoia throughout his oeuvre towards the possibility of a malicious explanation underlying every possible connection that can be made between data as well as towards the potential ubiquity of techno-scientific forces that use positivism to achieve world domination. So while Gaddis maintains hope in the prospect for art to one day be able to offer a form of transcendence free from epistemic reductionism, this is treated as an impossibility in *Gravity’s Rainbow* when, for example, the character Oberst Enzian has the realization, “I haven’t transcended. I’ve only been elevated. That must be as empty as things get” (661).

Furthermore, instead of being like Gaddis who treats epistemic impulses as merely curious examples of man’s desire to imbue the modern chaosmos with order, Pynchon adopts a much more bellicose view towards the austere rationalism associated with these systems and their fixation on control by comparing them with totalitarian forces such as Nazism exemplified by a “German mania for subdividing” (*Gravity’s Rainbow* 448) to the point where “[w]hat it could not use, it killed or altered” (722). Martin Eve notes that Pynchon despises these reductive impulses predicating epistemic frameworks because they make him question whether or not “we [are] really just things, objects in a world, bounced around by forces beyond our control, adhering to purely logical rules of systems?” (*Pynchon and Philosophy* 34). Consequently, in response to the relegation of aesthetic, ethical, and spiritual concerns to the realm of the nonsensical due to their inability to corroborate states of affairs, Pynchon champions the nonsensical through his concept of *illogical negativism*.

Regarding this notion of illogical negativism, Alec McHoul and David Wills argue that Pynchon’s aversion to the totalizing nature of representation and signification is

essentially a consequence of what he viewed as the “paradox of writing itself: any utterance, any mark provides some sort of pose or thesis to the extent that it occurs within materiality, but since it doesn’t occur in isolation or endowed with transcendental meaning, it also represents a difference which relativises its pose, inscribes it as difference” (*Writing Pynchon* 122). Accordingly, Pynchon attempts to deal with this paradox by embracing “[n]ot a logical positivism but an illogical negativism – where the negation should be read as a definite (positive?) refusal rather than, say, hopelessness” (126). Nonsense for Pynchon is therefore a means of resisting the totalizing epistemic frameworks that espouse positive theses. Thus, as the character Osbie Feel contends, “They’re the rational ones. We piss on Their rational arguments” (*Gravity’s Rainbow* 639).

So whereas Gaddis embraces indeterminacy in a way that allows him to attempt to find a place for alterity by making negative things do the work of positive ones—a pursuit that, while ethical, also risks totalizing alterity through its rationalization within his novel—it will be revealed that the indeterminacy of Pynchon’s illogical negativism is far more extreme as it attempts to respect the enigma of the Other by maintaining a non-committal, liminal position in order to remain truly open to an “Other Order of Being” (222) by avoiding rationalizing the problem of alterity altogether. But while this obscurantist non-position is a way for Pynchon to be able to resist the impulse to order information without adopting totalizing countermeasures in the process—or, as Rorty claimed, a way of offering a solution to “the problem of how to overcome authority without claiming authority” (*Contingency* 105)—Pynchon nevertheless struggles with the necessity of having to use language to be able to articulate these ethical aims. As McHoul and Wills argue:

Thus on the one hand signifying practice implicates itself in the questions of morality and ethics inasmuch as notions of identity and good are always, perhaps primarily, problems of signification and representations. [...] Thus the

semiotic becomes ethical at the point where we ask: how to live in a world where the side of the signifier and the side of the signified cannot be conjoined and where neither alone is to be trusted, neither pure materiality (Sr) nor absent or continually deferred meaning/spirit (Sd), neither substance nor phantom? (*Writing Pynchon* 89-90).

If, as Gaddis contends, the Platonic model is no longer tenable due to the absence of a transcendental signified and the proliferation of simulacra, then Pynchon is left to explore how ethical problems can be pursued in a malicious world where they can no longer be adequately articulated without inevitably engaging in a form of absolutist thinking.

Ultimately, it will be argued that Pynchon responds in a variety of ways to the various aspects that make up Gaddis's ethical imperative of remaining open to alterity: Gaddis's self-who-can-do-more who attempts to transcend egocentric impulses transitions to Pynchon's notion of an Other Order of Being that displaces any position of sameness altogether; Gaddis's world of stupidity transitions to Pynchon's world of maliciousness; Gaddis's indeterminacy transitions to Pynchon's nonsense; and Gaddis's attempt to make negative things do the work of positive ones transitions to Pynchon's illogical negativism. But while Pynchon's nebulous position may seem much more cynical compared to Gaddis's optimistic attempt to achieve a glimpse of the second order of alterity through his art, Pynchon nevertheless maintains hope in the possibility of one day encountering the "magical Other" within a world dominated by techno-scientific systems of control. The prospect of fostering an *agape* with the Other serves as a beacon of hope for many because, as one character observes, through love "isolation is overcome [...] Through the machineries of greed, pettiness, and the abuse of power, *love occurs*" (*Gravity's Rainbow* 440). Even in the direst of circumstances Pynchon describes the potential to foster an *agape* with something akin to Levinas's face of the Other:

In the trenches of the First World War, English men came to love one another decently, without shame or make-believe, under the easy likelihoods of their sudden deaths, and to find in the *faces of other young men evidence of otherworldly visits*, some poor hope that may have helped redeem even mud, shit, the decaying pieces of human meat [...] while Europe died meanly in its own wastes, men loved (616; italicized for emphasis).

Despite how these traces of “otherworldly visits” in the face of the Other cannot offer a complete return to the first idea nor, as Enzian suggests, be a means to transcending the techno-scientific forces within Pynchon’s universe, the prospect nevertheless remains that “[s]omewhere, among the wastes of the World, is the key that will bring us back” (525).

Chapter Three:

The Gravity of Illogical Negativism:

Paranoia and the “Other Order of Being” in Thomas Pynchon’s *Gravity’s Rainbow*

“Machinery that gives abundance has left us in want. Our knowledge has made us cynical. Our cleverness, hard and unkind. We think too much and feel too little. More than machinery we need humanity. More than cleverness we need kindness and gentleness. Without these qualities, life will be violent and all will be lost...”
—Charlie Chaplin, *The Great Dictator*

“Only is Order othered. Nought is nulled.”
—James Joyce, *Finnegans Wake*

3.1 The Paranoia of Pynchon’s Preterite

One of the most difficult aspects associated with Pynchon scholarship involves tactfully interpreting the meaning and motives that inform his work while also conceding the at times paradoxical nature of such an endeavor. Pynchon’s reclusiveness and his contempt for giving interviews, traits he shares with Gaddis, created a mythos that simultaneously discourages and also ostensibly demands scholarly consideration. However, there is always a risk that such consideration can lead, via apocryphal material, to counterproductive and/or erroneous conclusions.

Pynchon’s reclusiveness has led to many hoaxes and rumors in the past including speculation that Pynchon was a pseudonym for J.D. Salinger, Gaddis, or—more nefariously—the Unabomber: Ted Kaczynski. Despite being able to avoid the spotlight since his initial critical acclaim during the 1960s, Pynchon has also poked fun at the mythos surrounding him. For example, Pynchon did voiceovers for his animated cameos during two episodes of *The Simpsons*, and it is still debated as to whether or not he made a cameo in Paul Thomas Anderson’s 2014 film adaptation of Pynchon’s novel, *Inherent Vice*: the first film adaptation of a Pynchon novel by a major studio. Nevertheless, in a rare statement given to CNN Pynchon decried media speculation over his reclusiveness due to how “recluse is a code word generated by journalists” (*Concise New Markers* 620). Despite this sentiment, Pynchon’s concern with concealing his identity from the public spotlight is complementary of his desire to generate an ethical relation with the unthematizable magical Other throughout

his oeuvre because, as Eve argues, “although Pynchon’s fictions are explorations of America’s history and identity, they are framed through reference to the Other” (*Pynchon and Philosophy* 9-10).

For example, Pynchon incorporates an image similar to Levinas’s face of the Other at one point in *Gravity’s Rainbow* when, in a moment of sexual intimacy with the character Katje Borgesius, the protagonist Tyrone Slothrop encounters “the terrible Face That Is No Face, gone too abstract, unreachable: the notch of eye socket, but never the labile eye, only the anonymous curve of cheek, convexity of mouth, a noseless mask of the Other Order of Being” (222). This description of the “Face That is No Face” that belongs to an “Other Order of Being” complements the Levinasian notion of how an encounter with the face of the Other occurs as a collision between two orders where “we can proceed from the experience of totality back to a situation where totality breaks up, a situation that conditions the totality itself. Such a situation is the gleam of exteriority or of transcendence in the face of the Other” (*Totality and Infinity* 24).

It is therefore a fitting gesture that Pynchon, a writer whose work is typified by his subversive sense of irony as well as the paranoiac attitude he maintains towards systemic control, would station his novel as a Menippean satire targeting mankind’s penchant for erecting totalizing epistemic frameworks. These are impulses, Pynchon argues, that define the post-war American milieu where “we have come to live among flows of data more vast than anything the world has seen. Demystification is the order of our day, all the cats are jumping out of all the bags and even beginning to mingle” (“Luddite” 41). Such pursuits would come at the expense of an alterity residing in the Other Order of Being, and therefore—as Judith Chambers argues—Pynchon considers “the possibility for embracing an ethics of alterity” through “a preemptive strike against totalizing systems and the principle of reason which informs them” (“Parabolas and Parables” 5-6).

This paranoia aimed at systemic order is not solely a feature of *Gravity's Rainbow* but also present throughout Pynchon's oeuvre. Molly Hite, for example, notes in her study of the relationship between Pynchon's various epistemological claims and the structure of his narratives that Pynchon's works are fundamentally "*about order*":

about its presence or absence; about order as object of desire, dread, fantasy, or hallucination; about what order means, how it is apprehended, and what it entails. His work thus tends to comment on themselves. His characters look for the hidden structures of their experience that will reveal how events are connected, how everything adds up, what it all means (*Ideas of Order* 4).

Furthermore, Hite argues the impulse to order the world is a "human phenomenon" that attempts to insulate mankind from a "reality, [that] apart from the imagination's forming and informing, is meaningless alterity, chaos" (7). However, informational entropy threatens to undermine the various epistemic frameworks adopted to imbue the world with order—a phenomenon the character, Herbert Stencil, in Pynchon's debut novel *V.* (1963) reflects upon when he concedes that "the only consolation he drew from the present chaos was that his theory managed to explain it" (125).

With this in mind, the paranoiac interplay between epistemic frameworks and an ethical excess that eludes totalization is advanced by a series of protagonists throughout Pynchon's oeuvre who attempt to uncover meaning and establish order in their respective quests. For example, Herbert Stencil's distrust of a purely phenomenal-based reality would become the foundation of the paranoiac attitude in Pynchon's later works. Stencil attempts to unravel a mystery involving his father and an unknown woman named V. by tracing—or *stenciling*—her various movements over multiple decades. However, throughout the novel he warily reflects upon the negative aspects associated with his hermeneutic efforts due to how "[e]vents seem to be ordered into an ominous logic" (423), and—by the end of the novel—

Stencil's ultimate inability to strike through the pasteboard masks obfuscating the identity of V. essentially mirrors his father's similar failure ending in his death at the hands of a giant whale reminiscent of the ending of *Moby-Dick*.

The pitfalls associated with this ordering impulse would be magnified in Pynchon's detective novella, *The Crying of Lot 49*, when Oedipa Maas discovers that she has been selected by her recently-deceased ex-lover to be the executor of his estate. Upon discovering a mysterious collection of stamps, she then attempts to uncover a conspiracy involving the possible ongoing conflict originating during the eighteenth century between the Trystero and Thurn und Taxis postal systems. Accordingly, Mendelson notes that Oedipa's endeavor to order the endless data she encounters into a cohesive narrative takes on a spiritual dimension since she is "confronted by the same mysterious act—the manifestation of something of a wholly different order, a reality that does not belong to our world, in objects that are an integral part of our natural 'profane' world" ("Sacred, Profane" 20). However, Oedipa's attempt to make sense of the conspiracy proves to be impossible as instead of discovering connections it is suggested that she may be guilty of confirmation bias by essentially forging the connective threads herself. Thus, her discoveries could be nothing more than projections of her own paranoid fantasies.

The consequences surrounding this quest for order would be further developed in the works following *Gravity's Rainbow*. *Vineland* (1990) explores the lifespan of the counterculture from its early beginnings during the 1960s to its demise as a result of the incipient Nixonian/Reaganian wave of political conservatism. The paranoia in the novel is maintained by hippies and other countercultural denizens against the bureaucratic forces that attempt to destroy them through both overt practices such as physical intimidation tactics as well as more insidious methods such as television advertising. *Against the Day* (2006), Pynchon's longest novel, depicts events leading up to and immediately following World War

I. In the novel Pynchon floods the reader with a disorienting deluge of information that effectively creates a “limitless terrain of queerness” (758) for those trying to order the information into a comprehensible narrative. *Inherent Vice* (2009) functions as a spiritual successor to *Vineland* where the pothead hippie protagonist, Doc Sportello, stumbles upon a bureaucratic conspiracy. However, Michiko Kakutani notes that unlike the paranoia experienced by Pynchon’s previous protagonists, *Inherent Vice* is “a novel in which paranoia is less a political or metaphysical state than a byproduct of smoking too much weed” (“Another Doorway” 1). Pynchon’s latest novel, *Bleeding Edge* (2013), follows the plight of the fraud examiner, Maxine Tarnow, depicting how paranoia could in fact be a natural consequence of the surge of data that continues to proliferate within the Information Age.

But perhaps the most valuable resource relevant to outlining Pynchon’s paranoia towards epistemic frameworks is *Mason & Dixon*: a meta-historical novel following the astronomers and surveyors Charles Mason and Jeremiah Dixon as they plot the Mason-Dixon Line in America. This line would not only settle border disputes between the British colonies in Colonial America but also act as a precursor for the Missouri Compromise of 1820 that helped demarcate the free and slave states. The paranoia in the novel arises from the realization that the boundary the surveyors attempt to establish during the height of the Age of Reason is an insidious manifestation of the intellectual history of the Enlightenment in its quest to demarcate knowledge. The character, Ethelmer, at one point voices his suspicion towards claims to unequivocal truth when he contends, “Who claims Truth, Truth abandons. History is hir’d, or coerc’d, only in Interests that must ever prove base. She is too innocent, to be left within the reach of anyone in Power,—who need but touch her, and all her Credit is in the instant vanish’d, as if it had never been” (350).

Francisco Collado-Rodríguez suggests that Pynchon’s preoccupation with boundary-making and its relationship to the development of epistemic frameworks forces the reader to:

reflect on the *line* that separates truth from falsehood, historicity from fiction, and on the way we construct our interpretations of reality. The fight against the limitations imposed by artificial – textual – barriers, Pynchon seems to suggest, is not limited to the Gothic and Romantic revolt against the rational excesses of the Enlightenment (“Historiographic Metafiction” 80).

The boundary as an embodiment of these “rational excesses” is resisted by various mystical and occultist groups (e.g. geomancers) who feel that it cuts through their everyday relations with space and marginalizes their spatial practices. They attempt to use their ritualistic customs to resist what they view as the totalizing nature of scientific inquiry.

For example, the character Zhang—a Chinese feng shui practitioner—asserts that the surveying is intended to allow those commissioning it to “rule forever” because “[n]othing will produce Bad History more directly nor brutally, than drawing a Line [...] the very Shape of Contempt, through the midst of a People” (*Mason & Dixon* 615). Fittingly, Zhang—who first appears in the fictional serial gothic novel, *The Ghastly Fop*, read by the extended family of Reverend Wicks Cherrycoke—eventually transgresses the boundary of the frame narrative to invade Cherrycoke’s account of Mason and Dixon. Consequently, the conflict in *Mason & Dixon* stemming from the categorization and demarcation of knowledge—like the lines levied through surveying or the boundary that separates the different stories within the frame narrative—reveal how the ordering of information can be a means of controlling mankind. It also demonstrates how the various attempts to transgress these categorical limits produce what Collado-Rodríguez suggests is “a continual impression of instability and uncertainty in the reader that tries to apply Western logic to the act of reading” (“Historiographic Metafiction” 77).

Accordingly, Pynchon’s preoccupation with the construction and erasure of boundaries helps inform his Menippean treatment of epistemic frameworks in *Gravity’s*

Rainbow. In her Levinasian study of *Gravity's Rainbow* as a Post-Holocaust narrative, Katalin Orban contends that Pynchon's novel functions as:

a savagely hilarious and menacing vision of a culture of global rationalization. [...] a study of Enlightenment carried to its logical conclusion, it presents the grand narratives of progress and emancipation as inherently murderous (of those troublesome others excluded from the master plan) and ultimately leading to what one character defines as a "culture of death" (*Ethical Diversions* 115).

Furthermore, Harold Bloom claims that Pynchon erects an epistemic framework in his novel while also finding "ways of representing the impulse to defy the System, even though both impulse and its representations always are defeated" ("Introduction" 2).

With this in mind, it will be shown how *Gravity's Rainbow* parodies epistemic frameworks to reveal the nefarious nature of systemic control. As Gordon Slethaug contends, *Gravity's Rainbow*:

is a carefully crafted and highly wrought artifact that does its best to subvert its own medium while testing its readers and trying their patience to the breaking point. The book repudiates at least its own style, challenging the assumption that the massive accumulation of analysis and narrative technique can lead to greater comprehension, understanding, and authority. The medium assaults and undermines itself (*Play of the Double* 88).

The novel's self-reflexive treatment of its own epistemic foundation is at one point explicitly addressed when one character ponders, "Is it any wonder the world's gone insane, with information come to be the only real medium of exchange?" (258). Borrowing Keats's notion of *negative capability*, McHale contends that *Gravity's Rainbow* subverts its own structure by rejecting the formulaic theories it introduces within its narrative, which demonstrates that

while “we may not satisfy our drive for certitude [...] we will have exercised our negative capability, and will have preserved the text’s strangeness in the process” (*Constructing Postmodernism* 111-12).

Charles Hohmann further suggests that Pynchon was drawn to exploring the validity of epistemic frameworks— specifically encyclopedias—because it allowed him to combine “totally different areas of human behavior and understanding such as theology, history, science, and technology, politics, literature,” which is “indicative of his sensitivity to similarities and his predilection for systems” (*Conceptual Structure* 8). Moreover, Theodore Kharpertian suggests that encyclopedism was a tempting target for Pynchon’s Menippean satire because “official encyclopedism implies the adequacy of mind to world, and while fictionists may uncritically represent this Enlightenment effort, to the Menippean satirist such Faustianism is the occasion for exuberant parody and satire” (*Hand to Turn* 31).

Pynchon would highlight what he viewed as the totalizing nature of epistemic frameworks in *V.* when the character, Dudley Eigenvalue, reflects upon the conspiratorial nature of encyclopedism:

You’ve conceived somewhere the notion that I am intimate with the details of a conspiracy. In a world such as you inhabit [...] any cluster of phenomena can be a conspiracy. So no doubt your suspicion is correct. But why consult me? Why not the Encyclopaedia Britannica? It knows more than I about any phenomena you should ever have an interest in (154).

Eigenvalue’s faith in the *Encyclopedia Britannica* can be interpreted as ironically addressing how any conspiratorial phenomena that may undermine the comprehensiveness of an epistemic framework can be subsequently assimilated and totalized as a means of promoting the encyclopedia’s emphasis on categorical order. This tension between order and paranoia underpins the epistemic foundation of *Gravity’s Rainbow*.

Pynchon's novel is exceptionally erudite and covers a variety of disparate topics including aesthetic and music theory, astrology, astronomy, ballistics, chemistry, Gnosticism and mysticism, Orphism, Pavlovian psychology, pop culture, quantum physics, sadomasochism, statistics, tarot, and thermodynamics. Mendelson lauded *Gravity's Rainbow* as being the contemporary epitome of the encyclopedic narrative because its wide scope helped reflect the "newly-forming international culture" of the early 1970s ("Encyclopedic" 1271). However, Mendelson's celebration of Pynchon's "attempt to render the full range of knowledge and beliefs" (1269) of this culture is misguided and ignores Pynchon's self-reflexive reasons for negotiating epistemic frameworks. Luc Herman and Petrus van Ewijk, for example, argue that Mendelson's "restrictive definition" of the encyclopedic narrative renders it "unusable for definitions of the big American novel that seeks to incorporate its totalizing tendency at a time when the emphasis is on fragmentation rather than wholeness" ("Gravity's Encyclopedia" 169).

One of the novel's several narrative strands that explores the "totalizing tendency" of epistemic frameworks and a cultural "fragmentation" that hinders totalization centers on the American G.I., Tyrone Slothrop, and his many adventures throughout Europe during and after World War II. In true Pynchonesque fashion Slothrop encounters a surfeit of characters and inter-weaving plots during his quest to understand the mysterious, possibly conspiratorial circumstances related to the Pavlovian conditioning of his erections when exposed to the fictional chemical, Imipolex G: a compound used in the V-2 rocket. As a result of this conditioning, it is hypothesized by members of a psychological intelligence agency that there is a correlation between the locations of Slothrop's sexual escapades throughout London and the sites of V-2 explosions occurring days later.

Slothrop's quest begins in London before he travels to Monaco and then throughout a war-torn Europe in an attempt to unravel the possible conspiracy involving Imipolex G, but

he eventually discovers how in the end those “with the greatest interest in discovering the truth” will be “thrown back on dreams, psychic flashes, omens, cryptographies, drug-epistemologies, all dancing on a group of terror, contradictions, absurdity” (*Gravity’s Rainbow* 583). Trapped within an absurd chaosmos where either everything is connected or nothing at all, Slothrop concedes that he is reliant on such a conspiracy: “Either They have put him here for a reason, or he’s just here. He isn’t sure that he wouldn’t actually, rather have that *reason*” (434). This reason, while most likely nefarious, would at least instill the events of Slothrop’s life with a semblance of meaning that is far more preferable to a nihilistic life “where nothing is connected to anything, a condition not many of us can bear for long” (434).

In response to this quest for meaning and order, *Gravity’s Rainbow* essentially creates the illusion of comprehensiveness as a way of parodying a bureaucratic “System” that “remov[es] from the rest of the World these vast quantities of energy to keep its own tiny desperate fraction showing a profit” (*Gravity’s Rainbow* 412). The novel also parodies the teleological nature of the narrative form, and—as thematically addressed in *Mason & Dixon*—it lampoons what Herman and van Ewijk identify as “man’s obsession with demarcation” (“Gravity’s Encyclopedia” 176) while also hinting at an excess that cannot be subsumed by these systemic forces.

For example, Pynchon mocks the notion of encyclopedic comprehensiveness by creating a sense of incompleteness in the text that various characters attempt to mitigate by constructing comprehensive studies on various topics in a similar manner to Gaddis’s Gibbs in *J R* and the narrator in *Agapē Agape* who aspired to produce comprehensive histories of the player-piano. One parodic example of this endeavor in *Gravity’s Rainbow* occurs when the character, Brigadier Ernest Pudding, attempts to write his magnum opus, *Things that Can Happen in European Politics* (77). Despite his best efforts to produce an exhaustive account

of every diplomatic possibility that can conceivably occur, Pudding eventually realizes that he can never finish his colossal work because there is an ostensibly infinite amount of possibilities that he will never be able to include in his list.

Pudding's study was supposed to be published in 1931: the same year Kurt Gödel published his incompleteness theorems. This is fitting because Gödel's theorems established the inherent limitations of set theory in formal logic by proving that axiomatic systems could never be all-inclusive because some mathematic propositions cannot be proven within these systems. Herman and van Ewijk suggest that Pynchon's preoccupation with Gödel and list-making arises from how his theorems represent an "intimation of infinity" that "undoes any dreams of wholeness" because there will always be propositions that elude the closure of these axiomatic systems ("Gravity's Encyclopedia" 173). Appropriately, Pudding eventually realizes the impossibility of his endeavor when he concedes that he will "[n]ever make it [...] it's changing out from under me. Oh, dodgy—very dodgy" (*Gravity's Rainbow* 77).

Another example that mocks encyclopedic comprehensiveness occurs when the film critic, Mitchell Prettyplace, publishes a "definitive 18-volume study of *King Kong*" that purports to leave nothing out by including "every shot including out-takes raked through for every last bit of symbolism, exhaustive biographies of everyone connected with the film, extras, grips, lab people ... even interviews with King Kong Kult-ists" (274). However, Prettyplace's goal to produce an exhaustive study of *King Kong* fails for the same reason as Pudding's endeavor because there is always "bound to be some item around that one has omitted from the list" (320). This observation also prevents a character from committing suicide after he ponders the lyrics of a song called "Sold on Suicide" that renounces worldly things while actively promoting the merits of suicide. Despite the song's endorsement of suicide, the character realizes that the never-ending list of reasons counterproductively prevents suicide from occurring:

an item is not easy to think of off the top of one's head, so that what one does most likely is go back over the whole thing, meantime correcting mistakes and inevitable repetitions, and putting in new items that will surely have occurred to one, and—well, it's easy to see that the “suicide” of the title might have to be postponed indefinitely! (320).

Gödel's incompleteness theorems are also applicable to the attempt by the characters Pirate Prentice and Katje to construct an exhaustive account of the possible lovers they must encounter in the world in order to complete their “chronicle” of “*How I Came to Love the People*” (546). They begin by listing all of the people they have ever had sexual encounters with, but they eventually realize that their “megalomaniac master plan of sexual love with every individual” is an unattainable project because it can only be completed when everyone “somewhat miraculously, is accounted for at last” (547). Hite contends that this specific example exemplifying the impulse to objectify individuals and make them present-at-hand is rejected by Pynchon whose novel instead:

affirms the nonsystemic, nontotalizing connections of a community based on making meanings. To understand the infinitely various ways in which human beings deal with their common fear by exfoliating networks of significance and language is to love the People—and this is an inexhaustible project by definition. It is the project that *Gravity's Rainbow* undertakes, with humor, compassion, and a conspicuous lack of sentimentality (*Ideas of Order* 156).

These “nonsystemic, nontotalizing connections” associated with love render Pirate's and Katje's project impossible, which also complements Gaddis's notion of a sublime *agape* that eludes totalization explored earlier.

While these diverse pursuits for comprehensiveness are somewhat innocuous, Pynchon also explores how the hyper-processing of information involved in the attempt to

achieve all-inclusive accounts of various aspects of the world can be a means to more sinister ends. For example, the Jesuit character, Father Rapier, preaches about the consequences associated with this cognitive impulse during one of his sermons when claiming, “Once the technical means of control have reached a certain size, a certain degree of being connected one to another, the chances for freedom are over for good” (627). Moreover, Bersani argues that this totalizing gesture towards data collection empowers the techno-scientific “They-system” (*Gravity’s Rainbow* 640)—a system Slethaug argues is marked by “the drive to master, control, and exploit on all social levels—ideological, institutional, and informational” (*Play of the Double* 76)—because “the discovery of connections is identical to the discovery of plots. The plotters get together—they ‘connect’—in order to plot the connections that will give them power over others” (Pynchon, *Paranoia, and Literature*” 149). In order for these systems to maintain their power they must, according to Herman and Ewijk, “forcefully uphold the borders of their system or [...] try to reinterpret the information to make it fit nicely in their perceived order” (“Gravity’s Encyclopedia” 178). A question that then arises is how to resist the totalizing impulses of these systems of control without promoting a form of paranoia that in the process becomes an alternative ordering principle complementing the connective processes that erect such real and imagined associations in the first place?

To this end Pynchon stations an opposition in the form of an inclusive We-system against the exclusive They-system in a way that is analogous to the Calvinist dialectic of the elect and preterite. Calvinist dogma—the same doctrine adopted by Reverend Gwyon and Aunt May in *The Recognitions*—espouses a view of predestination in which the soteriological nature of Jesus’s death on the cross is only reserved for the chosen elect who will receive His gift of salvation whereas the preterite are essentially passed over. As Richard Moss argues in his study of Calvinist theology, “Preterition becomes, in Pynchon’s work, the general term for the marginalised in all senses of the word, be it religious in nature, or

historical, social or political [...] a social position that fosters salvific concepts such as community, outlawry and in its most extreme capacity, violent resistance” (*Towards a Preterite Theology* 21). John McClure suggests this Calvinist binary is typified by an endorsement of “an array of preterite spiritualities” (*Partial Faiths* 49) that underpin Pynchon’s universe. Moreover, Pynchon’s character, Der Springer, explicitly mentions this dialectic when claiming how the “Elite and Preterite” embody a Manichean dualism “mov[ing] through a cosmic design of darkness and light” (*Gravity’s Rainbow* 495). The elect takes the form of various systems who subjugate the preterite—e.g. bureaucratic, techno-scientific forces such as IG Farben that cause the war to be “dictated [...] by the needs of technology” (521)—while the preterite consist of the marginalized who are displaced and dominated by these systems of control. Accordingly, Pirate Prentice links the They-We binary to the elect and preterite respectively when claiming, “Of course a well-developed They-system is necessary – but it’s only half the story. For every They there ought to be a We. In our case there is. Creative paranoia means developing at least as thorough a We-system as a They-system” (638).

The totalizing epistemic frameworks the They-system attempts to establish is resisted by the preterite We-system who attempt to “piss on Their rational arrangements” (639). Louis Mackey suggests that the preterite resist these “rational arrangements” because on a rhetorical level preterition is synonymous with the Greek *paralepsis* in which, “Preterite rhetoric recuperates being by not signifying it. The non-signification does not permit the non-signified to become a signifier; does not draw it into the web of signification, but leaves it in its alterity” (“Paranoia, Pynchon, and Preterition” 25). Moreover, Stephan Mattesich affirms Mackey’s alignment of alterity with the preterite by arguing that the preterite advances “the figure of *praeteritio*, a conspicuous omission or constitutive substitution (A figurative “passing over”) that indicates an ontological modality of exception” precluded from these

rational arrangements (“Turning Around the Origin” 86). But while the preterite attempts to usurp the elect through initiatives such as the Counterforce—a grassroots We-group with the aim of “bringing down Their system” through “war” (640)—Pynchon’s paranoia is also aimed at the potential consequences associated with resistance that can counterproductively perpetuate the same totalizing binarism the preterite attempts to subvert.

One major issue with these We-systems is that even though they offer the preterite a means of resisting the dogmatic determinism of the They-system, they are still fundamentally byproducts of the same mode of thought. This is because the preterite ends up unwittingly engaging in what Buber refers to as an egocentric I-It relationship where the subject is incapable of maintaining an ethical relation with the Other due to the desire to make phenomena conform to the subject’s worldview. David Letzler suggests the totalizing aspects associated with this drive arise because, “in any method of justifying our lives – in selecting a Christ who both exemplifies and transforms them – we also must define everything that opposes it as bad and associate it with an emblematic Judas, even if this Judas has done nothing worse than select a different model of election” (“Character of Preterition” 377). This model inevitably promotes a subject-object relationship, which is the reason Herman and van Ewijk argue that the preterite Counterforce is also totalitarian because as a group they “refuse to look beyond their own imposed system. If it cannot be connected to the hierarchy ‘They’ have installed, it does not exist for them, thus creating a neat, but inherently flawed, totality” (“Gravity’s Encyclopedia” 177).

So while Raese suggests that Pynchon’s use of paranoia serves as a “hermeneutic tool [...] that resists totalizing impulses in the encyclopedia, thereby promoting anti-systems thinking and anarchic freedom” (“Contemporary Encyclopedic Novel” 99), the preterite’s paranoia towards order actually exemplifies these same “totalizing impulses” that Raese claims it purportedly resists. In fact, many characters in the text suffer from apophenia: the

experience of seeing patterns or connections that do not objectively exist in random and/or meaningless data.¹¹ A pitfall associated with apophenic paranoia is that it projects a totalizing vision of the world because, as *Gravity's Rainbow* suggests, the paranoid strives to make “the discovery that *everything is connected*, everything in the Creation, a secondary illumination – not yet blindingly One, but at least connected” (703). Hanjo Berressem describes this act as the “mode of going through the world [...] to reduce its inherent complexity to perceptually and cognitively manageable portions. We focus on things and relations that are important to us, and exclude others. Through perceptual reduction and pattern recognition we gain agency. We obscure the world in order to clarify and live within it” (“Coda” 174). This drive to reduce the world to “cognitively manageable portions” is, as Hohmann suggests, reflective of “man’s compulsion to impose meaningful patterns on the phenomenal experience of a universe which, no matter how haphazard it may seem, [must] ultimately make sense” (*Conceptual Structure* 52).

Furthermore, Peter Cooper contends that Pynchon’s view towards apophenia reveals how he is greatly “ambivalent about this human compulsion to find—or to make—patterns of experience and then interpret them. Such patterns always falsify reality to some unknowable degree, and they run the risk of reducing its rich varieties, contingencies, and singularities to mechanical regularities, dull predictabilities, and sterile uniformities” (*Signs and Symptoms* 1). As opposed to the hellish conditions of “anti-paranoia where nothing is connected to anything” (*Gravity's Rainbow* 434), Cooper suggests that Slothrop’s apophenia offers a way of avoiding these conditions by “fabricat[ing] versions of reality to satisfy his need for understanding as he faces the epistemological barriers or the superhumanly scaled atrocities that his era has sprung upon him” (*Signs and Symptoms* 22). But while apophenic paranoia

¹¹ Pynchon’s preoccupation with apophenic paranoia is shared by his university tutor, Nabokov, who referred to it as “referential mania” in his short story “Symbols and Signs” (1948). The story describes referential mania as occurring when an individual “imagines that everything happening around him is a veiled reference to his personality and existence” and how “[e]verything is a cipher and of everything he is the theme.”

may appear to be a way for the preterite to reclaim the post-war episteme manipulated by the elect, this form of resistance is still problematic because—in its exclusion of that which does not conform to the patterns the paranoid seeks to impose—it ends up counterproductively “playing Their game” (638) on Their totalizing terms.

Thus, this paranoiac opposition can be co-opted by the They-system as a justification for control. For example, Doc Sportello ponders how this form of resistance can be exploited by the They-system: “Was it possible, that at every gathering--concert, peace rally, love-in, be-in, and freak-in, here, up north, back east, wherever--those dark crews had been busy all along, reclaiming the music, the resistance to power, the sexual desire from epic to everyday, all they could sweep up, for the ancient forces of greed and fear?” (*Inherent Vice* 130). One of the members of the Counterforce—the statistician, Roger Mexico—comes to this same conclusion at the end of *Gravity’s Rainbow* when he observes, “They will use us. We will help legitimize Them, though They don’t need it really, it’s another dividend for Them, nice but not critical” (713).

