Reading Cruft: A Cognitive Approach to the Mega-Novel

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Abstract

READING CRUFT: A COGNITIVE APPROACH TO THE MEGA-NOVEL

by

David Letzler

Adviser: Gerhard Joseph

Reading Cruft offers a new critical model for examining a genre vital to modern literature, the mega-novel. Building on theoretical work in both cognitive narratology and cognitive poetics, it argues that the mega-novel is primarily characterized by its inclusion of a substantial amount of pointless text (“cruft”), which it uses to challenge its readers’ abilities to modulate their attention and rapidly shift their modes of text processing. Structured into five chapters respectively devoted to subgenres in which mega-novels have been grouped—the dictionary novel, the encyclopedic novel, the Menippean satire, the picaresque and frame-tale, and the epic and allegory—it demonstrates how these books make substantial use of their generic elements but also include text that fails to either fulfill or subvert their most crucial elements, rendering much of their text into excess that cannot be deeply processed. However, mega-novels also contain text that, though appearing to be cruft, is actually quite important, forcing readers to subtly distinguish between the text that does require deep attention and that which does not. This requires readers to develop more sophisticated procedures of attentional modulation in text processing. Reading Cruft argues that the education of attention this process prompts can aid readers in learning to manage the information overload that increasingly characterizes every aspect of contemporary life.
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And to Katie, for everything else.
People think I’m crazy ‘cause I’m worried all the time

If you paid attention, you’d be worried too.

You better pay attention or this world we love so much

Might

Just

Kill

You...
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Something strange is creeping across me.
La Celestina has only to warble the first few bars
Of “I Thought about You” or something mellow from
*Amadigi di Gaula* for everything—a mint-condition can
Of Rumford’s Baking Powder, a celluloid earring, Speedy Gonzales, the latest from Helen Topping Miller’s fertile
Escritóire, a sheaf of suggestive pix on greige, deckle-edged
Stock—to come clattering through the rainbow trellis
Where Pistachio Avenue rams the 2300 block of Highland Fling Terrace. He promised he’d get me out of this one,
That mean old cartoonist, but just look what he’s
Done to me now!

— John Ashbery, “Daffy Duck in Hollywood”

**The Agony and Ecstasy of Big Books**

Why do we respond so strangely to big books?

I mean a certain type of big book: the extremely literate, erudite tomes around which one
must plan one’s life for a month; the books one hesitates to approach without the assistance of a
university course, a reading circle, or at least a *Reader’s Guide*; the books whose spines stare
down from bookshelves, holding dominion over entire rooms; the books that inspire fanatical
devotion and revulsion in equal parts, though totally out of balance even with the scale of their
own elephantine materiality. I mean the books Frederick R. Karl calls “mega-novels” (155),
most notably including ambitious work by postwar American writers like William Gaddis, John
Barth, Thomas Pynchon, Don DeLillo, and David Foster Wallace, but also, if we take a more
catholic view, earlier titanic works like Gertrude Stein’s *The Making of Americans* and James
Joyce’s *Finnegans Wake* through contemporary global novels ranging from Haruki Murakami’s
*The Wind-Up Bird Chronicle* to Roberto Bolaño’s *2666*.

I ask this question because mega-novels’ most distinctive quality, even more than their
inimitable heft and learnedness, is the way they prompt otherwise sensible readers into
hyperbolic responses, vacillating wildly with respect both to the books themselves and others’
attitudes toward them. In some readers, mega-novels inspire love and reverence, exemplified by
Tom LeClair’s declaration that “our big books are our big books” (vii), because they “gather,
represent, and reform the time’s excesses into fictions that exceed the time’s literary conventions
and thereby master the time, the methods of fiction, and the reader” (1)—or at least the
enlightened mega-novel reader, since “other consumers in Mediamerica” are merely “amusing
themselves to death” on mass-produced entertainments (vii). For other readers, though, words
like “disgust,” “illegitimate,” and “frauds” are more likely to be used to describe mega-novels
and their devotees—though perhaps not without feeling “deeply ashamed” at their own inability
to appreciate these books (see Lapidos). It is not uncommon, in fact, for these contradictory
responses to be produced by the same readers: Jonathan Franzen, for instance, credited the
inspiration for his bestseller *The Corrections* to his devotional reading of Gaddis’s *The
Recognitions*, but subsequently railed that most other mega-novels (including Gaddis’s) merely
“punis[h] the reader,” their excess and difficulty just a “smoke screen for an author who has
nothing interesting, wise, or entertaining to say” (110). We might understand, then, why Mark
O’Connell’s widely-read essay about mega-novels should claim that reading them experientially
resembles Stockholm Syndrome and that the discourse surrounding them “has at least as much to
do with our own sense of achievement in having read the thing as it does with a sense of the
author’s achievement in having written it,” causing us to conceive such books as “monumental”
even if they involve “long, cruel sessions of boredom-torture”; conversely, Raymond Federman
seems on point in making the complementary observation that, whereas once upon a time one
needed to have read the latest ambitious novel to appear cultured, a reader now need merely
declare on which page of the most recent mega-novel he decided to give up (66).
What causes this array of responses? Their length only goes so far in forming an explanation. While size and scale, as Alastair Fowler points out, have always been among the most powerful elements shaping how we respond to a narrative (62-64), most long novels do not provoke the kind of reactions described above—consider V. S. Naipaul’s *A House for Mr. Biswas*, for instance, or Tom Wolfe’s *The Bonfire of the Vanities*, to say nothing of the *Harry Potter* or *Twilight* sagas. Difficulty and its relationship to pleasure seem important, too, but explaining exactly what we mean by these terms is not easy, especially since many mega-novel admirers deny that mega-novels are either particularly difficult or unpleasurable (see Marcus). Our inability to clearly lay out exactly why mega-novels provoke these reactions, I suspect, is why existing conversations around them get so wound up in circular logic and polemic (e.g., regarding the conflicts between realistic and experimental fiction, the competition of commercial and artistic interests, the place of entertainment in the reading process and in contemporary capitalism, the indisputability of taste, etc.). To circumvent such discourse, this book instead will offer a somewhat counter-intuitive theory: mega-novels cause such outsized responses because they all contain substantial text that is, basically, pointless.

**The Significance of Insignificance: The Cruft of Fiction**

There will be immediate objections: What do I mean by “pointless”? According to what standards? Why need literary text have a “point” at all? Let’s consider two foundational essays in narrative theory by Roland Barthes addressing the idea of literary purpose. In 1966, Barthes’s “Introduction to the Structural Analysis of Narrative” argued, in fact, that literary text could never be without purpose, writing, “everything has a meaning, or nothing has. To put it in a different way, Art does not acknowledge the existence of noise (in the informational sense of the word). It is a pure system […] Though a particular notation may seem expendable, it retains a
discursive function: it precipitates, delays, or quickens the pace of discourse, sums up, anticipates, and sometimes even confuses the reader” (249). Even in its blandest moments, in other words, a literary text could not help but do something. However, several years later, Barthes substantially revised this position in his famous essay on “reality effects,” the concrete details of realist fiction (e.g., the wall barometer in Flaubert’s *A Simple Heart*) that do not seem to signify anything at all. Asking, “if there exist insignificant stretches, what is, so to speak, the ultimate significance of this insignificance?” (12), Barthes eventually concluded that such *effets de réel* negotiated the aporia in nineteenth-century bourgeois realist fiction between narrative meaningfulness and mimetic reality by creating a “referential illusion” that says “only this: we are the real. It is the category of the ‘real,’ and not its various contents, which are being signified” (16).

This might be construed as a kind of purpose. However, once we grant the existence of such text, we may observe that there are many other instances of apparently purposeless literary text that do not qualify under this rubric. Decades earlier, in fact, Henry James had perceived stretches of such writing within the extremely long books of his era, rather than his own quintessentially realist novels:

A picture without composition slights its most precious chance for beauty, and is, moreover, not composed at all unless the painter knows how that principle of health and safety, working as an absolutely premeditated art, has prevailed. There may in its absence be life, incontestably, as *The Newcomes* has life, as *Les Trois Mousquetaires*, as Tolstoi’s *Peace and War*, have it; but what do such large, loose, baggy monsters, with their queer elements of the accidental and the arbitrary, artistically mean? We have heard it maintained, we well remember, that
such things are “superior to art”; but we understand least of all what that may mean, and we look in vain for the artist, the divine explanatory genius, who will come to our aid and tell us. There is life and life, and as waste is only life sacrificed and thereby prevented from “counting,” I delight in a deep-breathing economy and an organic form. (84)

Tolstoy’s philosophical fantasies, Dumas’s pseudo-romances, Thackeray’s quasi-metafiction: these cannot be construed as attempting to convey unmediated reality in the manner Barthes describes. Their volume and variety might be interpreted as mimicking the richness of life’s connectedness more generally, but as James points out elsewhere, “Really, universally, relations stop nowhere, and the exquisite problem of the artist is eternally but to draw, by a geometry of his own, the circle within which they shall happily appear to do so” (5): in other words, since one can always add more material to a novel, indefinitely, at a certain point additional material generates not a greater sense of life, but waste.

James would surely ask similar questions of contemporary mega-novels, all looser and baggier in construction than any that Tolstoy or Dumas ever envisioned. As Frederick R. Karl writes, the mega-novel “is long, but lacks any sense of completion; while it has no boundaries for an ending, of course it does end; it seems to defy clear organization—it seems decentered, unbalanced—yet has an intense order; it is located outside traditional forms of narrative, but still employs some conventional modes” (155). This unwieldy balance is why, as Mark Greif puts it, mega-novels “feel stuffed, overfull, or total; they feel longer than their straightforward story would require, and bigger than other books of similar length or complexity of plot” (27). While Greif believes this plenitude is designed to stave off longstanding portents of the death of the novel (28-29), to say a mega-novel is overfull implies not liveliness but that its parts are
excessive or even nauseous, as with an overfull stomach. Certainly, that is the argument James Wood makes when suggesting that “all the many thousands of pages of the big, ambitious, contemporary books” do not “lack for powers of invention,” but “there is too much of it,” as if each mega-novel is merely “a perpetual-motion machine that appears to have been embarrassed into velocity,” their “glamorous congestion […] almost succeed[ing] in hiding the fact that they are without life” (Irresponsible 179-185). Even Franco Moretti’s generally positive analysis of mega-novel prehistory in Modern Epic acknowledges that large swaths of them “do not really work all that well” (5).

It would be one thing were this charge of excessiveness purely pejorative, but, oddly, it is also assented to by mega-novel supporters: ironically, the mega-novel’s gratuitous text appears essential to its nature. It is quite telling that LeClair’s book in praise of mega-novels (which he calls “systems novels”) is named The Art of Excess, as it suggests the way in which mega-novel readers have embraced the idea that large parts of mega-novels are unnecessary or don’t quite fit together. However, while there have been a number of moves in recent narratology, as Pekka Tammi has written, “away from general model-building and standard definitions, toward studying, rather, the subversive and strange, previously untheorized or insufficiently theorized cases: the glorious exceptions to the rules” (29; see also Alber and Heinze), to my knowledge, no one has identified and explored this case of how to adequately explain the literary place of mega-novel excess.

To undertake such a study, then, we should start by naming this phenomenon. I will suggest “cruft,” a half-slang/half-technical term from programming circles that has expanded into general Internet culture. Defined by The New Hacker’s Dictionary as “Excess; superfluous junk; used esp. of redundant or superseded code,” cruft is generally characterized as code that is
“Poorly built, possibly over-complex” (135). Cruft is not technically wrong, *per se*, but it is unnecessary, inelegant, or too complicated for its own good. The term has widened to cover several digital phenomena, especially within wikiculture, where it has been applied to encyclopedic text that editors feel to be trivial, overwritten, redundant, or unreadable (“Discussing cruft”). Although the term is almost always intended negatively, it is associated with a certain obsessive attractiveness, most obviously in the case of “fancruft,” excessively detailed wiki entries about minor elements of a subculture lacking much general interest (“Fancruft”).

What does cruft look like in a mega-novel? Consider this excerpt from Gaddis’s dialogue-loaded *J R*, about a sixth-grader wheeling and dealing his way into a Wall Street empire from his school cafeteria’s phone booth:

—Tell them he’s been wait give it to me can’t tell what he’s been, hello…? Not here right now no he’s been … Davidoff yes Davi … Cohen oh calling on Nepenthe yes ran it up to sixteen today think the Boss is sitting tight on about nineteen percent of the issue just wants control so he can … wait no wants to work the nursing homes into this Health Package made to order outlets for Nobili got Hopper here now with his cemetery Brisboy bringing in his funer … what? General who? One thing we need right now anoth… Oh why didn’t you say so without the h yes why didn’t you say so, thought you were on your way up brought in one of our own legal boys waiting here now to go over your figures had Piscator run down your Dun and Bradstreet told the Boss you looked a little overextended mentioned controlling interest in another company sounds dead on its … Don’t worry about it no just took it as security on the loan help this man
Skinner out with his option on a publishing deal got him under management contract real topfli…don’t know no joint tenant said the gal he just married picked it up in her div…whose name hers? (532)

This passage, merely the beginning of a characteristic multi-page stretch of direct discourse, almost entirely comprises verbal static and interchangeable bits of financial jargon. We will examine why this may be dubbed cruft more rigorously during Chapter 1, but for now, it should suffice to say that another writer might easily have compressed almost all of this passage into no more than a sentence of summary with little loss: while several of its references have some larger relevance to the book (e.g., those involving General Haight), most of its ephemeral schemes are basically meaningless, even to J R himself, except as mere words. Furthermore, the noise of everyday speech represented in this passage is almost always edited out of literary discourse, for the same reason that characters’ flossing habits are: it takes up space without saying anything meaningful.

Even more obviously, consider the passage reproduced on the next page from Danielewski’s *House of Leaves*, recounting an expedition through the physics-defying labyrinth that has emerged within its protagonist’s house. Down the left margin we see a list, containing dozens of entries, of every architectural style that does *not* describe the labyrinth, while down the right is a similar, inverted list of every architect who would *not* have built it, and slightly off-center on each page is an equally-long catalog of furniture that is *not* to be found. In fact, the labyrinth signified by these elaborate marginalia, it turns out, is nothing but an empty sequence of rooms. Text does not get much more meaningless than this: it is hard, really, to imagine any sane reader processing more than the first few entries of any of these lists.
Hagia Sophia, Ravenna's interior of the Mausoleum of Galla Placidia, Rome's S. Stefano Rotondo or S. Maria Maggiore or S. Clemente, or Milan's S. Lorenzo, or even the plan of Old St Peter's, nor the slightest trace of classical foundations whether Greek, Hellenistic, or Roman, as might be exemplified by the Temple of Jupiter, Diocletian's palace at Spalato, the gateway to the market at Miletus, Algeria's Tingad with its Arch of Trajan, apartment housing in Ostia, Trajan's Market in Rome, also in Rome, the Baths of Diocletian, the Basilica of Maxentius, Baths of Caracalla, the Temple of Venus, near the Golden House of Nero, Hadrian's Mausoleum, the Mausoleum of Cecilia Metella on the Via Appia, the Casopax of Hadrian's villa, the interior of the Pantheon, Hadrian's villa at Tivoli, or the Piazza d'Oro with peristyle court and pavilions, or the Flavian Palace, the Villa of the Mysteries in Pompeii, plan of the Villa Jovis at Capri, Arch of Tiberius at Orange, France, Trajan's column in Rome, the Imperial Forum, Temple of Mars Ultor, Forum Augustum, Forum of Nerva, the Forum Romanum with the arch of Septimius Severus, the Arch of Titus and the Temple of Castor and Pollux, or in Spain the aqueduct at Segovia, or back in Rome the theatre of Marcellus, the Colosseum, the sanctuary of Fortuna Primigenia, Praeneste with its axonometric reconstructions, the Temple of Vesta at Tivoli, the Forum Boarium in Rome, the Maison Carrée at Nimes, or the House of the Vetii in Pompeii, the walls of Herculanum, the terrace of Naxian Lions on Delos, the Tower of the Winds in Athens, the Stoa of Attalus in the agora of Athens, the plan for the city of Pergamum or city center of Miletus or the Bouleuterion in Miletus, or the Temple of Apollo at Didyma, Temple of Athena Polias at Priene, Mausoleum at Halicarnassus, the theatre at Epidauros, the Choragic Monument of Lysicrates in Athens as well as the Temple of Olympian Zeus, or the tholos at Delphi, or the Temple of Apollo at Bassa, or the Erechtheion on the Acropolis, the Propylaea on the Acropolis, the Parthenon with its Parthenon frieze, Athens' acropolis, the temple of Aphaia at Aegina, the Temple of Olympian Zeus at Acragus, the Temple of Hera at Poseidon or Neptune at Paestum, the Temple of Apollo at Corinth, the shrine of Ambis at the Temple of Hatchepusat, Deir al Bahari, or the Lion Gate at Mycenae, or the palace at Mycenae, the palace of Tiryns, the Palace of Minos, Knossos, Crete—which seems like a good place to end though it cannot end there, especially when there is still the Great Zimbabwe Enclosure, the Giza pyramids of Mykerinos, Cheops and Chephren, to say nothing of Ireland's New Grange passage grave, France's Esquis gallery grave, Malta's Ggantija temple complex, Scotland's Skara Brae's settlement, the Lascaux cave, the Lascaux pre-historic rock-cut Venus, or the notion of the Term Armera bust which is also a good place to end though of course it cannot end there either.¹⁶⁴

Perhaps¹⁶⁵


is as good a place as any to consider some of the ghosts haunting The Navidson Record. And since more than a handful of people have pointed out similarities between Navidson's film and various com mercial productions, it seems worthwhile to least briefly examine what distinguishes documentaries from Hollywood releases.¹⁶⁶

In his essay "Critical Condition" published in Simple Themes (Univer sity of Washington Press, 1995) Brendan Beinborn declared that Navidson house, when the explorers were within it, was in a state of severe shock. "However without them, it is completely dead. Humanity serves as its life blood. Humanity's end would mark the house's end." A statement which provoked sociologist Sondra Staff to claim "Critical Condition" was "just another shear of Beinborn bullshit." (A lecture delivered at Our Lady of the Lake University of San Antonio on June 26, 1996.)

¹⁶⁴Mr. Truant refused to reveal whether the following bizarre textual layout is Zampar's or his own. — Ed.
Aside from cinematic, literary, architectural, or even philosophical ghosts, history also offers a few of its own. Consider two famous expeditions where those involved confronted the unknown under circumstances of deprivation and fear only to soon find themselves caught in a squall of terrible violence.

On September 20th, 1519 Ferdinand Magellan embarked from SantLucar de Barrameda to sail around the globe. The voyage would once and for all prove the world was round and revolutionize people's thoughts on navigation and trade, but the journey would also be dangerous, reprint with enough horror and hardship that in the end it would cost Magellan his life.

In March of 1520 when Magellan's five vessels reached Patagonia and sailed into the Bay of St. Julian, things were far from harmonious. Fierce winter weather, a shortage of stores, not to mention the anxiety brought on by the uncertainty of the future, had caused tensions among the sailors to increase, until on or around April Fools Day, which also happened to be Easter Day, Captain Gaspar Quesada of the Concepcion and his servant Luis de Molino planned and executed a mutiny, resulting in the death of at least one officer and the wounding of many more. Unfortunately for Quesada, he never stopped to consider that a man who could marshal an expedition to circle the globe could probably marshal men to retaliate with great ferocity. This gross understimation of his opponent cost Quesada his life.