Pynchon also advances this view within an allegorical episode featuring the sentient, immortal light bulb, Byron the Bulb. Byron initially begins to suspect that he is immortal when he continues to burn long after other bulbs burn out. Their deaths take an emotional toll on him, so he attempts to convince other bulbs that they are being systemically exploited by the lightbulb industry through planned obsolescence in order to boost revenue. However, Byron eventually discovers the futility of struggling against the industry after observing how some bulbs “do protest, maybe, here and there, but it’s only information, glow-modulated, harmless, nothing close to the explosions in the faces of the powerful that Byron once envisioned, back there in his Baby world, in his innocence” (650-51). Patrick McHugh reiterates this point when he suggests how Byron falls victim to “a vast cooperate cartel that uses Enlightenment as a ruse in service of social control [...] Thus the Enlightenment, along

with the knowledge and technology it enables, serve a repressive social system that co-opts truth into deception” (“Cultural Politics, Postmodernism, and White Guys” 16). Byron experiences a similar revelation to Roger Mexico when he realizes that one of the most nefarious aspects of the System, which for him emanates as the Phoebus international light-bulb cartel, is that it can manipulate resistance into a justification for the System itself. Harold Bloom notes how the They-system’s ability to take advantage of this resistance heightens the tragedy of Byron:

They cannot compel Byron to submit to the law of entropy, or the death drive, and yet they can deny him any context in which his immortality will at last be anything but a provocation to his own madness. A living reminder that the System can never quite win, poor Byron the Bulb, becomes a death in life reminder that the System also can never quite lose (“Introduction” 3).

In the end Byron reluctantly accepts that resistance against the System is ineffective, and the episode concludes with him reflecting on how he “is condemned to go on forever, knowing the truth and powerless to change anything. No longer will he seek to get off the wheel. His anger and frustration will grow without limit, and he will find himself, poor perverse bulb, enjoying it...” (*Gravity’s Rainbow* 655).

Despite being associated with the American counterculture, Pynchon uses the tragic fate of Byron to outline the consequences associated with overt resistance against systemic oppression since, as Bersani asserts, “profound social change will not result from head-on assaults” (“Pynchon, Paranoia, and Literature” 150). Bersani instead suggests that for Pynchon the “aggressively seductive subversion of the seriousness with which networks of power conduct their business” can only be challenged by a paranoid attitude that is “inherently unserious” (151). Accordingly, while the aim of this study is to demonstrate how Pynchon is one of three post-war novelists primarily preoccupied with the ineluctable

modality of the Other, Dwight Eddins suggests that Pynchon's subversive sense of humor challenges a "totalizing order" through what he refers to instead as an "ineluctable demodality of the risible" (*Gnostic Pynchon* vii). But while there is clearly an element of sardonic humor associated with Pynchon's paranoia, Bersani and Eddins perhaps overlook the fact that Pynchon does not solely maintain a playful attitude towards the They-system. Rather, Pynchon also attempts to offer a non-aggressive but deeply serious form of resistance against the elect while attempting to refrain from erecting a different determinate order in its wake. This functions as a type of ethically-driven paranoia in favor of the Other.

An example of this ethically-driven paranoia is apparent regarding how Slothrop maintains a "reflex of seeking orders behind the visible" (*Gravity's Rainbow* 219) that may or may not exist. Bersani points out the potential benefit of this reflex because, "In paranoia, two Real Texts confront one another: subjective being and a world of monolithic otherness. This opposition can be broken down only if we renounce the comforting (if also dangerous) faith in locatable identities" ("Pynchon, Paranoia, and Literature" 156). These "locatable identities" can lead to unethical ends because of their potential to induce a form of solipsism closed off from alterity. Therefore, in rejecting these locatable identities the paranoid can refrain from projecting reactionary, conspiratorial narratives onto the world that can be just as totalizing as the systems of control that often inspire them. Furthermore, the rejection of these identities can also encourage the paranoid into questioning one's own egocentric impulses as well as the validity of epistemic frameworks—primarily in terms of what is excluded from those frameworks—that largely dictate one's understanding of the world.

Slothrop's paranoia is so great that, in a similar manner to the various identities projected onto Wyatt throughout *The Recognitions*, Slothrop's locatable identity is diffused into various personas: Ian Scuffling, Max Schlepzig, Plasticman, Plechazunga, Rocketman, a Russian deserter, etc. The dissolution of Slothrop's identity culminates with the suggestion at

the end of the novel that he has been dispersed throughout the Zone (*Gravity's Rainbow* 742), which Bersani argues is the result of him being “so gluttoned with otherness as to render superfluous the very notion of otherness. Slothrop is no one; he is a certain position [...] that ‘space’ between inside and outside, between one simulation and another, which defeats polarities” (“Pynchon, Paranoia, and Literature” 163). Slethaug contends that this liminal space Slothrop is dispersed throughout has epistemological significance as Slothrop becomes:

an exemplum of modern man, [...] Not only Slothrop but the various other doubles in the book and indeed the whole system of doubled systems suggest the impossibility either of ascertaining unity or of delimiting reality to sets of oppositions. The binary system in science, business, logic, religion, and language is ultimately shown to be misleading (*Play of the Double* 90).

This liminal space between the insularity of Slothrop’s selfhood and the exteriority of alterity complements the suspicion maintained by the empirically-driven Pavlovian psychologist, Edward Pointsman, who at one point wonders, “Could Outside and Inside be part of the same field?” (*Gravity's Rainbow* 144).

Nevertheless, an alterity-oriented paranoia within Pynchon’s novel can also be wholly unethical. For example, early on in *Gravity's Rainbow* a military intelligence group known as the Psychological Intelligence Schemes for Expediting Surrender (PISCES), a subsidiary of the top-secret agency The White Visitation, attempts to understand how the points on the map Slothrop uses to mark his sexual conquests throughout London correspond exactly with the locations of V-2 rocket strikes. The Pavlovian researcher, Dr. Edwin Treacle—described as the “most Freudian of psychical researchers” for PISCES (85)—poses a theory that reflects the unethical aspect of paranoia. He contends that the map is a testament to Slothrop’s egocentrism that “subconsciously needs to abolish all trace of the sexual Other, whom he symbolizes on his map, most significantly, as a *star*, that anal-sadistic emblem of classroom

success which so permeates elementary education in America..." (85). Treacle's view of Slothrop's map is synergistic with Pynchon's treatment of epistemic frameworks in that the mapping and ordering of information into categories is of course necessary to make data comprehensible, but this reductive approach to making phenomena present-at-hand can lead to the totalization of alterity in a similar manner to how Treacle theorizes Slothrop's mapping destroys the "sexual Other."

But while Slothrop is said to unethically abolish all traces of alterity through his mapping, paranoids still attempt to seek out these traces excluded by the They-system. For example, the anti-Pavlovian character, Roger Mexico, ponders whether or not there is a latent ethical significance involving Slothrop's map. Although he suspects the correlation of these locations with the V-2 rockets is merely a statistical oddity:

he feels the foundation of that discipline trembling a bit now, deeper than oddity ought to drive. Odd, odd, odd—think of the word: such white finality in its closing clap of tongue. It implies moving past the tongue-stop—beyond the zero—and into the other realm. Of course you don't move past. But you do realize, intellectually, that's how you *ought* to be moving (85).

While Roger Mexico realizes it is impossible to free oneself from rational disciplines in order to reach this "other realm" exceeding the purview of epistemic frameworks, he nevertheless believes one "*ought*" to attempt to do so. He reflects upon this movement while considering the word *odd* and how its pronunciation suggests the absence of finality and/or closure. Mexico is a man of logic, yet this passage presents his paranoia towards the totalizing nature of rationalism and how it imposes closure in the form of a "tongue-stop" cut off from the oddity of a possible other order "beyond the zero."

Mexico's paranoia over the possible existence of a second order that cannot be rationalized and signified helps inform how *Gravity's Rainbow* adopts aspects of logical

positivism the They-system often employs as a means of control in order to undermine it. Despite the apparent benefits of an unwavering adherence to a clear and verifiable language, there are severe limitations regarding what logical positivism must necessarily exclude. For example, Wittgenstein concludes the *Tractatus* with the concession, “The limits of my language mean the limits of my world” (5.62), which is fundamentally at odds with the “things that cannot be put into words [...] They are what is mystical” (6.522). John Scott argues that among these “ineffable things” is alterity, but “our innate tendency to express moral concern and identify with the Other’s wants is stifled in modernity by positivistic science and dogmatic bureaucracy. If the Other does not ‘fit in’ to modernity’s approved classifications, it is liable to be extinguished” (*Fifty Key Sociologists* 19).

At one point in *Gravity’s Rainbow* the character, Thanatz, realizes some of the limitations associated with logical positivism when he concludes that he should not be “counting on any positivism to save him” because instead of being a means to truth, logical positivism merely obfuscates it through a “screen of words between himself and the numinous [...] it never let him feel any freer” (668). The “numinous” Ideal Thanatz seeks beyond the “screen of words” also extends to the structure of the narrative itself because, as Bersani contends, Pynchon’s text “mystifies us not so much because of the information it may be hiding, but above all because of the success with which it hides its own nature [...] It would not exactly be a question of something missing, but rather of the text’s ‘real’ nature as a kind of superior intelligible double of the text we read” (“Pynchon, Paranoia, and Literature” 155). Therefore, this suspicion of an ineffable saying that cannot be said within the text itself could, in its ability to elude reductive efforts to be made present-at-hand, reflect an ethical aspect of paranoia.

Hite contends it is therefore impossible to establish a dominant interpretation of Pynchon’s novels due these to semantic gaps within them, which reflect the post-structural

interplay between absence and presence that *Gravity's Rainbow* self-reflexively explores in order to reveal how language is:

simply inadequate to the truth, although the truth is thinkable: one can know something without being able to speak or write it. It follows that the novels are attempts to create conditions favorable to revelation, i.e., in some manner to signify that-which-cannot-be-signified, although because they are linguistic structures they fall short of revelation themselves (*Ideas of Order* 23).

Consequently, the paranoia aimed at “that-which-cannot-be-signified” offers a compelling counterpoint to logical positivism. Moreover, Bersani suggests that *Gravity's Rainbow* uses its status as art to challenge positivist reductionism by aiming to expose “the real nature of synthesis [...] the real nature of control” (*Gravity's Rainbow* 167):

the encyclopedic work in the modern period would demonstrate, first of all, that even in a culture saturated with scientific knowledge, art can reassert its claim to be thought of as the privileged medium that processes and “humanizes” that knowledge. [...] At the same time, in a technological world whose ordering capacities seem to owe even less to art than did prescientific cultures, [...] art itself becomes the sublime We in paranoid opposition to a dehumanizing They (“Pynchon, Paranoia, and Literature” 166).

Bersani's notion of art constituting a “sublime We”—resonating with Gaddis's desire for art to establish an *agapē* with the Other—challenges the purely utilitarian impulse to master knowledge promoted by the techno-scientific They. The preterite-We's paranoiac pursuit of a sublime second order that challenges the authority of They-system thus embodies one of the central conflicts in *Gravity's Rainbow* arising between the positivist reduction of information by totalizing epistemic frameworks—which, as one character observes, facilitate a “world [that] is only a fraction, an outward-and-visible fraction” (612)—against the ineffable “Other

Order of Being” (222) that cannot be totalized and as a result demands for characters to “look to the untold, to the silence around us” (612).

This paranoiac fixation with the ineffable as a possible means of combatting the dogmatic over-determinism of the techno-scientific They-system marks the impetus for Pynchon’s preoccupation with the notion of illogical negativism that will be explored in the subsequent sections of this chapter. Illogical negativism, a radical means of challenging the austere nature of logical positivism that treats alterity as anathema, is advanced thematically within *Gravity’s Rainbow* by various obscurantist practices such as Gnosticism and Jewish mysticism. As Eddins claims, these mystical practices recognize how the “spiritual element in man not only constitutes his otherness, but awakens him to this otherness” (*Gnostic Pynchon* 11), which possibly offers a non-totalizing means of resistance in favor of a “mode of meaning behind the obvious” (*Crying Lot* 136) that is excluded from the purview of epistemic frameworks.

This mystical counterpoint to the rigid determinism of the techno-scientific order reflects, as Pynchon suggests, the historical proclivity of religious America to act as a “broad front of resistance to the Age of Reason [...] Each in its way expressed the same profound unwillingness to give up elements of faith, however ‘irrational,’ to an emerging technopolitical order that might or might not know what it was doing” (“Luddite” 46). This irrational, mystical fixation with the ineffable Other Order of Being “whose name, like the permuted names of God, cannot be spoken....” (*Gravity’s Rainbow* 590) may offer the paranoid preterite the possibility of maintaining a semblance of autonomy within the techno-scientific They-system without having to adopt totalizing imperatives in order to actively resist it (e.g. Gaddis’s ethical imperative of the self-who-can-do-more). Pynchon’s illogical negativism will now be explored in order to illustrate how it helps *Gravity’s Rainbow* challenge the “Apollonian Dream” (754) of establishing a closed, comprehensive epistemic

framework by instead promoting a rhizomatic structure of openness in favor of an alterity that cannot be totalized.¹²

3.2 Illogical Negativism and the Other Order

Pynchon's religious background and the extent to which it influences his work is a difficult topic to tackle. Although Bloom notes that Pynchon was raised in a Catholic family ("Biography of Pynchon" 12), the distrust he promotes throughout his oeuvre towards bureaucratic systems also extends to institutional religion. For example, one of his fellow classmates at Cornell, Jules Siegel, recalls how during Pynchon's time at university, "He went to Mass and confessed, though to what would be a mystery" ("Who is Thomas Pynchon?").¹³ After university Pynchon would gradually align himself closer to secularism and, as he would later write in *Gravity's Rainbow*, be increasingly incredulous of organized religions and their "stories, all false, about who we are" (135).

Perhaps fittingly, Pynchon is the descendant of William Pynchon: one of the original colonists of the Massachusetts Bay Colony and the founder of Springfield, Massachusetts. Daniel Crown notes that William Pynchon was a Puritan who gained considerable notoriety within the colony after his book, *The Meritorious Price of Our Redemption* (1650), was deemed heterodoxy and banned for challenging the Calvinist notion of punishment and suffering as a requirement for atonement by instead suggesting that obedience to God's will was all that was required to receive His grace ("Price of Suffering" 1). William Pynchon's heterodoxy would be passed down to Thomas Pynchon who would go on to model this lineage through Slothrop's own Puritanical ancestry in both *Gravity's Rainbow* as well as in Pynchon's short story, "The Secret Integration" (1964).

¹² While the structure of the rhizome is clearly synergistic with Pynchon's emphasis on challenging hierarchical order, it should also be mentioned that Pynchon aimed a playful sense of irreverence towards Deleuze and Guattari in *Vineland* by mentioning the fictional "indispensable *Italian Wedding Fake Book* by Deleuze & Guattari" (97) as a joke about the duo's erudition.

¹³ It should be noted, however, that there may be a potential conflict of interest associated with the article since Siegel's wife, Christine, had a brief affair with Pynchon.

But despite falling out with organized religion, there is evidence that Pynchon was still preoccupied with spiritual matters. For example, Steven Weisenburger notes that at the age of 22 Pynchon provided an autobiographical outline of his development as a writer in an application for a Ford Foundation Fellowship. During his early stages as a writer Pynchon admits he was drawn to “atheism/logical positivism” that he channeled into a “rash of science fictions,” but upon returning to Cornell he began gradually warming up to neo-Romanticism and mysticism (“Autobiographical Sketch” 696). Wittgenstein’s axiom, “There is indeed the inexpressible. This shows itself; it is the mystical” (*Tractatus* 6.52), helps shed light on Pynchon’s anti-positivist, neo-Romantic, quasi-mystical stance because—as Eve suggests—it is significant that “the sentiments of Romanticism – embracing the sublime, transcendence, experience, individualism and affect – appear at the conclusion of a philosophical work on logic. In many ways, whereof the *Tractatus* speaks of mysticism, thereof it speaks of Romanticism” (*Pynchon and Philosophy* 14). Moreover, Sascha Pöhlmann contends that Pynchon adopts a similar outlook to the one outlined by Wittgenstein at the end of the *Tractatus* because in “[s]howing the limits of language and representation, both Wittgenstein and Pynchon force their readers to deduce that something lies beyond that limit” (“Silences and Worlds” 161).

Furthermore, Thomas Moore argues that Pynchon’s growing fascination with mysticism stems from his ambivalence towards logical positivism. While he viewed rational-based methodologies as obfuscating reality through “frame categories, the chief of which is language itself, The Word” (*Style of Connectedness* 9), Pynchon also understood that they are necessary for making information comprehensible. This then leads to a “paradox by which the ordering of facts into systems, instincts into ideas, life into art, is both a betrayal of final reality and the only imaginable means of making reality visible to consciousness” (18). Accordingly, this paradox helps form the crux of Pynchon’s Menippean satire.

One of the first hints of Pynchon's growing preoccupation with epistemological movements such as logical positivism occurs in Pynchon's debut novel, *V.* where—as Eve claims—“early Wittgenstein is situated within a framework of totalitarianism, perhaps for its atomising, logical perspective” (*Pynchon and Philosophy* 71). At one point in the novel Pynchon stations the *Tractatus* as the epitome of logical positivism during the serenade that the character, Charisma, gives in an attempt to seduce the character, Mafia, who is a parody of Ayn Rand and her philosophy of Objectivism. Charisma begins his song with a proposition by referencing “Thesis 1.7” (288). According to J. Kerry Grant who cites Justin Pittas-Giroux's unpublished MA thesis within his companion work to *V.*, the proposition conflates two of Wittgenstein's most famous propositions from the *Tractatus*: the first proposition (“The world is everything that is the case”) and the seventh proposition (“Whereof one cannot speak, thereof one must remain silent”) (*Companion to V.* 143). John Hunt suggests that this reference is an attempted panacea against informational entropy that inhibits communication by encouraging individuals to try to “keep sane” through silence by “let[ting] it go at that and ask[ing] no questions” (“Comic Escape” 38). Thesis 1.7 effectively combines the positivist notion of meaning being contingent on conveyable, logically-verifiable statements along with the mystical elevation of the ineffable.

Mafia then rejects Charisma on the grounds that love is meaningless since Charisma can only express it through the tautological phrase, “We'll define love as anything lovely you'd care to infer to” (289). Instead, Mafia maintains a positivist position by aligning herself only with the “the hard and tangible things” that can be verified (289). This view is also apparent in *The Crying of Lot 49* when the character, Emory Bortz, emphasizes the importance of embracing only what is capable of being articulated when he mocks Oedipa for her pursuit of a sublime second order beyond language to which he retorts, “Pick some words. Them, we can talk about” (151). While comical, Michael LeMahieu contends that

Pynchon uses these exchanges to convey his preoccupation with the “pernicious ideological implication” (*Fact and Value* 159) associated with a “totalizing and dehumanizing worldview, which Pynchon in turn associates with logical positivism” (157). This worldview disregards and renders meaningless aesthetic, ethical, and spiritual concerns because they are incapable of being expressed through empirically-verifiable statements. Petra Bianchi likewise suggests that the Charisma-Mafia exchange reflects the inability of language to signify the ineffable nature of love and thus “Wittgenstein's theory” suggests “that love is a meaningless concept and cannot be talked about but only demonstrated” (“Wittgensteinian Thread” 9). Consequently, the austere formal logic of logical positivism has significant limitations because, as LeMahieu argues, there is always “bound to be a remainder, an indigestible residue” that cannot be expressed (*Fact and Value* 186)—i.e. a “constitutive other” (187) or what Levinas refers to as an ethical saying that cannot be made present-at-hand by the ontological said.

Nevertheless, the Levinasian interplay between the saying and the said in fact complements some of Wittgenstein’s assertions in the *Tractatus*. As Eve notes, the *Tractatus* “hinges upon a distinction between the speakable and the showable; that which is in language, and that which is subject only to ostensive definition: Wittgenstein's ineffable” (*Pynchon and Philosophy* 3). Moreover, Pöhlmann contends that the ending of *Tractatus* both “hints at the innate terror of this radical incapability to gain a full understanding of the world inside language” while also acknowledging the merit of “non-propositional insight as another means of achieving what maybe cannot be quite called knowledge” (“Silences and Worlds” 163). Like Levinas’s notion of an ethical saying that cannot be signified by the logocentric said, Wittgenstein’s sixth proposition argues how the ethical “cannot be put into words” due to belonging to the “transcendental” realm beyond the scope of language (*Tractatus* 6.421). This does not constitute an outright rejection of ethics, however, but rather

a bracketing of it from a purely rational-grounded discourse. Therefore, Mafia's rejection of Charisma, while highlighting the austerity of logical positivism, also allows Pynchon to reaffirm the ineffable.

Pynchon also conveyed his wariness of logical positivism within a passage from the typescript of *V.* that was not included in the final version of the novel.¹⁴ In the 21st section of the typescript the character, Kurt Mondaugen, rejects logical positivism in favor of a new notion: "But a little of my youthful mystic determinism still prevails. With age it has mellowed into a doctrine I now call Illogical Negativism, which has only one thesis: *die Welt ist alles was Mondaugen ist*. And as must be obvious by now, Mondaugen is nothing extraordinary." Mondaugen channels this "mystic determinism" into illogical negativism as a way of offering respite from the totalizing nature of logical positivism. McHoul and Wills describe Mondaugen as "the engineer-poet [...] who knows the wise-man, Wittgenstein, also the engineer-poet whose text is present-at-logic and absent-as-mysticism" ("Die Welt" 277). But while it might be argued that the fact that Pynchon cut this passage indicates his lack of sympathy with Mondaugen's doctrine, the expression—taken seriously or satirically—is an acknowledgement of the relevance and importance of Wittgenstein's theoretical perspective within Pynchon's novel. Thus, for the purpose of this chapter illogical negativism is taken as an indication of Pynchon's interest in experimenting with and inverting positivist approaches to knowledge.

The sole thesis of Mondaugen's illogical negativism mockingly replaces the first proposition of the *Tractatus* with a much more solipsistic aphorism: "the world is everything that Mondaugen is" (*die Welt ist alles was Mondaugen ist*). Similar to the paradox at the crux

¹⁴ The exact reason as to why the section of the typescript was so heavily altered before publication remains unclear. A series of letters between Pynchon and his editor, Corlies Smith, about the revisions were published without authorization under the title *Of a Fond Ghoul* (1999), but only fifty copies were printed. Luc Herman and John Krafft note that Pynchon perhaps offers some insight as to why the section was cut when he wrote to Smith about how his frustration with the section stems from, as Herman and Krafft paraphrase, "historical-political and fictional-narrative reasons" ("The Typescript of Pynchon's *V.*" 13).

of Pynchon's Menippean satire identified towards the beginning of this section, William Plater describes Mondaugen's relativistic position as simultaneously "recogniz[ing] the need for an illusion of order and sequence with which men can explain their existences" while also rejecting "a cause and effect, sequential system of time and history" (*Grim Phoenix* 37). Mondaugen's illogical negativism therefore necessitates embracing an obscurantist position that can neither be articulated nor logically verified and is therefore relegated to the realm of the nonsensical. So if, as Wittgenstein suggests, ethical statements are fundamentally nonsensical, then illogical negativism becomes an ethical means of re-conceptualizing nonsense into something worthy of championing.

Pynchon would continue to highlight the conflict between logical positivism and mystical obscurantism in his subsequent work. For example, Pynchon describes Oedipa Maas as being in a perpetual search for "transcendent meaning" (*Crying Lot* 158), which David Cowart argues is a pursuit that provides Oedipa with the hope of one day escaping the "agnostic positivistic cul-de-sac of contemporary rationalism" (*Dark Passages* 11). The They-system for Oedipa is the dominant postal system that the preterite—in the form of the underground postal system, Trystero—attempts to overthrow. However, as Oedipa stumbles upon this conspiracy, she fears that Trystero's aim of taking control of the exchange of the written word will one day allow it to "grow larger than she and assume her to itself" (*Crying Lot* 125). Accordingly, Eddins suggests that Oedipa's paranoia stems from her "fear of absorption into a totalizing system that would destroy her sense of humanity and earth" (*Gnostic Pynchon* 125), and McClure describes the novella as being wary of the "dominant scientific-technical-corporate regime hostile to life itself" in favor of "more survivable" yet nonsensical "spiritual constructions of the real and the good" (*Partial Faiths* 30).

This attitude towards scientism and spiritualism extends to *Gravity's Rainbow* where it is explicitly reflected in the novel's epigraph quoting the German-American aerospace

engineer and space architect, Werner von Braun: “Nature does not know extinction; all it knows is transformation. Everything science has taught me, and continues to teach me, strengthens my belief in the continuity of our spiritual existence after death.” The epigraph helps introduce the conflict arising in the novel between the totalizing techno-scientific bureaucratic forces that threaten to subsume alterity through “the grim rationalizing of the World” (588) and the mystical, illogical negativist practices attempting to combat totalization by promoting what Chambers describes as “a language which embodies mystery and paradox [...] that acknowledges and embraces the otherness of the Other” rather than a language that “tends to objectify and exclude Otherness” (“Parabolas and Parables” 2).

To this end Pynchon’s incorporation of non-dogmatic forms of mysticism offers characters in *Gravity’s Rainbow* a counterpoint to the logical positivism that grimly rationalizes alterity. For example, Roger Mexico and Jessica Swanlake at one point attend a church service as a respite from the war. During the sermon a Jamaican corporal sings hymns while the preacher invites the audience to “[l]isten to this mock-angel singing, let your communion be at least in listening, even if they are not spokesmen for your exact hopes, your exact, darkest terror, listen. There must have been evensong here long before the news of Christ” (135). The preacher suggests a communion can be fostered free from the dogmatism of institutional religion as is evident by his suggestion that an evensong existed long before the Judeo-Christian Word—a notion that resonates with Reverend Gwyon’s fascination of the Mithraic temple buried beneath the basilica of Saint Clement.

The preacher’s use of the term “mock-angel” is an allusion to Rilke’s *Duino Elegies*. The first elegy—the same one that Esme copies out in *The Recognitions*—begins with the speaker lamenting over his existential despair by asking, “Who, if I cried out, would hear me among the hierarchies of angels?” (I.6). Rather than maintaining a Judeo-Christian interpretation of the angel, Rilke contends that he adopted a secular notion of the angel in

order to preserve a sublime, ineffable beauty detached from Christian dogma: “The Angel of the Elegies has nothing to do with the angel of the Christian heaven [...] the Angel of the Elegies is that creature in whom the transformation of the visible into the invisible, which we perform, appears already complete” (*Letters* 1925). Like the Levinasian Other, Rilke’s angel is ineffable because its perfection transcends the cognitive capacity of mankind and “attests to the recognition of a higher level of reality in the invisible – Terrifying, therefore, to us because we, its lovers and transformers, still cling to the visible” (*Letters* 1925). Rilke’s “recognition of a higher level of reality,” similar to Gaddis’s imperative of seeking out recognitions of the sublime alterity of a second order, is “terrifying” precisely because it suggests significant limitations to the epistemic frameworks mankind relies upon for establishing meaning and order.

Rilke’s preoccupation with humanity’s need to thematize the angel as a way of maintaining control over a world that can never be completely known is highlighted through a debased form of spiritualism practiced during the séance scene towards the beginning of *Gravity’s Rainbow*. A group of characters attempt to commune with spirits from the “other side” (31)—a nonsensical realm described by Hohmann as an order where “[d]elusional categories like time, history, space and causality become irrelevant” (*Conceptual Structure* 201). Echoing Rilke, the medium Carroll Eventyr warns that the attempt to rationalize and totalize the other side only leads to “tak[ing] on a greater, and more harmful, illusion. The illusion of control” (*Gravity’s Rainbow* 30). Replacing the techno-scientific order with a mystical order essentially exchanges one system of control for another—an idea reminiscent of Eliot’s view of myth-making as being “simply a way of controlling, of ordering, of giving a shape to the immense panorama of futility and anarchy which is contemporary history” (“Ulysses, Order, Myth” 483). So despite Pynchon’s interest in stationing an Other Order of Being as a mystical counterpoint to the determinate order of the They-system, he was also

wary of the potential for mystical practices to erect alternative systems of control that could be just as absolutist as the techno-scientific systems they attempt to undermine.

This tension is most apparent regarding the preoccupation with *völkisch* folklore in *Gravity's Rainbow*. The *völkisch* movement was originally a populist measure aligned with German Romanticism that, as Doug Haynes notes, embraced German folklore and occultism as a way of responding to the alienating effects of industrialization (“Volk and Fetish” 313). However, in the years immediately leading up to World War II the *völkisch* movement began to adopt a jingoistic, anti-Semitic sentiment eventually culminating in the establishment of a type of Nazi mysticism that, according to Haynes, represents for Pynchon “the culture of irrationalism in the Weimar period and how it prepares an imaginary history for the Third Reich” (“Volk and Fetish” 310). Furthermore, Moore suggests Pynchon was fascinated with these “twentieth-century German conditions” that allowed Nazism to thrive and how they “issued from the interplay between *Volk*-ish charisma and technologized rationality” (*Style of Connectedness* 207). For example, the character—Margherita Erdmann—tells Slothrop she changed her surname from *Karel* to *Erdmann* to conform to the *völkisch* movement. Even more nefariously, Captain Weissmann changed his name to *Blicero*—a name David Seed suggests is a combination of the Old German word *Blicker* (“death”) and modern German *Bleicher* (“bleacher”) (“Naming in Pynchon” 52)—upon joining the SS, which Weisenburger suggests complements the homogenizing practices of Nazism aimed at totalizing that which is Other to *völkisch* purity through an Aryan “white death” (*Companion* 244).

The *völkisch* enmeshment of mystical elements with a techno-scientific rationality exemplifies Pynchon’s paranoia about how even numinous practices that ostensibly resist systemic control can become totalizing forces themselves. For this reason it can be argued that Pynchon’s mystical preoccupations attest to a desire to pursue alterity while also being cognizant of how it is necessary for the Other Order of Being to remain ineffable and non-

conceptual to avoid its totalization. Therefore, Pynchon's illogical negativism assumes a liminal position between the scientific and spiritual in *Gravity's Rainbow* by suggesting, in Wittgenstein's terms, the existence of a second order that is not the case while also remaining silent about it. To avoid becoming a totalizing countermeasure, it will now be shown how illogical negativism borrows obscurantist elements from Jewish mysticism as a means of fostering a non-totalizing communion with the magical Other.

3.3 Jewish Mysticism and the Magical Other

Pynchon's attempt to situate illogical negativism as a non-totalizing means open to alterity is largely owed to the mystical tradition of the Kabbalah: an esoteric mode of Judaic thought in which the mystic seeks to attain hidden, incommunicable insight into the divine nature of God. David Ariel argues that Kabbalists attempt to foster an altered state of consciousness in which their experience with the transcendental takes on a “noetic quality—an element of insight, knowledge, intuition, or revelation not normally acquired through rational means” (*Kabbalah* 3). The goal of this esoteric, non-rational stance is to attempt to establish a non-totalizing, “non-absorptive unity with the transcendent deity” (11).

Weisenburger identifies Gershom Scholem's *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism* (1941) and *On the Kabbalah and Its Symbolism* (1965) as some of the primary sources on the Kabbalah that Pynchon consulted while working on *Gravity's Rainbow*. Scholem argues that the Kabbalah is heavily influenced by the Jewish experience of exile, which Bloom suggests situates the Kabbalah as a “doctrine of Exile [...] After the Exile from Spain, Kabbalah intensified its vision of belatedness, an intensification that culminated in the Lurianic myth in which the Creation itself became an Exile” (*Kabbalah and Criticism* 83). This notion of exile complements Pynchon's concern with the preterite's marginalization within the They-system, and the fixation on noetic insight is synergistic with the paranoia of Pynchon's preterite regarding the existence of an Other Order of Being. Moreover, Evelyn Fishburn argues the

Kabbalah is noteworthy for its belief “in the hidden existence of godliness behind and within every material object. Thus, in Cabbalistic thought, the visible world is likened to a veil, or curtain, which can be lifted by means of esoteric interpretations, to reveal a more direct vision of the true mysteries of God and his creation” (“Borges, Cabbala” 408).

This arcane form of exegesis is present in *Mason & Dixon* when at one point Reverend Cherrycoke ponders if an empirical approach to understanding the world is predicated on a mystical yearning for access to a transcendent realm: “Is it the Infinite that tempts us, or the Imp? Or is it merely our Vocational Habit, ancient as Kabbalah, of seeking God there, among the notation of these resonating Chains...” (721). Furthermore, at one point Dixon discusses with Mason the possibility of a Kabbalistic conspiracy “whereby Messages may be extracted from lines of Text sacred and otherwise, a Knowledge preserv’d by various Custodians over the centuries [...] and arrang’d into Lines, like those of a Text, manipulated till a Message be reveal’d” (479). The hidden text containing a “secret Body of Knowledge” (487) is conceptualized as being a possible means to a second order that exceeds the purview of epistemic frameworks. This Kabbalistic emphasis on ineffability as a counterpoint to the totalizing nature of scientism would later be adapted in Pynchon’s *Against the Day* in the form of the occultist group, “the True Worshippers of the Ineffable Tetractys” (219), described as “seekers of certitude” who pursue noetic insight embodying “some unthinkable zero [...] out on the other side” (247).

Nevertheless, some characters still attempt to co-opt Jewish mysticism as a means of controlling others. For example, in *Mason & Dixon* the Jesuit antagonist and anti-mystic, Padre Zarpazo, discusses at length how he feels threatened by the seductive powers of the Kabbalah due to its emphasis on individual exegesis at the expense of the Church’s authority:

Perhaps they see a way back,— to the single Realm, as it was before
Protestants, and Protestant Dissent, and the mindless breeding of Sect upon

Sect. A Portrayal, in the earthly Day-light, of the Soul's Nostalgia for that undifferentiated Condition before Light and Dark,— Earth and Sky, Man and Woman,— a return to that Holy Silence which the Word broke, and the Multiplexity of matter has ever since kept hidden (*Mason & Dixon* 523).

Similar to the notion of a primordial first idea existing before epistemic differentiation, the Kabbalah advocates for a return to the pre-semiotic, “undifferentiated” “single Realm” of “Holy Silence.” Since this mystical insight cannot be recorded and therefore manipulated by religious institutions, Padre Zarpazo is wary of how the Kabbalah may offer respite from the dogmatic order he wishes to impose.

Fishburn also examines this Kabbalistic emphasis on ineffability in her study of Jorge Luis Borges's relationship with the Kabbalah. She claims how “[w]riting is connected to the mystical experience in that the moment the mystic tries to clarify his experience by reflection and formulate it, and especially when he attempts to communicate it to others, he necessarily must impose a framework of conventional symbols and ideas upon it” (“Borges, Cabbala” 409-10). The Kabbalistic belief in a primordial text existing prior to the development of a “framework of conventional symbols” that cannot be articulated—similar to Esme's fixation on the possibility of a sublime realm “where nothing was created, where originality did not exist: because it was origin” (*Recognitions* 114)—prefigures the post-structural emphasis on undermining the “traditional pre-eminence accorded to the *spoken* over the *written* in Western thought” (“Borges, Cabbala” 412).

Furthermore, Pynchon's skepticism of logical positivism resonates with how the Kabbalah resists scientific reductionism—a feature Pynchon shares with Borges whose work, as Fishburn argues, maintains a constant preoccupation with “an unfathomable universe set off against man's vain attempt to understand it” (“Borges, Cabbala” 409). In fact, at one point in *Gravity's Rainbow* Pynchon references Borges and his wariness towards mankind's

impulse to impose order on the world when a group of Argentine anarchists claim, “We are obsessed with building labyrinths, where before there was open plain and sky. To draw ever more complex patterns on the blank sheet. We cannot abide that *openness*: it is terror to us. Look at Borges” (264). This desire to insulate mankind from openness by “building labyrinths” reflects an ordering principle Moore describes as a “conquistadoring of self over other, a framing of primeval oneness felt as threat, as evil, the world outside not only open to conquest but deserving of it” (*Style of Connectedness* 51).

Pynchon’s Menippean treatment of the epistemic impulse to totalize this openness is partly informed by how Borges self-reflexively brings attention to the epistemological and teleological structures that marginalize alterity within his own work. Swigger suggests that Borges’s preoccupation with totalization is apparent since his stories often “explore the possibilities for speculation that derive from combining meditations on infinity with the idea of the book as repository of knowledge or the tool of memory” (“Fictional Encyclopedism” 359). This helps suggest why Borges was drawn to Jewish mysticism as a hermeneutic model functioning as a counterpoint against absolutist thinking.

For example, Borges’s short story “The Library of Babel” lampoons the notion of encyclopedic comprehensiveness while being sympathetic to Kabbalistic exegesis. The story features a library containing so many books that it includes every possible permutation of an unspecified 22-letter alphabet. Since the library contains every possible combination of letters, it is essentially an unnavigable labyrinth because any true information is rendered indistinguishable from the false information contained in the “several hundred thousand imperfect facsimiles: works which differ only in a letter or a comma” (*Labyrinths* 66). There is also a mystical cult based on the Kabbalists who believe that within the library there must also be a perfect index of the library’s content. Their search for an ultimately unobtainable book reflects the Kabbalist’s quest for divine revelation that can never be signified.

Borges also explores epistemic labyrinths in his story, “Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius.” The story begins with the discovery of a mysterious article within the fictional encyclopedia, “*Anglo-American Cyclopaedia*” (*Labyrinths* 20)—a “literal if inadequate reprint of the *Encyclopædia Britannica* of 1902” (20)—about the fictional land of Uqbar. Eventually the eleventh volume of a fictional encyclopedia known as *Orbis Tertius* is discovered, which is dedicated entirely to ordering the fictional world of Tlön containing Uqbar. A unique aspect of Tlön is that it is created entirely through an extreme form of subjective idealism in which the “world for them is not a concourse of objects in space; it is a heterogeneous series of independent acts. It is successive and temporal, not spatial” (24). Thus, the reality of the fictional world is literally contingent on the encyclopedic entries.

However, there is also an awareness regarding the pitfalls of this prioritization of subjective perception over the material world. The narrator at one point states how these signs can become a reductive means of totalizing the world when claiming, “Every mental state is irreducible: the mere fact of naming it—i.e., of classifying it—implies a falsification. From which it can be deduced that there are no sciences on Tlön, not even reasoning” (*Labyrinths* 25-6). Pynchon would later echo this sentiment regarding how “[n]ames by themselves may be empty” (*Gravity’s Rainbow* 366). Borges’s and Pynchon’s shared interest in the Kabbalah as a counterpoint to reductive epistemic frameworks thus reflects the conflict between logical positivism and what one of the narrators in *Gravity’s Rainbow* suggests is a noetic “silence the encyclopedia histories have blandly filled up with agencies, initials, spokesmen and deficits enough to keep us from finding them again...” (586).

In terms of this noetic insight, Ariel argues that mystics maintain a faith—rather than certainty—in the Kabbalah’s ability to serve as a “guide to achieving an expanded consciousness of the hidden presence of the divine in everything around and within us” (*Kabbalah* 17). Similar to Oedipa’s paranoia about the possibility of a magical Other capable

of “call[ing] into being the trigger of the unnamable act, the recognition, the Word” (136), Kabbalists conceptualize God as an ineffable alterity while His divine presence—known as the *Shekhinah* (*Kabbalah* 47)—immanently emanates within the world as traces of a transcendental signified. The *Shekhinah*'s perpetual oscillation between absence and presence strongly resonates with the emphasis on belatedness in post-structural theory as well as the liminal nature of Pynchon's illogical negativism as they both attempt to offer a counterpoint to the metaphysics of presence in favor of the ineffable Other Order of Being.

In this sense not only does Bloom assert that Derrida's notion of the hauntological trace complements how the Kabbalah “speaks of a writing before writing,” his description of the Kabbalah is analogous to Levinas's notion of the ethical saying because it is “a speech before speech, a Primal Instruction preceding all traces of speech” (*Kabbalah and Criticism* 52), which Pynchon describes as the first idea that the “convolution of language denied us” (*Gravity's Rainbow* 148). Just as Derrida and Levinas look to rupture logocentric closure by seeking out gaps and interruptions between the signifier and signified, Sanford Drob suggests that Kabbalists account for this disconnection when interpreting “not only each word and letter of the Torah, but also the white spaces dividing them” (*Kabbalah and Postmodernism* 59). Citing Deuteronomy 33:2, this interpretation of the spaces within the Hebraic text is largely owed to the Hasidic rabbi—Levi Isaac of Berditchev—who was fascinated by the interplay between the black and white fires that God used when giving the Torah to Moses (60). Moreover, Scholem claims the black fire is engraved on the white fire in a similar manner to how black ink is imposed on white parchment (*Major Trends* 49).

Kabbalists view the white fire as constituting an ineffable language required for being able to gain noetic insight that cannot be totalized by the black fire of the logos. Derrida was also drawn to the notion of the two fires with regard to post-structural belatedness since he viewed the white fire as making it “always possible for a text to become new, since the white

spaces open up its structure to an indefinitely disseminated transformation” (“WriTing, EncaSing, ScreeNing” 345)—essentially lacunas functioning as traces of the ethical saying that interrupt the logocentric said. Furthermore, Derrida discussed how the Kabbalist’s pursuit of this “magical power” associated with the hidden white fire of the text demonstrates that the “name is transcendent and more powerful than we are” (“Eyes of Language” 214). However, its totalization by the black fire of signification reveals the inevitable “abyss that is enclosed within” the text (226-27).

Berressem contends that *Gravity’s Rainbow* reflects this semantic abyss because in the novel “it is neither the signifier nor the signified alone that preside over their text, but their ‘complicity’” (*Pynchon’s Poetics* 9). Thus, the Kabbalistic attempt to interpret the apophatic white spaces between the words of the Torah can be viewed as resonating with Pynchon’s illogical negativism that attempts to maintain a nonsensical non-position between these two poles. It is then apparent why Pynchon stationed Jewish mysticism in *Gravity’s Rainbow* as a compelling antithesis to the logical positivism of the They-system. It will now be shown how specific characters, adopting illogical negativism, attempt to symbolically use the magical power associated with these fires to commune with the magical Other.

3.4 The Black and White Fires of Signification

Many characters in *Gravity’s Rainbow* eventually realize the limitations of the black fire of the written word as well as the futility of pursuing an ultimate signified. For example, Pynchon satirically stations a Puritanical treatment of the Word—a position Hite argues “attests to a faith that transcendence can become immanence, absence can become presence, words can become the Word” (*Ideas of Order* 34)—as a counterpoint to the obscurantism adopted by both the Kabbalist and the illogical negativist. Despite being conditioned from a long tradition of “word-smitten Puritans” (*Gravity’s Rainbow* 207) who memorized the Bible because the “[d]ata behind [it]” represented “the numinous certainty of God” (242), Slothrop

loses his “Puritan hopes for the Word, the Word made printer’s ink” (571). Berressem contends that this realization is the result of recognizing “the possibility of an infinite play of the signifier [...] opened up within discourse, because no signification can be returned to the level of a stable and natural signified but glides endlessly within the passage from signifier to signifier” (*Pynchon’s Poetics* 87). So rather than the Word becoming flesh, the Word is revealed to be simply imperfect signs generated by the black fire of written language unable to signify the white fire of a sublime truth.

In a similar manner the character, Galina—a teacher in Kirghizstan—alludes to the logocentric interplay between absence and presence when she bemoans how she “must stay below in the schoolroom, shut in by words, drifts and frost-patterns of *white* words” (339; italicized for emphasis). She is stuck within the closed system of a determinate order but is teased by the mystical “white words” that can rupture such closure yet are incapable of being articulated. Likewise, Carroll Eventyr can grasp the ineffable saying of the “other side” (31) yet is incapable of expressing it through the black fire of the logocentric said. He realizes how “[s]ometimes, rarely, there may be tantalizing—not words, but halos of meaning around words his mouths evidently spoke, that only stay behind—if they do—for a moment, like dreams, can’t be held or developed, and, presently, go away” (145). This conflict between being “shut-in” within an epistemic framework of techno-scientific determinism away from the openness of these belated “halos of meaning” rumbles on throughout the novel.

For example, the black fire of signification is treated askance by the marginalized Asian and African communities within the system who maintain a “primitive fear of having a soul captured by a likeness of image or a name” (302). Many of these aboriginal groups instead opt to attempt to maintain a closer proximity to the primordial natural world that the reductive, determinate impulse of the They-system strives to make it present-at-hand. As Eddins contends, language for these communities function as “simulacrum that falsifies

reality,” so they—like Gaddis’s Esme and Wyatt before them—recognize that “if preverbal Earth represents in some sense a transcendental unity, the mere existence of an immanentizing Word—however normative—violates that unity” (*Gnostic Pynchon* 151). However, resisting the black fire of the They-system proves to be difficult.

This is apparent in one episode when the Russian character, Tchitcherine—a Soviet intelligence officer—takes part in a program of implementing the New Turkic Alphabet within these communities: an initiative modeled after Stalin’s Likbez literacy program as well as the Turkish reforms spearheaded by Atatürk. The Russians attempt to replace the oral traditions of many groups in Central Asia with the written language of the NTA in order to redeem words “from the lawless, the mortal streams of human speech” (355). The implementation of the alphabet is a manifestation of positivist control designed to totalize alterity, causing the narrator to note that despite how the names themselves “may have no magic, [...] the *act* of naming, the physical utterance, obeys the pattern” (322) and is therefore useful to the They-system. Nevertheless, these communities view the abstraction associated with language as setting “the namer more hopelessly apart from the named” (391) because, as the character Fausto Maijstral claims in *V.*, the “word is, in sad fact, meaningless” (307). In fact, at one point the narrator in *Gravity’s Rainbow* states how language implies a fundamental disconnection between referents and their corresponding signifiers because the “pencil words on your page” are effectively a “ Δ t from the things they stand for” (509).

This point is further emphasized when Tchitcherine attempts to use a stenotype in order to record the sacred song that honors a “place where words are unknown,” which the illiterate, nomadic Aqyns sing about the Kirghiz Light:

If the place were not so distant,
If words were known, and spoken,
Then the God might be a gold ikon,

Or a page in a paper book.

But It comes as the Kirghiz Light—

There is no other way to know It (358).

While the song may seem wholly un-Derridean for privileging the Aqyn oral tradition over the ostensibly derivative written “paper book,” the song nevertheless embraces the possibility of a saying that cannot be said and is therefore a fitting rejection of Tchitcherine’s reductive attempt to totalize the song through the stenotype.

Pynchon further explores the mystical search for noetic insight that cannot be articulated when the character, Oberst Enzian—the leader of a faction of formerly-colonized Africans from German South-West Africa known as the Zone-Hereros who was named by Blicero “after Rilke’s mountainside gentian” in the Ninth Elegy (101)—wonders if he and his followers “*are* supposed to be the Kabbalists out here [...] to be the scholar-magicians of the Zone, with somewhere in it a Text, to be picked to pieces, annotated, explicated, and masturbated till it’s all squeezed limp of its last drop” (520). Not only does this perspective complement the Kabbalistic notion of world as text in the form of the *sephirot* that must be continually interpreted, it is also an idea Pynchon would explore in *Mason & Dixon* when a character views the surveying of colonial America as a Kabbalistic practice:

America, withal, for centuries had been *kept hidden*, as are certain Bodies of Knowledge. Only now and then were selected persons allow’d Glimpses of the New World,— [...] a secret Body of Knowledge, —meant to be studied with the same dedication as the Hebrew Kabbala [sic] would demand. Forms of the Land, the flow of water, the occurrence of what us’d to be call’d Miracles, all are Text, —to be attended to, manipulated, read, remember’d (487).

Another character points out a possible convergence between the science of land surveying and various forms of mystical practices such as Kabbalist exegesis and Chinese geomancy:

“Hence as you may imagine, we take a lively interest in this Line of yours inasmuch as it may be read, East to West, much as a Line of Text upon a Page of the sacred Torah, —a Tellurian Scripture, as some might say, —” (487). In a similar manner, Enzian realizes that the Zone itself constitutes a physical text shaped by the black fire of the metaphysics of presence while the white fire of the Other Order is an enigma he must uncover. But if the signs of the black fire that can be freely rearranged into any number of new meanings by the Kabbalist, then does an unequivocal “holy Center” (517) exist at all or is it merely fabricated to suit the needs of the mystic?

Enzian attempts to solve this problem by pondering if the underlying “holy Text” he seeks could in fact be embodied by the German rocket—the most prominent symbol of the They-system’s power revealing the pitfalls of unconstrained technological innovation—which the Hereros vehemently resist. This type of “rocket-mysticism” (154) adopted by characters such as the rocket engineer, Franz Pökler, would in fact be a perversion of Jewish mysticism as the ten emanations of God in the form of the *sephiroth* “which must be apprehended all at once, together, in parallel” are instead replaced by the “serial” ten-second countdown that precedes the firing of the rocket (753). As the “Kabbalist spokesman” Steve Edelman explains:

God sent out a pulse of energy into the void. It presently branched and sorted into ten distinct spheres or aspects, corresponding to the numbers 1-10. These are known as the Sephiroth. To return to God, the soul must negotiate each of the Sephiroth, from ten back to one. Armed with magic and faith, Kabbalists have set out to conquer the Sephiroth. Many Kabbalist secrets have to do with making the trip successfully (752-53).

This “Rocket state-cosmology” (726) promoted by the They-system co-opts the *sephiroth* as a means of maintaining control over the preterite by discouraging the belief of a second order

beyond the techno-scientific framework They impose. Moss suggests that this totalitarian cosmology is a result of the “twinning of the male symbol (usually the Rocket, this time the iconic explosion itself) with the female coming together with destructive force, [which] suggests a perversion of the Shekhinah” (*Towards a Preterite Theology* 99). Aware of the perverse nature of this cosmology, the narrator posits, “What if there is no Vacuum? Or if there is—what if They’re *using* it on you? What if They find it convenient to preach an island of life surrounded by a void? Not just the Earth in space, but your own individual life in time? What if it’s in Their interest to have you believe that?” (*Gravity’s Rainbow* 697).

Accordingly, Enzian maintains paranoia towards the possibility that the “symmetries, its latencies, the *cuteness*” of the Rocket Text may be obfuscating the white fire of the Ideal that “persisted, somewhere else, in its darkness, our darkness” (520). Like Derrida’s suggestion about how epistemic frameworks are unavoidably decentered because the “center is at the center of the totality, and yet, since the center does not belong to the totality (is not part of the totality), the totality has its center elsewhere. The center is not the center” (“Structure, Sign, Play” 279), the rocket as Logos could be merely a false “holy Center” the techno-scientific system promotes to disguise how Their order is also decentered.

This is apparent when the Empty Ones (also known as the *Otukungurua*), a rival Herero faction led by Josef Ombindi, attempt to locate the rocket in order to commit tribal suicide to reach this primordial “Center again, the Center without time, the journey without hysteresis, where every departure is a return to the same place, the only place” (319)—a notion complementing Wyatt’s call for self-erasure in *The Recognitions* as a means of returning to the primordial first idea. Ombindi views the world as once possessing a “Pre-Christian Oneness” and “an innocence he’s really only heard about, can’t himself believe in” existing prior to the divisionary nature of epistemic frameworks (321). Many other characters also pursue this primal Center. For example, the Argentine anarchist Francisco Squalidozzi

“longs for a return to that first unscribbled serenity...that anarchic oneness of pampas and sky” (264), Thomas Gwenthidwy suggests that postlapsarian history has created a diaspora by which civilization is “all scattered like seeds [...] still flying outward from the primal fist so long ago” (170), and Margherita Erdmann seeks to return the Jewish diaspora back to a primordial “Light” (476).

The rocket therefore becomes an eschatological means of ending the suffering of the Empty Ones because they believe the “Eternal Center can easily be seen as the Final Zero. Names and methods vary, but the movement toward stillness is the same” (319). Known as the “Doctrine of the Zero,” the Empty Ones adopted their anti-humanist philosophy—an ideology Pynchon strives to avoid through the noncommittal nature of illogical negativism—after they “have learned their vulturehood from the Christian missionaries” (319). Faced with a pervasive Western influence that has compromised the alterity of their Herero culture, the Empty Ones pursue tribal suicide to annihilate this influence.

With this in mind, Weisenburger notes that the Hereros believe suicide can function as a “blood vengeance” because Herero folklore views the dead as being “capable of bringing about evil and death more effectively than the living” from the “Other Side” (*Companion* 194). Treacle also observes this aspect of Herero culture when he mentions to Roger Mexico, “These are peoples [...] who carry on business every day with their ancestors. The dead are as real as the living. How can you understand them without treating both sides of the wall of death with the same scientific approach?” (*Gravity’s Rainbow* 153). Treacle’s insistence of extending science’s applicability to “those who’ve passed over to the other side” (153) reveals the consequences associated with a reductive positivist impulse to totalize alterity in order to understand it.

However, Enzian views Ombindi’s nihilistic quest as being fundamentally unethical because his attempt to seek a “mythical return” to an absent Center within the lawless Zone—

a war-torn area full of clashing factions and conflicting information that move centrifugally “away from all the others, in fated acceleration, red-shifting, fleeing the Center” (519)— becomes just as totalizing as the determinate forces he attempts to resist. Enzian argues that the rocket Ombindi pursues only offers a false escape from totality because in reality, “Nowhere is safe. We can’t believe Them any more. Not if we are still sane, and love the truth” (728). Enzian is nevertheless susceptible to the lure of a locatable Center when he considers if the true Holy Text is in fact a latent part of the entire Zone itself and should therefore be the focus of his exegetical efforts. This idea is similar to when Oedipa realizes during her phantasmagorical journey how it could be possible that “[b]ehind the hieroglyphic streets there would either be a transcendent meaning, or only the earth [...] either some fraction of the truth’s numinous beauty [...] or only a power spectrum” (136). Like Oedipa, Enzian is unable to resist the temptation of attempting to locate the white fire of a second order obfuscated by the black fire of techno-scientific totality.

Accordingly, this pursuit of a mystical Center by these various factions within the techno-scientific landscape can be viewed as a microcosm for the conflict between illogical negativism and rational-based methodologies in *Gravity’s Rainbow*. Mankind’s frantic desire to establish meaning by projecting patterns onto the world is a way of assuaging the paranoia that comes with experiencing the chaos of the modern world. An example of such patterning occurs when the character, Dr. Géza Rozsavolgyi, administers a projective Rorschach ink-blot test to Slothrop in which “The *ba*-sic theory, is that when given an *unstruc*-tured stimulus, some shape-less *blob* of exper-ience, the subject, will seek to impose, *struc*-ture on it” (82). The consequences associated with attempting to establish such a “finely labyrinth” (680) of categorical order, along with endeavoring to locate a point of sublime exteriority where all “boundaries between our lands, our bodies, our stories” (135) dissolve, are explored throughout *Gravity’s Rainbow*.

For example, during the evacuation episode at the beginning of the novel *Pirate* Prentice dreams about how the movement of refugees attempting to flee the “detritus of an order, a European and bourgeois order they don’t yet know is destroyed forever” (551) ends up “not [being] a disentanglement from, but a progressive *knotting into*” (3). This statement applies to how the epistemic impulses to “disentangle” and thereby master the unknown through the explication and ordering of data is fundamentally counterproductive because it ends up “*knotting into*” what Moore argues are the “systems created by those meanings and by the act of projection” (*Style of Connectedness* 3). In other words, the attempt to disentangle from Borgesian labyrinths of disorder ends up knotting into totalizing labyrinths of epistemic control.

This reveals the ultimate tension at the heart of Pynchon’s Menippean satire in that the pursuit of rupturing closure in favor of a mystical alterity, primordial Center and/or the white fire of the ineffable saying unavoidably fosters a level of paranoia created by this radical openness. Such openness, as Hoffmann argues, spawns more systems “of rationalities, categorizations, hierarchies, and power structures in order to save at least the illusion of dominating the world” (*Modernism to Postmodernism* 375). Collado-Rodríguez suggests this embodies the “human propensity to narrativize reality” yet this “thus stands as the ultimate insurmountable barrier in our necessity to know the historical real” (“Historiographic Metafiction” 71). Therefore, Edward Pointsman’s reflection about whether or not “Outside and Inside” could be “part of the same field” (*Gravity’s Rainbow* 144) recognizes the potential conflation of the binary between the Inside of epistemic frameworks and Outside of an ineffable second order.

One example of this conflation occurs when organic chemists are referred to as “coal-tar Kabbalists” whose production of synthetic compounds makes them “no better than the Qlippoth, the shells of the dead” (589). Like the polymers manipulated by these chemists in

order to create compounds, words “too can be modulated, broken, recoupled, redefined, copolymerized, one to the other in worldwide chains that will surface now and then over long molecular silences, like the seen parts of a tapestry” (355). The consequences associated with this unethical manipulation of Kabbalist practices to conform with the rational-driven pursuits of the They-system that attempts to totalize these “long molecular silences” is most apparent with regard to Lazlo Jamf: the inventor of Imipolex G who conditioned the infant Slothrop to the compound.¹⁵

For example, Jamf at one point proclaims his unethical desire to subsume alterity when he describes his preference for the ionic bond rather than the covalent bond. In a symbolic treatment regarding the totalization of alterity by the egocentric self, he describes the sharing of electrons in the covalent bond as a “cosmic humiliation” (577). Instead, he attests to “[h]ow much stronger, how everlasting was the *ionic* bond—where electrons are not shared, but *captured. Seized! And held!*” (577). Rather than maintaining an ethical relation with the Other in the form of a covalent bond, Jamf strives to conquer alterity through the ionic bond by engaging in the “endlessly diddling play of a chemist whose molecules are words...” (391). This totalization of the Other is reflected during one of Slothrop’s nightmares in which he discovers “a very old dictionary” and opens to the entry for “JAMF” and “read[s]: I” (287).

So while the Kabbalah may offer a counterpoint to epistemic reductionism, it is also a target of satire by Pynchon due to its potential to co-opt the determinate tactics of the They-system when pursuing the Other Order of Being. For example, one of Pynchon’s most controversial characters—the retired adult film actress, Margherita Erdmann—at one point

¹⁵ As a way of further weakening the veracity of epistemic order in *Gravity’s Rainbow*, Pynchon raises the question later in the novel about whether or not Jamf in fact actually exists: “There never was a Dr. Jamf. [...] Jamf was only a fiction” (*Gravity’s Rainbow* 738). Shawn Smith suggests that Jamf is one example of the “abstractions [that] predict the failure of the Formist project of classification and categorization: quantification, from within the narrative field, fails because the reality of the evidence at hand is ambiguous” (*Pynchon and History* 70).

assumes the role of the *Shekhinah*, the “mother of God,” who “wander[s] all the Diaspora looking for strayed children” that she refers to as “fragment[s] of a smashed vessel” in order to take them back to a primordial “Light” (476). By murdering the children, she hopes to save them from what Weisenburger contends is the abjection of “modern science, symbolized by the Rocket” by returning “God’s exiled sparks to their original home, a return that ends Time with a cosmic hysteron proteron” (“Hysteron Proteron” 99). However, Moss contends this unethical endeavor makes Margherita “the corruption of the Shekhinah absolute, [...] a monstrous entity that feeds off the Semitic beliefs she misappropriates. No longer is the Shekhinah the embodiment of the consolidation of Israel, but an enemy of such, taking the children in blood sacrifice” (*Towards a Preterite Theology* 101). Thus, Erdmann’s attempt to return the Jewish Diaspora to a mystical point of primordial oneness prior to epistemic differentiation ends up counterproductively becoming a means of totalizing alterity by quite literally annihilating the Other.

Moreover, Pynchon also parodies the Kabbalistic notion of divine mystical revelation facilitated by the Metatron: an archangel in Judeo-Christian folklore derived from the Biblical prophet, Enoch, who supervises each *sephiroth* and the divine dwelling place of the *Shekhinah*. Pynchon parodies a passage from Scholem’s *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism* that explains how the soul must pass through seven antechambers before the Metatron can permit the soul’s ascent:

When I ascended to the first palace I was devout (*hasid*), in the second palace I was pure (*tahore*), in the third sincere (*yashar*), in the fourth I was wholly with God (*tanim*), in the fifth I displayed holiness before God, in the sixth I spoke the *kedushah* (the trishagion) before Him who spoke and created, in order that the guardian angels might not harm me, in the seventh palace I hid myself erect with all my might, trembling in all limbs (*Major Trends* 78).

Pynchon's character, Brigadier Ernest Pudding, partakes in a satirical inversion of this test where rather than ascending to the divine realm and standing erect before the *Shekhinah*, Weisenburger notes he instead "descends into a personal hell" and "kneels in abject servility (but sexually erect)" before the dominatrix Domina Nocturna, played by Katje, in the final antechamber (*Companion* 122). Instead of receiving the divine Word, the ritual ends with him consuming her excrement. This final scene, an embodiment of the narrator's earlier observation that "Shit, money and the Word" form "the three American truths" (*Gravity's Rainbow* 28), supports Weisenburger's assertion regarding how Slothrop's sodium amygdala-induced Kenosha Kid hallucination introduces a scatological "word/shit" binary present throughout *Gravity's Rainbow* (*Companion* 43).

Pynchon's association of the Kabbalah with a word/shit binary may make it appear as if he is dismissive of the value of mysticism as a legitimate counterpoint to the black fire of the written word. Bloom seems to believe this when he claims that despite how the *sephirot* are supposed to function as an "immutable knowledge of a final reality that stands behind our world of appearances," this can be tyrannical because the "fundamental images of Kabbalah are used to suggest tragic patterns of over-determination, by which our lives are somehow lived for us in spite of ourselves" (*Kabbalah and Criticism* 28). In fact, Bloom goes so far as to suggest that Pynchon's mysticism is a "Gnosis without transcendence" and that therefore "there is no fathering and mothering abyss to which it can return" ("Introduction" 3-4). Rather than invoking the white fire of alterity, Bloom views Pynchon's portrayal of Jewish mysticism as being contingent on the detritus of the black fire of the written word that proves to be nothing more than shit. So in returning to the fate of Byron the Bulb, it becomes clear why Bloom views the episode as being allegorical of "Pynchon's despair of his own Gnostic Kabbalah, since Byron the Bulb does achieve the Gnosis, complete knowledge, but purchases that knowledge by impotence, the loss of power" ("Introduction" 9). The enlightenment

Byron obtains comes with the price of a debilitating form of a paralytic paranoia that Bloom suggests reveals the inadequacy of mystical practices to be able to repel the totalizing tendencies of the They-system.

However, Bloom's view is too pessimistic. While Pynchon is wary of the potential for mystical practices to become totalizing acts, the Kabbalah nevertheless offers a form of resistance to the same over-determination that Bloom accuses it of being complicit in. As Slethaug argues, the Kabbalah weakens the black fire by revealing how "the Word, in *Gravity's Rainbow*, comes to represent not just the Western believer's abstractions of spirituality and science but the means by which they are conveyed—the abstractions of language itself" (*Play of the Double* 89). But while Jewish mysticism offers a compelling counterpoint to the positivist control of the They-system, the Kabbalah is not allowed to thrive unchecked.

Pynchon's illogical negativism therefore attempts to avoid the dogmatism that comes with fully endorsing either fire. To this end Oedipa realizes the problematic nature of this binary while on her quest to locate a second order. During her search she contemplates how she initially "heard all about excluded middles; they were bad shit to be avoided..." (*Crying Lot* 136). Hite describes how the principle of excluded middle dictates that "if a proposition is false, its contradictory must be true, and vice versa" (*Ideas of Order* 16). Oedipa is unable to resist the temptation of believing that there is either "another mode of meaning behind the obvious, or none" (*Crying Lot* 137)—either the Tristero postal system exists and imbues Oedipa's life with meaning or Tristero does not exist, rendering Oedipa's life meaningless.

Collado-Rodríguez outlines Pynchon's attitude towards this either/or principle as reflecting the underlying drive to impose categorical order—specifically binary order that Herbert Stencil refers to as an "ominous logic" (V. 423)—as a way of insulating mankind from the indeterminacy and randomness of a chaotic world:

Pynchon chooses to continuously undermine such oppositions by stressing the ambiguity of our surrounding universe, neither mythic integration nor categorical either/or: both options only respond to our necessity to narrativize, to map a reality whose meaning always escapes us despite the fact that language, our tool to communicate, cannot easily escape from the all-pervasive Law of the Excluded Middle (“Historiographic Metafiction” 15).

This necessity associated with mapping out reality is indicative of a determinate impulse that Gaddis, for example, would decry with regard to the player-piano because he viewed it as being the “grandfather of the computer, the ancestor of the entire nightmare we live in, the birth of the binary world where there is no option other than yes or no and where there is no refuge” from reducing all phenomena into the “unambiguous language translatable into the 1’s and 0’s of the binary system” (“Treatment for a Motion Picture” 22). Likewise, Wittgenstein contested the either/or principle by claiming, “When someone sets up the law of the excluded middle, he is as it were putting two pictures before us to choose from, and saying that one must correspond to the fact. But what if it is questionable whether the pictures can be applied here?” (*Remarks on the Foundations of Mathematics* 268).

In a rare instance of candidness about his own writing, Pynchon outlined a similar sentiment about language. Instead of “consciously groping after any synthesis” between opposing forms of discourse, Pynchon celebrates the experimental writing of his time as “not a case of either-or, but an expansion of possibilities” (*Slow Learner* 7). However, it should be noted that Pynchon may not be completely forthright here since the endeavor to discover these possibilities that completely avoid the totalizing either/or binary would be a difficult if not impossible task because these binary structures are a necessary means of helping make the world comprehensible. In a notion complementing the liminal nature of illogical negativism, Eve suggests that rather than attempting to transcend the binary one should re-

conceptualize it by rejecting the notion of “dialectical progress” and instead “forever moving in terms of negative critique, allowing thought continually to unthink itself” (*Pynchon and Philosophy* 144). Following this reasoning it can be argued that instead of siding with one opposition at the expense of the other, Pynchon—like Pig Bodine in *V.* who “[i]n times of crisis [...] preferred to sit in as voyeur” (17)—attempts to avoid the ominous logic associated with dialectical reasoning by instead opting for what Hite refers to as an “infinite ‘middle’ region between the hyperbolic extremes of an absolute, externally imposed (i.e., a particular kind of) order and total chaos” (*Ideas of Order* 16).

This excluded middle region is best exemplified by the lawless, limitless Zone that Slothrop investigates for answers. The war-torn Zone, like the epistemic foundation of Pynchon’s novel, is a “depolarized” (*Gravity’s Rainbow* 556) labyrinth without a center where “categories have been blurred badly” (303) without “subdivisions” or “frontiers” (298), and old orders are enmeshed to the point where “Outside and Inside interpierc[e] one another too fast, too finely labyrinthine, for either category to have much hegemony anymore” (681). Despite the absence of an authoritative center to imbue the Zone with meaning and order, Slothrop nevertheless feels the presence of this excluded center:

Whiteness without heat, and blind inertia: Slothrop feels a terrible *familiarity* here, a center he has been skirting, avoiding as long as he can remember — never has he been as close as now to the true momentum of his time: faces and facts that have crowded his indenture to the Rocket, camouflage and distraction fall away for the white moment, the vain and blind tugging at his sleeves *it's important ... please ... look at us ...* but it's already too late (312).

Clark suggests that Slothrop’s longing for this center is reminiscent of “the fictional encyclopaedia’s nostalgia for states of eternal knowledge. The characters would like to make sense of the bleak chaos of the Second World War by entering zones of knowledge outside

their everyday condition” (*Fictional Encyclopaedia* 40). Like the white fire of the perpetually-belated saying, Slothrop can only encounter the detritus of this center in the form of the white inertia that formerly imbued the Zone with order.