Like a general, Magellan rallied those men still loyal to him to retake the commandeered ships. The combination of his will and his tactical acumen made his success, especially in retrospect, seem inevitable. The mutineer Mendoza of the Victoria was stabbed in the throat. The Santa Anna was stormed, and by morning the Concepcion had surrendered. Forty-eight hours after the mutiny had begun, Magellan was again in control. He sentenced all the mutineers to death and then in an act of calculated good-will suspended the sentence, choosing instead to concentrate on maritime law and his own ire on the three directly responsible for the uprising: Mendoza's corpse was drawn and quartered. Juan de Cartagena was marooned on a barren shore and Quesada was executed.

Quesada, however, was not hung, shot or even forced to walk the plank. Magellan had a better idea. Molino, Quesada's trusty servant, was granted clemency if he agreed to execute his master. Molino accepted the duty and
What exactly are we supposed to do with such text, then? Literary studies may have traveled a long way from the purer forms of Jamesian organicism, formalized by Percy Lubbock’s argument in *The Craft of Fiction* (from which this book adapts its name) that a narrative must be built around “A subject, one and whole and irreducible,” with anything deviating from that subject being “wasteful” (41), but even allowing that we need not be so rigid, how would we explain why good novels would include text that seems merely to gum up and lengthen their already-very-long narratives?

There are several possible arguments. One, exemplified by Steven Moore, suggests that this text is not actually excessive, but merely appears that way to those without sufficient knowledge of the history of prose fiction:

> I remain convinced that negative reactions to unconventional modern fiction can be blamed partly on ignorance of the novel’s long, colorful, and decidedly unconventional history. No one familiar with Lyly’s *Euphues* is likely to accuse a contemporary writer of being showy and pretentious; Lyly makes them all look as modest as nuns. Gaddis’ alleged difficulty is a walk in the park compared with Subandhu’s *Vasavadatta*. Those who balk at the length of some of today’s literary mega-novels (*Gravity’s Rainbow*, *Infinite Jest*, *2666*) might be chastened to learn that the best novels in China, Arabia, and France during the late medieval period are thousands of pages long. *(Novel 30)*

We will take up this perspective’s emphasis on tradition and genre in a moment. Another view, though, takes precisely the opposite approach, as exemplified in this passage by John Johnston:

> [Mega-novels’] value, therefore, would seem to lie in the fullness with which they bring to awareness and propagate the complexity of this cultural moment. They
do this, as I try to show, by transforming the novel into various ‘writing-down systems’ that articulate and render visible a postmodern discourse network defined first by the formations of information theory and cybernetics, and only secondarily by textuality and simulacra. At the same time, inasmuch as they remain novels, they model and reflect a new form of postmodern subjectivity. They do this most fully by serving as exemplary instantiations of a contemporary psychic apparatus, registering material and semiotic processes that are not yet entirely assimilable but which continue to shape—or to make impossible—what we still call human experience. (Information 8)

This view, which might be aligned broadly with poststructuralism, claims that mega-novels, rather than unearthing the narrative structures of the past, create an entirely new, and at least partially emancipatory, form of writing for the contemporary moment, in which the entire conventional concept of purpose is “short-circuited or exceeded such that the novel no longer makes sense” (16).

Between them, these two perspectives will sketch out much of the trajectory by which the rest of this study proceeds. However, both have serious weaknesses. While many mega-novels do clearly draw upon narrative forms predating the modern novel, as Moore suggests, in doing so, as we will see, they almost always distort or omit narrative elements crucial to those genres’ goals, rendering many of the other generic elements extraneous or ineffective. On the other hand, celebrating mega-novel text for defying all previous schemas, as Johnston does, fails to distinguish mega-novel text from garden-variety incoherence: after all, “unassimilable semiotic processes” that “no longer make sense” more typically characterize bad writing than good (e.g., in our students’ hastily written papers).
We need a better way to articulate how cruft can provide value to a narrative, one that acknowledges cruft’s insignificance without suggesting that proliferating chaos itself constitutes a meaningful response to a chaotic world. I believe we can do so via a subject frequently invoked when discussing mega-novels but thus far not explored systematically: attention.

**Attention, Overload, and Boredom**

That mega-novels pose substantial challenges to readers’ attentions has long been acknowledged. LeClair, for example, argues that “the dominant strategy in systems novels is, at least initially, overload. […] In a systems novel, overload—or what I call excess—can stop the reading, cause scanning, or produce a reorientation to the novel’s information” (14-15). As Joseph Tabbi points out, this feeling of being overwhelmed by stimuli is closely related to the classical sublime, wherein the mind’s immediate perceptual capacities collapse and yield to alternate cognitive modes, just as the mega-novel’s excessive and apparently pointless text “keep[s] readers from understanding too quickly” what they perceive (*Postmodern* 24). However, both subsequently suggest that these attentional challenges should be overcome relatively quickly by a competent mega-novel reader, as a prerequisite to decoding the text. Mega-novel critics often, in fact, exhibit disdain for those who have any prolonged attention difficulties, as might be exemplified by Moore’s retort to a critic complaining of the demands *J R* made upon its readers’ attentions: “as though a better novelist would make allowances for daydreaming” (*Gaddis* 64).

This sentiment has its roots in an attitude, going back at least to Victorian England, that conceives the principal goal of all literary education to be the development of sustained attention. As Stephen Arata notes, John Ruskin’s 1864 lecture “Of King’s Treasures” codified the now-standard attitude that the classroom should inculcate in students attentionally-intensive reading
habits (200-201), while as John Guillory has observed, I. A. Richards’s epochal emphasis on “close reading” in the 1920s derives from his concern for the “vigilance” of readers’ stimuli-response mechanisms (see Richards 182) and his related fear that mass media were eroding students’ abilities to maintain close attention by conditioning “stock responses” (Guillory, “Close” 24). Such concerns, Guillory further points out, extend today to the worries expressed by humanists like N. Katherine Hayles that media streams like television, video games, and the Internet have caused “Deep attention, the cognitive style traditionally associated with the humanities, […] characterized by concentrating on a single object for long periods […]], ignoring outside stimuli while so engaged, preferring a single information stream, and having a high tolerance for long focus times” to be displaced in younger students by “Hyper attention […] characterized by switching focus rapidly among different tasks, preferring multiple information streams, seeking a high level of stimulation, and having a low tolerance for boredom” (Hayles, “Hyper” 187; Guillory, “Close” 25). The corollary to this notion—that contemporary readers’ attentions might become degraded to the point where they will soon not be able to read long books at all, termed by historian William Cronon “the Anna Karenina problem” (qtd. in Parry A27)—is often invoked by mega-novel critics as a diagnosis for why mega-novel detractors consider them unduly difficult, frequently citing J R’s PR executive Davidoff’s remark about “longer works of fiction now dismissed as classics and remaining largely unread due to the effort involved in reading and turning any more than two hundred pages” (527).

However, though current cognitive research has confirmed that attentional control is vital to the development of reading abilities (see Savage et al., Conners) and that attention lapses while reading can cause serious processing failures and misconceptions (see Smallwood), the idea that all serious reading must be done in a cognitive mode of unbreakable attention—
particularly in contrast to the supposed distractibility inculcated by contemporary media—has a number of problems. For one, as those like Cathy N. Davidson have argued, a rigidly-focused attention can itself cause cognitive failures, like those associated with “attentional blindness,” and conversely, a looser attention can engender greater creativity (1-11). The later Barthes, as respected a reader as any, put himself forward to exemplify the latter point, writing, “My pleasure can very well take the form of a drift. Drifting occurs whenever I do not respect the whole, and whenever, by dint of seeming driven about by language’s illusions, seductions, and intimidations, like a cork on the waves, I remain motionless, pivoting on the intractable bliss that binds me to the text (to the world)” (Pleasure 18-19). Moreover, given the emphasis of those like Hayles on the proliferation of video games and ADHD as harbingers of attentional decline, it is important to note that current research actually suggests that when those who have ADHD play video games, not only do they have little difficulty sustaining their focus on them, they have a hard time getting themselves to stop: in other words, their attention becomes too sustained (Bioulac, Arfi, and Bouvard). This finding generally jibes with the current academic paradigm surrounding ADHD, suggesting that the disorder derives not from any inherent deficit in basic attention but rather an underdeveloped ability to self-regulate where one’s attention is placed (Barkley 78, 86). An optimal attention, then, is not one that can focus indefinitely, but that knows when to increase and when to decrease its focus.

The biggest problem, though, with suggesting that the mega-novel’s excessive text must all be processed in deep attention, and that those who do not appreciate it simply lack sufficient attention span to do so, is that human brains simply do not work that way. As George A. Miller famously demonstrated, our working memory is usually limited to about six or seven represented objects, which means reading any non-trivial piece of writing requires both constantly chunking
text into abbreviated representations and strategically allocating attention to text that seems more important at the expense of text seeming less important. (By the way, since attention is closely related to memory, especially working memory, all my discussions of the former should be read as implicating the latter.) In other words, our minds have limited channel capacity and are subject to “cognitive overload” whenever that limit is exceeded (Tsur 36-37). As Gaddy, van den Broek, and Sung’s study of reading cycles puts it, any cognitive analysis of the reading process must acknowledge its selectiveness:

When attempting to comprehend text, readers must devise ways to condense the wealth of information that is presented to them. Limitations on working memory or attentional resources make this task particularly important, for without the ability to selectively attend to particular textual information, readers would be faced with the burden of trying to retain every piece of information that is presented in text throughout the reading process. Successful comprehension of text therefore involves a reader’s ability to appropriately allocate his or her attention to the most important aspects of a text, and at the right times, during reading. (89)

In fact, our default method for attending text is probably one of shallow processing (Sanford and Emmott 103-110). Noting that most of the text we do read passes out of our consciousness almost immediately, Pierre Bayard’s How to Talk About Books You Haven’t Read points out that “When it comes to books, we never read more than a portion of greater or lesser length, and that portion is, in the longer or shorter term, condemned to disappear,” rendering our elaborate discussions of literature into mere charades constructed around mostly-forgotten text fragments (48). This is especially so for long novels: as Barthes observed, “it is the very rhythm of what is
read and what is not read that creates the pleasure of the great narratives: has anyone ever read Proust, Balzac, War and Peace, word for word? (Proust’s good fortune: from one reading to the next, we never skip the same passages.)” (Pleasure 11).