The Zone, a “Region of Uncertainty” (700) where “[b]inary decisions have lost meaning” (335) that Tony Tanner describes as having “no locational as well as no epistemological stability” (*Thomas Pynchon* 80), is therefore a fitting symbol of the non-committal, nonsensical, non-position Pynchon attempts to maintain in *Gravity’s Rainbow* in order to avoid subscribing to totalizing binaries at the expense of the magical Other. Pynchon’s desire to maintain an indeterminate position—his own Zone of the Excluded Middle—would offer an alternative to the Apollonian-Dionysian dichotomy extending to other dialectics “most conveniently paired and inseparable” in the text such as absence and presence, immanence and transcendence, as well as “[s]peaker and spoken-of, master and slave, virgin and seducer” (*Gravity’s Rainbow* 89).

Chambers argues this emphasis on an indeterminate position present throughout Pynchon's oeuvre is influenced by “a postmetaphysical ethics, a basis for humane action [...] located not in a set of prescriptive rules but rather in the indeterminate, contingent, though not subjective principle of love” (*Thomas Pynchon* 3). Accordingly, Pynchon’s liminal position between the positivist black fire and obscurantist white fire prevents “either category” from “hav[ing] much hegemony” (*Gravity’s Rainbow* 680)—a state described by Leni Pökler, in an act of defiance against her empirically-driven husband, where language runs as a “[p]arallel, not series [...] Mapping on to different coordinate systems” (159).

The Zone of the Excluded Middle—a region “[w]here ideas of the opposite have come together, and lost their oppositeness” (49)—thereby avoids the rigid categorization of epistemic frameworks opposed to alterity. It is a liminal space symbolic of Pynchon’s eclectic worldview Eve suggests is typified by how “Pynchon’s political, ethical, and philosophical

positions” are constantly “jarring against one another in an impossible non-synthesis” (*Pynchon and Philosophy* 172). This “impossible non-synthesis” can be viewed as paralleling the flight path of the V-2 rocket where its apex, known as *Brennschluss* (*Gravity’s Rainbow* 6), represents a point in which control of the rocket is momentarily lost as it enters a space similar to the excluded middle. However, this liminal space ostensibly free from control—like Pynchon’s Sisyphean attempt to maintain an illogical negativist non-position that must nevertheless be thematized within his novel—cannot be maintained indefinitely because the *Brennschluss* must eventually complete its rainbow-like trajectory by falling back under the control of gravitational forces that direct the rocket towards its target.

3.5 The Zone of the Excluded Middle

This excluded position emanates in a variety of ways. For example, instead of endorsing the preterite whose attempts to usurp the elect can be manipulated by the They-system as a justification for control, Pynchon suggests a third position can occur that dissolves the Calvinist dialectic. Reviving the “Slothropite heresy” originally posed by William Slothrop in his work *On Preterition* (555)—inspired by William Pynchon’s Calvinist heterodoxy—Tyrone questions if there might be a “set of coordinates from which to proceed, without elect, without preterite, without even nationality to fuck it up?” (556). To accept such a path would require embracing “a radically different idea of what winning and losing meant” (344)—effectively rejecting the binary for a liminal position between the two poles.

However, the text suggests that reaching this “set of coordinates” between the We and They requires a dissolution of the self that is analogous to Gaddis’s call for the culling of the disproportionate I because, as the Counterforce eventually realizes, the System actively exploits the preterite conceptualization of selfhood for Their own gain: “The Man has a branch office in each of our brains, his corporate emblem is a white albatross, each local rep has a cover known as the Ego, and their mission in this world is Bad Shit” (712-13).

While Slothrop eventually “pluck[s] the albatross of his self” (737) at the end of the novel to break free from the System’s influence, this comes with the price of his “Scatter[ing] all over the Zone” where it is “doubtful if he can ever be ‘found’ again, in the conventional sense of ‘positively identified and detained’” (712). By the end of the novel Slothrop’s old friend, Pig Bodine, is “one of the few who can still see Slothrop as any sort of integral creature any more” rather than the various factions who cannot comprehend him as a cohesive being despite their attempts to make him present-at-hand “as a concept” (740). Herman and van Ewijk contend rather optimistically that Slothrop’s disappearance implies that he reached a point of exteriority free from totalization:

his position does reveal an outside to “Their” structure, exposing once again that there is more beyond the totality “They” allege to encompass. Slothrop’s position points toward knowledge excluded and might stimulate a reassessment of the imposed structure. His predicament underlines the soundness of a renewed encyclopedic awareness with regard to the illusion of totality (“Gravity’s Encyclopedia” 178).

This interpretation of Slothrop’s dissolution would suggest that Slothrop is ultimately able to elude the They-system by entering the illogical negativist realm of “knowledge excluded” that cannot be totalized within an epistemic framework. However, Slothrop’s fate should not be recognized as a form of transcendence, since true exteriority from the text is impossible. Rather, just as Slothrop feels a paradoxical sense of presence in the Zone’s absent center, his entry into the liminal space of the excluded middle at the end of the novel suggests that neither total immanence nor transcendence can be fully realized.

The attempt to dissolve binaries in favor of an excluded middle is also apparent in Blicero’s satirical pursuit of transcendence by sacrificing his lover, Gottfried, to the rocket. Rather than continuing to live within the world where everyone is “so at the mercy of

language” (723), Blicero instead tells Gottfried, “I want to break out – to leave this cycle of infection and death. I want to be taken in love: so taken that you and I, and death, and life, will be gathered inseparable, into the radiance of what we would become....” (724).

However, Blicero’s desire “to be taken in love” and become “inseparable” from Gottfried is a bastardization of Gaddis’s *agape* with the Other. In maintaining his role as the “highest oppressor” (666) exemplifying the relationship between Nazism and the technological drive to correct humanity’s problems, Blicero’s sacrifice of Gottfried constitutes an unethical totalization of his alterity.

Moreover, the dynamic between Blicero and Gottfried during the firing of the rocket can be viewed as a satirical subversion of the Levinasian call for the self to maintain an ethical relationship of non-reciprocity with the Other. As Levinas claims, “I am responsible for the Other without waiting for reciprocity” (*Ethics and Infinity* 98). While Blicero can communicate from the ground by radio to his helpless victim, the radio offers only one-way communication with no possibility of exchange, so Gottfried’s screams end up going unheard (758). Blicero’s unethical actions therefore reveal the pervasive nature of signification in *Gravity’s Rainbow* that reflects a similar “cycle of infection and death” since that which cannot be signified at the periphery of the They-system ends up being wholly dismissed while that which can be signified is totalized through acts of violence by signifiers.

Another example of the violence associated with signification occurred earlier in the novel when Katje contemplates how her Dutch ancestor, Frans Van der Groov, participated in the systematic extinction of the dodo bird on Mauritius because of their inability to speak. Despite how the Dutch colonists were wary of being “trapped among frequencies of their own voices and words” (110), they still slaughtered the dodos because as Frans observed, “No language meant no chance of co-opting them in to what their round and flaxen invaders were calling Salvation” (110). This inability to comprehend language prevented the Dodos

from receiving the divine Word, and thus they are subjected to the same cycle of infection and death that Blicero strives to escape but nevertheless perpetuates.

Nevertheless, Blicero initially viewed the idea of escaping this cycle as being inconceivable in *V*. While in the German colonies within Southwest Africa, Blicero praised Mondaugen for his work as a codebreaker that allowed him to homogenize alterity through the deciphering of radio signals into comprehensible messages. Mondaugen's ability to order entropic data—a sentiment in opposition to the Herero suspicion of language that merely cages “old gods, snare[s] them in words, give[s] them away, savage, paralyzed, to this scholarly white who seemed so in love with language” (*Gravity's Rainbow* 99)—foreshadows the totalizing epistemic endeavors of the They-system in *Gravity's Rainbow*.

Mondaugen's attempt to totalize the sferics, however, does not go unchallenged. In the typescript to *V*, the character—Hugh Godolphin—criticizes Mondaugen for his unyielding commitment to rationalism at the expense of alterity:

And there are too many young men like you, [...] positivist, determinist, content to regard man as a physical accident. And trying to fit all poetry, all dreams—your astrology—into the same framework. I knew a young engineering-student who showed me once a blueprint he had drawn up for an angel. Under “next higher assembly” he had written Heaven. As far as I know he is now at work on the ground-plan of that city (*V. TS* 369).

Mondaugen meets this criticism with the rebuttal, “Why not, [...] Man works, one way or another, with what is measurable. The amount of speculation over the years on angels, heaven, etc. is measurable, it is enormous. Why should we not relate that to what is already predictable” (*V. TS* 370). This privileging on the logically verifiable is essentially an endorsement of logical positivism at the expense of the nonsensical entities of the excluded middle Godolphin reserves for things such as dreams and poetry.

Consequently, Godolphin dismisses Mondaguen's justification as being merely an "undergraduate theory, if nothing else. Man reads in the actions of the physically-determined universe the vital needs of his own blueprinted soul" (*V. TS* 386). Likewise, where once Blicero had faith in the ability of language to help mankind by being "capable of exfoliation and infinite revealing" (*Gravity's Rainbow* 94), he ends up realizing that technology has "worded over" (589) and replaced any possibility of earnest communication with the lifeless "electric voices" of the austere rationalism promoted by the They-system (720). Blicero therefore attempts to try to account for the excluded middle by adopting a bastardized form of illogical negativism emanating as an "electro-mysticism"—what Russell Blackford suggests constitutes a warped "scientific mysticism" ("Physics and Fantasy" 35)—that explores how humans "live lives that are waveforms constantly changing with time, now positive, now negative. Only at moments of great serenity is it possible to find the pure, the informationless state of signal zero" (*Gravity's Rainbow* 404). This type of electro-mysticism as a misguided means to an ineffable truth seeking to account for the "informationless state" between the negative and the positive would later be explored through the practice of computer hacking in *Bleeding Edge*:

You don't learn it from a manual, because there's nothing in print. Features written into the software that you don't find in the manual are meant instead to be passed on in person, [...] The way certain kinds of magical lore go from rogue rabbis to apprentices in kabbalah. If the manual is scripture, phantomware is tutorials are the secret knowledge. And the geeks who promote it—except for one or two little details, like the righteousness, the higher spiritual powers—they're the rabbis (88).

This indeterminate "signal zero"—while unethically pursued by characters like Blicero—can also be viewed as potentially exemplifying the ethical non-position of the excluded middle.

This non-position is further explored by the One/Zero debate between the behavioral psychologist, Edward Pointsman, and the statistician, Roger Mexico. The One/Zero problem arises from Pointsman's pursuit of establishing a "stone determinacy of everything, of every soul" (86) by focusing on a strict, empirically-based methodology of observable behaviors the White Visitation conditions into its subjects such as Slothrop who is placed into a "labyrinth of conditioned-reflex work" (88). For Pointsman, either the subject reacts to the stimuli or not—there is no room for a middle position.¹⁶ He is therefore trapped in "the domain of zero and one" because his strict methodology means he "can only possess the zero and the one. He cannot, like Mexico, survive anyplace in between" (55). McHoul and Wills link the One/Zero problem with logocentrism since "it might be suggested that the threat of reduction to the zero is in fact intrinsic to a logocentric conception which, more than anything else, is permanently in the business of such reductions, constantly resolving difference by appropriation to the singular or exclusion to an opposite other" (*Writing Pynchon* 81).

The One/Zero problem also relates to interpretive binary in communication theory in which data is represented through sequences of ones and zeroes. This is apparent in *The Crying of Lot 49* where Oedipa thinks of herself as "walking among matrices of a great digital computer, the zeroes and ones twinned above, hanging like balance mobiles right and left, ahead, thick, maybe endless" (*Crying Lot* 136). Consequently, Mendelson argues that Oedipa is stuck between "the *zero* of secular triviality and chaos, and the *one* that is the *ganz andere* of the sacred" ("Sacred, Profane" 27). Moreover, this binary thinking is also expressed in *Vineland* when the character, Frenesi, realizes that anarchy is impossible because humanity is subservient to "defining moments only, purely, by the action that filled them [...] a world based on the one and zero of life and death" (71-2).

¹⁶ In fact, Pointsman's surname reflects this either/or impulse because, according to Patrick Hurley's study of the character names encountered throughout Pynchon's oeuvre, *pointzman* historically denoted the occupation of a railroad switch-puller whose role was to control whether trains would take one direction or another down intersecting sets of tracks (*Pynchon Character Names* 123).

Although there is no room for the excluded middle within the reductive worlds of ones and zeroes that Frenesi and Oedipa occupy, the possibility of maintaining such a position between the austere objectivity of a rational order and the ineffability of a second order is explored throughout *Gravity's Rainbow*. As Hite argues, "Pynchon's fictions inhabit the boundless space between the originating One of a postulated primal unity and the terminating Zero that is the end of time: the space of language and the freedom of language to constitute worlds" (*Ideas of Order* 36). Factions marauding throughout the Zone believe cause and effect are simultaneously illusionary and necessary, so they therefore fail to see a distinction between the One and Zero because "there was no difference between the behavior of God and the operations of pure chance" (*Gravity's Rainbow* 324). This lack of a distinction between cause and effect is at odds with how the narrator claims the reader "will want cause and effect. All right" (663), which Herman and van Ewijk argue is paramount for an epistemic understanding of the world because a "human being occupying such a system resides in an egocentric universe in which causality is used to strengthen the structure that is imposed on it" ("Gravity's Encyclopedia" 174).

This causal approach to data, described by Kharpertian as advancing the "sterile determinism of cause-and-effect epistemology" (*Hand to Turn* 110), is met with skepticism by Mexico whose statistical equations account for the non-causal possibility of discontinuity and indeterminacy "*between* zero and one—the middle Pointsman has excluded from his persuasion—the probabilities" (*Gravity's Rainbow* 55). This is because Mexico feels that "cause-and-effect may have been taken as far as it will go. That for science to carry on at all, it must look for a less narrow, a less . . . sterile set of assumptions. The next great breakthrough may come when we have the courage to junk cause-and-effect entirely, and strike off at some other angle" (89). Katje echoes a similar sentiment regarding the excluded middle related to the flight path of the V-2 rocket: "You will come to understand that

between the two points, in the five minutes, *it* lives an entire life. You haven't even learned the data on our side of the flight profile, the visible or trackable. Beyond them there's so much more, so much none of us know..." (208).

Moreover, at one point Pirate Prentice tells Mexico that the type of reductive empiricism championed by Pointsman is incapable of fostering any meaningful conclusions because rather than having "to worry about questions of real or unreal....It's the *system* that matters. How the data arrange themselves inside it. Some are consistent, others fall apart" (638). This view is also apparent in Pynchon's short story "Low-Lands" when the character, Dennis Flange, notices how data inevitably "falls apart" when it is categorized in the age of quantum mechanics:

you and the truth of a true lie were thrown sometime way back into a curious contiguity and as long as you are passive you can remain aware of the truth's extent but the minute you become active you are somehow, if not violating a convention outright, at least screwing up the perspective of things, much as anyone observing subatomic particles change the works, data and odds, by the act of observing (*Slow Learner* 69).

Flange's observation reflects Werner Heisenburg's uncertainty principle which states that when observing subatomic particles, the location and velocity of these particles cannot be known simultaneously. Therefore, as Kharpertian notes, "the perceiver of subatomic events ineluctably alters the perceived by the very act of perception" (*Hand to Turn* 52). The notion that measuring and ordering phenomena can alter them complements Pynchon's view regarding a strict adherence to the either/or framing impulse because, as Eddins contends, "the attempt to textualize the moment of mystical illumination alters the quintessence of that moment [...] That is, the mind immanentizes as it perceives; and the Word, the Text, is one product of this hopelessly delimiting immanentization" (*Gnostic Pynchon* 137).

This preoccupation with the inability to reincorporate the excluded middle is also addressed by various spirits who, perhaps paradoxically, can only communicate these ideas to PSI Section: a division of the White Visitation that seeks to gain strategic psychic intelligence through rational measures. Moore suggests that PSI Section's reductive efforts to understand the Other Order of Being makes the group similar to their Pavlovian counterparts since they are "spiritualistic pointsmen, 'controls' and 'media' men, who seek continuity as cathexes between two discrete 'sides,' this and the Other" (*Style of Connectedness* 93). These "true-believing spiritualists" (92) promote an equally problematic solution to the One/Zero problem. Whereas the positivists conclude that either a proposition can be expressed and logically verified or it is otherwise meaningless, these spiritualists invert this binary in their attempt to prove "another mode of meaning behind the obvious" (*Crying Lot* 137).

For example, in one episode PSI Section communes with the ghost of Walter Rathenau from the Other Order of Being who discusses the consequences of the One/Zero binary embraced by PSI Section since, "All talk of cause and effect is secular history, and secular history is a diversionary tactic" (*Gravity's Rainbow* 167). The spirit of Peter Sachsa also speaks from the Other Side to PSI Section during a séance where he likewise derides the diversionary tactics associated with mankind's attempts to establish meaning and order. Peter expresses an opinion akin to Gaddis's vision of a sublime oneness beyond epistemic differentiation when he rejects the reductive either/or binary in relation to the law of identity by instead adopting a relativistic position where "A could do B [...] A and B are unreal, are names for parts that ought to be inseparable..." (30).

The statement is an allusion to the work of the Russian esotericist, P. D. Ouspensky, who negated Aristotle's law of non-contradiction—one of the early iterations of the principle of excluded middle—which states that propositions cannot be simultaneously true and untrue. Instead, Ouspensky adopts a mystical stance in *Tertium Organum*—a position that some

characters in *Gravity's Rainbow* label as “Ouspenskian nonsense” (30)—by arguing that a given proposition can be simultaneously affirmed and negated. Similar to the non-position of illogical negativism, Ouspensky embraces an ineffable “third mode of thinking” due to how he viewed “the *axioms of higher logic*” as being “merely *attempts* to express the axioms of this logic in concepts. In reality the ideas of higher logic are *inexpressible* in concepts” (*Tertium* 262). By adopting this stance, Peter Sachsa is effectively undermining the notion of a causal, reason-based methodology in favor of an excluded middle position emanating as a “third mode of thinking.”

However, this esoteric indeterminacy and wary approach to causality is lambasted by Pointsman who at one point contemplates:

How can Mexico play, so at his ease, with these symbols of randomness and fright? Innocent as a child, perhaps unaware—perhaps—in his play he wrecks the elegant rooms of history, threatens the idea of cause and effect itself. What if Mexico’s whole generation has turned out like this? Will Postwar be nothing but “events,” newly created one moment to the next? No links? (56).

To Pointsman’s dismay, the desire for causality in the form of a “true mechanical explanation” and a “clear train of linkages” is often subverted throughout the novel (89). One of Pynchon’s favorite techniques for undermining these causal binaries is his symbolic implementation of *hysteron proteron* that, as Weisenburger suggests, “plays event sequences backwards and foregrounds the idea of causality by disrupting it” (“Hysteron Proteron” 87). Rather than embracing an empirical model that strictly adheres to the zero and the one, the hysteron proteron, as Weisenburger suggests, attacks “a rationalist culture whose aim is nothing less than the immachination of all being—an apotheosis of the modern, [...] they are targeted as the naturalizing strategies of a rationalist enterprise that [Pynchon’s] satire seeks to explode” (88-9).

This temporal reversal of cause and effect appears throughout *Gravity's Rainbow*. For example, the affair between Roger Mexico and Jessica Swanlake often involves Jessica having an orgasm “twice before cock was ever officially put inside cunt, and this is important to both of them though neither has figured out why, exactly” (120), the flagship *Arbella* of the Winthrop fleet is described as “sailing backward in formation” (204), a Polish undertaker hopes to get struck by lightning in order to “experience a singular point, a discontinuity in the curve of life [...] Infinite miles per hour changing to the same speed *in reverse*” (663), and the Empty Ones desire a return to an originating “Eternal Center [that] can easily be seen as the Final Zero” (319).

The most important instance of hysteron proteron as a means of subverting the causality of epistemic frameworks is reserved for the V-2 rocket itself. For example, the continuous construction of V-2 rockets by derelict factories within the Zone is described as “a Diaspora running backwards, seeds of exile flying inward in a modest preview of gravitational collapse” (737). But, more importantly, rather than people being subjected to the explosive aftermath of the rocket following it striking its target, the rocket is described as having its “explosion first, and then the sound of the approach” (86), which constitutes a “reversal! A piece of time neatly snipped out” (48). It is therefore fitting that the rocket—the ultimate symbol of the They-system and its adoption of the violent causality of the One/Zero binary—undermines the idea of how “reality is not reversible” because “[e]ach firebloom, followed by blast then by sound of arrival, is a mockery (how can it not be deliberate?) of the reversible process” (139).

This subversion of the One/Zero binary is also apparent regarding Slothrop’s conditioning to Imipolex G found in the V-2 rocket. Slothrop is essentially in the ultra-paradoxical stage of Pavlov’s transmarginal phases in which rather than a “stimulus, strong or weak, call[ing] upon” a proportional response, this stage is “the base of the weakening of the

idea of the opposite” (49) where response and stimuli are effectively reversed. Slothrop’s deconditioning by Jamf results in his erections responding to the absence of Imipolex G, so rather than the explosion of the rocket being a precursor to Slothrop’s erections, he “instead only gets erections when this sequence happens *in reverse*. Explosion first, then the sound of approach: the V-2” (86). Hohmann argues the hysteron proteron related to Slothrop’s “inverted reflex, albeit a ‘paranoid’ behavioral pattern in an individual, becomes for the ‘System’ a defiance of ‘Their’ total control, an anarchic phenomenon ‘They’ cannot allow” (*Conceptual Structure* 70-1). Pointsman is, as a result, forced to acknowledge the limitations of stringently embracing the One/Zero binary:

Not only must we speak of partial or of complete extinction of a conditioned reflex, but we must also realize the extinction can proceed *beyond* the point of reducing a reflex to zero. We cannot therefore judge the degree of extinction *only* by the magnitude of the reflex or its absence, since there can still be a *silent extinction beyond the zero* (*Gravity’s Rainbow* 85).

Slothrop’s non-causal erections, implying an Ouspenskian “third mode” beyond the One/Zero binary, allows him to briefly elude the totalizing impulses of the They-system. This forces the intelligence groups to concede that in regard to Slothrop’s map of sexual encounters—serving as the entire basis for their hypothetical link between the rocket and his erections—“perhaps the colors are only random, uncoded. Perhaps the girls are not even real” (19).

While Slothrop may not be able to completely elude the totalizing either/or determinism of the They-system, he nevertheless attempts to assume an excluded middle position that resists being made present-at-hand. To this end Tyrone Slothrop—a name Hurley suggests is an anagram of “Entropy or Sloth” (*Pynchon Character Names* 146)—comes to embody entropy that the character, Callisto, describes in Pynchon’s short story “Entropy” as “the measure of disorganization for a closed system” that these systems attempt

to reduce “from the least to most probable, from differentiation to sameness, from ordered individuality to a kind of chaos” (*Slow Learner* 55). So just as alterity eludes the ordering impulse of epistemic frameworks to be totalized into sameness, entropy is constantly increasing at the expense of uniformity within a closed system.

This is apparent regarding how Callisto—an advocate of the One/Zero binary who wishes to reduce the chaos of post-war life—attempts to impose order by turning his apartment into the closed system of a greenhouse that prevents heat from dissipating to the outside since it is “[h]ermetically sealed [...] a tiny enclave of regularity in the city's chaos, alien to the vagaries of the weather, of national politics, of any civil disorder” (*Slow Learner* 52). David Seed suggests that by “devoting a story to a scientific concept, and by examining different meanings, Pynchon in effect alerts the reader to the fact that he must pay attention to different ways of ordering” (“Order” 148). Entropy is initially viewed hostilely in the text because of how it inhibits communication and threatens the harmony of the party downstairs from the enclosed apartment. However, by the end of the story Callisto realizes the consequences of actively reducing entropy, so he destroys the windows in order to open the apartment to the disorder of the outside world.

Furthermore, the pitfalls associated with reducing entropy in order to maintain the One/Zero binary is exemplified by Pynchon’s preoccupation with Maxwell’s demon: a thermodynamic thought experiment considering the possibility of sorting molecules and reducing entropy through the use of an infinitely-quick demon in order to create perpetual motion and thus demonstrate that the Second Law of Thermodynamics only has statistical rather than unconditional certainty. The demon appears in *The Crying of Lot 49* when Oedipa meets John Nefastis whose demon contraption “connects the world of thermodynamics to the world of information flow” (*Crying Lot* 72). But just as the novel serves as a Menippean satire of the epistemic impulse to order the world, Moore contends that the Demon:

is equated metaphorically with system-mongering Theys, [...] but eventually, wider “couplings” will open the system, entropy *will* increase, the rocket fall. The Demon meanwhile presides metaphorically over all forms of Their Demonic compulsion to build systematic artifices in ultimate malice toward life (*Style of Connectedness* 177).

As a result, the totalizing either/or impulse of Maxwell’s demon—described in *Gravity’s Rainbow* as “helping to concentrate energy into one favored room of the Creation at the expense of everything else” (412)—can never be comprehensive in scope because an entropic alterity will always elude systematic efforts to be ordered.

Collado-Rodríguez contends that this preoccupation with entropy in Pynchon’s work functions as a significant counterpoint to categorical, dialectical thinking because it puts a “physical end to the happy Newtonian-categorical belief in a clockwise Universe where limits and boundaries are clearly fixed and obey neat universal laws. Chaos [...] is finally going to overcome Order” and therefore the “Aristotelian Law that entraps humans in categorical thinking has now to deal with the opposing effects of another law” (“Historiographic Metafiction” 3). Entropy is thus a fitting metaphor for the excluded middle that Pynchon seeks between what Moore describes as the “quasi-mystical ‘openings-out,’” (*Style of Connectedness* 164) of a transcendent order and “the increasing cloture of the system of men and machines” (168). Consequently, Pynchon attempts to situate his work into the excluded middle by embracing the non-committal, non-position exemplified by an illogical negativist sensibility that refuses to adopt totalizing imperatives which would otherwise reduce the entropic alterity of the magical Other into sameness.

3.6 Concluding Thoughts on Pynchon’s Other Order of Being

As Enzian and Slothrop search throughout the Zone for the holy grail to their respective quests—the sublime truth of the Other Order of Being referred to by Oedipa as

“the central truth itself” (*Crying Lot* 95)—they eventually discover that the possibility of locating a transcendental signified in the form of a “direct, epileptic Word, the cry that might abolish the night” (118) is utterly impossible. While the Zone may resist the totalizing closure of the techno-scientific They-system due to the excessive amount of entropy that cannot be sorted, a transcendent Logos remains unattainable. Unlike the pilgrimage undertaken by John Bunyan’s *Everyman*, there is no divine insight capable of offering deliverance from the They-system at the end of Slothrop’s Progress.

Instead it becomes apparent that despite his best effort to resist totalization and reach the magical Other, Slothrop can never completely elude the One/Zero binary. Consequently, the mysterious V-2 rocket carrying Imipolex G that Slothrop pursues throughout the Zone is the same rocket that will land on the theatre at the end of the novel. The number of the apocalyptic rocket—00000—serves as both an ominous warning of the novel’s imminent termination as well as signifies a quintuple negation of Slothrop’s identity as he is completely absent from the text by the time it lands. So rather than viewing Slothrop as being able to go “beyond the zero” (85) to an excluded point that ruptures the One/Zero binary, his dissolution is in fact firmly situated within the binary as the totalizing One takes the form of Enzian’s construction of a new rocket—the 00001 being “the second in its series” (724) of the “most terribly potential of bombardments” (727)—that will continue the They-system’s control.

But while Slothrop is ultimately unable to transcend this binary, *Gravity’s Rainbow* nevertheless still endeavors to maintain an excluded middle position in order to remain open to alterity. However, rather than the novel adopting an excluded middle position in the form of a purely indifferent stance analogous to what Brian Ingrassia suggests is a “leap of unfaith” by “respond[ing] not with a humbled epistemology but rather with a prideful ontology which denies that the truth itself exists” due to being “[d]enied full access to the central truth itself, to the Word as beginning and end” (“Postmodern Post-Secular?” 64), it is still possible to

foster localized truths from the detritus of the Word. Pynchon's illogical negativism, while avoiding prescriptive claims to unequivocal truth, can still make a moral commitment in its attempt to avoid rationalizing the problem of the Other.

So despite how Slothrop's adventure throughout the Zone is thoroughly nonsensical and outlandish, there are nevertheless poignant calls for responsibility to alterity emanating in the form of the Levinasian face of the Other that supplants the relativism within the Zone. For example, at one point Slothrop engages in total sexual depravity during a hedonistic party with pedophilic undertones aboard the *Anubis* ferry by copulating with Margherita Erdmann's daughter, Bianca. Slothrop describes her as a "knockout, alright: 11 or 12, dark and lovely" (463), and she initially piqued his interest after a burlesque performance where she dressed up as Shirley Temple. During the episode Slothrop, who throughout the novel has been trapped in a totalizing state of apophenic paranoia, is forced to momentarily suspend his egocentric impulses and recognize Bianca's alterity. During intercourse the narrator observes, "He knows. Right here, under the makeup and the fancy underwear, she *exists*, love invisibility....For Slothrop this is some discovery" (470). This awareness—which is wholly absent during his previous sexual conquests where he purportedly "abolish[es] all trace of the sexual Other" (85)—arises because Bianca comes to embody something akin to the unthematizable face-to-face relation in which the Other issues an unconditional command of responsibility that transcends Slothrop's egocentric worldview where all phenomena must somehow relate back to his quest for meaning.

This unconditional call to responsibility present in Bianca's prepubescent face complements Slavoj Žižek's Levinasian reflection about the overwhelming pathos associated with the subject of child pornography:

there is nonetheless something in the image of a hurt, vulnerable child which makes it unbearably touching: the figure of a child, between two and five

years old, deeply wounded but retaining a defiant attitude [...] —is this not one of the figures of the Absolute? [...] This horrified face must be linked to the child's defiant gaze: if ever there was an image that illustrates the Levinasian point about the wound to the face, this is it (*Parallax View* 73).

The “defiant gaze” of Bianca confronts Slothrop with an “Absolute” imperative that he is forced to recognize. However, after leaving Bianca to attend the Potsdam Conference before eventually returning to the *Anubis* as Rocketman, Slothrop discovers that Bianca has been inexplicably lost to the Zone during his absence. Her red, semen-stained frock is all that remains when Slothrop attempts to retrieve her from the ship. The garment, along with the memory of her face, forces Slothrop to confront the consequences of his egocentric impulses as he is constantly reminded of “her lowered face, all but forehead and cheekbone in shadow, turning this way, the lashes now whose lifting you pray for . . . will she see you? a suspension forever at the hinge of doubt, this perpetuate doubting of her love—” (672).

Another example of the Levinasian face as an ethical point of exteriority that offers respite from the relativism of the lawless Zone occurs when Franz Pökler is forced to confront the consequences of his participation in the construction of the V-2 rocket. While working as an engineer, Pökler at one point questions if he is “giving up the world, entering a monastic order?” (402) by abandoning his ethical responsibility to the Other—specifically his daughter, Ilse. Blicero, in an attempt to incentivize Pökler to work harder, had secretly interned Ilse in the Nordhausen-Dora labor camp largely responsible for providing materials for the construction of the V-2 rockets. As a result, Pökler is implicated in what Hannah Arendt would refer to as the banality of evil (*Eichmann* 252) as his work on the rocket comes to embody a different “engineering skill, the gift of Daedalus that allowed him to put as much labyrinth as required between himself and the inconvenience of caring” (428). Like the Borgesian labyrinths that attempt to insulate mankind from the chaos of the world by

totalizing alterity into sameness, Pökler's labyrinth is a way of distancing himself from his responsibility to the Other.

Pökler eventually comes to realize the insidious nature of his role with the Nazis because despite having “known the truth with his senses,” he has instead “allowed all the evidence to be misfiled where it wouldn't upset him. Known everything, but refrained from the only act that could have redeemed him” (428). Pökler's erudition but ultimate inability to use that knowledge to combat the evil around him exemplifies Radhakrishnan's scathing view of the Western epistemic impulse for generating meaning revolving around an “ontology of language” at the expense of alterity, which he feels requires a “re-definition of the process of knowledge” in order to afford “practical possibilities for the emergence of the ‘other’” (“Post-Modern Event” 40). This is evident when Pökler discovers the fate of his daughter in the labor camp and his subsequent guilt regarding how during his time as an engineer he “was not looking for Ilse, or not exactly. He may have felt that he ought to look, finally. He was not prepared. He did not know. Had the data, yes, but did not know, with senses or heart....” (*Gravity's Rainbow* 432). Pökler is then finally forced to confront the atrocities he ignored:

All his vacuums, his labyrinths, had been the other side of this. While he lived, and drew marks on paper, this invisible kingdom had kept on, in the darkness outside [...] He cried some. The walls did not dissolve—no prison wall ever did, not from tears, not at this finding, on every pallet, in every cell, that the faces are ones he knows after all, and holds dear as himself, and cannot, then, let them return to that silence (433).

The cold austerity of positivism leads Pökler to a level of apathy that prevents him from fulfilling the ethical imperative of combatting the banality of evil in defense of the Other. No longer able to rely on his insulating labyrinths, Pökler is forced to acknowledge the faces

around him whose labor Pökler indirectly relied upon in order to manufacture the ultimate apparatus of death. But despite his desire to prevent those faces from “return[ing] to that silence” excluded from the purview of the positivist They-system, Pökler is unable to do anything more than merely give a ring to one of the survivors as a pittance for his actions.

Pynchon’s paranoia towards the epistemic reductionism of the techno-scientific They-ultimately leaves *Gravity’s Rainbow* in a dilemma similar to the one Pökler finds himself in when confronted with the faces of Nordhausen-Dora: both the novel and Pökler openly acknowledge the obfuscation of an excluded alterity, but they are unable to adopt effective countermeasures that prevent the Other’s subjugation. Nevertheless, the non-committal non-position of illogical negativism would serve as an important precursor to David Foster Wallace’s own preoccupation with determinate thought-processes embodied by what he referred to as an “Unbelievably Naïve Positivism” (“Authority and American Usage” 84). Wallace outlined how Pynchon’s paranoia aimed at mankind’s epistemic impulse for meaning and order had a profound effect on his own work:

The only time I’ve ever seen anybody...really show us where a transcendence might lead is Pynchon in *Gravity’s Rainbow*...paranoia is a natural response to solipsism, alright, but Pynchon’s transcendence is, boy, is a lot like Milton’s Satan. You realize the problem and you rally what remains. Damn it, if I’m alone and metaphysical structures are primarily threatening and I am paranoid, then paranoia is a central metaphor, damn it, I’m going to make this as beautifully ordered and complex as I can (“Introduction” xiv).

Wallace shared Pynchon’s anxiety towards reductive epistemic frameworks, and Pynchon’s form of transcendence as a means of assuaging the pitfalls of egocentrism complements Wallace’s own philosophical perspective on the matter. However, in the same interview Wallace discussed what he viewed as a significant limitation to Pynchon’s work: “I’ve lost a

lot of my interest in Pynchon because it seems to me that there's a different way to transcend it. That instead of a satanic way of transcending it, there's an angelic way of transcending it for me—again I can't articulate about this" (xv). This statement outlines a desire to transcend solipsism in a way that is more conclusive than Pynchon's paralytic indecisiveness.

Despite Wallace's inability to "articulate about this" form of transcendence, it will become apparent in the following chapter that Wallace—unlike Gaddis and Pynchon—still believes it is possible to respect the ineffable while maintaining a faith in the power of language. As Raese contends, while "Wallace's *Infinite Jest* similarly seeks to destabilize hierarchical structures of order," instead of merely "simply rejecting the dominant discourse or rationality, Wallace must contend with both an authoritative discourse (the same Enlightened rationality that Pynchon identifies) and the counter-discourse of postmodernism espoused by Pynchon and others" ("Contemporary Encyclopedic Novel" 152). So whereas Pynchon laid the groundwork for pursuing an excluded middle position in favor of the Other Order of Being, it will now be argued that Wallace's notion of the "cohesion-renewing Other" (*Infinite Jest* 384) essentially serves as a metaphor for the renewed cohesion he attempts to foster between analytic and continental modes of thought within *Infinite Jest*.

Accordingly, Wallace's fidelity to language is akin to Rorty's notion of a post-positivist neopragmatism that recognizes "where there are no sentences there is no truth, that sentences are elements of human language, and that human languages are human creations" (*Contingency* 5). Therefore, as Cornel West describes, "the validation of knowledge claims rests on practical judgments constituted by, and constructed in, dynamic social practices" ("Limits of Neopragmatism" 183). These dynamic communal practices are, according to Elizabeth Freudenthal, channeled by Wallace into his depiction of "a world in which people are most able to cope with their world when they view themselves as dynamic objects in relationships to other people and objects" ("Anti-Interiority" 204). Wallace promotes these

dynamic relationships to avoid succumbing to what he referred to as “natural default setting of being uniquely, completely, imperially alone, day in and day out” (“This is Water” 60)—a pervasive sense of solipsistic insularity leading to an egocentric worldview where everybody is “identical in their secret unspoken belief that way deep down they are different from everyone else” (*Infinite Jest* 205) at the expense of maintaining a responsibility to the Other.

To help mitigate the consequences associated with this totalizing “unspoken belief,” Wallace’s neopragmatic stance offers a way of renewing cohesion between the metaphysics of presence and an alterity belonging to the ineffable Other Order of Being that cannot be codified within epistemic frameworks. This aim complements what Wallace referred to in his review of H.L. Hix’s *Morte d’Author: An Autopsy* (1992) as a “modern commissure where Continental theory and analytic practice fuse” by combining “Derridean metaphysics that rejects assumptions of unified causal presence and a Wittgensteinian analytic method of treating actual habits of discourse as a touchstone for figuring out what certain terms really mean and do” (“Greatly Exaggerated” 140). While it is impossible to thematize an infinite alterity without totalizing it, Wallace’s civically-driven goal of establishing the epistemic conditions necessary for generating a cohesive neopragmatic network predicated on the Other essentially becomes the jest of the infinite within *Infinite Jest*.

Chapter Four:

The Jest of the Infinite:

Neopragmatism and the “Cohesion-Renewing Other” in David Foster Wallace’s *Infinite Jest*

“My whole tendency and, I believe, the tendency of all men who ever tried to write or talk Ethics or Religion, was to run against the boundaries of language.”

—Ludwig Wittgenstein, “A Lecture on Ethics”

“An honest religious thinker is like a tightrope walker. He almost looks as though he were walking on nothing but air. His support is the slenderest imaginable. And yet it really is possible to walk on it.”

—Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Culture and Value*

4.1 David Foster Wallace’s Affinity for Infinity

Wallace’s biographer, D.T. Max, notes that Wallace grew up as an academically-precocious child benefiting from being the son of two academics: his father is Emeritus Professor of Moral Philosophy at the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign specializing in American Pragmatism; his mother is a lexical expert and former English professor (*Every Love Story* 1). Wallace was encouraged at a young age to develop a fascination with words and what they signify. A self-described “SNOOT (Syntax Nudniks of Our Time)” (“Authority and American Usage” 69), he once wrote about his views of language and its communal usage in a letter to his pen pal, Don DeLillo: “Issues of usage, looked at closely even for a moment become issues of Everything—from neurology to politics to Aristotelian *pisteis* to Jaussian *Kritik* to stuff like etiquette and clothing fashions” (*Every Love Story* 250). When Wallace entered university as an undergraduate student at Amherst College he followed in his parents’ footsteps by double majoring in English Literature and philosophy with an emphasis in modal logic and mathematics (25).

At Amherst Wallace earned *summa cum laude* honors for his philosophy thesis entitled “Richard Taylor’s ‘Fatalism’ and the Semantics of Physical Modality” that refuted the semantic validity of Taylor’s proof of logical fatalism: the belief that actions have no effect on the future but rather the future determines the present (40). The thesis would later be posthumously published as *Fate, Time, and Language: An Essay on Free Will* (2010). While Wallace was writing his thesis he began to develop a serious academic interest about the

nature of language and the importance of verifiable and unambiguous statements promoted by philosophers such as the logical positivists. For example, in the introduction to *Fate, Time, and Language* James Ryerson notes how Wallace became deeply intrigued by Wittgenstein's view in the *Tractatus* about the importance of developing a language that could accurately mirror reality ("Introduction" 18).¹⁷

Wallace was also fascinated by Wittgenstein's lifelong interest in ethics and religion despite how Wittgenstein considered them nonsensical and therefore non-articulable in a positivist sense. He eventually came to recognize the limitations of logical positivism that Ryerson contends was replaced by "the meaning-as-use account of language in the *Investigations*, which toppled the account of language that Wittgenstein had provided in the *Tractatus*, [and] also threatened the sort of formal semantics" (18) Wallace had adopted in his thesis. Wallace would more explicitly articulate the problematic nature of logical positivism regarding its assumption of how the "only utterances that made any sense at all were the well-formed data-transferring propositions of science" while devaluing "ethics or aesthetics or normative prescription" as being merely "a confused mishmash of scientific observation & emotive utterance" ("Empty Plenum" 228-29). So despite having a predilection for analytic philosophy, Wallace—like Wittgenstein—was deeply preoccupied with aesthetic, ethical, and spiritual matters that were essentially incompatible with formal logic. This concern informs why Wallace was drawn to Wittgenstein's notion of communal language-games in *Philosophical Investigations*, which Wallace described in an interview:

Wittgenstein argues that for language even to be possible, it must always be a function of relationships between persons (that's why he spends so much time arguing against the possibility of a "private language"). So he makes language

¹⁷ Perhaps counterintuitively, Wallace would echo this sentiment in the title of his short story, "Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature" (1998) borrowing its name from Rorty's seminal neopragmatic work that effectively combines analytic and continental philosophical elements in order to discredit logical positivism.

dependent on human community, but unfortunately we're still stuck with the idea that there is this world of referents out there that we can never really join or know because we're stuck in here, in language, even if we're at least all in here together ("Expanded Interview" 44).

Wallace rejected the positivist notion of unequivocal meaning by claiming how "it's now pretty much universally accepted that (a) meaning is inseparable from some act of interpretation and (b) an act of interpretation is always somewhat biased, i.e., informed by the interpreter's particular ideology" ("Authority and American Usage" 86). Accordingly, Wallace began developing a of language that rejected the correspondence theory of truth—an idea also dismissed by Gaddis and Pynchon that Wallace believed constituted "the loss of the whole external world to language" because it entails that "we can know and speak of nothing more than little mimetic pictures. Which divides us, metaphysically and forever, from the external world" ("Expanded Interview" 44)—while also recognizing the contingency of language on communal use in the form of language-games.

Nevertheless, Wallace was also wary of his writing becoming too metaphysical because, as Max argues, it encouraged forms of abstract thought—such as self-reflexive thinking—that like the paralytic paranoia throughout Pynchon's oeuvre, could lead to a form of "paralysis, the a.p.-s's (adolescent pot smoker's) solipsism he always feared" (*Every Love Story* 262). Freudenthal suggests this type of thinking is typified by "self-conscious rationalization and ratiocination, and paralyzing reflexivity" ("Anti-Interiority" 202). Wallace outlined the epistemological reasons for mankind's aversion to abstract thought:

It is a total myth that man is by nature curious and truth-hungry, and wants, about all things to *know*. Given a certain recognized sense of "to know," there is in fact a great deal of stuff that we do *not* want to know. Evidence for this is the enormous number of very basic questions and issues we do not like to

think about abstractly, [...] The dreads and dangers of abstract thinking are a big reason why we now all like to stay so busy and bombarded with stimuli all the time. Abstract thinking tends most often to strike during moments of quiet repose (*Everything and More* 12-13).

The unyielding epistemic pursuit to understand the world leads to an abstraction-induced solipsism because, as Wallace claimed, the job “to recall, choose, arrange: to impose order & only so communicate meaning is marvelously synecdochic of the life of the solipsist, of the survival strategies apposite one’s existence as monad in a world of diffracted fact” (“Empty Plenum” 226). This type of thinking comes at the expense of what Wallace described is an ethical imperative embodied in “the very old traditional human verities that have to do with spirituality and emotion and community” (*Le Conversazioni*). Consequently, Ryerson contends that to read Wallace’s:

acutely self-conscious, dialectically fevered writing was often to witness the agony of cognition: how the twists and turns of thought can hold out the promise of true understanding yet also become a danger to it. [...] It was a defining tension: the very conceptual tools with which he pursued life’s most desperate questions threatened to keep him forever at a distance from the connections he struggled to make (“Introduction” 8).

Wallace therefore attempted to assuage the solipsistic pitfalls associated with this cognitive impulse by embracing the notion of language-games advanced in Wittgenstein’s *Philosophical Investigations*, which Wallace described as “the single most comprehensive and beautiful argument against solipsism that’s ever been made” (“Expanded Interview” 44). Wallace was drawn to Wittgenstein’s notion of how man’s understanding of the world was “a function of relationships between persons” and “dependent on human community” (44)—essentially language-games necessitating the role of an Other. Echoing Gaddis’s call for

culling the egocentric impulses of the “disproportionate I” as well as Pynchon’s concern with how apophenic paranoia can foster a totalizing worldview at the expense of the magical Other, Wallace embraced communal language-games as a remedy for the solipsistic nature of self-reflexive thinking shut-in by language. It will therefore be argued that this neopragmatic approach is the basis for Wallace’s ethical communion with the “cohesion-renewing Other” (*Infinite Jest* 384) in his work.

Wallace’s affinity for neopragmatism also developed from his working knowledge of continental approaches to language. He claimed in an interview with David Lipsky that there was “four thousand pages of continental philosophy and lit theory in my head” (*Although Of Course* 35). This knowledge is showcased in his creative writing thesis that would later become his first novel, *The Broom of the System* (1987). Wallace once claimed in an interview with Larry McCaffery that *The Broom of the System* should be read “as the sensitive tale of a sensitive young WASP who’s just had this mid-life crisis that’s moved him from coldly cerebral analytic math to a coldly cerebral take on fiction and Austin-Wittgenstein-Derridean literary theory” (“Expanded Interview” 41). The inclusion of Wittgenstein and Derrida in this statement—titans of analytic and continental philosophy respectively—helps prefigure the neopragmatic approach to language that Wallace would later adopt in *Infinite Jest* where, as Samuel Cohen and Lee Konstantinou contend, he “grappled with a neopragmatist and quasi-deconstructionist sense that we might be nothing more than discourse or pretense or irony, all the way down” (“Introduction” xvii).

This “neopragmatist and quasi-deconstructionist sense” present in *The Broom of the System*—influenced by the philosophy of Derrida, Heidegger, and Wittgenstein—is noticeably Levinasian elements as well. For example, in a gag depicting the totalization of the Other by the self, the character Norman Bombardini is left by his wife due to his incredible obesity. He then joins Weight Watchers that “holds as a descriptive axiom the transparently

true fact that for each of us the universe is deeply and sharply and completely divided into for example in my case, me, on one side, and everything else, on the other. This for each of us exhaustively defines the whole universe. Self and Other” (101). Norman fears “an empty, rattling personal universe” (102), and Weight Watchers tries to alleviate this fear by encouraging “their allies” to “systematically decrease the self-component of the universe, so that the great Other-set will be physically attracted to the now more physically attractive Self, and rush in to fill the void caused by that diminution of Self” (102). However, Norman breaks down and takes an unethical approach to filling his personal universe. As a satirical response to Wittgenstein’s axiom, “I am my world,” he plans to literally grow “infinite in size” (103) to the point of enveloping the Other.

In another episode an eccentric therapist warns the protagonist, Lenore Beadsman, that Lenore’s boyfriend is attempting to totalize her autonomy when he claims, “Why do you think he’s so possessive? He want you *in* him. He wants to trap you behind the membrane with him. He knows he can never validly permeate the membrane of an Other, so he desires to bring that Other into him, for all time. He’s a sick man” (377). While satirical, these examples nevertheless reveal Wallace’s legitimate concern about solipsistic impulses at the expense of the Other.

The Broom of the System therefore serves as an important precursor to the dialectical treatment of totality and infinity in Wallace’s nearly 1,100-page magnum opus, *Infinite Jest*: a vast and discursive novel taking place in a satirical, overly-commodified future version of North America. Ryerson observes how like his “forebears Thomas Pynchon and William Gaddis, Wallace wrote big, brainy novels that were encyclopedically packed with information and animated by arcane ideas” that “tackled a daunting range of highbrow topics, including lexicography, poststructuralist literary theory, [...] science, ethics, and epistemology” (“Introduction” 8).

The novel contains a wide variety of plots and sub-plots including drug-addiction, entertainment, game theory, sports, supernatural encounters, and terrorism. In the novel America, Canada, and Mexico have united to form the Organization of North American Nations (O.N.A.N.), which is revealed to be a ploy by the US president, Johnny Gentle, as a way of forcing Canada to accept US territory in the northeast filled with hazardous waste generated by rampant American consumerism. This territory becomes known as the Great Concavity in America and Great Convexity in Canada. Various anti-O.N.A.N. insurgent groups, such as the Quebecois *Les Assassins en Fauteuils Roulants* (A.F.R.), constantly threaten to destabilize O.N.A.N.

The episodes are primarily set in Allston, Massachusetts taking place between the fictional Enfield Tennis Academy (E.T.A.) and Enfield Drug and Alcohol Recovery House. E.T.A. is a hilltop tennis academy for promising young tennis players established by the late James Orin Incandenza, an optics expert credited with discovering *annular fission* who commits suicide by placing his head inside of a microwave. He was also an “après-garde” and “anticonfluential” auteur—a fictional aesthetic movement in *Infinite Jest* “characterized by a stubborn and possibly intentionally irritating refusal of different narrative lines to merge into any kind of meaningful confluence” (n.61: 996)—who produced the notorious Entertainment that causes viewers to go insane by being lulled into a trance-like, solipsistic state of pure bliss that eventually leads to their deaths. After James’s suicide his adulterous wife, Avril—a pedantic grammarian with an obsessive-compulsive disorder perhaps based on Wallace’s own mother—takes over as headmistress of the academy.

The eldest Incandenza child, Orin, is a professional American football punter and serial womanizer who is estranged from his family. The middle child, Mario, is physically deformed as well as mentally impaired, and his inability to be anything but sincere in social situations is constantly at odds with an ironic sensibility maintained by other characters.

Mario also aspires to be a film auteur like his father. The youngest child, Hal, is one of the two protagonists of *Infinite Jest*. Paralleling Wallace's own childhood, Hal is a tennis and lexical prodigy. But despite his extensive vocabulary and academic precociousness, Hal lacks the ability to sincerely communicate with those around him due to his anhedonia. Drug use becomes a way for him to deal with the social alienation he experiences, but this leads to an abstract, solipsistic mode of thought that deeply preoccupies Wallace. The specter of James, in homage to the ghost of Hamlet's father, reveals at the end of the novel that he made The Entertainment to be able to reach out to Hal and liberate him from his debilitating egocentric insularity. The other protagonist is Don Gately: a counselor-in-residence at a halfway-house for drug addicts. Gately's struggle to overcome his various chemical dependences forces him to eventually cross paths with Hal who is also trying to overcome his own addiction. The tennis academy and halfway house therefore emerge as dual aspects of the American Dream: E.T.A. promotes the pursuit of fame and success for their athletes while Enfield House rehabilitates individuals left broken from their excessive self-indulgence.

Before exploring how Wallace attempts to account for the cohesion-renewing Other that eludes conceptualization but is nevertheless a necessary participant in communal language-games within his work, it is pertinent to understand how Wallace's view of the concept of infinity itself—a notion he considers to be “one of the most breathtaking problems in human consciousness” (*Every Love Story* 274)—informs his attitude towards an infinite alterity. To this end Wallace wrote a historical and mathematical study of infinity titled *Everything and More: A Compact History of Infinity* (2002). The book is Wallace's attempt to explore infinity as an “ontology of abstraction” through Cantor's set theories (*Everything and More* 33), and it serves as an invaluable synopsis of Wallace's philosophical perspective regarding the nature of infinity. Wallace begins *Everything and More* by addressing the tenuous existence of abstractions:

In what way can we say a unicorn exists that is fundamentally different, less real, than the way abstractions like humanity or horn or integer exist? Which is once again the question: In what way do abstract entities exist, or do they exist at all except as ideas in human minds—i.e., are they metaphysical fictions?

[...] what is the ontological status of mathematical entities and relations? (20).

In a notion complementing Levinas's call for rupturing epistemic closure in order to gain an idea of the infinite, Wallace suggests that mathematics promotes a form of abstract thinking that, while at times disconcerting, helps individuals better conceptualize what would otherwise be utterly incomprehensible. This is because mathematics for Wallace allows man to “encounter one of the average human mind's weirdest attributes. This is the ability to conceive of things that we cannot, strictly speaking, conceive of” (*Everything and More* 22).

Wallace was also fascinated by the relationship between infinity and limits. On the one hand infinity is essentially non-definable because it is “not only endless and inexhaustible but formless, lacking all boundaries and distinctions and specific qualities. Sort of the Void, except what it's primarily devoid of is form” (44). On the other hand, Wallace recognized the Aristotelian notion of potential infinity with regard to non-terminating processes that are nevertheless finite at any specific time. Zeno's Paradoxes—such as the arrow that can never hit its target because it must first reach an infinite number of points between the archer and the target, which would be thematically explored in Wallace's novella, *Westward the Course of Empire Takes Its Way* (1989)—offer examples of potential infinity. The paradoxes are the products of a vicious infinite regress where an endless number of propositions must be completed before achieving a given goal—a regress similar to the self-reflexive, abstract thinking Wallace feared led to solipsism.

Nevertheless, mathematicians such as Cantor and Weierstrass used the convergence of an infinite series to solve the problem of a vicious infinite regress by demonstrating—in a

similar manner to Wallace's takedown of Richard Taylor's fatalism—that the paradoxes amount to nothing more than semantic problems (*Everything and More* 195). Wallace then used Cantor's diagonal argument for the existence of uncountable, infinite sets to illustrate how “infinite sets can be understood and manipulated, truly *handled* by the human intellect. [...] So one thing to appreciate up front is that, however abstract infinite systems are, after Cantor they are most definitely *not* abstract in the nonreal/unreal way that unicorns are” (205).¹⁸ This abstract, yet not necessarily incomprehensible nature of infinity serves as an important philosophical notion underpinning Wallace's work.

More importantly, the contrasting ideas of infinity as a formless void and infinity as having the semblance of form in a finite system is wholly relevant to the Other. Wallace's view of infinity complements Guenther's suggestion that the Other “is neither an identifiable individual nor an abstract universal, but rather an irreducibly singular Other who overflows his or her own phenomenal appearance, and breaks with every representational schema without thereby dissolving into nothingness” (“Nameless Singularity” 168). Nevertheless, Wallace understood the impossibility of rupturing this “representational schema” in his work since, as Ryerson claims, “all language and thought take place inside some language game or other, there is no transcendent, non-language-game standpoint from which you can step back” (“Introduction” 24). Accordingly, Roberto Natalini argues that one of the central epistemological quandaries in *Infinite Jest* relates to this need “to escape the vicious circle of infinite regress to reach a more stable knowledge” by solving the “infinite circularity of word problems” (“Mathematics of Infinity” 44). But unlike how Gaddis and Pynchon attempt to resist the totalizing metaphysics of presence in favor of an ineffable alterity, Wallace accepts that true transcendence from language is impossible and therefore, as Derrida claims, it

¹⁸ Wallace's character, James Incandenza, also held Cantor in high regard “whose 1905-ish Diagonal Proof demonstrated that there can be an infinity of things between any two things no matter how close together the two things are, D. Proof seriously informed Dr. James Incandenza's sense of the transstatistical aesthetics of serious tennis” (*Infinite Jest* n.35: 994).

becomes “necessary to state infinity’s excess over totality in the language of totality; [...] to state the other in the language of the Same” (“Violence/Metaphysics” 112).

Wallace’s neopragmatic approach to the Other can be thus best envisioned by what Marshall Boswell suggests is the “conceiving of the self/Other dynamic as an inside/outside dialectic [that] links the science of open and closed systems to the themes of identity, community, and signification” (*Understanding Wallace* 51). This conceptualization of the self/Other dichotomy as an inside/outside dialectic is articulated at one point in *The Broom of the System* by the psychologist, Dr. Curtis Jay. In the novel Dr. Jay explores this dialectic through his “membrane theory”—a model reminiscent of Lazlo Jamf’s unethical predilection for the ionic over the covalent bond in *Gravity’s Rainbow*—that demarcates the boundary between the self and the Other:

Self and Other. Difference. Inside-Outside. [...] The heat is the Outside. It’s getting in, because the Inside’s *broken*. The Inside doesn’t keep the distinction going. [...] It coats the Self with Other. It pokes at the membrane. And if the membrane is what makes you you and the not-you not you, what does that say about you, when the not-you begins to poke through the membrane? (154).

The negotiation of this boundary is also thematically explored in *Infinite Jest* where Hal and Gately exemplify the interior/exterior dialectic between selfhood and Otherness. The first episode of the text, functioning proleptically as the chronologically final episode of the narrative, depicts a psychologically-fractured and socially-alienated Hal claiming how despite his inability to communicate with other characters, he is in fact “in here” (3). Hal’s extreme alienation recalls Wallace’s review of David Markson’s *Wittgenstein’s Mistress* where Wallace cites the passage, “If I exist, nothing exists outside me, But if something exists outside me, I do not exist,” as being “a marvelous inversion of the *Cogito & Ontological Argument*” (“Empty Plenum” 239).

The final episode of the text depicts Gately lying on a beach in what is likely either a drug-induced coma or near-death hallucination, which ends with the words, “And when he came back to, he was flat on his back on the beach in the freezing sand, and it was raining out of a low sky, and the tide was *way out*” (981; italicized for emphasis). These two contrasting spatial orientations complement the negotiation between what can be *in here*—that is, within the egocentric confines constituting the totality of the self—against what is *way out* and eludes codification. Wallace therefore attempts to pinpoint a *way out* of solipsism and the closure of epistemic frameworks that leave characters trapped *in here*: a state of totalizing sameness cut off from the Other.

Consequently, Natalini argues Wallace pursues a form of hybrid closure in *Infinite Jest* between the *in here* of totality and *way out* of infinity by re-conceptualizing these boundaries through the notion of potential infinity: “To overcome this kind of paralysis, Wallace looks toward the other kind of mathematical infinity—with limits, convergence, asymptotes, and so on—to go beyond our standard boundaries” (“Mathematics of Infinity” 48). The notion of an immanent transgression of these theoretical boundaries can be identified in the diverging perspectives between tennis coach, Gerhardt Schtitt, and Quebecois terrorist, Remy Marathe, regarding the epistemological boundaries between totality and infinity. Echoing Wallace’s fascination with the notion of potential infinity, Schtitt views tennis as driven by the need to negotiate the limits of selfhood:

Cantorian and beautiful because *infoliating*, *contained*, this diagnate infinity of infinities of choice and execution, mathematically uncontrolled but humanly *contained*, bounded by the talent and imagination of self and opponent, bent in on itself by the containing boundaries of skill and imagination that brought one player finally down, that kept both from willing, that made it, finally, a game, these boundaries of the self (82).

The boundaries of the tennis court can be negotiated by what Schtitt advocates as an “infinite expansion inward” (83) because he believes that tennis is not “reducible to delimited factors” but instead possesses a “*not-order* [...] the place where things broke down, fragmented into beauty” (81). This fascination with the notion of the bound plane is partially owed to Edwin Abbot’s *Flatland: A Romance of Many Dimensions* (1884), which imagines a world only consisting of two dimensions: length and breadth. The novel is “inescapable-at-E.T.A.” since it is required reading for many of the courses (281-82). Wallace later explained in an interview that the idea of the bound plane in *Infinite Jest* explores the “movement within limits and whether you can puncture the limits or not” (“Wallace Winces” 71). But rather than rupturing these boundaries, Schtitt suggests that the tennis player must learn how to cultivate an infinite experience within them:

The true opponent, the enfolding boundary, is the player himself. Always and only the self out there, on court, to be met, fought, brought to the table to hammer out terms. The competing boy on the net’s other side: he is not the foe: he is more the partner in the dance. He is the what is the word *excuse* or *occasion* for meeting the self. [...] Tennis’s beauty’s infinite roots are self-competitive. You compete with your own limits to transcend the self in imagination and execution. Disappear inside the game (84).

Schtitt’s focus on the “transcendence of self” as a form of “self-forgetting” (635)—like Levinas’s ethical imperative of rejecting egocentrism in favor of alterity, Wyatt’s ethical imperative of culling the “disproportionate I”, and the Zone-Hereros “Doctrine of the Zero”—promotes the endeavor to negotiate the boundaries of totality by embracing the potential infinity emanating within them.

Schtitt later argues that tennis offers the opportunity for an ethical encounter with the Other:

Nets and fences can be mirrors. And between the nets and fences, opponents are also mirrors. This is why the whole thing is scary. This is why all opponents are scary and weaker opponents are especially scary. See yourself in your opponents. They will bring you to understand the Game. To accept the fact that the Game is about managed fear. That its object is to send from yourself what you hope will not return. This is your body, they want you to know. You will have it with you always (176).

Recalling the Lacanian mirror stage, “The Game” represents the opportunity to recognize one’s sense of selfhood through the image of the Other. Schtitt’s imperative of recognizing “yourself in your opponents” and “send[ing] from yourself what you hope will not return” also complements Levinas’s notion of the self’s non-reciprocal responsibility to the Other.

Schtitt’s endeavor to negotiate the boundaries of the self through potential infinity is juxtaposed against Marathe’s position of rupturing these solipsistic boundaries altogether. In a lengthy philosophical discussion with O.N.A.N. field operative Hugh Steeply, Marathe discusses the need to transcend one’s egocentric impulses:

Our attachments are our temple, what we worship, no? What we give ourselves to, what we invest with faith [...] Choose your temple of fanaticism with great care [...] Love of a woman, the sexual, it bends back in on the self, makes you narrow, maybe crazy. Choose with care. Love of your nation, your country and people, it enlarges the heart. Something bigger than the self (107).

Marathe’s call for transcending these insular temples—similar to Pynchon’s apophenic labyrinths—complements the Levinasian notion of *excendance* described by Gibson as the “spontaneous *and immediate* desire to escape the limits of the self, a desire generated as those limits are experienced in their narrowness, even their sheer absurdity. [...] Evasion is the ethical impulse towards or openness to the other that effects a release from the confines of the

self” (*Leavis to Levinas* 37). Burn suggests Wallace felt it imperative to pursue excedance from these solipsistic, self-imposed temples because “emerging out of the pursuit of pleasure is a logic of self-interest that denies the existence of the Other” (*Reader’s Guide* 11).

Wallace more explicitly expressed the pitfalls of this logic of self-interest during his commencement speech at Kenyon College in 2005 where he emphasized the importance of avoiding instances of being “unconscious, a slave to your head and to your natural default-setting of being uniquely, completely, imperially alone” (“This is Water” 60). He suggested that the pursuit of fulfilling one’s desires is symptomatic of a “natural default-setting” that is a “hard-wired” setting of egocentrism (3). Wallace thus advocates for an excedance from the self’s natural default-setting in order for an ethical encounter with the Other to be possible. So while Marathe’s call for rupturing these solipsistic, self-imposed boundaries is opposed to Schtitt’s call for self-erasure by embracing the potential infinity within said boundaries, both positions attempt to negotiate the divide between the Other and the self.

With the Marathe-Schtitt debate in mind, it will now be examined how Wallace’s conceptualization of this interior-exterior dialectic is also relevant to the epistemic foundation of his novel. Wallace’s recognition of the necessity of language to make sense of the world combined with his preoccupation regarding the potential for language to advance a logic of self-interest at the expense of alterity is fully apparent in the way he treats the cataloging of information within *Infinite Jest*. If cataloging is viewed as an act that buttresses epistemic frameworks by providing a point of reference for the self through the ordering of disparate data, then cataloging is susceptible to the same weaknesses Derrida felt were inherent in all epistemic structures attempting “to feign coherence only by excluding and forgetting that which it cannot assimilate, the absolute indigestible, that which is ‘other’ to it” (*Glas* 151). Since alterity eludes codification within these systems, Derrida argues that it can therefore only emanate as blind spots within them:

I could not possibly speak of the Other, make of the Other a theme, pronounce the Other as object, in the accusative [...] but for the Other not to be overlooked, He must present himself as absence, and must appear as nonphenomenal. Always behind its signs and its works, always within its secret interior, and forever discreet, interrupting all historical totalities (“Violence/Metaphysics” 103).

Similarly, Levinas views alterity as being fundamentally incompatible with the practice of cataloging that strives to make data present-at-hand because “alterity occurs as a divergency and a past which no memory could resurrect as a present, [...] a past that has never been present” (“Enigma and Phenomenon” 1134). Likewise, Wallace was skeptical of cataloging because he realized, as Burn suggests, the impossibility of ordering “a totality of human data, empathy, and moral honesty” in his work, which spurred his “metaphysical ache for some kind of meaningful knowledge that lies beyond mortal beings” that is otherwise incapable of being made present-at-hand (*Reader’s Guide* 9). He therefore situates cataloging as a symbolic practice of the unethical said to highlight the incomprehensiveness of his novel by hinting at an ethical excess that cannot be codified through, as David Hering notes, a “deliberate obfuscation of straight answers to the principle enigmas of the novel,” which “reminds the reader that they are regarding a schema characterized as much by absence as by presence” (“Choices and Chases” 91).

It will therefore be revealed how both the literal and figurative gaps exposed through Wallace’s cataloging come to function as the ethical basis for fostering traces of the Other that serve as an ethical release from the bondage of a solipsistic logic of self-interest in *Infinite Jest*. Wallace’s negotiation of epistemic closure through cataloging will now be analyzed to reveal how—in a manner complementing the title of his series of short stories, “Yet Another Example of the Porousness of Certain Borders” from *Brief Interviews with*

Hideous Men (1999)—his novel attempts to open itself up to these traces of alterity by both structurally and symbolically dismantling the boundary between the totality of self-sameness and the infinity of an ineffable alterity.

4.2 The Porousness of Epistemic Closure

Prior to *Infinite Jest*, Wallace had already expressed his wariness towards the totalizing potential of language in *The Broom of the System*. In a moment of clarity, Lenore eventually realizes while working as a phone operator that language is isolating because it not only inadequately represents the referents it attempts to name but also alienates people from one another. The practical joker, Michael Pemulis, would also use the symbol of the phone to highlight the isolating nature of signification in *Infinite Jest* through the recursive message he leaves on his answering machine: “This is Mike Pemulis’s answering machine’s answering machine; Mike Pemulis’s answering machine regrets being unavailable to take a first-order order message for Mike Pemulis, but if you’ll leave a second-order message...” (854). While comical, Boswell contends that these examples showcase a sense of existential alienation arising from the fact that “whenever the characters invest meaning in things—that is, in referents rather than in the interactive production of functional signification—they inevitably succumb to loneliness and solipsism” (*Understanding Wallace* 40). Moreover, Lenore experiences the tragic realization that life only amounts to what can be said about it—i.e. cataloged—but that “any telling automatically becomes a kind of system that controls everybody involved. [...] Every telling creates and limits and defines” (*Broom of the System* 138). This sentiment complements Pynchon’s paranoia towards the positivist They-system, but unlike Pynchon’s illogical negativism that attempts to evade such control, Lenore concedes that her existence is contingent on the same epistemic framework that totalizes her.

In a similar manner to the treatment of cataloging in *The Broom of the System*, Burn suggests *Infinite Jest* satirizes its attempts at cataloging by “dramatiz[ing] the accumulation

of information” in order to show how instances of cataloging “prove empty and futile exercises” (*Reader’s Guide* 28). Wallace’s dramatization of this perceived futility associated with cataloging helps undermine the comprehensiveness of his enormous novel, referred to by Ryan Mullins as an example of “Theory of Everything” fiction, because while “most TOE novels explore the effect and possibility of the mythological and metaphysical impulse of totalization, *Infinite Jest* [...] shows the impossibility of TOEs. TOE novels are expansive in reach and seek to capture reality’s infinite complexity within a particular model” (“Theories of Everything” 239). Accordingly, Wallace’s use of cataloging lampoons this impulse to “capture reality’s infinite complexity within a particular model” in favor of an alterity that eludes representation. Thus, as Burn argues, Wallace attempts “to break the closed circle and direct the reader outside the book, to find what has escaped the encyclopedia” (*Reader’s Guide* 29). However, Wallace’s inability to abandon the necessity of having to use language in order to convey meaning—like Lenore Beadman’s inability to avoid participating in the totalizing systems of signification that shape her sense of selfhood—helps emphasize why he strives to renew cohesion between the saying and the said in *Infinite Jest*.