To counteract this basic fact about the reading process, writers have long used certain devices to cue readers’ attention toward their texts’ most important passages. We might find a taxonomy of these techniques—repetition, section breaks, segmentation, beginnings and endings, the use of titles, etc.—in any book on the craft of writing, and empirical work in stylistics has generally confirmed that they function as traditionally intended (Sanford and Emmott 72-131). Discussing such “Rules of Notice” in Before Reading, Peter Rabinowitz points out that the very standards of our discipline require us to analyze text cued by these methods more readily than text that is not: an interpretation of Faulkner’s “A Rose for Emily,” for instance, that ignored the ending to emphasize several passages from the middle would be considered unacceptable, but one that passed over several passages in the middle to emphasize the ending would not be (47-75). This is not mere mindless conventionality: it is necessary for any coherent discussion of texts that otherwise far exceed our capacities to process them. As Rabinowitz writes, “If one assumes that all features of a text are to receive close attention from an interpreter, then a text (even a lyric poem, certainly a novel) becomes an infinite and impenetrable web of relationships” (51).4

If some readers need further convincing of the necessity of selective attention to higher cognitive processes, consider the cases of the legendary mneumonists who lacked these apparent limitations on attention and could absorb large amounts of information into working memory at once, like A. R. Luria’s patient S., the autistic savant Kim Peek, or Jorge Luis Borges’s fictional Ireneo Funes the Memorious. As neurologist Rodrigo Quian Quiroga notes in Borges and
Memory, despite their impressive memory banks, they were all strikingly inept at basic pattern recognition and logical inferences: the sheer volume of data they could process rendered them incapable of establishing relationships between that data or hierarchizing it for practical use (101-116). In fact, S. at times became so overwhelmed by all that he naturally memorized that he could only remain sane by consciously learning to “avoid paying attention” (47). Higher-level thought, in other words, requires attention to focus on certain things very closely and to compress or ignore everything else. As Borges pointed out, someone with Funes’s capacious attention and memory would “not [be] very good at thinking. To think is to ignore (or forget) differences, to generalize, to abstract” (137).

What we need to develop, then, is not the ability to pay closer attention to everything, but a sophisticated attentional modulation, the process Jesse Prinz argues is at the basis of all consciousness (89). This entails not only learning how to focus our attention on any given target, but when to reduce it. As Michael Posner puts it, “a major factor in allowing coherent behavior in the social world is the ability to suppress brain activity” (73). Indeed, Warren Thorngate writes that our whole conscious life might be conceived as operating within an “attentional economics,” in which we must choose how to best spend fixed attentional resources upon an ever-growing number of possible attentional targets (249-252). This process becomes increasingly important, and more difficult, as we progress further and further into the information age, as many cultural critics have expressed sentiments similar to Orrin Klapp’s that the benefits brought by the increased diversity of and access to information might be negated by the problems posed by how to adequately attend all this information: “By taking in too much noise, a person becomes cluttered, not integrated. The result for our information society is that
we suffer a lag in which the slow horse of meaning is unable to keep up with the fast horse of mere information” (2).

Klapp also raises another point that will be important in a moment: overload, counter-intuitively, tends to cause boredom. Though classically characterized as occurring when we are “(a) prevented from doing what we want to do or (b) forced to do what we do not want to do”—in other words, when we experience stimuli deprivation—recent research points out that boredom can also be “a condition of apparent freedom in which the individual is nonetheless unable to maintain attention on, or interest in, any object” (Cheyne, Carriere and Smilek 580). As Klapp writes, this attentional paralysis is most likely to derive from an overload of choices (1). Boredom, after all, unlike subjective deficits like apathy and anhedonia (Goldberg et al.), is at least partly dependent upon environment (Eastwood et al. 484): someone who is bored has the capacity and desire to pay attention, but cannot figure out what to do with it. That is why our mental image of a bored person is not the superfluous Russian or ennui-filled Frenchman, but an active yet unfilled individual, restlessly fidgeting, yawning, or struggling to hold up a drooping head (Toohey 34-45). As Otto Fenichel once noted in his classic analysis of the subject, a bored person “is searching for an object, not in order to act upon it with his instinctual impulses, but rather to be helped by it to find an instinctual aim which he lacks” (293).5

What does this tell us about reading the mega-novel? As a glance at the passages from J R and House of Leaves will suggest, mega-novels often flagrantly violate any Rules of Notice, barely distinguishing between relatively important and unimportant text. Moreover, unlike the terse, oblique social dioramas of late-realist/early-modernist fiction, which similarly do not foreground key passages at times, mega-novels multiply the unimportant text beyond its usual proportion and render it even more purposeless than usual. The resulting overload is almost
certain to create attentional confusion leading to lapses in focus, difficulties in consolidating short-term into long-term memory, and boredom. Against the critical tendency to assert that all mega-novel text is equally and fabulously interesting, then, we need to examine how, as Samuli Hägg puts it, mega-novel “overwriting” induces boredom and how “part of the ‘interest’ […] is witnessing everything becoming a blur and attempting to figure out ways of enjoying the event—and conjuring out its interpretive significance” (“Boredom” 78-79, 86).

I do want to be careful about the extent to which I generalize this point. Boredom is, after all, as dependent upon its subject as its object, and generally speaking, something that one reader might find boring another might not find boring at all. As Patrick Colm Hogan notes in his discussion of the relationship between cortical stimulation and aesthetic appreciation, we experience art as “boring” when we find it “too easy” or repetitive, since it does not provide us with any “novel stimuli,” but we also become bored when it is “too hard,” because we experience it “as random, thus as noise,” making it “an experience, not of novelty, but of sameness.” Furthermore, Hogan adds that “judgments of both excessive difficulty and excessive simplicity vary from person to person, and for different ages” (9-11). Lionel Trilling’s witticism about the modernist canon is instructive on this point, that “these books at first rejected me; I bored them. But as I grew older and they knew me better, they came to have more sympathy with me and to understand my hidden meanings” (Beyond 7). Usually when someone (e.g., a student) tells us that a great book is boring, we should attribute the problem to the reader rather than to the text. There is in fact a way in which, as Moore claims, parts of mega-novels can be read as thrillers once one has gotten into them (Novel 9). That said, one cannot claim that cruft is merely the subjective illusion of readers with insufficient attention for great writing, because it often tends to be both “too easy” and “too hard” at the same time. For instance, in the passage
above from *House of Leaves*, a reader with a low threshold for textual stimulation will surely be overloaded into boredom almost immediately, but a reader looking for higher degrees of stimulation will soon realize that all this text, despite its overwhelming appearance and substantial volume, is so mechanical as to say virtually nothing, and will become equally bored with it. Consequently, it is objectively pointless, and objectively boring. We can categorize this passage and text like it as cruft, because—as if to invert the famous joke about Catskills resort food from *Annie Hall*—it doesn’t mean enough, and there’s far too much of it.

Why should cruft be useful in a mega-novel, then? There are, after all, clear negative cognitive and emotional impacts to experiencing attention lapses, since an inability to sustain attention tends to generate prolonged negative affect (Fenske and Raymond; Eastwood et al.487-489) and causes the regions involved in higher-order thought to disconnect from neural activity (Weissman et al.). While there are arguments that boredom conditions character (see Russell 63), inspires creativity (see Svendsen 58-59), and provides relief from overstimulation (see Spacks 261), even these perspectives frame boredom as a temporary condition functioning either as a repellent to or an inoculation from worse mental states, not something one ought to actively seek out for itself. In fact, as Sianne Ngai notes, boredom is almost never construed as a positive element of the reading experience by literary critics, because it “tend[s] to be written off as unsophisticated: from this point of view, only a philistine would be bored by the later Beckett” (262). Even Patricia Meyer Spacks, author of a literary history of boredom (which, like most similar studies, emphasizes the *representation* of boredom rather than how text bores readers), insists that reading itself “resists boredom” (1): even of writers with whom boredom is an “aspect of discourse,” like Donald Barthelme, she writes, “I know readers who declared they are bored by him […]. Such readers do not include me” (256). Ngai attempts, like Tabbi, to recover
this experience as a variation on the sublime (the “stuplime,” in her terms), believing the ineluctable materiality of excessive text “perform[s] a doubling-over of language that actively interferes with the temporal organization dictated by conventional syntax” (260) and drives us toward “new strategies of affective engagement and to extend the circumstances under which engagement becomes possible” (262), but does not describe how this is any different from reading merely stupid text: again, most text that constantly reminds us of its own materiality does so because it is badly written. In fact, as Travis Jeppsen notes, there often is not a straightforward distinction between prose by mega-novelists like Stein and Joyce and mere “bad writing” (136-137) at all.