One of the most noteworthy aspects of the narrative structure in *Infinite Jest* is the surfeit of endnotes in the text. While ostensibly functioning as a means of sorting the staggering amount of disparate data into a cohesive referencing system, Wallace uses these endnotes as a way of challenging the notion of epistemic closure by elaborating on aspects of the text while also self-reflexively questioning the validity of such a methodology. Many of the 388 endnotes in *Infinite Jest* function as a way of subverting the comprehensiveness of its epistemic framework by, as Boswell suggests, “calling attention to the world *outside* the novel” (*Understanding Wallace* 125).

In a television interview with Charlie Rose in 1997, Wallace defended his use of what some critics felt was a superfluous number of endnotes by arguing they were implemented for

“certain structural reasons” that not only helped clarify aspects of the novel but also disrupted the linearity of the narrative. Wallace found that linear narratives were fundamentally at odds with reality because, as he went on to elaborate to Rose, it “is fractured right now, at least the reality that I live in. Then the difficulty about writing about that reality is that text is very linear, and it is very unified. You - I, anyway, am constantly on the lookout for ways to fracture the text that aren’t totally disorienting” (“Interview with Wallace”). In a letter written in 1994 to his editor, Michael Pietsch, Wallace claimed that aside from fracturing linearity the endnotes were also implemented to mimic “the information-flood and data triage I expect’d be an even bigger part of US life” (*Every Love Story* 195). This notion of a post-war America saturated by information complements LeClair’s suggestion of how Wallace’s forefathers such as Gaddis and Pynchon viewed their cataloging of an exhaustive amount of disparate data within their respective novels as a means to counteracting the mass media’s “thin layer of superficial information” (*Art of Excess* 16).

Furthermore, in his study on Wallace’s referencing system, Ira B. Nadel suggests, “For Wallace, the footnote was organic and an extension, as well as a critique, of the text beyond the documentation of an idea or fact” (“Consider Footnote” 219). The endnotes within *Infinite Jest* thereby attempt to simultaneously fracture the main text as much as they buttress it in what essentially amounts to subversions of the text through sub-versions of the text. More importantly, the disorder Wallace creates through his endnotes complements what Levinas views as the interplay of closure and openness within an epistemic framework because to “contain more than one’s capacity does not mean to embrace or to encompass the totality of being in thought; [...] To contain more than one’s capacity is to shatter at every moment the framework of a content that is thought” (*Totality and Infinity* 27). Likewise, Burn suggests that this immense amount of information “exceeds the synthesizing powers” of the novel (“Collapse” 59), so Wallace “does not simply use the novel to store data, but rather

explores the negative impact [of] endlessly proliferating information” (“After Gaddis” 163).

As a result, a significant function of Wallace’s endnotes is their ability to challenge the validity of epistemic frameworks on the basis of how and why information is adopted.

Wallace would go on to express his skepticism of how facts are generated and ordered within his final novel, *The Pale King*. In perhaps homage to Gaddis’s *J R*—Wallace, after all, had great respect for Gaddis’s work as is evident by how Max notes that Wallace had recommended his work to the lexicographer, Bryan Garner (“D.F.W.’s Favorite Grammarian” 1)—the character, Chris Fogle, accidentally stumbles into an accounting class at his university where he overhears a professor stressing the importance of the accountant’s role in organizing data: “Yesterday’s hero pushed back at bounds and frontiers—he penetrated, tamed, hewed, shaped, made, brought things into being. Yesterday’s society’s heroes generated facts. For this is what society is—an agglomeration of facts. [...] Gentlemen, the heroic frontier now lies in the ordering and deployment of those facts” (*Pale King* 232). Facts can be promoted, manipulated, or obfuscated to advance the agenda of whoever is blazing a path within this “heroic frontier,” so a major aspect of Wallace’s preoccupation with the epistemic impulse to order the world is exploring whether this organization of data—at odds with the fractured nature of post-war America—can still account for the radical alterity of his cohesion-renewing Other.

Accordingly, Wallace consciously structures his novel to reflect these epistemological concerns surrounding the proliferation of data while also attempting to avoid promoting a totalizing form of epistemic closure in his novel. With this aim in mind Burn contends, “While one aspect of his project was a systematic attempt to overcome the solipsism of metafiction, perhaps Wallace’s greatest bequest to the writers who come after him may lie in his conceptualization of the novel not as an isolated object, but as a node in a connectionist network, always striving to reach beyond itself” (*Reader’s Guide* 75). The exceptionally

wide-ranging types of endnotes in Wallace's work, drawing upon both real and fictional sources, are designed to help undermine the notion of epistemic comprehensiveness in *Infinite Jest*. Some endnotes are merely brief, expository add-ons to clarify and/or interpret data while also being purposely excessive in their explication of seemingly insignificant information. This is Wallace's way of playing with the physical capacity of *Infinite Jest* as well as lampooning the novel's referential schema. On the other hand, other endnotes contain entire episodes within them designed to fracture the main narrative in an attempt to force the reader to re-conceptualize the concept of a narrative totality and its assumed structural borders by implying that an extra narratological dimension can exist beyond the main narrative. The epistemic implications of these two categories of endnotes in *Infinite Jest* will now be explored.

Wallace's expository endnotes are simultaneously gratuitous and insufficient in information, which Letzler designates as *cruft* that "is excessive to no clear purpose, simultaneously too much and too little, [...] encyclopedic novels' cruft seems often to achieve a state of near-objective pointlessness, combining both excess and emptiness, redundancy with wild innovation" ("Cruft of Fiction" 308-309). This combination of excess and emptiness is akin the paralytic, recursive thinking described by the character, Marlon Bain, that fittingly occurs in a footnote within an endnote:

This tendency to involuted abstraction is sometimes called "Marijuana Thinking." [...] Marijuana-Think themselves into labyrinths of reflexive abstraction that seem to cast doubt on the very possibility of practical functioning, and the mental labor of finding one's way out consumes all available attention and makes the Bob Hope-smoker look physically torpid and apathetic and amotivated sitting there, when really he is trying to claw his way out of a labyrinth (n.269: 1048).

Like the Borgesian epistemic labyrinths that Pynchon addresses in *Gravity's Rainbow*, Wallace reveals the drawbacks of ordering data at the expense of its “practical functioning” by treading the lines between emptiness and excess in many of his endnotes. For example, one endnote elaborates on the “Mild Designer Class” (53) drugs consumed recreationally by E.T.A. students:

I.e.: psilocibin; Happy Patches^a; MDMA/Xstasy (bad news though, X); various low-tech manipulations of the benzene-ring in methoxy-class psychedelics, usually home-makeable; synthetic dickies like MDMA, DMA, DMMM, 2 CB, para-DOT I-VI, etc. – though note this class doesn't and shouldn't include CNS-rattlers like STP, DOM, the long-infamous West-U.S.-Coast ‘Grievous Bodily Harm’ (gamma hydroxybutyric acid), LSD-25 or -32, or DMZ/M.P. Enthusiasm for this stuff seems independent of neurologic type.

- a. Homemade transdermals [...] with DDMS or the over-counter-available DMSO as the transdermal carrier (n.8: 984).

Wallace negotiates the efficacy of cataloging by elaborating on something as seemingly inconsequential as the chemical makeup of a minor drug or what constitutes a “Happy Patch” while purposefully withholding information that could clarify what the acronyms such as DDMS, STP, DOM—and, more importantly, the mythical drug, DMZ—stand for. DMZ is later described by Michael Pemulis as “The Great White Shark of organosynthesised hallucinogens” (211), and the text hints that it plays a significant role in Hal's mind-body disconnection he experiences later on in the novel. So like Gaddis's inability to produce a comprehensive history of the player-piano and Pynchon's fascination with the relationship between Gödel's incompleteness theorems and the futility of list-making, the expository endnotes demonstrate how referencing systems can never be comprehensive without having to constantly expand upon concepts with additional addendums ad infinitum.

Moreover, Boswell argues that the implementation of insignificant cruft among the endnotes designed to obfuscate pivotal information forces the reader to reassess conventional aspects of reading:

Readers of the book quickly learn that the notes can provide useless information, essential information, extra but nonessential narrative, or even, at times, narrative that is more important to the ongoing novel than the passage to which the note is attached. Readers can, and even must, devise some way to read through the book that allows them to keep their focus on the story while also mining the notes for all their information (*Understanding Wallace* 120).

The reader is often forced to wade through many endnotes that neither advance the plot nor clarify aspects of the novel. For example, the text introduces the history of “Ennet House Drug and Alcohol Recovery House^{49[sic]}” (137) containing an endnote for what could be assumed to provide a detailed description of the halfway house. However, the endnote ends up merely stating “Redundancy *sic*” (n.49, 995) due to the two instances of “house” within its name. This endnote is an example of excessive pedantry by the annotator that diverts the reader’s attention away from the main narrative and, in the process, consequently undermines the usefulness of the referencing system within *Infinite Jest*.

Furthermore, some cruft endnotes use the term *sic erat scriptum* to point out exaggerated and/or erroneous elements of data purposely introduced by the annotator. An example of this occurs during the endnote describing the war-game of Eschaton played by tennis players at E.T.A. Teams are separated into opposing countries to battle on a global map drawn upon the surfaces of multiple tennis courts. Tennis balls are lobbed by combatants at enemy targets designated by objects on the court, and the subsequent damage to these targets is calculated using a sophisticated computer program. During the endnote the character, Evan Ingersoll, attempts to exploit a rule by calling into question—in a manner

reminiscent of Borges's micro-story, "On Exactitude in Science" (1946)—the lack of a clear distinction between the Eschaton map and the real territory of the tennis courts on which the map rests. In addition to serving as a symbolic subversion of the correspondence theory of truth, Pemulis—a devout player of Eschaton—complains to the game-master, Otis Lord, that by considering Ingersoll's point Lord is effectively undermining the sanctity of the game: "Pemulis howls that Lord is in his vacillation appeasing Ingersoll in Ingersoll's effort to fatally fuck with the very breath and bread of Eschaton^{130 [sic]}" (338). However, the endnote accompanying this quote clarifies that "Pemulis doesn't actually literally say 'breath and bread'" (n.130: 1025). While used for comedic purposes, the revelation regarding how information is not always objectively portrayed by the annotator calls into question the reliability of the narrative, which Letzler suggests helps undercut Mendelson's view of encyclopedic narratives because it would "seem very strange for a writer to choose the novel to communicate a 'mastery' of information, given how the form disavows its text's accuracy" ("Cruft of Fiction" 307).

But while erroneous data is meant to disrupt the accuracy of the text, important data is sometimes included within the endnotes as a way of challenging the reader's attention. Perhaps the most significant catalog of data is James Incandenza's filmography (n.24: 985-993). Spanning nearly nine pages and containing over 70 individual entries, the list is one of the longest endnotes in *Infinite Jest*. In what amounts to a self-reflexive admission about the lack of epistemic comprehensiveness within *Infinite Jest*, the endnote begins with a short preface by the compilers claiming, "The following list is as complete as we are able to make it" (985) and the "list's order and completeness are, at this point in time, not definitive" (986). The character, Joelle, describes James's oeuvre as a filmic quest attempting to locate a "freedom from one's own head" (742)—a notion similar to the attempt to disavow the totalizing logic of self-interest in "This is Water"—that Burn identifies as being paradoxical

since it is a wholly egocentric endeavor amounting to “an encyclopedic survey of efforts to understand the self in his films” (*Reader’s Guide* 49).

Some of the film in the survey describe—sometimes inexplicably—episodes that occur within the main narrative while other entries call into question the validity of the episodes altogether. For example, the entry for *It Was a Great Marvel That He Was in the Father Without Knowing Him* explores the themes of signification and solipsism by alluding to an episode in the narrative when James disguises himself as a conversationalist in order to coax Hal into communicating with him. The entry reads, “A father (Watt), suffering from the delusion that his etymologically precocious son (Smothergill) is pretending to be mute, poses as a ‘professional conversationalist’ in order to draw the boy out” (993). But when James implores Hal to have a dialogue with him that “does not end like all the others: you staring, me swallowing” (31), Hal accuses his father of hallucinating about how he never speaks.

This fear regarding Hal’s inability to speak is reconfirmed years after James’s suicide when the wraith of James visits Don Gately in the hospital and observes, “when alive in the world of animate men, [he] had seen his own personal youngest offspring, a son, the one most like him, the one most marvelous and frightening to him, becoming a figurant, toward the end” (837). However, the possibility that James may in fact be the one experiencing the mind-body disconnect that prevents him from communicating with his son is explored in the film entry for *Insubstantial Country*: “An unpopular après-garde filmmaker (Watt) either suffers a temporal lobe seizure and becomes mute or else is the victim of everyone else’s delusion that his (Watt’s) temporal lobe seizure has left him mute” (992). This entry illustrates how James was at least partially aware of the possibility that he may be wrong, which lends considerable weight to the wraith’s assertion:

no one else in the wraith and boy’s nuclear family would see or acknowledge this, the fact that the graceful and marvelous boy was disappearing right

before their eyes. They looked but did not see his invisibility. And they listened but did not hear the wraith's warning, [...] the nuclear family had believed he (the wraith) was unstable and was confusing the boy with his own (the wraith's) boyhood self, or with the wraith's father's father (838).

Consequently, these film entries create a level of ambiguity regarding the nature of the relationship between Hal and James that diminishes the reliability of the main narrative.

The usefulness and validity of the filmographic referencing system is further undermined in the entry for the meta-film, *The Joke*. The entry states that it is a performance piece where an audience is filmed while watching *The Joke* resulting in the audience "watching itself watch itself get the obvious 'joke' and become increasingly self-conscious and uncomfortable and hostile," which "supposedly comprises the film's involuted 'antinarrative' flow" (989). This creates a *mise en abyme* effect designed to challenge the film critics James loathed who attributed meaning to his films for their own agendas. He therefore uses *The Joke* to reveal the critics' logic of self-interest who end up "studying themselves studying themselves taking notes with endless fascination" (398) while oblivious to the mockery at their expense. This meta-critique of art criticism also complements Gaddis's polemic in *The Recognitions* against the intellectual posturing and vapidness of art critics. In response to the critics who were unable to spot Wyatt's forgeries of Flemish paintings, Valentine claims, "It's heartbreaking to watch, isn't it. They are all so fearfully serious. But of course that's just what makes it all possible. The authorities are so deadly serious that it never occurs to them to doubt, they cannot wait to get ahead of one another to point out verifications" (229).

This "deadly serious" need "to point out verifications" is targeted in *The Joke* that is part of a pseudo-genre James creates called "Found Drama" aiming to expose the limitations of academic criticism through the creation of a film genre in which "there *weren't* any real

cartridges or pieces of Found Drama. This was the joke” (n.145: 1027). The ultimate joke about this fake filmography—and perhaps the entire practice of cataloging within *Infinite Jest*—is that it may not enhance, but perhaps even detract from, the clarity and comprehensiveness of the main narrative. Despite the connections that can be made by the reader, a possibility nevertheless remains that—in a similar manner to how Found Drama exposes the glibness of articles written about James’s films—these connections are a byproduct of reading too much into the text to find drama that may not exist.

But while it may be tempting to write off these endnotes as being nothing more than gimmicky postmodern parlor tricks, they can also be viewed as challenging the privileged status of the logocentric said in favor of a latent saying incapable of being signified. Levinas, for example, argued that such interruptions are paramount for rupturing epistemic closure in order to identify the saying obfuscated within a novel that is essentially:

interrupted discourse catching up with its own breaks. But books have their fate; they belong to a world they do not include, but recognize by being written and printed, and by being prefaced and getting themselves preceded with forewords. They are interrupted, and call for other books and in the end are interpreted in a saying distinct from the said (*Otherwise than Being* 171).

These interruptions promote an ethical saying that relies upon a network of scholarship extending past the novel into what Derrida refers to as the *outwork* (*hors-livre*) that, as Ellen Armour suggests, precludes the possibility of epistemic closure because, “Derrida shows that the failure of encyclopedists to produce such a book is not accidental, but intrinsic to the structure of the book itself. The ideal of the book as a [...] self-enclosed whole carries the possibility of its own failure within it” (*Feminist Theology* 55). Wallace’s endnotes can therefore be viewed as interruptions helping to weaken the notion of epistemic closure in order to hint at an outwork that exceeds the purview of his novel.

To help symbolically establish this outwork, Wallace figuratively subverts the epistemic closure of the main narrative through what Nadel refers to as “expansive footnotes” with their “own recursive discourse” (“Consider Footnote” 236). One of the most significant examples of the expansive endnote designed to negotiate the porous boundaries of epistemic closure within *Infinite Jest* occurs during the Eschaton episode. Not only does the passage elaborate on the mathematical intricacy of Eschaton by providing an extensive summary of the mean-value theorem, the endnote is also noteworthy for suggesting that Pemulis has transgressed the closure of the main narrative to supplant the annotator within the endnote. The endnote begins, “Pemulis here, dictating to Inc, who can just sit there making a steeple out of his fingers and pressing it to his lip and not take notes and wait and like inscribe [*sic*] it anytime in the next week and get it verbatim, the smug turd” (n.123: 1023). While the term *sic erat scriptum* is used in the craft endnotes as a way of interrupting the text and undermining the efficacy of the novel’s referencing system, in this example it is used to note Hal’s “occasional verbal flourishes” (n.123: 1023) of Pemulis’ explanations, which perhaps suggest that Hal is inscribing Pemulis’s words as an annotator.

This figuratively complements Rorty’s ironist notion of *redescription* as a means of revealing the contingency of language on communal use. That is to say, despite how people “do not want to be redescribed” but instead “taken on their own terms” in their own language, Rorty’s “ironist tells them that the language they speak is up for grabs by her and her kind” (*Contingency* 89). So rather than redescription making people “look futile, obsolete, and powerless” (89) in a manner similar to what Hal perhaps does to Pemulis in the endnote, Rorty argued that it can also present “itself as uncovering the interlocutor’s true self, or the real nature of a common public world which the speaker and the interlocutor share,” which “suggests that the person being redescribed is being empowered, not having his power diminished” (90).

Nevertheless, the neopragmatic notion of redescription is complicated by Pemulis's mathematical explanation, along with Hal's edits, of the mean-value theorem and its relationship with boundaries. As Pemulis observes, "This is *wicked*. This is fucking *elegant*. Note that (*Note that's* another like compulsory [*sic*] term) [...] you can use this Mean-Value time-saver with anything that varies within a (*definable*) set of boundaries and whatnot" (n.123: 1024). In a meta-treatment of this explanation, these two characters symbolically subvert the definable boundaries necessary for the theorem to function because their presence as annotators in the endnote reveals the presumably porous nature of the "definable" boundary dividing the main narrative from the endnotes. Pemulis, a supporter of the Allston High School Wolf-Spiders, then closes the section under Hal's inscription:

It's going to be interesting to see if [*sic*] Hal, who thinks he's just too sly trying to outline Eschaton in the 3rd-person tense [*sic*] like some jowly old Eschatologist with leather patches on his elbows [*sic*], if Inc can transpose [*sic?*] the math here without help from his Mumster. Later.

P.S. Allston Rules (n.123: 1024-25).

However, Pemulis returns a couple of endnotes later to usurp the annotator who, if the reader can believe Pemulis, is Hal narrating in the third-person:

A lot of these little toss-ins and embellishments are Inc amusing himself, not Otis's TRIGSIT, which is 100% all biz.

P.S. Wolf-Spiders Ruleth the Land (n.127: 1025).

This type of framing technique depicts Hal and Pemulis attempting to negotiate their roles as characters—and by extension the boundaries of the main narrative—by becoming annotators in the endnotes. Consequently, this can be interpreted as the characters symbolically entering a liminal space that complements the notion of an outwork essentially Other to the epistemic framework it critiques, which blurs the distinction of being inside and outside of a text by, as

Derrida suggests, “undo[ing] the philosophical representation of the text, the received opposition between the text and what exceeds it” (“Outwork” 32).

But perhaps the most important example of the expansive endnote with regard to revealing the porous nature of epistemic closure occurs in endnote 324. Rather than correlating to a specific aspect of the main text, the endnote instead refers to a literal gap of space (787). The corresponding passage in the endnote, symbolic of the lacuna in the main narrative, fittingly questions the epistemic impulse for attaining truth. The section begins in a locker room as Pemulis prepares for an upcoming match against Keith “The Viking” Freer. While getting dressed he overhears a younger student, Todd Possalthwaite, crying because his father has reneged on a deal to take him to Disney World. As a result, Todd bemoans, “Nothing’s fair because nothing’s *true*” (n.324: 1068).

Pemulis sympathizes with the metaphysical angst Todd is experiencing, so he combats this relativistic position by revealing to Todd how “certain things are rock-solid, high-grade true” (n.324: 1068). Pemulis contends the only stable truth rest in mathematics because, “When the headless are blaming. When you do not know your way about. You can fall back and regroup around math. Whose truth is deductive truth. Independent of sense or emotionality” (n.324: 1071), and “at times like this, when you’re directionless in a dark wood, trust to the abstract deductive” (n.324: 1072). While Pemulis’s veneration of deductive reasoning as a means to truth would complement the austere formal logic promoted by logical positivists, Wallace does not necessarily support Pemulis here.

Wallace concluded *Everything and More* by observing how “Gödel and Cantor both died in confinement, bequeathing a world with no finite circumference. One that spins, now, in a new kind of all-formal Void” (305). So not only does Pemulis’s application of the mean-value theorem help emphasize the symbolic obfuscation of boundaries in Wallace’s novel, it also perhaps suggests that mathematical logic has done little in helping Pemulis, and by

extension Wallace, navigate through the Dantean dark wood of indeterminacy. Therefore, like the lacuna in the main text, Wallace incorporates Pemulis's line of reasoning as a way of ironically undermining the validity of fixed-truth systems.

Not only is cataloging in the endnotes used as a means of negotiating the porous borders of epistemic closure, it is also adopted by various characters as a way to make phenomena around them present-at-hand to allow them to better comprehend their own senses of selfhood. Like Rorty's call to recognize the contingency of one's selfhood and vocabulary by "becom[ing] reconciled to the idea that most of reality is indifferent to our descriptions of it, and that the human self is created by the use of a vocabulary rather than being adequately or inadequately expressed in a vocabulary" (*Contingency* 7), Marcello Fiocco links Wallace's depiction of this contingency of selfhood to epistemic indeterminacy:

Indeterminacy is a phenomenon recognized in connection to many issues in the philosophy of language, in physics, and in metaphysics. [...] To say that indeterminacy is unproblematic as a consequence of contingency is certainly not to suggest that the phenomenon, in its multiplicity, is amenable to any simple or definitive account but only to acknowledge that it is a genuine phenomenon; [...] the assumption of bivalence for all propositions seems somewhat naïve or myopic ("Metaphysics of Contingency" 88).

Wallace reveals the pitfalls associated with the "assumption of bivalence for all propositions" exemplified by his characters' often-totalizing attempts to eliminate indeterminacy through cataloging. It will now be explored how in seeking to reduce the multiplicity of phenomena into a "simple or definitive account" through compulsive cataloging—what Freudenthal suggests is a totalizing "means of grasping for personal control over anxieties about control itself" ("Anti-Interiority" 196)—these characters reveal their dependence on this ordering impulse while unwittingly calling attention to an ethical excess eluding codification.

4.3 Cataloging and the Contingency of Selfhood

In *The Broom of the System*, Lenore experiences a philosophical antinomy—à la Russell’s paradox—arising from the impossibility of establishing a set of all sets in set theory. Aside from being set up as a semantic problem, the antinomy also serves as a classic phenomenological quandary Buber, Heidegger, and Husserl viewed as a manifestation of the problematic subject-object dialectic that dominates Western metaphysics. For Lenore, the dialectic leads to a profound impasse related to the intentionality of consciousness because by viewing the object as a necessary component for consciousness itself (i.e. all consciousness must in fact be conscious of something including consciousness itself as a self-reflexive object of thought), it establishes a totalizing binary between those that think contra the objects and ideas that cannot think themselves—essentially that which is Other to the intentionality of consciousness. As Lenore’s brother explains to her:

all thinking requires an object, something to think of or about. And the only things that can be thought about are the things that are not that act of thought, that are Other, right? You can’t think of your own act of thinking-of, [...] But if we can’t think ourselves, that means we, ourselves, are things that can’t think themselves, and so are the proper objects for our thought, we fulfill the game’s condition, we are ourselves Other. If we can think ourselves, we can’t; and if we can’t, we can (*Broom of the System* 282).

The crux of this problem is that if the self cannot think about its own act of thinking-of, then the subject becomes a non-thinking object and thus—per the set’s stipulation—an object of thought. Therefore, the subject makes oneself present-at-hand as its own object of reference. This is similar to a conundrum Levinas identified as arising when attempting to articulate about alterity because, while language is necessary to signify this aim, it also totalizes the Other in the process. Robbins suggests this becomes apparent when Levinas contends such

“work ought to be nonself-identical. But if his work is nonself-identical in the way that his work says that the work ought to be nonself-identical, then it is self-identical. In fact, if Levinas’s work does not do what it says about the work, if his work is thus nonself-identical, then it does what it says about the work, and it is self-identical” (*Altered Reading* 12).

This antinomy is integral to understanding the existential angst and loneliness experienced by anhedonic characters such as Hal and Kate Gompert in *Infinite Jest*. When attempting to articulate their senses of selfhood, they find themselves alienated and—like Lenore—effectively Othered by the objects they wish to catalog because the “anhedonic Inability To Identify is also an integral part of *It*. [...] Everything is part of the problem, and there is no solution. It is a hell for one” (696). Language obfuscates and even supplants the aspects of reality these characters aim to express:

The anhedonic can still speak about happiness and meaning et al., but she has become incapable of feeling anything in them, of understanding anything about them, of hoping anything about them, or of believing them to exist as anything more than concepts. Everything becomes an outline of the thing. Objects become schemata. The world becomes a map of the world (693).

The notion at the end of this passage of the world becoming a map of the world highlights the imperfect relationship between referents and their corresponding signifiers. This reflects a comparable theme in Borges’s “On Exactitude in Science” in which cartographers construct a map so large that it supersedes the physical territory it is supposed to represent. The Eschaton episode develops a similar tension when Pemulis lashes out during the map-territory debacle after Evan Ingersoll attempts to gain an unfair advantage by attacking another combatant with a tennis ball who is standing on the map. Pemulis contends:

Players themselves can’t be valid targets. Players aren’t inside the goddamn game. Players are part of the *apparatus* of the game. They’re part of the map.

[...] It's like the one ground-rule boundary that keeps Eschaton from degenerating into chaos. Eschaton gentlemen is about logic and axiom and mathematical probity and discipline and verity and *order*. You do not get points for hitting anybody real. Only the gear that *maps* what's real (338).

It is noteworthy that the Bostonian slang word anatomically designating *head* in the novel is referred to as a *map*—e.g. individuals who commit suicide are described as “eliminat[ing] their own map for keeps” (220)—because it fittingly extends this cartographical problem to the issue of selfhood. This is troublesome for the two anhedonic characters because they come to realize how their senses of selfhood are contingent on language that, like the cartographical enmeshment of map and territory, does not always conform to the “logic and axiom and mathematical probity and discipline and verity and *order*” Pemulis describes.

The anhedonic states of Hal and Kate are partly caused by them realizing that the process of cataloging their feelings leads to a fabrication further alienating them from characters around them. For example, the crippling depression of Kate—a name shared with Markson's language-preoccupied protagonist in *Wittgenstein's Mistress*—is exacerbated by her inability to communicate her inner turmoil because she deems it “indescribable,” and this causes her depression to be “lonely on a level that cannot be conveyed” (695). In one episode Kate is interviewed by a doctor who believes that a major reason for Kate's depression is her inability to communicate the extent of her alienation to which Kate simply responds, “That's what you guys want to call it, I guess” (73). She later argues it is impossible to catalog the true extent of her depression without betraying it when claiming, “I don't know what I could call it. It's like I can't get enough outside it to call it anything” (73). Unlike Hal and Pemulis who—in a symbolic act reflecting the porous nature of epistemic closure—are potentially able to reach an outwork within the endnotes, Kate realizes she is unable to liberate herself from her paralytic insularity in order to accurately express her sense of selfhood.

Kate's anhedonia would later be adapted into Wallace's short story "The Depressed Person." The female protagonist's depression is exacerbated by her inability to properly "get enough outside" her egocentric thinking to convey her emotions and feelings to others, which causes her to be "frightened for herself, for as it were '[her]self' – i.e., for her own so-called 'character'" (*Brief Interviews* 68). At one point she ponders "what words and terms might be applied to describe and assess such a solipsistic, self-consumed, endless emotional vacuum and sponge as she now appeared to herself to be? How was she to decide and describe – even to herself" (69). Like the depressed protagonist, Kate is trapped within a totalizing sense of solipsism that she cannot articulate.

Likewise, Hal's anhedonia is partially caused by the realization that despite being a lexical prodigy who can "recite great chunks of the dictionary, verbatim, at will" (317), he is unable to accurately express his feelings. Hal feels he lacks "bona fide intensity-of-interior-life-type emotion" because those feelings are essentially linguistic constructs detached from reality, which causes Hal to believe his interior self contains "pretty much nothing at all" (694). Hal of course is capable of emotion, but as Boswell claims he fears that communicating these feelings would "tear them from the prelinguistic Real that is his interior and transport them into the alienated world of textuality" (*Understanding Wallace* 150). Wallace's short story "Good Old Neon" (2001) explores the inability to authentically signify the complexity of the human mind:

This is another paradox, that many of the most important impressions and thoughts in a person's life are ones that flash through your head so fast that fast isn't even the right word, they seem totally different from or outside of the regular sequential clock time we all live by, and they have so little relation to the sort of linear, one-word-after-another-word English we all communicate with each other with that it could easily take a whole lifetime just to spell out

the contents of one split-second's flash of thoughts and connections, etc.—and yet we all seem to go around trying to use English (*Oblivion* 150-151).

However, prior to his degenerative mind-body schism, Hal did not realize this “paradox” regarding the limitations of language.

For example, Hal at one point attempted to situate himself in a room by providing an exhaustive list of all of the blue-colored phenomena in the E.T.A. administration offices: blue shapes in the shag carpet, two plush chairs, lamps, some of the magazine covers, the wallpaper, window sills and crosspieces, a “nautical –blue border of braid” around Pemulis’ yachting cap, the slices of blue sky visible in photographs of students, a chaise, the fingertips and lips of Alice Moore, Avril’s pen, etc. He then moves on to situating other characters into these categories such as Trevor Axford, “about whom there was today not even a hint of the color blue” (510). This constitutes an unethical act because Hal makes Axford present-at-hand to conform with his categorical ordering at the expense of Axford’s alterity. Moreover, Hal’s inability to experience “bona fide intensity-of-interior-life-type emotion” is a result of how he ends up viewing himself as an object within the room to be cataloged as well, which—as Freudenthal suggests—reveals the “clear debility of interiority here, the destructive potential of fixated, rationalist introversion, shows the powers of commodity society to penetrate what may be our most intimate spaces” (*Anti-Interiority* 204). Like Lenore and Kate, Hal’s compulsive cataloging—rather than buttressing his sense of selfhood—effectively weakens it.

This episode is comparable to the first episode that appears in the novel. Hal sits in an administration office at the University of Arizona with his uncle—Charles Tavis—and tennis coach, Aubrey deLint, while being interviewed by members of the university admissions staff. At this point Hal has already experienced the psychological trauma resulting from his mind-body disconnect. The episode begins:

I am seated in an office, surrounded by heads and bodies. My posture is consciously congruent to the shape of my hard chair. This is a cold room in University Administration, wood-walled, Remington-hung, double windowed against the November heat, insulated from Administrative sounds by the reception area outside, at which Uncle Charles, Mr. deLint and I were lately received [...] I am in here (3).

The passage is especially jarring because, while it appears that Hal is finally able to experience interior-of-life-type emotions exemplified through the proclamation of being “in here,” he is unable to communicate with the outside world. For example, after Hal worries his interviewers by displaying animal-like characteristics while attempting to communicate, he is then rushed to the hospital while exhibiting what is ultimately a useless lexical prowess when thinking, “There are, by the *O.E.D. VI*’s count, nineteen nonarchaic synonyms for *unresponsive*, of which nine are Latinate and four Saxonian” (17).

Wallace would later parody this erudite detachment from emotion in the short story “*Datum Centurio*” within *Brief Interviews with Hideous Men*. The short story takes the form of a passage from a futuristic encyclopedia that contains various definitions and uses for what is by then the archaic term *date*. While considerable in its breadth and precision, the excerpt ultimately lacks the pathos associated with romance. One of the definitions within the passage refers to dating as “the unilateral pursuit of an immediate, vigorous, and uncodified episode of genital interface without regard to neurogenetic compatibility or soft offspring or even a telephone call the next day” (127-28). This austere definition complements how Hal is not only physically isolated within a “cold room” but also emotionally isolated from the characters around him due to his inability to communicate, and thus Hal is effectively placed within what Burn refers to as a “spatial metaphor for the hermetic husk of a self” (*Reader’s Guide* 46).

Hal then attempts to negotiate the confines of this husk and demonstrate that he in fact has an intact sense of selfhood by internally cataloging his philosophical views when claiming, “I believe the influence of Kierkegaard on Camus is underestimated. I believe Hobbes is just Rousseau in a dark mirror. I believe, with Hegel, that transcendence is absorption” (12). Hal’s view of Hegel is especially relevant to the nature of the cohesion-renewing Other because it refers to the Hegelian synthesis of opposites—in this case immanence with transcendence—which constitutes a form of dialectical resolution that Wallace attempted to achieve in the form of a renewed cohesion between the immanence of epistemic frameworks and the transcendence of an ineffable alterity that eludes thematization within his work.

Hal’s idea of transcendence as absorption originated in Hegel’s *Encyclopedia of the Philosophical Sciences* where he claimed, “the real infinite, far from being a mere transcendence of the finite, always involves the absorption of the finite into its own fuller nature” (45). This synthesis also complements Kierkegaard’s notion regarding how a “human being is a synthesis of the infinite and the finite, of the temporal and the eternal” (*Sickness Unto Death* 3), and—more importantly—the Levinasian notion of a reintegration of totality with infinity in the form of an *au-delà-dans* Robert Bernasconi argues necessitates treating the totality-infinity dialectic as a symbiotic pair rather than oppositions because “the conditions for the possibility of the experience of totality are the conditions for its impossibility of the experience of totality, in the sense that the rupture of totality shows that there never was a totality” (“Rereading *Totality and Infinity*” 24).

However, Hal’s attempt to affirm his inner state with the outside world is nevertheless doomed to fail because his selfhood remains contingent on epistemic frameworks that can never be completely comprehensive in scope, and thus as Burn argues, “The novel’s opening, then, sets up a tension between an excess of information and unexplainable selfhood that is

elaborated throughout the rest of the book” (*Reader’s Guide* 46). So if, as Burn notes, *Hamlet* begins with the watchman Bernardo asking “who’s there?” in order to initiate an ontological exploration of the Renaissance man, *Infinite Jest* answers this question by beginning the narrative with Hal’s assertion, “I am.” But while Burn argues that this phrase begins an extensive catalog geared towards a “millennial update” of understanding the contemporary self (46), it would be even more accurate to view such a task as being impossible in its attempt to comprehend a fractured subjectivity that cannot be codified.

Therefore, in the attempt to use cataloging to foster epistemological and ontological validation, the practice can turn into an addictive compulsion for characters leading to a totalizing sense of insularity. Burn suggests that the need for certain characters to totalize data through compulsive cataloging is “indicative of a deeper lack of control” (*Reader’s Guide* 28) and thus “encyclopedic data storage is, for Wallace, another potentially dangerous addiction, and the attempt to control data leads to larger slippages in their lives” (29). For example, in a comical portrayal of the addictive nature of cataloging, *The Pale King* depicts a young boy who attempts the “unimaginable challenge” of comprehensively cataloging his body by “press[ing] his lips to every square inch of his own body” (396). The boy’s chiropractor then espouses a philosophy that is wholly relevant to the totality/infinity dialectic by observing, “the interpenetrating dance of spine, nervous system, spirit and cosmos as *totality*—in the universe as an *infinite* system of neural connections that had evolved was the universe’s way of being accessible to *itself*” (405-406; italics for emphasis).

Likewise, this egocentric impulse for control is pondered over by Don Gately who observes how addiction “makes its command headquarters in the head” (*Infinite Jest* 272), and addicts are often “all jonesing and head-gaming and mokus and grieving and basically whacked out and producing nonstopping output 24-7-365” (273). As a result of this nonstop output, most addicts “are also addicted to thinking, meaning they have a compulsive and

unhealthy relationship with their own thinking” (203), which traps many of these characters within an insular, “paralytic thought-helix” (335).

There are various examples of this type of compulsive cataloging throughout *Infinite Jest*. Hal experiences the paralytic thought-helix during the many self-reflexive, addiction-induced monologues he has throughout the text. During one episode in which Hal catalog his teammates’ tennis attire, he becomes completely alienated from those around him. He then “wonders, not for the first time, whether he might deep down be a secret snob about collar color issues and Pemulis, then whether the fact that he’s capable of wondering whether he’s a snob attenuates the possibility that he’s really a snob” (335). Hal finds that being able to express this “so terribly abstract” form of hyper-self-consciousness is impossible because it is “fraught with implications and consequences that even thinking about how to articulate it seems so complexly stressful that being almost incapacitated with absorption is almost the only way out of the complex stress” (340). Unlike the Hegelian notion of absorption as transcendence, Hal’s absorption leaves him trapped within an incapacitating sense of solipsism cut off from those around him.

Other examples of this type of compulsive cataloging include how the character, Rodney Tine—Chief of the US Office of Unspecified Services—routinely measures and records the length of his penis in a notebook every day since the age of 12 (548). Tine’s cataloging is a way to literally reaffirm the extent of his manhood. Another example of a compulsive and somewhat more sinister form of cataloging is undertaken by Don Gately’s stepfather who meticulously records each beer he consumes within a notebook. Don speculates that his stepfather, who “was very precise and controlled in his approach to things” (840), documented his beer consumption because “he was the sort of person who equated incredibly careful record-keeping with control” (841). The stepfather’s compulsive cataloging functions as a justification for his alcoholism—a practice that as a child Gately found to be

“bullshit and maybe crazy” (841). But while both Tine and Gately’s stepfather are certainly addicted to their respective forms of cataloging as a means of reinforcing their senses of selfhood, their habits are not necessarily totalizing acts at the expense of the Other.

Nevertheless, there are unethical manifestations of compulsive cataloging that do just that. For example, Orin Incandenza meticulously catalogs his sexual encounters with women to the point of totalizing them by categorizing them as “Subjects” (43)—an act similar to how Slothrop “subconsciously needs to abolish all trace of the sexual Other” by recording his sexual escapades on a map in his bedroom (*Gravity’s Rainbow* 85). In what can be viewed as an ironic gesture in relation to the dichotomy of totality and infinity, Orin traces lemniscates—or “little sideways 8’s”—on the “postcoital flanks” of his Subjects (289). The narrator posits that Orin does this as a way of coping because he “like many children of raging alcoholics and OCD-sufferers had internal addictive-sexuality issues” (289), but the lemniscates can also be interpreted as unethical gestures that mock the Levinasian call for respecting the infinite Other since Orin ends up totalizing his Subjects through his sexually-driven cataloguing.

This unethical form of classifying and ordering is also apparent when Steeply recounts the obsessive cataloging undertaken by his father while watching episodes of the television show *M*A*S*H*. Steeply’s father began watching the show every Thursday after work, but the syndication of the television show turned his initially harmless habit into a crippling compulsion. As reruns of episodes began appearing more frequently, Steeply’s father started taking notes in a small notebook while watching *M*A*S*H* (641). The father’s obsession, however, reached its apex when he began to believe that there were cryptic messages within the episodes that could be deciphered. He then moved into his den so that he could endlessly catalog episodes and unravel the meaning of the alleged secret messages until his eventual death.

The cataloging becomes totalizing when Steeply's father starts to believe that television is a medium to a more legitimate reality than the phenomenal world around him, so he attempted to project facets of *M*A*S*H* onto his surroundings in order to make it conform with the show. At first he referred to rooms in his house as fictional locations from the show such as calling his kitchen the "Mess Tent" and his den the "Marsh or Swamp" (642). More troublingly, he writes letters to the actors in *M*A*S*H* but addresses the envelopes to the characters that the actors played on the show. For example, he writes letters to Maury Linville but addresses them to his character, Major Burns, and he mails them "not c/o Fox Studios or whatever, but addressed to an involved military address, with a Seoul routing code" (643). Like Don Quixote before him, Steeply's father totalizes the alterity of the actors to make them conform to the categories that support his apophenic vision of a *M*A*S*H*-based reality.

These various instances of cataloging adopted by characters within *Infinite Jest* come to reveal the tenuous grasp they have on their senses of selfhood and how, in their attempt to situate themselves within the world by making phenomena present-at-hand, they are at the mercy of language. Nevertheless, while Wallace's use of cataloging in *Infinite Jest* both illustrates the porous nature of epistemic closure and the contingency of selfhood on such closure, the attempt to transcend the metaphysics of presence is ultimately impossible. *Infinite Jest* therefore comes to serve as a type of meta-response to the impossible task of challenging the epistemic closure of what Burn refers to as the "closed circle of knowledge" because the "roots of the term *encyclopedia* lie in a misreading of the Greek *enkylios paideia*, and denote the circle of learning, but the many circles in *Infinite Jest* [...] bring little real knowledge. This is even stressed by the largest circle of all, the book itself" (*Reader's Guide* 29). This notion of the closed circle in *Infinite Jest* complements Clark's suggestion about how throughout history the attempt to establish a comprehensive epistemic framework "has

been characterized by a drive to encircle or include all there is to know. However, this drive has always encountered problems, limitations built into the enterprise itself. [...] the totality of this body is an elusive thing” (*Fictional Encyclopaedia* 20).

Wallace portrays this epistemic impulse to encircle knowledge as leading to an annular, solipsistic form of thought the character, Joelle van Dyne, describes when claiming, “What looks like the cage’s exit is actually the bars of the cage. [...] The entrance says *EXIT*. There isn’t an exit. The ultimate annular fusion: that of exhibit and its cage” (222). Thus, as Boswell suggests, the solipsistic self is a “closed system” (*Understanding Wallace* 53) whose paralytic logic of self-interest is likened to “somebody doing somersaults with one hand nailed to the ground” (*Infinite Jest* 570). Furthermore, Joelle’s conflation of the annular cage’s entrance and exit highlights the difficulty of conceptualizing what it would mean to be free from this closed system of egocentric thought, which complements Rorty’s description of how the “ironist theorist” is “caught in a dilemma between saying he has actualized the last possibility left open and saying that he has created not just a new actuality but new possibilities. The demands of theory require him to say the former, the demands of self-creation require him to say the latter” (*Contingency* 108). Like Joelle, the ironist discovers that the attempt to use language to create new possibilities free from these totalizing cages cut off from alterity may lead to the construction of new cages instead.

Accordingly, the ironist interplay between the attempt to situate oneself within the world, the epistemic frameworks necessary for such an aim, and the symbol of a caged circle that maintains such closure is embodied by Heidegger’s notion of the *hermeneutic circle*. Heidegger argued hermeneutics is an iterative process of self-reference that makes the attainment of knowledge tautological in nature: “But if interpretation always already has to operate within what is understood and nurture itself from this, how should it then produce scientific results without going in a circle, especially when the presupposed understanding

still operates in the common knowledge of human being and world?” (*Being and Time* 152: 147-48). The hermeneutic circle arises from how the holistic interpretation of a text requires understanding its constituent parts, but understanding these parts is contingent on being able to understand the text as a whole. Heidegger then extended the circle to the relationship between self-understanding and one’s understanding of the world. Consequently, this notion is paramount for understanding how Wallace’s neopragmatic approach attempts to both work within and interrupt this caged hermeneutic circle through the use of communal language-games that can perhaps produce new possibilities and understandings related to the concepts of alterity and selfhood.

4.4 Neopragmatism and the Hermeneutic Circle

Heidegger went so far as to suggest that the hermeneutic circle governs epistemology and ontology because it is an “essential fore-structure of Dasein itself” (*Being and Time* 32: 195). Like Derrida’s notion of *différance*, meaning within the hermeneutic circle is subject to an open-ended system in which signs refer to other signs ad infinitum. Levinas suggests Husserl’s notion of infinite iteration is a way of representing this endless postponement of the signified: “Hence the wearing away of the signified, releasing a system of signs, of signifiers without signifieds, of a language that no full meaning guides. Thus is expressed, in the guide of dissemination, the *différance* in which presence is deconstructed, a postponement without due date to be met” (“Wholly Otherwise” 58).

This perpetual postponement leads to a vicious infinite regression that, as Natalini claims, imprisons Wallace’s novel within the “infinite circularity of word problems” (“Mathematics of Infinity” 44). Clark suggests infinite regress is unavoidable in epistemic frameworks because “the possibility of the totalizing circle totalizes the encyclopaedist; nonetheless, this circular completion or ful-filling of knowledge must contend with the vicious circularity of desire and endless deferral” (*Fictional Encyclopaedia* 21). To escape

vicious infinite regress, Natalini argues Wallace pursues a neopragmatic form of closure that reinterprets “our standard boundaries” between totality and infinity (“Mathematics of Infinity” 48). Such an aim is in line with how Heidegger stresses that the hermeneutic circle must be simultaneously maintained and interrupted in a matter similar to Wallace’s neopragmatic treatment of the circle of knowledge within his novel:

What is decisive is not to get out of the circle, but to get in it in the right way. [...] The circle must not be degraded to a *vitiosum*, not even to a tolerated one. A positive possibility of the most primordial knowledge is hidden in it which, however, is only grasped in a genuine way when interpretation has understood that its first, constant, and last task is not to let fore-having, fore-sight, and fore-conception be given to it by chance ideas and popular conceptions (*Being and Time* 153: 158).

Despite the impossibility of rupturing the hermeneutic circle, Critchley suggests that *clôtural readings* striving for a “production of dislocation within the text” can offer a way of negotiating epistemic closure (*Ethics of Deconstruction* 88). These readings—similar to how some of Wallace’s endnotes reveal the porous boundary of the main narrative—attempt to interrupt the logocentric said. Patrick Bourgeois supports Critchley’s notion by contending this would entail “deciphering a dislocation within a text, dividing it along the split axes of belonging and not belonging to the metaphysical or logocentric tradition. This clôtural structure of textuality is indicated by the transgression and restoration of closure, both maintained in a nonsymmetrical and nontotalizable relation” (*Boundary of Reason* 6).

Infinite Jest seeks out these moments of dislocation through a form of informational entropy designed to interrupt the epistemic closure of the hermeneutic circle. Like Gaddis and Pynchon before him, Wallace was fascinated with the idea of entropy that he channeled into *Infinite Jest* through the fittingly circular nature of James Incandenza’s annular fusion: the

fictional process involved in creating a form of perpetual energy from the detritus of consumerism through cycles of aridity and fertility within the Great Concavity/Convexity. This form of energy created out of detritus is owed in part to Pynchon. For example, Pirate Prentice maintains a rooftop banana garden where waste forms an “unbelievable black topsoil in which anything could grow, not the least being bananas” (*Gravity’s Rainbow* 5), and therefore “it is not often Death is told so clearly to fuck off” (10). Moreover, in Pynchon’s short story “The Secret Integration” the children are described as crafting an “imaginary playmate” by recycling “phrases, images, possibilities that grownups had somehow turned away from, repudiated, left out at the edges of towns. [...] things they could or did not want to live with but which the kids, on the other hand, could spend endless hours with, piercing together, rearranging, feeding, programming, refining” (*Slow Learner* 51).

Furthermore, Gödel’s incompleteness theorem—an area of academic interest Wallace shared with Pynchon—is also relevant to the treatment of informational entropy in *Infinite Jest*. As Weisenburger notes in his study of *Gravity’s Rainbow*, Gödel’s theorem refutes the notion Alfred North Whitehead and Bertrand Russell put forth in *Principia Mathematica* that claimed arithmetical expressions could be translated into sentences of formal logic and tested for their verifiability through a process of “mapping” (*Companion* 144). Gödel proved that axiomatic systems were intrinsically incomplete since “there would always exist, within the rules of the system, the possibility of a sentence or proposition the validity of which could not be decided by the rules themselves” (145). In *Infinite Jest*, these instances of excess and incompleteness that cannot be totalized within a closed epistemic framework function as an entropic disorder that challenges the closure of the hermeneutic circle.

Wallace attempted to portray this incompleteness by imagining what rupturing the hermeneutic circle could potentially look like at the end of *The Broom of the System*. The final episode depicts the malfunctioning of the closed phone line system that regulates calls at

Lenore's workplace, which subsequently leads to a form of communication breakdown. The dialogue reflects this disruption with the final line, "'You can trust me,' RV says watching her hand. 'I'm a man of my word'" (530). The missing word in the quote is in fact *word*, so the lacuna left behind is symbolic of the informational entropy that cannot be ordered within an epistemic framework. As a result, the lacuna in place of the final word both complements the post-structural notion of signifiers being in a state of perpetual belatedness along with serving as a symbolic upheaval of the hermeneutic circle as the absence of the final constituent part of the novel means that a complete understanding of it as a whole can never be truly achieved by the reader.

But despite this lacuna at the end of *The Broom of the System*, the attempt to interrupt the closure of the hermeneutic circle proves to be much more complicated in *Infinite Jest* due to the fact that the solipsistic somersaulter's attempt to identify "the cage's exit" is often conflated with the "bars of the cage" (222). However, Wallace proffers a way of negotiating the hermeneutic circle through a neopragmatic view of language. For example, organizations such as Alcoholics Anonymous and Narcotics Anonymous suspend epistemic objectivity by instead adopting a nominalist approach to language designed to re-conceptualize the closed system of the "traditional huge circle" (503) so that it becomes a symbol of unification that assuages language-laden solipsism rather than perpetuating it.

In this sense Hering argues, "the 'vicious' circle or cycle of addiction and solipsism is recontextualized and disarmed, and we have a circular image defined by a connecting of individuals that opposes that of the solo imprisoned somersaulter nailed to the floor" ("Choices and Chases" 95). Alcoholics Anonymous and Narcotics Anonymous therefore attempt to rehabilitate substance abusers by championing vicious infinite regress through a series of communal language-games that adopt tautological "empty platitudes" (*Infinite Jest* 1053) designed to offer substance abusers a different "slavish dependence" (706) over drugs.

The vicious, paralytic closure associated with solipsistic, self-reflexive thought is thus supplanted by the tautological banality of AA/NA adages that paradoxically trap individuals within a circular logic designed to repress critical thinking so that they can eventually accept how the “vapid the AA cliché, the sharper the canines of real truth it covers” (446).

These clichés are often initially dismissed by new members. For example, many addicts are frequently skeptical regarding the legitimacy of the program’s many maxims such as “One day at a time. Easy does it. First things first. [...] It works if you work” (270). But unlike the negative effects associated with solipsistic, self-reflexive thought, the program’s “Attitude of Platitude” encourages members to shed the thick skin of epistemic objectivity and instead be placed “into such a double-bound desperation that they finally come back in with their faces hanging off their skulls and beg to be told just what platitudes to shout, and how high to adjust their vacant grins” (706). Freudenthal suggests AA/NA is designed to “critique intellectualism itself, repeatedly emphasizing that the process of rational thought makes one vulnerable to addiction’s usurpation of self-control” (“Anti-Interiority” 201). Members are thus often reminded that their best thinking caused them to need rehabilitation in the first place, so they are encouraged to “abandon common sense and resolve to Hang In and keep coming and then find their cages all of a sudden open” (350).

In addition to attempting to offer a panacea for the annular cages of solipsism through the use of communal language-games and platitudes, Wallace also attempted to depict informational entropy emanating as lacunas in the text to symbolically interrupt the hermeneutic circle and undermine the logocentric said in favor of an ethical saying that eludes codification. To this end Wallace develops a couple of structural methods for hinting at an excess that cannot be thematized within his novel. For example, as has been analyzed in the previous section on cataloging, a lacuna occurs on page 787 in the main narrative, which is denoted by endnote 324. The endnote contains the missing passage that delves into

Pemulis's "emotio-philosophical" quandary (n.324: 1070) related to the delineation of expressible and quantifiable truth.

Another tactic for structurally negotiating epistemic and logocentric closure is represented by some of the dialogue that Wallace—in perhaps homage to Gaddis or Manuel Puig—purposely omits through the use of ellipses. While Burn convincingly contends that the ellipses “acknowledge and dramatize the role of the silent partner” (*Reader's Guide* 31), these instances of missing dialogue help interrupt the closure of Wallace's epistemic framework by symbolically functioning as an entropic alterity that cannot be ordered. An example of Wallace's use of ellipses occurs during a conversation between Hal and Mario regarding their father's suicide:

“You're talking about since Himself passed away.”

“...”

“See? You never say.”

“I do too say. I just did.”

“...”

“I just didn't happen to say what you wanted to hear, Booboo, is all.”

“...”

“There's a difference” (40-41).

During the conversation Mario keeps repeating “Hey Hal?” after asking his brother a series of questions. Hal appears to answer each of these questions, so one can infer that either Mario is unnecessarily repeating himself due to his stunted mental cognition or Hal is not actually able to engage in language-games with his brother. More importantly, the ellipses suggest a fundamental disconnection between the two interlocutors that complements Critchley's notion of a *clôtural* dislocation of the text.

Consequently, this example bears considerable post-structural implications. Bourgeois contends that it is “in the *clôtural* reading itself that the logos precisely as closure is first focused upon, and, from there, in the process of this technique of reading, the language of

difference emerges, leading beyond the transgression of closure to the alterity of the text! And the alterity is reached due to the ellipsis” (*Boundary of Reason* 9). The implementation of ellipses, as had been previously incorporated within the dialogue of *The Broom of the System*, figuratively highlights how the pursuit of alterity inevitably leads to communication breakdown. But aside from merely interrupting the logocentric said, the ellipses can also represent a pre-ontological saying as argued by Levinas:

This excess is *saying*, [...] a saying without words, but not with empty hands. If silence speaks, it is not by some ecstasy of intentionality, but through the hyperbolic passivity of giving, [...] prior to all willing and all thematization. This is a Saying bearing witness to the other of the Infinite, which tears me open as it awakens me in the Saying (“God and Philosophy” 74).

Wallace’s use of ellipses to represent the excess of the saying is also apparent in *Brief Interviews with Hideous Men* during the episodes when the hideous men are being interviewed by a therapist whose questions are denoted solely as “Q:” Due to the one-sided nature of these interviews, the reader is forced to ascertain the questions by solely analyzing the men’s responses. The absent questions come to represent a saying that Boswell argues requires the reader to engage in “Wittgenstein’s language game, since the pieces, in a sense, constitute a ‘game’ in which meaning is a product of peculiar ‘rules’ the pieces rely on for meaning, a ‘game,’ moreover, in which the reader must play a role” (*Understanding Wallace* 188). The reader is therefore an active contributor by participating in these language-games with the text to foster meaning in the place of the absent dialogue.

Boswell further contends that this relationship between the ellipses, language-games, and an ethical saying points to a lacuna caused by a type of refraction that “creates an empty space in the narrative, the space between two mirrors reflecting each other, and in this space resides the story’s true heart, that act of empathy that is there as a product of the narrative

because, paradoxically, it is not dramatized directly” (197). Wallace was acutely aware of the impossibility of dramatizing this “act of empathy” without unethically thematizing what Buber referred to as the sacred I-Thou relation where the “relation to the You is unmediated. [...] Every means is an obstacle. Only where all means have disintegrated encounters occur” (*I and Thou* I.XV). Wallace therefore situates the subject of empathy within this empty narrative space to prevent the I-Thou relation from being manipulated into an I-It relation to conform to the logocentric said.

But while Wallace’s structural implementation of ellipses and lacunas can symbolize a rupturing of epistemic closure in favor of the ethical excess within *Infinite Jest*, being able to truly interrupt the hermeneutic circle to represent the Other within the novel is impossible. Consequently, this alterity-oriented crusade requires adopting an element of hermeneutical non-realism and an anti-representational view of language. Accordingly, the conflict arising from language as being necessary for conveying meaning against the view of language leading to a totalizing form of solipsism can be assuaged through a neopragmatic, cohesion-renewing view of language that, as Rorty explained, “does not view knowledge as a matter of getting reality right, but rather as a matter of acquiring habits of action for coping with reality” (*Objectivity, Relativism, and Truth* 1). Kevin Vanhoozer elaborates on this view by arguing, “Language is not a clear surface that reflects reality; it is rather the glass through which we can see only darkly. Rorty here agrees with Derrida: *we can never break out or rise above language to make sure that our words correspond to the world*” (*Meaning in This Text?* 55). So rather than conceptualizing the purpose of language as attempting to accurately mirror reality, a notion Rorty dismissed in *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* (1979), these ironist “habits of action for coping with reality” instead emanate in *Infinite Jest* as dynamic belief systems that communally-construct temporary versions of truth as a way of adapting and reacting to the world in a non-dogmatic way.

It will now be argued that these dynamic, faith-based, and communally-driven belief systems—embodying a type of neopragmatic mythos and the spiritual aspects of Levinasian phenomenology—function, according to Robert Bolger, as a type of “Wallacian theology” which adopts stories that are not necessarily true in order to “create a sort of ‘meta-narrative’ that justifies other individual’s existence and actions” (“Pragmatic Spirituality” 46). Referred to by Gaddis’s McCandless as a “good serviceable fiction” (*Carpenter’s Gothic* 121) to “get through the night” (157), this Wallacian theology—complementing what Amy Hungerford describes as a “belief in the religious qualities and powers of meaninglessness” (*Postmodern Belief* xiv)—allows for the pursuit of alterity that is otherwise impossible to conceptualize and thematize within *Infinite Jest*.

This line of reasoning is largely owed to Wittgenstein’s posthumously-published work, *On Certainty* (1969). Wittgenstein outlined what he viewed as the pitfalls associated with Western epistemology and its tendency to attempt to identify what can be unequivocally known through philosophical skepticism. Certain societal beliefs, however, must be free from this radical form of doubt in order for a culture to be able to function because, as Wittgenstein argued, “At the core of all well-founded belief, lies belief that is unfounded” (253). Ryerson notes that the mentor of Wallace’s father, Norman Malcolm, was an assistant editor for *On Certainty* (*Fate, Time, Language* 20), and Wallace thematically channeled the book’s assertions into his short story, “Another Pioneer” (2001). The plot focuses on a precocious child who—after being repeatedly questioned by villagers whom come to rely upon the boy’s wisdom for generating truth—eventually begins to question the underlying assumptions of his civilization to the point where “the advanced boy’s relation to as it were both Truth and Culture [...] breaks with previous convention,” which “sends both cultural and economic shock-waves through the village’s community” (*Oblivion* 130-31). The story highlights how even the most robust epistemic frameworks are predicated on faith-based belief systems.

Consequently, the belief systems that allow for this alterity-oriented pursuit to remain possible adopts Gaddis's quasi-spiritual attempt to foster an *agape* with the Other while also helping to assuage Pynchon's fear regarding the totalizing nature of such pursuits by acknowledging their status as radically-contingent, fictional constructs. Therefore, Wallace's neopragmatic, alterity-oriented fictions—like Wittgenstein's ladder—can be thrown away the moment they cease to offer solutions of how to renew cohesion with the Other in order to better cope with the chaos nature of an ever-changing world.

4.5 Alterity and the Supreme Fiction

The dynamic, faith-based belief system necessary for undertaking Wallace's quixotic pursuit of rupturing epistemic closure in favor of the ethical excess despite recognizing the impossibility of such a quest was also explored by a different Wallace: the modernist critic and poet, Wallace Stevens. This faith takes the form of the *supreme fiction* that functions as a post-Nietzschean, fictive replacement for God that can only be achieved through willed self-deception. Milan Kundera describes the circumstances that made it necessary to generate the supreme fiction following the end of the medieval episteme: "As God slowly departed from the seat whence he had directed the universe and its order of values, distinguished good from evil, and endowed each thing with meaning, [...] the single divine Truth decomposed by the myriad relative truths parcelled out by men. Thus was born the world of the Modern Era..." ("Depreciated Legacy" 6). The supreme fiction arises from this need to forge "myriad relative truths" to imbue the world with meaning and order.

As Stevens argued in his series of aphorisms titled "Adagia" (1940), a supreme fiction arises when one recognizes it is "the belief and not the god that counts. [...] the final belief is to believe in a fiction, which you know to be a fiction, there being nothing else. The exquisite truth is to know that it is a fiction and that you believe in it willingly" (189). The primary role of Stevens's supreme fiction is to attempt a return to a first idea that is obfuscated by rational-

based methodologies—measures the narrator in *Infinite Jest* denies when stating that “logical validity is not a guarantee of truth” (202). Stevens’s notion of the first idea is a pre-epistemic pure poetry similar to the poetic space Esme attempted to reach “where nothing was created, where originality did not exist: because it was origin” (*Recognitions* 114). Moreover, Rorty described something akin to the first idea when claiming, “I linguisticize as many pre-linguistic-turn philosophers as I can, in order to read them as prophets of the utopia in which all metaphysical problems have been dissolved, and religion and science have yielded their place to poetry” (*Rorty & Pragmatism* 33).

Furthermore, Stevens referred to the first idea as “a poem that never reaches words” (“Notes” 2.96), which is essentially an ethical saying that eludes codification. Krzysztof Ziarek describes the first idea as an ineffable, pre-linguistic notion that has the “positivity only of a trace, disrupting the text by means of its absence and otherness, its modality is always that of a maybe or perhaps” (*Inflected Language* 125), which suggests that Stevens is preoccupied with the “‘non-poem’ withholding itself from writing, [...] in what remains other with respect to the text of a poem” (105). Stevens addressed this notion of the first idea as an ethical excess beyond representation in his poem, “Notes toward a Supreme Fiction” (1942):

There was a muddy centre before we breathed.

There was a myth before the myth began,

Venerable and articulate and complete (1.4: 10-12).

Complementing Wallace’s neopragmatic negotiation of the epistemic boundaries of the hermeneutic circle through communal language-games, Stevens further suggested that it is the artist’s role to encourage the creation of supreme fictions because “what makes the poet the potent figure that he is [...] is that he creates the world to which we turn incessantly and without knowing it and that he gives to life the supreme fictions without which we are unable to conceive of it” (“Noble Rider” 31). Hite also explored how language serves as a necessary

means for proliferating new fictions purportedly capable of addressing that which we are unable to conceive of:

Meaning must emerge from the play of language, or it will not emerge at all.

In the absence of an external guarantor of truth, human beings must constitute fictions to address their needs for meaning and value. The capacity of language to proliferate endlessly serves the enterprise of creating new fictions, each in its own way a response to the demand for a supreme fiction, none of them able to maintain supremacy (*Ideas of Order* 36-7).

Therefore, the notion of a supreme fiction offers a means to negotiating the unavoidable paradoxes arising in the pursuit of attempting to conceptualize alterity that cannot be made comprehensible within epistemic frameworks without being totalized in the process. This quixotic faith in the capacity of language to generate these fictions would, however, be missing from Markson's *Wittgenstein's Mistress* because—as Wallace suggested—the protagonist's solipsistic alienation is caused by her cynical view of the sterility of language, which leads to her inability to maintain a “belief in either a reader for them or a (meta)physical presence producing them” because it “would require a kind of quixoticism Kate's long since lost or resigned” (“Empty Plenum” 223).

Even so, Derrida viewed the relationship between alterity and the supreme fiction as being somewhat tenuous in “Violence and Metaphysics.” In the essay he claimed the conceptualization and thematization of “alterity or negativity interior to the ego, [...] is but an appearance: an illusion, a ‘play of the Same’” (93). Nevertheless, Derrida's suggestion that the egocentric attempt to conceptualize alterity through an illusionary “play of the Same” in fact complements the illusionary nature of the supreme fiction and its impossible pursuit of the first idea that eludes language. Ziarek suggests that Derrida's preoccupation with how alterity evades the language of self-sameness is an integral part of the supreme fiction:

It is as if Stevens were teasing us with the suggestion that language can note otherness only as a supreme fiction, or, even more forcefully, that the very attempt to note otherness is itself a supreme fiction. [...] Supreme fiction can, then, be read as the Stevensian notation of otherness, perhaps only a poetic fiction, whose “maybe” is constantly exposed by the self-sameness of its language (*Inflected Language* 130).

Consequently, the adoption of a supreme fiction that ambitiously attempts a neopragmatic negotiation of language to generate poetic fictions capable of notating otherness is perhaps the only way to move forward with attempting to account for an entropic alterity that interrupts logocentric closure.

It seems fitting that the philosopher who helped advance the notion of *clôtural* readings would also be interested in the supreme fiction. Critchley observes how “[p]aradoxically, a supreme fiction is a fiction that we know to be a fiction—there being nothing else—but in which we nevertheless believe. A supreme fiction is one self-conscious of its radical contingency” (*Faith of the Faithless* 91). Like Rorty’s call for the ironist to recognize how one’s sense of selfhood is radically contingent upon the Other, Critchley contends that the supreme fiction’s acknowledgement of its own radical contingency as an ephemeral linguistic construct helps assuage some of the more totalizing tendencies of more rational-based measures. Nevertheless, Critchley outlines the inherent paradoxe associated with the attempt to conceptualize alterity because “what is unbound, nonthematizable and wholly other to ontology and logocentrism can only be articulated through a certain repetition of ontological or logocentric language, a repetition that interrupts that language” (“Bois” 178). So if, for example, Kierkegaard claims that a “teleological suspension of the ethical” is necessary for rationalizing the antinomies an individual encounters when attempting to comprehend the nature of an infinite Being (*Fear and Trembling* 41), then the supreme

fiction requires a suspension of not only the ethical but also the epistemological to avoid the inevitable paradoxes associated with attempting to comprehend alterity.

However, this is not to suggest that the philosophy of Critchley and Rorty are completely compatible with one another. Rorty, for example, at one point stated how he was “unable to connect Levinas’s pathos of the infinite with ethics or politics” (“Deconstruction and Pragmatism” 17). Rorty took Critchley to task for his Levinasian emphasis on maintaining a responsibility to the ineffable second order at the expense of political praxis because, “When we take up our public responsibilities...the infinite and the unrepresentable are merely nuisances. Thinking of our responsibilities in these terms is as much of a stumbling-block to effective political organization as is the sense of sin” (*Achieving Our Country* 97). Nevertheless, Critchley also attempted to address Rorty’s concern by reflecting upon how to place the unrepresentable into the public sphere. Critchley’s solution is a type of neopragmatic measure similar Wittgenstein’s rationale in *On Certainty* and Rorty’s notion of merging the ironist’s private sphere with the civic project of human solidarity through a communal form of self-creation:

We appear to be facing a paradox. On the one hand, to be true everything must become a religion, otherwise belief lacks (literally) credibility or authority. Yet, on the other hand, we are and have to be the authors of that authority. The faith of the faithless must be a work of collective self-creation where I am the smithy of my own soul and where we must all become soul-smiths, as it were (*Faith of the Faithless* 4).

By referring to those who create the supreme fiction as “soul-smiths,” Critchley alludes to Stephen Dedalus’ epiphany in the denouement of Joyce’s *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (1916) when Stephen claims, “I go to encounter for the millionth time the reality of experience and to forge in the smithy of my soul the uncreated conscience of my race” (228).

While Critchley's suggestion succumbs to circular reasoning since authority is necessary for the fiction to generate faith but the fiction needs the faith of soul-smiths to imbue it with authority, it is nevertheless noteworthy for its promotion of the communal involvement necessary for creating a supreme fiction that embodies the collective "uncreated conscience" of a society.