Reading in the Information Age

To address what is going on in the mega-novel—or, at the least, why anyone ought to read its cruft-laden prose—we must contextualize with respect to reading’s role as a mediator of attention and information in the contemporary era. As noted earlier, it has become commonplace to speak of our age as characterized by information overload. Ironically, despite several decades of humanist hand-wringing about the coming dominance of the image over the word, most of this information has turned out to be text (see Goldsmith 24-27, Koepnick 233). As James Gleick writes in his history of information, anxiety about information overload has been expressed practically since the invention of the printing press (402-403), but the current moment poses particularly acute problems regarding how to collectively manage information, with serious social and political ramifications. As the narrator of Wallace’s final novel, The Pale King, a fanciful take on the lives of IRS tax examiners in mid-1980s Peoria, IL, puts it:

Fact: The birth agonies of the New IRS led to one of the great and terrible PR discoveries in modern democracy, which is that if sensitive issues of
governance can be made sufficiently dull and arcane, there will be no need for officials to hide or dissemble, because no one not directly involved will pay enough attention to cause trouble. No one will pay attention because no one will be interested, because, more or less a priori, of these issues’ monumental dullness. (84)

There is simply so much information to process in the digital age—and so many alternative, entertaining sources of it available to distract and hold our attention when we become bored—that any sufficiently overwhelming or boring material will be ignored, even if there is some legitimately important information contained within it. This is, sadly, probably why the result of increased information tends not to be greater engagement with other perspectives but more reliance on preconceived schemas (Yoon, Sarial-Abi, & Gürhan-Canli), because the mind must resort to confirmation bias to filter the information with which it is faced. As Gleick puts it, “The old ways of organizing knowledge no longer work. Who will search; who will filter? […] Which is worse, too many mouths or too many ears?” (410).

It would be tempting to argue that depicting this contemporary situation requires mega-novelists to write in a commensurately excessive and boring style. However, as Tabbi notes, “The excess to be found in technological systems […] is scarcely of a type with literary excess; the individual writer, often a loner with pen and paper, could never compete with the high-budget productions of the various corporate media. Excess in this fiction is not simply more than but other than the technological mechanisms, media, and categories it deforms” (13).

Furthermore, this view would lead us toward the mimetic fallacy, which, in fact, Terry Eagleton’s How to Read a Poem exemplifies as “the belief that, say, a poem about boredom should be boring” (167). After all, if information overload is a serious societal problem, a
mimetic treatment of it threatens to exacerbate that problem rather than alleviate it, as Lev Grossman suggests when remarking that the mega-novel “treats the world as an infinite network, but we already have an infinite network, the Internet, and our nose is rubbed in it on an hourly basis. We don’t need more of that—more hysteria.” Moreover, it is quite possible to be brief about complex subjects, just as it is to be lengthy about simpler ones: as Thomas Pavel put it, “The classic question […] ‘why is a long novel long?’ cannot be answered in a purely referential way, by making the dimensions of the text depend on those of the world about which it speaks. The fictional universe of [Borges’s five-page story] ‘The Approach to al-Mu’tasim’ may exceed in size the worlds of Remembrance of Things Past” (94).  

I will argue, instead, that mega-novel cruft’s value is in how it helps us develop our abilities to modulate attention when processing large amounts of information. What I mean by this might be exemplified well by The Pale King’s tax examiners, who are placed in as pure a battle of attention against information overload as can be imagined, as they must cull through endless pages of data, bureau jargon, and coded cross-references in search of the rare hidden narrative of tax evasion. However, the task’s dullness makes any breakthrough from dulling trivia to hidden discovery ever more valuable, because it is so unlikely to be found. This causes one of the examiners to conclude that the only essential skill in the modern world is “the ability, whether innate or conditioned, to find the other side of the rote, the picayune, the meaningless, the repetitive, the pointlessly complex. To be in a word, unborable. […] It is the key to modern life. If you are immune to boredom, there is literally nothing you cannot accomplish” (438). 

However, believing that “To be able to reach a state of total concentration means gaining the possibility of transcending boredom,” and that this state will enable us “to parse social, political, and cultural narratives for relevance and meaning” as some essays on the book
have suggested (see Clare 441, 444), is not as purely positive a result as it might seem. This might be demonstrated by the one character in the book who has achieved this state:

Supervisors at the IRS’s regional complex in Lake James township are trying to determine why no one noticed that one of their employees had been sitting dead at his desk for four days before anyone asked if he was feeling all right.

Frederick Blumquist, 53, who had been employed as a tax return examiner with the agency for over thirty years, suffered a heart attack in the open-plan office he shared with twenty-five coworkers at the agency’s Regional Examination Center on Self-Storage Parkway. He quietly passed away last Tuesday at his desk, but nobody noticed until late Saturday evening when an office cleaner asked how the examiner could still be working in an office with all the lights off.

Mr. Blumquist’s supervisor, Scott Thomas, said, ‘Frederick was always the first guy in each morning and the last to leave at night. He was very focused and diligent, so no one found it unusual that he was in the same position all that time and didn’t say anything. He was always absorbed in his work, and kept to himself.’ (27-28)

This passage’s significance is not that the tedium of Blumquist’s work gave him a coronary—it’s that Blumquist’s state of unbreakable attention was not distinguishable from death. To have perfect focus on one thing, after all, means that one is totally shut out from the rest of life. One must not be unborable, then—one must instead have a high resistance to boredom as well as the ability to become bored by totally useless data, allowing one to break attention and move on in
search of more important information. Though Chapter 1 will critique Kenneth Goldsmith’s argument that linear reading has become obsolete in the information age, there is something to his claim that our task as contemporary readers involves “parsing” (i.e., skimming, browsing, filtering) text as much as analyzing it word by word (158-174). Our attentional modulation, then, must function like Maxwell’s Demon, sorting relevant from useless information as it enters the consciousness. To develop this ability, though, we must seek out text whose important material is sometimes contained within large amounts of pointlessness.

This ability, furthermore, will be most pressured when there is minimal apparent difference between important and unimportant text. That, I argue, is the function of cruft in the mega-novel: it takes up a great deal of space to no apparent purpose, but in doing so, it masks similar-looking text that does have purpose, challenging readers to refine the way they modulate their attention in processing it. That is why these books tend to be suffused with tropes like waste, immensity, and perceptual failure: doing so draws attention to the importance of the distinctions we must make in processing their enormous and often wasteful text. *The Pale King*, in its unfinished state, often experiments with extreme levels of cruft—e.g., the chapter describing different examiners turning pages in their files (310-313), or the 100- and 70-page chapters devoted respectively to the narcissistic monologues of “Irrelevant” Chris Fogle (154-252) and Meredith Rand (444-509)—but while it is not yet clear how well such passages can beneficially train attention, I will argue that the more integrated cruft of Wallace’s earlier *Infinite Jest* clearly can,¹⁰ as can the best works of Gaddis, Barth, Pynchon, and the other great mega-novelists.

More than anything, I believe the extremity to which mega-novels push this process is responsible for the characteristic affective responses noted at the introduction’s outset. These do
not merely result from differences in taste: they arise from more serious disputes over the adequacy of readers’ information-processing abilities. Readers’ attempts to rapidly modulate through different cognitive modes in response to the overwhelming text will already cause an initial vacillation in affective states, but this affective complex will be further complicated by readers’ more or less frequent self-perception of having either failed in adequately attending the text (e.g., having passed over a plot point that becomes important two hundred pages later, or having gotten bogged down trying to deeply process a passage that turns out to have minimal importance) or having achieved a particularly hard-won success. Furthermore, interacting with others’ self-reports of the reading experience will complicate that affect even more by either confirming one’s self-evaluation of success and failure (or alternately, corroborating one’s sense that success is entirely impossible) or by implying that one’s method for evaluating one’s own cognitive successes and failures of attention is faulty and demonstrate an incapability of managing information. This, I believe, is what constitutes the agony and ecstasy of reading the mega-novel.

**Cruft and Genre in Poststructuralism and Cognitive Theory**

We still have yet to establish, though, exactly how to determine “purpose” in fictional text. The past few decades of debate in narratology have more or less established that there is no perfect way to determine what is or is not important or interesting about a particular text for a given reader, or whether individual readers are right or wrong in ascribing that importance (see Herman and Vervaeck). I believe we can address this problem, though, through genre. One need not go so far as E. D. Hirsch’s claim that “an interpreter’s preliminary generic conception of a text is constitutive of everything that he subsequently understands” (74) to acknowledge the importance genre plays in how we ascribe purpose to narrative. As Michael Sinding points out,
Genre is a fundamental instance of categorization, without which, as Ireneo Funes demonstrates, cognition could not proceed (468). John Frow further notes that genre establishes relevant knowledge bases and intertextual schemas for a text and at the same time specifies which elements we should and should not pay attention (6-9): for instance, Rolf A. Zwaan famously demonstrated that readers who are told that a given narrative is a news article will read it relatively quickly and with little attention to the specific language, but with high attention to its real-world situational implications, whereas those told it is a work of fiction will read relatively slowly, with more attention for specific text and less to situational implications. As such, genre allows us to combine the objective elements of narrative theory with the subjective aspects of reader-based models of literary study by establishing how readers generally anticipate, organize, and respond to certain narrative phenomena.11

Genre is especially important for discussing mega-novels because they frequently violate the standard schemas that readers bring to narrative, prompting them to grasp for alternate models. That is likely why, as Sinding notes, early criticism on mega-novels often invokes genre, because “such large-scale framing” is vital for initial comprehension, subsequently “clearing the way for finer-grained interpretation” (474). For instance, one tradition of criticism, most often associated with Edward Mendelson, has dubbed mega-novels “encyclopedic narratives,” explaining their non-novelistic proliferation of technical data (e.g., mathematical equations, documentary materials, scientific terminology) as an effort to organize and explain their cultures via specialized fields of knowledge. Another, building primarily upon Frye’s *Anatomy of Criticism*, identifies them with the classical Menippean satire, understanding their outlandish and often grotesque representations as large-scale critiques of society (308-312). Similarly, mega-novels’ fabulating tendencies have been described by many critics via the
picaresque and frame-tale genres, just as their enigmatic figural structures have been explained using the epic and allegory. In fact, these genres—alongside one new one, which I am introducing to categorize mega-novels bearing unorthodox linguistic structures, the dictionary novel—will provide the organizational structure for this book.  

However, though these schematic purposes may initially appear to be fulfilled by mega-novels’ excessive text, each chapter will demonstrate how they often omit or distort key elements necessary to achieve those genres’ goals, on the basis of which I categorize their excessive text as cruft. It is not enough to say that such moments might be justified simply because they “violate expectations”: again, unless accompanied by some alternate positive effect, which would cause us to recategorize the text and lead us back toward genre, the failure to fulfill expectations is much more characteristic of bad writing than good. We might conceive this book’s structure as arranged around the career of Roland Barthes, whom I have invoked several times already, as perhaps no other individual’s criticism has so thoroughly explored the different possible purposes of literature: Chapter 1, for instance, will discuss how mega-novels gesture toward, but often do not realize, the textual jouissance pursued by the later Barthes; Chapters 2 and 4 respectively analyze how the referential indexing of systematic knowledge and development of plot functions explored in Barthes’s middle period are often not put toward any meaningful end in mega-novels; and Chapters 3 and 5 look at how mega-novels at first invite but then rebuff the early Barthes’s alternate interests in burlesquing and seriously engaging with societal mythologies. These may not exhaust literary text’s possible purposes, but they cover most of the justifications traditionally offered for mega-novels’ excessive elements. To invoke Barthes once more, these apparent narrative purposes serve as a studium to orient our attention,
but the text’s cruft then becomes a peculiar kind of *punctum*, text that stands out not because it draws but actively resists the attention (see *Camera* 25-27).

As may be becoming apparent, this book attempts to supplant what has been the academy’s dominant poststructuralist approach to the mega-novel and replace it with one grounded in the cognitive experience of reading, albeit while keeping in mind poststructuralism’s valid criticisms of what I will call the *Reader’s Guide* approach exemplified by Moore’s insistence that if we “keep reading […] even the most difficult novel will eventually make some sense” (*Novel* 22). This proposal might meet with some resistance, not least because criticism on many mega-novels has typically taken for granted that they express poststructuralist ideas: hopefully, among other things, this book will demonstrate the separability of postmodern fiction from postmodern theory. Others might object, along the lines laid out by Ellen Spolsky in “Darwin and Derrida,” that cognitive approaches to literature are not only compatible with, but the logical extension of, poststructuralist analysis. Spolsky’s position, though, defines poststructuralism very broadly, essentially as including any approach in which categories are perceived as mutable. In practice, especially regarding the mega-novel, poststructuralism tended to produce literary criticism demonstrating how the text resists all categorization, producing a Deleuzian rhizome that resists all plotting or the Barthesian experience of bliss—after all, when one categorizes, according to Jacques Derrida himself, “a limit is drawn. And when a limit is established, norms and interdictions are not far behind” (“Genre” 56). It is one thing to argue that categories are not given *a priori*, though, and quite another to believe that a critic’s default position should be to dismantle all categories as rhetorical mystifications. Bruno Latour has articulated the problem of conflating these two perspectives well in his mournful comment on the history of Theory: “Unwittingly, constructivism had become a synonym of its opposite number:
deconstruction” (92). To refuse categories entirely is almost certainly more cognitively harmful using rigidly defined ones. As Sinding notes, in response to Derrida, “I am unashamed to say I like categories: I use them every day, all the time; they enable me to make sense of things; they keep me sane, and they are essential to the ‘madness’ of creativity; they are part of who I am. I do not know what I would do without them” (472-473). Considering genre instead, as Wai Chee Dimock suggests, a way to see and create “kinship networks” among texts otherwise divided by temporal boundaries (1380)—an approach commensurate, incidentally, with the actor-network approach recently championed by Latour—can engender valuable conceptual blends, as was demonstrated decades ago by Frye’s preemptive anticipation and superseding of Derrida’s approach to genre by treating prose fiction as not comprising separate categories but generic strands capable of combination (303-314).

Such an approach will equally demonstrate, though, that many concepts don’t blend well. Our mental apparatuses need to be ready to recognize and discard failed blends when necessary, because otherwise a procedure designed to organize and make navigable our world will instead render it even more chaotic and unreadable. The best blends deserve our attention; the rest need to be discarded as cruft.

**What This Book Does and Does Not Do: Some Caveats on Cruft**

The argument of this book, even in its formative stages, has shown a tendency to create misconceptions, so I wish to clarify a number of points before commencing it in earnest. Most importantly, one should keep in mind that there are a wide variety of possible critical applications of attention to the reading process: as I write, in fact, interdisciplinary fMRI projects are underway at a variety of institutions to study what actually happens to our brains when we read, several of which involve attention (see Goldman). I suspect the data from such
experiments will have a significant impact on our field over the coming years. However, their possible implications spread much more widely than this study’s focus. This book deals with only one kind of attentional interaction, as it applies to one specific kind of text.

How the relationship of difficult to attention pertains to this study is also a complicated issue. Difficulty, of course, implies some struggles with attention, as it creates a situation in which one cannot figure out exactly how to orient one’s focus, and certainly, learning to modulate one’s attention so as to better manage these difficulties is an important process for this book. However, as the typology presented George Steiner’s famous essay “On Difficulty” might remind us, not all difficult text is cruft. For instance, while Steiner’s “contingent” and “modal” difficulties—respectively, when a reader does not understand either a factual reference or its web of connotations—play into the issues raised in Chapters 1 and 2 of how we manage textual information, the word “contingent” tellingly suggests how these difficulties are dependent upon the individual reader’s knowledge rather than the text itself. A reader unfamiliar with, say, the probabilistic or engineering equations of which *Gravity’s Rainbow* makes figural use (not to mention *Against the Day*’s archaeology of turn-of-the-century mathematics) will likely find managing the book’s information more difficult, but this difficulty is not quite the same as the more universal challenges posed by the purposeless encyclopedic information Chapter 2 discusses. Though such reader-dependent difficulties probably exacerbate the problems posed by cruft and influence the ways that individuals strategize to manage it, my lack of access to imaging technology and test subjects prevents me from speaking to it. Conversely, Steiner’s “tactically” and “ontologically” difficult text—respectively, when a text is ambiguous in meaning or when it gestures toward the ineffable—are, like cruft, difficult to assimilate into the larger work, but they possess an eventual literary purpose that cruft does not have. While
ambiguous and ineffable text delays us in figuring out its purpose, cruft’s difficulty derives from how, though it may entice us to devote attention to analyzing it, it has none.

We should also distinguish cruft from another related difficulty that I earlier claimed was necessary but not sufficient for characterizing the mega-novel, the difficulty in maintaining focus on many hundreds of pages’ text over the indeterminate amount of time it takes to read them. We might group alongside this difficulty the congruent challenge in reading the mega-novel’s inordinately intricate sentences and paragraphs. As all human brains regularly experience lapses in attention and working memory (see Cheyne, Carriere, and Smilek),\(^\text{15}\) the cumulative strain upon concentration and memory caused by reading a novel requiring dozens of hours of attention is enormous, especially if the narrator does not periodically remind us (à la Fielding or Dickens) about text from earlier in the novel that may have been understandably forgotten in the interim.\(^\text{16}\) I am not quite sure that Moore is joking when he suggests that \textit{J R} (which lacks any explicit section divisions) should be read more or less in one sitting, with breaks only taken at designated points for sleep (\textit{Gaddis} 66), but for many obvious practical and cognitive reasons, that approach is not feasible. Again, though, these questions cover a larger territory than the one this book examines, as they might be applied to not only any long book but to the struggles many viewers feel in watching certain grand operas and epic films.\(^\text{17}\) There is much that might be explored regarding these issues—for instance, why 18\textsuperscript{th}-century readers rarely reported boredom in reading Richardson’s million-word \textit{Clarissa} even though many contemporary ones (who have no trouble with the similarly-long \textit{Harry Potter} saga) find it unbearably tedious—but these are highly dependent on individuals’ capacities, like Steiner’s modal and contingent difficulties, and thus unfeasible to analyze using my methodology. Great length does, however, heighten the
attentional problems related to cruft to the point where they become inescapable parts of the reading process, which is why I am solely studying its role in the mega-novel.

All of this is to acknowledge that, though this book discusses the boring parts of excessively long books, I refer only to certain types of excessively long books, and to certain types of boredom. Consequently, many texts associated with boredom that aim for the languid rather than the overwhelming (e.g., much of Beckett’s work), will not be considered here, because their text is boring in a somewhat different way than is cruft. The relationship between any of these works and attention may well be worth pursuing elsewhere, but that relationship is different enough from what I am discussing that to treat them would probably be more confusing than helpful. Moreover, while I suspect that it is possible to apply some of the arguments I make here to a number of other long, quirky books frequently cited as mega-novel predecessors (e.g., *Gargantua and Pantagruel*, *Don Quixote*, and especially *Tristram Shandy*), I think that those earlier books are sufficiently different in their overall structures from mega-novels that I need only mention them in passing. Lastly, contemporary books written deliberately in the tradition of the pre-novel genres I invoke but do not make use of cruft, such as picaresque-like “road novels” or contemporary epic poems like Derek Walcott’s *Omeros*, will not be addressed either.