Wallace, however, explicitly countered the notion of the soul-smith in his story, "The Soul is not a Smithy" (2003). In the work the adult protagonist attempts to recall the details of a traumatic childhood episode that occurred during school when his teacher experienced an existential crisis that led him to taking the protagonist and other students hostage. During the incident the protagonist was daydreaming and therefore missed out on important sensory data, which forces him as an adult to retroactively construct the story from the memories of other characters. As a child the protagonist would often peer out of his classroom's square-meshed window and treat it like a comic strip by ordering the phenomena appearing within the individual squares into cohesive story panels:

anything in any way remarkable in the view outside—such as a piece of vivid litter blowing from one wire square to the next, or a city bus flowing stolidly from right to left through the lowest three horizontal columns of squares—became the impetus for privately imagined films' or cartoons' storyboards, in which each of the remaining squares of the window's wire mesh could be used to continue and deepen the panels' narrative (*Oblivion* 70).

This type of narration becomes symbolic of the protagonist's attempt to combine his experience as a hostage with accounts from the other witnesses into a unified narrative. The individual testimonies—like the protagonist's window-based fantasy—are indeed self-made constructs, but Wallace counters the notion of the soul being a smithy by demonstrating the aesthetic impotence of the soul. The protagonist notes how these reports are corrupted by the

errancy of memory because, “As we age, many people notice a shift in the objects of their memories” (*Oblivion* 97). The story demonstrates how the protagonist’s convoluted narration and inability to step outside the egocentric framing of his narrative reinforces the drawbacks associated with the totalizing, solipsistic desire to situate oneself within world by making phenomena present-at-hand as opposed to the more communal, albeit radically contingent nature of neopragmatic creation.

So despite Wallace’s rejection of the soul being a smithy, Critchley’s idea of the faithless participating in a work of collective self-creation offers invaluable insight about the treatment of the supreme fiction within *Infinite Jest*. Burn, for example, suggests one of the novel’s “most persistent themes” is “the spiritual hollowness of a life without belief” (*Reader’s Guide* 63). The idea of a collective self-creation—an amalgamation of both communal and egocentric pursuits—may seem counterintuitive. However, this is reflected by how the supreme fiction is treated in the text as a Hegelian Spirit that is both collectively constructed and individually adopted by members of AA/NA to liberate them from addiction and solipsism closing them off from the Other.

This synthesis between communal and egocentric pursuit complements how Kierkegaard conceptualized the soul as encompassing a dualism between the aesthetic and ethical realms (*Either/Or* 1: 86). On the one hand the aesthetic realm of the supreme fiction is geared towards using the fiction as a means to individual self-creation, but on the other hand the ethical dimension is a civic one that—like the promotion of the supreme fiction by AA/NA—limits the autonomy of the subject in favor of communal interests. Although it may seem that the idea of a communally-driven form of self-creation would lead to a fabricated sense of selfhood, Allard den Dulk contends, “[f]or Kierkegaard, the fact that the self is something ‘made’ does not imply that it is a fiction, in the sense of an imperfect artificiality that corrupts the diversity of the individual” (“Boredom, Irony, Anxiety” 87). Rather, the

combination of the aesthetic and ethical realms used to develop the supreme fiction can lead to what Kierkegaard argued is a profound self-realization otherwise inaccessible to the spiritually-hollow individual (*Sickness unto Death* 3).

But while Wallace incorporates both the aesthetic and ethical dimensions into his conceptualization of the supreme fiction, he does not necessarily consider them equal. Wallace prioritizes the supreme fiction as a civic rather than an individual construct, which is closer to Stevens's understanding of the fiction as being a primarily pragmatic one because its importance arises "not alone from an aesthetic point of view, but for what they reveal, for what they validate and invalidate, for the support that they give" ("Adagia" 186). So even though many members of AA/NA lack genuine spiritual belief, they are still encouraged to adopt a serviceable fiction by praying to an Other of their choosing—exemplified by the dictum, "God as you understand Him" (*Infinite Jest* 443)—to help them with sobriety. This fiction, however, does not require sincere belief in order to be adopted since "AA and NA and CA's 'God' does not apparently require that you believe in Him/Her/It before He/She/It will help you" (201).

Wallace's experience with organized religion can perhaps inform why he was so fascinated by the serviceable fictions offered by AA/NA. While Wallace never went to church during his childhood because, as Max describes, "his parents refused to let him or his sister go [...] because it would contaminate the rigor of their thought; believers were little better than dupes" (*Every Love Story* 114), he became interested in spiritual practices as an adult. Although he was never a member of a congregation, Wallace referenced periodically attending church services during such as in his essay "The View from Ms. Thompson's" (2001). In an article written by John Williams, Max mentions how Wallace may have found a serviceable fiction in the form of organized religion as a way of liberating himself from his own addiction: "He had no natural predisposition for belief in a divine being, but I think he

forced himself to overcome it mostly to remind himself he wasn't He. It helped him to relax to know not everything was under his control" ("God, Mary Karr, and Ronald Reagan" 4). However, Max also concedes that Wallace's remarks about attending church services may have been his code word—a type of serviceable, self-created fiction—for his own AA/NA meetings that he attended to both help deal with his substance abuse as well as to research the inner-workings of the program for *Infinite Jest* (4).

Wallace's quasi-theological view also has the added benefit of helping avoid the onto-theological traits associated with Western metaphysics that Heidegger argued marginalizes alterity and contributes to a forgetfulness of Being due to its conflation of ontology with theology. For Heidegger, ontological questions about beingness inevitably lead to the theological question of "which being is the highest being?" ("Kant's Thesis" 10-11), and therefore ontology merges with a theologically-driven faith while theology—what Heidegger referred to as a "positive science" of faith ("Phenomenology and Theology" 41)—attempts to ontologically conceptualize the highest being. Consequently, Boswell notes that the "Kierkegaardian religion" of AA/NA (*Understanding Wallace* 143) avoids these ontotheological pitfalls because the "'AA God' is not any one thing but rather a fluid concept that is more a 'necessary fiction,' in Stevens's sense, than an, if not the, transcendental signified" (146).

During the same year Wallace published *Infinite Jest* he also wrote an introduction for the *Review of Contemporary Fiction* where he expressed his views of religion as a fluid concept separate from the austere formal logic of rational-driven methodologies such as logical positivism:

To me, religion is incredibly fascinating as a general abstract object of thought—it might be the most interesting thing there is. But when it gets to the point of trying to communicate specific or persuasive stuff about religion, I

find I always get frustrated and bored. I think this is because the stuff that's truly interesting about religion is inarticulable ("Quo Vadis" 7-8).

Max suggests that Wallace's frustration when listening to religious discussions may have stemmed from his own experience with AA/NA where at times he found the rhetoric to be untenable: "the logical tautology behind recovery bothered him, [...] He was astonished to find people talking about a 'higher power' without any evidence beyond their wish that there were one" (*Every Love Story* 140). Instead, Wallace—like Wittgenstein—was more interested in the ineffable nature of spirituality that could not be articulated.

So rather than adopting the totalizing onto-theological discourse that presupposes the existence of a transcendental signified, Wallace treated language-games as a communal form of secular worship that recognizes its conditional, rather than absolute, claim to truth. This view is apparent in a letter he wrote to Jonathan Franzen claiming, "If words are all we have as world and god, we must treat them with care and rigor: we must worship" (*Every Love Story* 166). Despite how Wallace recognized the complicity of language in the totalization of alterity, Patrick Horn contends Wallace also acknowledged its invaluable role in giving meaning to concepts that are impossible to logically defend:

Moral and religious language necessarily involves trusting in something that cannot be clearly delineated and justified by the intellect, trusting in something whose source is inherently Mystery to the intellect. [...] What follows from this observation is that many features of our lives involve speaking to one another about things that we have some understanding of but cannot intellectually justify: goodness, love, grace, justice, God, and so on ("Does Language Fail Us?" 267).

This notion is supported by van Ewijk who suggests that the banal AA/NA aphorisms in *Infinite Jest* function as language-games that intend "to force the addict out of the solipsistic

cage and into a dyadic community of peers with the help of a Power beyond the self” (“I/Other” 134). This “dyadic community of peers” helps addicts avoid succumbing to a totalizing mode of recursive thinking referred to as “Analysis-Paralysis” (*Infinite Jest* 203) due to how the Disease “makes its headquarters in the head” (272). Boswell notes how AA/NA accomplishes this feat by effectively inverting the binary between inside and outside because if the addicts are left to choose between being “in the Program” or “Out There, where the Disease is” (1002n), then “to be Out in the World is to be trapped In the Cage, whereas to be In the Program is, effectively, to be Out, because, although the community of AA is a refuge, it is also a place where one can open oneself to the truth” (*Understanding Wallace* 145). This inversion complements Levinas’s call for rejecting an insular, egocentric rationale in order to understand the infinite without totalizing it—an idea predicated on “the placing of the Infinite in thought, but wholly other than the thought [...] as thought—without wanting to play on words—the *in* of the Infinite signified at once the *non-* and the *within*” (*Of God* 63). However, like Wallace’s own experience with the tautological nature of AA/NA rhetoric, the purported Power spawned by these communally-constructed fictions is initially met with skepticism by addicts who are wary of adopting the platitudes.

For example, the character Geoffrey Day—a former professor suffering from severe alcoholism—challenges the validity of the AA/NA tenets by claiming, “So then at forty-six years of age I came here to learn to live by clichés, [...] To turn my will and life over to the care of clichés. One day at a time. Easy does it. First thing first. Courage is fear that has said its prayers. Ask for help. Thy will not mine be done. It works if you work it. Grow or go” (270). He also questions the rudimentary nature of the adages by stating, “I used to think in long compound sentences with subordinate clauses and even the odd polysyllable. Now I find I needn’t” (271). However, he eventually realizes that regardless of their simplicity, the AA/NA language-games and the serviceable fictions they generate can allow members to

liberate themselves from their cages of solipsism if they are willing to worship something other than their totalizing logic of self-interest.

A manifestation of this logic of self-interest that the language-games attempt to curb is the totalizing I-It relation. As had been previously explored, this cognitive impulse totalizes phenomena by promoting a form of causal, hierarchical order that prioritizes the self through—as van Ewijk claims—the creation of “a very lonely, egocentric universe where there is no place for the ‘Other’” (“I/Other” 138). Buber instead advocated for an I-Thou relation in which the “I and You confront each other freely in a reciprocity that is not involved in or tainted by any causality” (*I and Thou* 101). AA/NA attempts to avoid the I-It relation by encouraging its members to reject the causal “appeal to exterior *Cause* that can slide, in the addictive mind, so insidiously into *Excuse*” because “The *Why* of the Disease is a labyrinth” (*Infinite Jest* 374). Instead, addicts are encouraged to “Identify” with other members through language-games rather than to “Compare” (345) their experiences because comparison risks the subject promoting a totalizing I-It relation at the expense of the Other.

Later on, the text describes how Don Gately comes to reject his logic of self-interest by reluctantly adopting the supreme fiction of the AA/NA God:

It’s supposed to be one of AA’s major selling points that you get to choose your own God. [...] The sole experience so far is that he takes one of AA’s very rare specific suggestions and hits the knees in the A.M. and asks for Help and then hits the knees again at bedtime and says Thank You, whether he believes he’s talking to Anything/-body or not, and he somehow gets through the day clean (443).

Freudenthal suggests that this process of adopting the supreme fiction situates Gately into a state of “anti-interiority” by encouraging him to partake in “a compulsive, ritual, and physical investment in an entity outside of himself that may or may not exist. Despite his ambivalence

about the nature of the powers controlling him, he creates a functional but empty signifier for them” (“Anti-Interiority” 192). Those who suspend their disbelief and place faith in this “functional but empty signifier,” such as the elder members of AA/NA known as “The Crocodiles,” experience the benefits of this willed self-deception since, “The Crocodiles, decades sober, live in a totally different spiritual galaxy, inside. One long-timer describes it as he has a whole new unique interior spiritual castle, now, to live in” (365). This “interior spiritual castle,” rather than being a solipsistic construct, functions as a type of neopragmatic, communal construction that liberates the Crocodiles from their vices.

Likewise, Gately is eventually able to become sober and establish his own interior spiritual castle due to his internalization of the communal language-games, embracement of the I-Thou relation, and adoption of the supreme fiction. Freudenthal suggests this culminates in Gately experiencing “AA’s highly abstract notion of a timeless infinity of present moments as a bodily, anti-intellectual endeavor because he believes that the human mind’s capacities of empirical observation and rationalization intensify pain, not lessen it” (“Anti-Interiority” 206). However, he nevertheless remains incredulous after this serviceable fiction leads him to sobriety:

He couldn’t believe it. He wasn’t Grateful so much as kind of suspicious about it, the Removal. How could some kind of Higher Power he didn’t even believe in magically let him out of the cage when Gately had been a total hypocrite in even asking something he didn’t believe in to let him out of a cage he had like zero hope of ever being let out of? (468).

This episode functions as a counterpoint to Hal’s radical sense of disbelief—an intense skepticism typifying Wittgenstein’s epistemological concerns in *On Certainty*. Burn notes that by the end of the novel, “Hal can find only emptiness not just in theological belief, but in any kind of belief” (*Reader’s Guide* 74), which is confirmed by one of Hal’s epiphanies: “It

now lately sometimes seemed like a kind of black miracle to me that people could actually care deeply about a subject or a pursuit, and could go on caring this way for years on end. Could dedicate their entire lives to it. It seemed admirable and at the same time pathetic” (900). But despite his clear lack of belief, the proleptic first episode of the narrative suggests that Hal perhaps altered this view during a period that coincides with his loss of the ability to communicate with others.

Unlike Gately who requires communal language-games in order to release him from his solipsistic confines, Hal must first establish a strong sense of selfhood for the supreme fiction to take root. For most of the novel Hal is a brilliant orator who, unlike Gately, can engage in language-games but lacks an intact sense of selfhood. Thus, in the proleptic first episode despite being unable to engage in language-games or even articulate his thoughts without it looking “like some sort of infant’s random stabs on a keyboard” (9), Hal finally acknowledges that he has “an intricate history. Experience and feelings” (11). Many interpretations of this episode tend to focus on the horror of Hal’s mind-body schism. While these perspectives are not necessarily misguided, they do not completely appreciate the passage’s more positive ramifications. Rather, it can be contended that the schism is in fact necessary for allowing Hal to self-actualize to the point of being able to adopt a supreme fiction capable of mending his solipsistic hollowness closed off from the cohesion-renewing Other. The supreme fiction is therefore a testament to Wallace’s neopragmatic approach for fostering an alterity-oriented language that offers cohesion between the private sphere of the ethical saying and the more civic sphere facilitated by the logocentric said.

4.6 Concluding Thoughts on Wallace’s Cohesion-Renewing Other

In Wallace’s *Westward the Course of Empire Takes Its Way*—which parodically appropriates and critiques metafictional tropes from John Barth’s “Lost in the Funhouse” (1968)—a character claims, “We all have our little solipsistic delusions, ghastly intuitions of

utter singularity” (308). But, as Levinas argued, “there can be no place for singularity in a totality” (*Totality and Infinity* 244). Wallace therefore attempts to neopragmatically negotiate the totalizing closure of the epistemic framework within *Infinite Jest* in favor of the cohesion-renewing Other. This pursuit is Wallace’s way of avoiding engaging in a totalizing sense of epistemic foundationalism while also acknowledging the novel’s contingency on language in order to articulate this ethically-driven endeavor.

Nevertheless, Wallace differs from Gaddis and Pynchon in the sense that rather than merely acknowledging the obfuscation of the ethical saying, Wallace’s neopragmatic methodology offers a means of pursuing the infinite in the form of the supreme fiction as a communally-constructed mythos predicated on the Other. Bourgeois notes that the quixotic pursuit for that which exceeds the purview of the ontological said can become the impetus for rupturing epistemic closure:

The excess is the demand and absolutely given belief in the priority of the flux and of the closure supposedly intrinsic to all openness to logos, thus constituting a priority of the nonlogocentric. Hence, the logos inevitably leads to its own downfall because it is exclusive, closive, and emerges from a prior abyss. That is, there is a further belief, even more basic, that all beliefs reveal the initial belief in logos as a bit of an illusion (*Boundary of Reason* 11).

The supreme fiction as a communally-generated faith in the “nonlogocentric” helps assuage the language-laden anxiety often leading to an “exclusive, closive” solipsistic insularity experienced by Wallace’s various anhedonic characters. Consequently, this quixotic quest to account for alterity within a logocentric tradition necessitates adopting a serviceable fiction espousing that such an impossible aim is in fact achievable. This fiction essentially allows Wallace to challenge epistemic closure while avoiding the antinomian pitfalls inevitably arising when attempting to conceptualize and, by extension, totalize the Other.

Nevertheless, the logocentric said is still a necessary component for forging the supreme fiction. Perhaps the great irony here is that in Wallace's profoundly ethical, yet impossible attempt to rupture the insularity of egocentric thought in favor of the cohesion-renewing Other, he fosters a form of informational entropy that disrupts the cohesion of the text. Accordingly, the cohesion-renewing Other becomes the cohesion-eschewing Other. As a result, the pursuit of alterity—simultaneously demanding responsibility from the reader yet incapable of being conceptualized and thematized within the novel—effectively becomes the jest of the infinite within *Infinite Jest*. As a literary descendent of *Hamlet*, Wallace's novel effectively amends the binary of the play's famous soliloquy: rather than choosing whether to be or not to be, Wallace instead opts for a third possibility by embracing a Levinasian, alterity-oriented position exceeding the purview of his epistemic framework—that which is *otherwise* than being.

Wallace's cohesion-renewing Other—as has been adapted for the purpose of this study—thereby offers a potential point of convergence between the formal logic of analytic philosophy and the more nebulous designs of its continental counterpart. This negotiation helps to oppose an insidious type of cognitive impulse that causes mankind to be susceptible to assuming that “one's head is, in some sense, the whole world” (“Empty Plenum” 221). Wallace accomplishes this aim by encouraging the reader to adopt an acute form of empathy in order to establish an *agape* with the Other—a sentiment exemplifying Wallace's adage, “Good literature makes your head throb heartlike” (218).

Wallace's awareness of the infinite alterity that perpetually eludes the totalizing potential of his storytelling also perhaps informs the meaning of an enigmatic phrase he included throughout his oeuvre: “Every love story is a ghost story.” Wallace's neopragmatic vision is ultimately an act of love for the Other that he can never articulate—an ethical saying situated against the logocentric said—and therefore *Infinite Jest* functions as a Derridean,

hauntological ghost story forever in search of these spectral traces of alterity evading epistemic closure. More importantly, Wallace's structural and symbolic negotiation of totality and infinity within *Infinite Jest*—predicated on the exploration of various epistemological approaches to understanding one's place within a fragmented world radically contingent upon the Other—lays the foundation for the continual examination of the place for alterity within the ever-evolving episteme of the digital age.

Conclusion

“The postmodern would be that which, in the modern, puts forward the unrepresentable in presentation itself; that which denies itself the solace of good forms, the consensus of a taste which would make it possible to share collectively the nostalgia for the unattainable; that which searches for new presentations, not in order to enjoy them but in order to impart a stronger sense of the unrepresentable. A postmodern artist or writer is in the position of a philosopher: the text he writes, the work he produces are not in principle governed by pre-established rules, and they cannot be judged according to a determining judgment, by applying familiar categories to the text or to the work. Those rules and categories are what the work of art itself is looking for.”

—Jean-François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition*

“All our so-called consciousness is a more or less fantastic commentary on an unknown, perhaps unknowable, but felt text.”

—Friedrich Nietzsche, *Daybreak*

5.1 Closure and Open-Endedness

In Dostoevsky’s *The Brothers Karamazov* (1880), the character Alyosha at one point remarks, “We are all responsible for everyone else—but I am more responsible than all the others” (374). The quote was a favorite of Levinas, and its emphasis on the self’s non-reciprocal responsibility to the Other serves as a common banner for uniting the ethical pursuits adopted by Gaddis, Pynchon, and Wallace within their respective novels. If repositories of information make data present-at-hand to allow readers to be able to better situate themselves in the world, these three authors self-reflexively negotiate the epistemic frameworks they erect in order to effectively highlight the excess that cannot be categorized. Such a pursuit complements what Foucault described as “breaking up all the ordered surfaces and all the planes with which we are accustomed to tame the wild profusion of existing things,” and—in the process—helping to account for an excess that “collapse[s] our age-old distinction between the Same and the Other” (*Order of Things* xvi).

Responding to a culturally-vacuous post-war society devoid of absolutes, it was first shown how Gaddis attempted to collapse this “age-old distinction between the Same and the Other” in *The Recognitions* by using simulacra as a means of symbolically subverting the

correspondence theory of truth and the subject-object distinction that underpin epistemic frameworks. This allowed Gaddis to promote Wyatt's aesthetic vision espousing an ethics of indeterminacy as a means of fostering an *agape* with the indeterminate Other. Embracing indeterminacy is pivotal for Gaddis because, as Jack Gibbs contends in *J R*, it is erroneous to assume "that organization is an inherent property of knowledge itself, and that disorder and chaos are simply irrelevant forms that threaten it from outside. In fact it's exactly the opposite. Order is simply a thin perilous condition we try to impose on the basic reality of chaos..." (20). Wary of the fabricated nature of epistemic order that insulates mankind from the "basic reality" of a chaotic world, Gaddis's novel sought a quixotic return to the indeterminate, primordial first idea that predates epistemic differentiation. Perhaps paradoxically, Wyatt's imperative of the "self-who-can-do-more" (*Recognitions* 253) as a means of grasping this sublime idea necessitates the self essentially doing less by culling egocentric impulses to be able to open up to the possibility of establishing an *agape* with the ineffable Other and thus "make negative things do the work of positive ones" (590).

Gaddis's earnest attempt to foster a communion with the Other in a world he believes to be more ignorant than malicious is diametrically opposed to Pynchon's paranoia aimed at a world dominated by malicious systems of control. It was argued that Pynchon, cautious of adopting totalizing countermeasures in the form of ethical imperatives in order to resist these techno-scientific systems, promoted the notion of illogical negativism—a parody of the austere formal logic associated with logical positivism—as a means of situating his work into a non-committal, liminal position that mirrors the nebulous nature of his Other Order of Being. Frank Palmeri, citing Foucault's *Order of Things*, suggests that such a position "lies outside the field of the rational" and thus "can only be seen as madness, as non-sense" ("Other than Postmodernism?" 3.2). Accordingly, Pynchon's pursuit of the "magical Other" (*Crying Lot* 136) that lies outside the purview of epistemic frameworks—an aim akin to what

Palmeri suggests is a Levinasian “pre-original responsibility for the other [that] escapes and precedes being, definition, and identity” (2.1)—is impossible. However, Pynchon’s refusal to depict the Other in more concrete terms serves as a way of avoiding the totalization of alterity throughout his oeuvre.

But while Pynchon’s refusal to take a proactive stance in the form of an ethical imperative allowed him to avoid succumbing to similar types of totalizing thought processes that he railed against, Wallace attempted to assuage the more relativistic pitfalls associated with Pynchon’s work. It was argued that Wallace’s exploration of a “cohesion-renewing Other” in *Infinite Jest* attempted to renew cohesion between Gaddis’s earnest attempt to promote the self-who-can-do-more as a means of returning to a primordial first idea against Pynchon’s wariness towards adopting totalizing imperatives at the expense of alterity. Conscious of both the need to actively adopt an ethical imperative for the Other while also being mindful of the necessity of having to engage with totalizing epistemic frameworks in order to convey meaning, Wallace promoted a neopragmatic approach through the aid of language-games as a means to communally constructing a supreme fiction that allows his work to pursue an ineffable alterity while nevertheless repudiating epistemic foundationalism and acknowledging the radical contingency of language and selfhood on the Other.

These three authors offer distinct approaches to the question of representing the Other within their Menippean satires that, by revealing the limitations of epistemic frameworks through the negotiation of totality and infinity, demonstrate a profoundly ethical aim that has tended to be ignored in postmodern studies. Critics such as Hoffmann and McHale assume the concerns of postmodern fiction are ontologically rather than epistemologically dominant because, as McHale contends, “although it would be perfectly possible to interrogate a postmodernist text about its epistemological implications, it is more *urgent* to interrogate it about its ontological implications. In postmodernist texts, in other words, epistemology is

backgrounded, as the price for foregrounding ontology” (*Postmodernist Fiction* 11). But as has been argued in this thesis, these three authors indicate instead how ontological questions and their implications are in fact predicated on the Other because the authors recognize how understanding the Other is paramount for understanding the self. As a result, epistemological issues—especially the problem at the heart of these novels regarding accounting for the ethical excess as a form of entropic alterity that eludes totalization—come to prefigure ontological ones.

Consequently, this exploration of the infinity-totality dialectic by Gaddis, Pynchon, and Wallace reveals a type of chiasmus within their novels. Diderot’s re-conceptualization of epistemic frameworks as dynamic, open networks reduced the need for comprehensiveness since these referencing systems would be more receptive to addendums, extensions, and revisions. This openness would, however, function conceptually as the epistemic framework’s interpretive limits and thus its own closure since the Enlightenment referencing model acknowledges how it must necessarily become outdated and replaced over time. On the other hand, novels—which do in fact have endings and are therefore much more closed and/or limited in what they can textually encompass relative to these referencing systems—are nevertheless open-ended when writers such as Gaddis, Pynchon, and Wallace purposely withhold narrative closure in order to highlight this ethical excess that cannot be thematized within them. Thus, the open-endedness of the Enlightenment referencing model necessitates its own closure through obsolescence while the novel’s boundaries constitute a physical closure that can be offset by withholding narrative closure. This is significant because *The Recognitions*, *Gravity’s Rainbow*, and *Infinite Jest*—negotiating both the open, rhizomatic network of scholarship associated with post-Enlightenment referencing systems and the narrative closure associated with fiction—offer new ways of exploring the tension between closure and open-endedness with regard to the question of the Other.

This design was addressed by van Ewijk who—with regard to Mendelson’s notion of the encyclopedic narrative—argued, “The tension between totalization and open-endedness will serve as the basis for a new definition of the encyclopedic novel, whose contemporary relevance as a generic denomination will be enhanced through comparisons with the complexity of more current forms of textuality, such as hypertext and database” (“Encyclopedia, Network” 206). As the novel continues to evolve within the age of information, new possibilities can potentially arise related to the place for alterity within epistemic frameworks.

5.2 Epistemic Frameworks and the Information Age

In Don DeLillo’s latest novel, *Zero K* (2016), a character describes the harrowing experience of living in the digital age where everything in the world is interconnected at the expense of the subject’s autonomy:

All the coded impulses you depend on to guide you. [...] tracking your habits, measuring your capabilities. All the linked data designed to incorporate you into the megadata. Is there something that makes you uneasy? Do you think about the technovirus, all systems down, global implosion? Or is it more personal? Do you feel steeped in some horrific digital panic that's everywhere and nowhere? (239).

This fear associated with being incorporated “into the megadata”—a sense of wariness Michael Berry suggests stems from how “the ostensive merits of high-tech, globally encompassing educational developments [...] has tremendous emancipatory potential,” but “this access also threatens to undermine users’ epistemological and social autonomy” (“Power/Knowledge 2)—is akin to how Gaddis, Pynchon, and Wallace were wary of epistemic frameworks that, in their drive to categorize and order information, have the propensity to totalize alterity. While the advent of online, collaborative repositories of

information such as Wikipedia has made data more accessible than ever before, there are nevertheless drawbacks associated with such civically-driven technological innovation that each author addressed in turn.

Gaddis's *Agapē Agape*, for example, bemoaned how the punch-card system used in the player-piano—developed out of the same technology Joseph Marie Jacquard used to create the automated loom at the beginning of the 19th century—eventually led to the creation of commercial technology that cheapened art and alienated individuals from the world around them. The narrator in Gaddis's novella decries:

all this computer madness besotted by science besotted by technology by this explosion of progress and the information revolution, [...] it was the plague spreading across America a hundred years ago with its punched paper roll at the head of the whole thing, of the frenzy of invention and mechanization and democracy and how to have art without the artist and automation, cybernetics you can see where the, damn! (10).

The narrator's polemic against the perceived virtue of cybernetics as a democratizing agent of information echoes a similar sentiment outlined earlier by Wallace who applied this same line of reasoning when critiquing the internet during an interview with Lipsky. Wallace was bewildered by "this idea that the Internet's gonna become incredibly democratic? [...] I mean, if you've spent any time on the Web, you know that it's not gonna be, because that's completely overwhelming. There are four trillion bits coming at you, 99 percent of them are shit, and it's too much work to do triage to decide" (*Although Of Course* 87).

D.T. Max notes that in an unpublished short story titled "Wickedness" Wallace criticized what he felt was the naïve view of the internet constituting a populist treatment of information: "Despite all the hoopla about populism and information, what it really was was [sic] the bathroom wall of the U.S. psyche" ("D.F.W. Archives" 1). Sharing Gaddis's

wariness towards the commodification of information, Wallace foresaw that this treatment of data would in fact become a necessary means of making a seemingly endless supply of information in the digital age comprehensible because, “very soon there’s gonna be an economic niche opening up for gatekeepers. [...] We absolutely have to give our power away. The Internet is going to be exactly the same way, [...] walls and sites and gatekeepers that say, ‘All right, you want fairly good fiction on the Web? Let us pick it for you’”

(*Although Of Course* 87).

Berry argues that rather than achieving a true democratization of information, the internet as well as the communication technology behind it expand “both as a neoliberal capitalist end (insofar as technology is consumed through the commodity market) and as a means by which the hegemonic epistemology can be furthered. The dominant knowledge system is indissociable from the neoliberal agenda that facilitates it” (“Power/Knowledge” 3). Thus, Wallace’s prescient observation about how an “economic niche” will open for categorizing and ordering the proliferation of information within the digital age anticipates the development of what Berry refers to as a “hegemonic epistemology” that, rather than being a civic venture, is “indissociable from the fiscal and structural imperatives of neoliberal economic policy” (4)—imperatives that have no need to acknowledge the ethical excess of the Other that cannot be commodified.

This hegemonic epistemology is akin to the techno-scientific systems that establish epistemic frameworks as a means of increasing their power and profit throughout Pynchon’s oeuvre. For example, Pynchon noted how with the advent of financially-driven cybernetic technology, “we have come to live among flows of data more vast than anything the world has seen. Demystification is the order of our day, all the cats are jumping out of all the bags and even beginning to mingle” (“Luddite” 41). Nevertheless, in *Bleeding Edge* Pynchon imagines an excess in the form of a nether-space known as DeepArcher that eludes this

“demystification” by being “the deep unlighted. [...] the border country, the edge of the unnavigable, the region of no information. [...] the edge of the beginning before the Word” (358). A millennial update to the Other Order of Being introduced in *Gravity’s Rainbow*, Pynchon’s DeepArcher network is a liminal space free from the demystification associated with categorization and epistemic differentiation.

That is not to suggest, however, that the potential evolution of epistemes spawned by technological innovation is without its benefits. Just as Diderot re-conceptualized the encyclopedia into a much more rhizomatic model compared to the hierarchical models of its precursors, George Landow argues that the use of hypertext within these online repositories of information demonstrates an abandonment of “systems founded upon ideas of center, margin, hierarchy, and linearity,” being replaced instead by “multilinearity, nodes, links and networks” (*Hypertext 2*) in which “one experiences hypertext as an infinitely decenterable and recenterable system” (57). Mark Z. Danielewski, for example, attempted to portray a form of hypertext within *House of Leaves* designed to illustrate this multilinearity and the new possibilities it brings to the question of alterity. Nicoline Timmer suggests that *House of Leaves*, like *Infinite Jest* before it, “hints at a sense of connectedness already on the level of experiences, as if each individual’s experience world [sic] is already and somehow necessarily ‘inhabited’ by something or someone ‘other’” (*Do You Feel It Too?* 353). For Timmer, non-hierarchical hypertext fosters a level of interconnectivity between the self and the Other that was unavailable in previous epistemic models.

So while Don DeLillo laments the nature of “linked data” in *Zero K* as being indicative of a hegemonic epistemology that diminishes the autonomy of the subject by connecting everybody within an immense nexus of information, he proffered a much more positive view of cyber interconnectivity at the end of *Underworld*. One of the final episodes depicts the character, Sister Edgar, as being literally enveloped into cyberspace. Where once

in “her veil and habit she was basically a face” (824) that would be susceptible to being made present-at-hand:

Here in cyberspace she has shed all that steam-ironed fabric. She is not naked exactly but she is open—exposed to every connection you can make on the world wide web. There is no space or time out here. [...] There are only connections. Everything is connected. All human knowledge gathered and linked, hyperlinked, this site leading to that, this fact referenced to that, a keystroke, a mouse-click, a password—world without end, amen (824–25).

Echoing Gaddis’s endeavor in *The Recognitions* to reject the differentiation that predicates epistemic frameworks by instead promoting the notion of a primordial first idea of sublime oneness eluding totalization, DeLillo suggests the hyper-connected space Sister Edgar enters links “Sister and Brother. A fantasy in cyberspace and a way of seeing the other side and a settling of differences” (826). Casey McCormick suggests this cyber “other side” is DeLillo’s way of “recognizing the sublime nature of infinite connectivity that is afforded to the cyberspace inhabitant” (“Toward a Postsecular Fellowship” 106), which “collaps[es] the roles of Self and Other” (100). Like Pynchon’s DeepArcher, McCormick suggests DeLillo’s cyberspace envisions a nebulous realm where “the proliferation of connections is no longer menacing, inducing paranoia, or suggesting conspiracy, but instead emerges as freeflowing, liberating, and at once comprehensible in its perpetual connectedness” (104).

This decentered, rhizomatic cyberspace of “perpetual connectedness” that lacks a fixed position for individuals to use in order to better situate themselves within the world would have the added benefit of effectively displacing the distinction between the self and the Other that, as Irvin Schick argues, “is central to human/social praxis, [...] both identity and alterity are contained and conveyed through narrative...the notions of identity and alterity, of ‘us’ and ‘them,’ are closed linked to the sense of place, that is, to notions of ‘here’ and

‘there’” (*Erotic Margin* 23). Gaddis, Pynchon, and Wallace challenge the totalizing closure of epistemic frameworks while envisioning the prospect of a nebulous system that eradicates the distinction between the “here” and “there” in order to allow for a “freeflowing” form of interconnectedness without codifying alterity in the process. While the Other will forever exceed the representational capacity of epistemic frameworks, the potential for an emergence of a new, decentralized episteme in the information age could spur new possibilities for pursuing an ethical, non-totalizing communion with the Other—an endeavor spearheaded within the works of Gaddis, Pynchon, and Wallace.

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