This brings us to periodization. As indicated at the outset, the book primarily addresses a number of major works of American postmodern fiction, suggesting that the way they treat the relationship of information to attention may tell us something about the contemporary moment. On the other hand, it also deals with books seemingly external to this periodization. In particular, the early chapters reach back into the early twentieth and late nineteenth centuries, while the last two address contemporary works from around the globe. There are several ways to explain this incongruity. One is that I am primarily interested in the mega-novel less as a
representation of the contemporary era than as a cognitive tool for contemporary readers, and therefore I am less intent upon creating a cogent historical narrative using mega-novels than in selecting several texts that provide the most illuminating examples of how cruft functions.

Another is that there is, actually, a loose historical narrative compatible with my organization. Because the first two chapters, addressing the dictionary and encyclopedia, deal with purely textual overload, which has been an obtrusive phenomenon for some centuries, it makes sense that we might use relatively older novels to engage that subject. As Hugh Kenner notes, post-Enlightenment Europe’s attitude toward books and knowledge is increasingly marked by how “The Encyclopaedia, like its cousin the Dictionary, takes all that we know apart into little pieces […] No Bacon, no Aquinas is tracing the hierarchies of human knowledge which he has assumed the responsibility of grasping. If the Encyclopaedia means anything as a whole, no one connected with the enterprise can be assumed to know what that meaning is” (1-2). On the other hand, the later chapters’ emphasis on the overload of textual representations of persons, actions, and concepts are more characteristic of the contemporary, globalized world, and so it is useful to compare books written in the United States or Europe during this time with those produced in Asia or South America to see how these ideas have begun to converge.

But perhaps most importantly, I approach periodization the way I do because, as Thomas Pavel has written, “ontological systems […] rarely command an unqualified loyalty,” more typically yielding to “ontological fusions” (138): in other words, people inhabiting the same temporal, material world often do not inhabit precisely the same imagined one, while those living in different material realities can have overlapping imagined worlds. Especially since we no longer inhabit a world in which, say, an artist like Beethoven would have little access to the scores written by his countryman Bach less than a century earlier, but instead one where books
from many eras and traditions are available to many people worldwide, lines of literary influence and affinity are rarely as clear as chronology and geography would imply. As Dimock has suggested, viewing periodization this way “mudd[ies] temporal, spatial, and generic lines” and “invites us to rethink our division of knowledge” (1386). Consider, for example, how we would periodize Gertrude Stein’s *The Making of Americans*, a book set in the rural nineteenth-century American Midwest, but written in Paris during the first decade of the twentieth century, published only two decades after that, and only come to the peak of its critical prominence upon being adopted by the twenty-first-century American avant-garde. Where does it really belong? To all these places and times, I think.

Along these lines, readers might notice that there are relatively few mentions of “modernism” or “postmodernism” in this book. I spent some time attempting to make the mega-novel function as a subcategory contained by one or the other, but while I oppose the sentiment that there are few clear distinctions to be made between modernism and postmodernism, I think it is best to consider all these terms as generic strands that may or may not be blended in given books. I believe this viewpoint is supported by how, even though many contemporary writers have rejected hallmark postmodern techniques, they seem as attracted to excess and overload as ever (see Burn, *Franzen* 5-9). Adopting this perspective will also prevent my argument from suggesting that the interaction between cruft and attention subordinates all other elements of mega-novels, as they usually have other valuable features as well. For example, Rushdie’s film adaptation of *Midnight’s Children* jettisons nearly all the material I address in Chapter 5, but the rest of its narrative, which is otherwise faithful to the book, still has significant aesthetic value (and uses its new medium to accomplish several things the book cannot).
Finally, I would like to make a few remarks on the nature of cruft. Since it is a pejorative term in its original context, some have been taken aback by my argument that mega-novels contain it. Certainly, to call any text pointless or excessive is usually not a compliment: if one notes, for instance, that Ayn Rand’s *Atlas Shrugged* is an excessively long novel with lots of pointless, drab text, it is usually understood that one is making a serious criticism both of the novel and its many devoted fans, even though the same description might be applied in a more positive context to Gaddis’s *The Recognitions*. It is illustrative, though, that even a veteran Pynchonist like Luc Herman admits he could not really decide whether his boredom with Pynchon’s *Against the Day* was a valuable part of the book’s aesthetic or simply a sign that it wasn’t all that well written (Herman and Vervaeck 126-127): the line between the two is exceedingly thin. There are certainly many attempted mega-novels that generate substantial cruft but don’t do anything that interesting with it, making them merely excessive in the bad sense (e.g., Gilbert Sorrentino’s *Mulligan Stew*). Similarly, I have debated whether cruft might also be defined so as to include ham-handed, repetitive uses of symbolism or hyperrealist dialogue. While one might characterize these as cruft, though, they are not really the kind of thing I am examining here, because in these cases something meaningful appears to have been attempted yet not necessarily achieved, while the instances of cruft that I want to discuss are those in which the purposelessness has some positive value.

The word “pointless” as a descriptor of cruft may cause some further confusion, since if this supposedly pointless text contributes positively to the text, in what sense is it really pointless? We might better define cruft by inverting Kant’s famous formula that objects of aesthetic interest are those that have “purposiveness […] without any purpose” (66): cruft is text that has purposivelessness with purpose. Cruft is text of some length that cannot be deeply
processed, but whose resistance to deep processing might have an interesting attentional impact for the work as a whole. In other words, cruft does not have any purpose or significance in the narrative—at the very least, the amount of space it takes up is vastly out of proportion to its importance (after all, cruft has different densities)—but its lack of significance may have a benefit to the reading process. A good comparison might be the purer forms of the mystery device known as the red herring. For instance, early in Arthur Conan Doyle’s *The Hound of the Baskervilles*, Sherlock Holmes identifies three leads he believes will lead him to the killer of Charles Baskerville: a threatening note to Henry Baskerville with text cut from a recent issue of the *Times*, a black-bearded spy who resembles the Baskervilles’ caretaker Barrymore, and the number of the cab in which that black-bearded spy had been tailing Holmes. However, all three end up being dead ends: the original newspaper is never found, a telegram confirms that Barrymore has an alibi, and the cab driver can only tell Holmes that the black-bearded spy had identified himself as “Mr. Sherlock Holmes” (691-698). Not only do none of these clues lead to the killer, they provide minimal information about anything else—not especially the threatening message, whose author is only revealed as an afterthought after the mystery is solved. Why, then, does Doyle delay Holmes’s thrilling trip to the moors with these three broken threads in London? I believe the answer to be due to the misdirection they provide, because these three red herrings obscure the one clue in the chapter that does help solve the mystery: Henry’s new brown boot, which is stolen from his hotel only to be returned and switched with his old black one. Were this incident treated by itself, readers might be able to deduce its significance—i.e., that only the old boot has Henry’s scent—but when placed amidst the other pointless clues, the puzzling affair of the missing boots seems as if it might be every bit as opaque to plotting as the threatening note. As with many mysteries, then, the goal of *The Hound of the Baskervilles*’
readers is not to try to make all the clues fit together so that each decodes equally into the solution, but to distinguish the useful clues from the red herrings and solve the mystery using only the former. Though mega-novels do not have “solutions” in quite the same way that mysteries do, putting together their information in a cogent manner is perhaps the biggest challenge their readers face.

I would also like to add a few minor notes regarding the structure of this book before beginning. Obviously, since I have chosen to use several in-depth examples from mega-novels rather than to create a historical survey, this book is not meant to be exclusive: that I have not addressed certain authors or certain novels is not meant to suggest that they do not contain cruft or achieve the effects I describe. My most notable omission is probably Joyce’s Ulysses, which, though I considered treating it at various points in several different chapters, dissuaded me with its famously unwieldy mountain of commentaries. I will instead take the escape route Frye chose in his generic scheme for prose fiction by simply asserting that it combines all the phenomena I discuss (313-314). Furthermore, that I analyze a book in one chapter does not mean that it doesn’t also engage the issues discussed by the other chapters, merely that I thought it was most usefully examined there: a different organization, for instance, might easily have swapped Infinite Jest into Chapter 3 and The Recognitions into Chapter 2. There may be other possible varieties of cruft that I have not addressed, too, though I believe I have covered the major types that exist empirically. As a last caveat, while I have attempted to be diligent in my interdisciplinary reading (and I do have a degree in mathematics to support my information-theoretical work in Chapter 1), I do not have formal training in neuroscience, and what I say regarding that subject should be read as the work of an educated layman.
I would like to conclude this introduction by establishing what I hope to have accomplished. As many of the quotes in this introduction suggest, there has long been an attitude expressed by mega-novel admirers that, while one might initially face some minor attention lapses during the reading process, these difficulties should soon be cast aside so one can diligently decode the book’s disorienting text. Boredom, this view assumes, is a condition suffered only by weak minds, and need not be given any serious thought by the committed mega-novel reader: only if it has been rejected can the serious work of understanding what the book reveals about culture, politics, and existence begin. I argue instead, however, that it is not only acceptable but crucial to be occasionally bored by mega-novels: to paraphrase the old skin cream ads, that’s how you know they’re working. Consequently, the way we establish the reading “rhythm” about which Barthes wrote—that is, the balance between what we pay close attention to and what we attend more shallowly—becomes of paramount importance to describing their peculiar value. That many readers only establish this rhythm upon rereading a mega-novel is likely not only because they have, upon the second attempt, committed to reading more closely, but because their first reading has cued them toward specific ways to better modulate attention to the book’s needs, as with how readers on their second tour through *Ulysses* often have learned to note the man in the mackintosh at Dignam’s funeral—but also probably know they needn’t devote much attention to the tailor George Mesias, mentioned several paragraphs later (90).20

As a result, though this book will by necessity refer to individuals mega-novels’ oft-cited hermeneutic key-phrases,21 it will also attempt to give closer attention to the passages that critics have usually learned to ignore or summarize. Similarly, because most criticism on these books treats their status as masterpieces as a given (or, alternately, as Text requiring Interpretation), I will often engage with contemporary reviews and other initial responses to mega-novels, because
whatever these analyses lack in the sophistication that accretes over time in criticism, they make up for in their honest consideration of the possibility that stretches of a book might not have much of a point. That consideration of the strategic decisions by which our brains choose how to evaluate and process text is, in many respects, what I wish this book to recover. I do not dispute in the least that many passages of mega-novels are brilliant and worthy of substantial close attention; I will examine a few of these, also. At the same time, though, many other passages are not, and any reading of these books must acknowledge that. I cannot articulate as a general principle how the mind does or should determine which is which, or when to modulate back and forth between modes best suited to these different kinds of text, but given its extreme plasticity and adaptability, I am confident it can train itself (consciously or not) to better perform that task as we read, and that as it does so, it can learn to apply these methods to the information overload we face in our everyday lives. Instead of feigning thralldom, then, to every nonstandard usage, gratuitous datum, broad parody, wandering subplot, and enigmatic symbol that a mega-novel contains, we ought to investigate how our minds manage an overwhelming amount of narrative text, how they work through material that is often pointless and boring, and how they adjudicate the intelligent use of stupid text.
Chapter One—The Dictionary

Hands that can grasp, eyes
that can dilate, hair that can rise
if it must, these things are important not because a

high-sounding interpretation can be put upon them but because
they are
useful. When they become so derivative as to become
unintelligible,
the same thing may be said for all of us, that we
do not admire what
we cannot understand

—Marianne Moore, “Poetry”

The Unreadable Dictionary

Unique among the generic categories structuring this book, the term dictionary novel has
not, to my knowledge, been generally used to describe mega-novels. This, I believe, is an
oversight, because at least one major strain of mega-novel shares with the dictionary its most
distinctive characteristic: the desire to expand of the boundaries of language. Dictionaries, after
all, especially those in English, have long been used to open new avenues of communication for
their readers. The original English dictionaries, for instance, were bilingual translating
references, while the first ones written entirely in one language were designed not to be
exhaustive compendiums but to enlarge readers’ vocabularies with “hard” words (Winchester
20-23), a function that can still be seen in the dictionary-browsing habits of poets, crossword
aficionados, spelling-bee contestants, and otherwise inquisitive readers. The modern English
dictionary’s attempt to formalize this impulse by seeking out and compiling all the language’s
words into one place is, as Simon Winchester notes, an endeavor peculiarly appropriate to the
capaciousness of our language, which, unlike the rigidly-policed French or Italian tongues,
“changes constantly; it grows with an almost exponential joy. It evolves eternally; its words alter
their sense and their meanings subtly, slowly, or speedily according to fashion and need” (29).

The resulting volumes might appear overwhelming, filled as they are with alien combinations of letters and sometimes even more obscure definitions regarding their usage, but this is necessary for them to disseminate and facilitate the language’s development, so that readers may eventually become acclimated to the new linguistic possibilities they present. We might say something similar about the experimental language of certain mega-novels, like James Joyce’s *Finnegans Wake*: with its dozens of polyglot neologisms per page, ranging from “aardappel” to “zyngarrettes,” not to mention many other linguistic phenomena outside of everyday usage, the *Wake* might seem excessive or nonsensical at times, but this may only be due to our initial slowness in assimilating the marvelous advances it brings to the language.2

However, as with the dictionary, mega-novels’ all-embracing expansiveness swiftly encounters a potential problem: their text can very quickly dissolve into unreadable junk. For the dictionary, the trouble is not merely because, as Umberto Eco notes, the language that a dictionary instantiates cannot be decoded on its own terms: that is, if one wants to have a complete dictionary, one must define complex words via combinations of simpler ones, and those simpler words by even simpler ones still, but eventually one must start defining simpler words by the more complex ones that they had decoded in the first place, causing perpetual regression (*Semiotics* 46-86). More importantly, the dictionary’s principle of linguistic accretion tends quickly to produce a large amount of increasingly pointless text. As Winchester notes, for instance, among early English dictionaries, the competition to produce ever-higher word counts caused lexicographers to stuff them full of ephemeral slang and jargon with no practical value (25-27). Similarly, mega-novels’ impulse to experiment can quickly generate language that cannot really be understood: a reader of the *Wake*, for instance, who wishes to explicate
“Fleppety! Flippety! Fleapow!” (15) will find no elucidation among even the book’s most thorough commentaries. In some avant-garde writing, this kind of text can go so far as to produce merely an effet du surréal, which does not communicate anything except “This is an experimental text.” Such language often impedes communication without replenishing it, and so we should be suspicious of claims made on its behalf.

The tension between these productive and destructive forms of innovation highlights the basic conundrum upon which Dr. Samuel Johnson stumbled when composing his famous Dictionary of the English Language: the competing tendencies in language toward an expansive descriptivism and a compressing prescriptivism. As Johnson realized, “Those who have much leisure to think, will always be enlarging the stock of ideas, and every increase of knowledge, whether real or fancied, will produce new words, or combinations or words” (41), but at the same time, “Change […] is not made without inconvenience, even from worse to better. There is in constancy and stability a general and lasting advantage, which will always overbalance the slow improvements of gradual correction” (28). In other words, while linguistic innovation always offers new possibilities, if it is not restrained by some stable conventions, it quickly becomes bloated gibberish. Writing on this problem several centuries later, David Foster Wallace observed, “The most obvious problem with [descriptivist grammar] is that not everything can go in The Dictionary. Why not? Because you can’t observe every last bit of every last native speaker’s ‘language behavior,’ and even if you could, the resultant dictionary would weigh 4 million pounds and have to be updated hourly” (Consider 84). Even in an era when many dictionaries (notably including the Oxford English Dictionary) have moved online and the logistical problem of size no longer looms, the potential for linguistic entries of lasting
value to get crowded out by local ephemera and idiotic junk (as appears to have occurred, say, to the online *Urban Dictionary*) remains quite real.

This chapter, then, will examine the frequent charge that mega-novels are overwritten with pointless experimentation to the point of being unreadable. Is it possible to process such writing, and if so, is there any benefit to it? For instance, consider William Gaddis’ *J R*, which even George Steiner, who praised modern poetry’s inscrutable, “ontologically difficult” text in “On Difficulty,” excoriated for its unreadable incomprehensibility:

> It is well known that suburban matrons and clubmen are haunted by the conviction that they could, given necessary willpower, typewriter ribbon, and shamelessness, produce an erotic scenario, a thriller, or a domestic saga as fine as any on the bestseller list. […] But what, then, of the truly unreadable book? This, surely, must be in every man’s reach. Yet again, the answer is no. To produce an unreadable text, to sustain this foxy purpose over seven hundred and twenty-six pages, demands rare powers. Mr. Gaddis has them. (“Crossed” 106)

Steiner goes on to characterize the novel’s rarely-broken blocks of mimetic dialogue (such as the one quoted in the Introduction), filled with the phonetic/syntactic errors of everyday speech and numerous other irregularities, as an “autistic” clutter of “interminable direct address, […] patches of narrative and an auxiliary stream of P.A. interjections,” so chaotically unstructured that the book could be “dipped in nearly at random and skimmed” (106). Given the credentials of its author, this critique cannot be dismissed as mere philistinism. After all, given that, as Norbert Wiener pointed out long ago, human communication depends upon “pattern and organization” (21), and since, according to Steiner, *J R* fails to produce any, we might well wonder if it simply descends into nonsense.
On the other hand, though, too much pattern can cause an equally unreadable excess by limiting communicative possibilities to the point where a text cannot say much of anything. Several decades earlier, Edmund Wilson, while otherwise valorizing the famously obscure modernist canon in *Axel’s Castle*, located this form of unreadability in Gertrude Stein’s 925-page *The Making of Americans*. Despite his general appreciation for Stein’s writing and his well-known interest in experimental literature, Wilson suggested her self-proclaimed masterpiece was unbearably repetitive. Of the way in which its grammatical structure seems to rigidly and endlessly replicate the same phrases, Wilson wrote, “Stein’s patient and brooding repetitiousness […] is here carried to such immoderate lengths as finally to suggest some technique of mesmerism. With sentences so regularly rhythmical, so needlessly prolix, so many times repeated and ending so often in present participles, the reader is all too soon in a state” (240). This argument critiques extreme prescriptivism much as Steiner does extreme descriptivism, suggesting that when a book has no allowance for novelty, it will evacuate readers’ abilities to process text. As a result, regarding the work as a whole, Wilson concluded, “I have not read this book all through, and I do not know whether it is possible to do so” (239).

How do we establish the point at which experimental writing collapses into nonsense, and if a mega-novel’s text really does become unreadable, is there any positive function the resulting cruft might serve? To answer these questions will require a more rigorous definition of “unreadable,” and as such, we will need to briefly examine a few aspects of how we process text and how we determine what depth of attention to devote it.

**Text Processing, Literary Convention, and Information Theory**

Of course, as far as at least one strain of literary theory is concerned, to argue that certain innovative text might be unreadable is not necessarily a criticism. After all, one of the central
principles of the last hundred years of poetics has been the idea that literary text is supposed to impede, rather than facilitate, our ordinary reading processes. A century ago, Viktor Shklovsky claimed that when perceptions becomes habitualized, “life fades into nothingness,” and that consequently the purpose of literature is to “mak[e] perception long and ‘laborious’” by delaying our text processing through unconventional devices to the point where we become conscious and attentive to the stimuli we perceive (5-6). Some decades later, Roland Barthes made a related point when distinguishing between “readerly” text, which emphasizes simple and unimpeded decoding, and “writerly” text, which enables its readers to pursue the “infinite play of the world” (4-5), a division he adapted later to one between texts that generate “pleasure” and “bliss” (*Pleasure* 51-52).

As Reuven Tsur has since pointed out, such arguments are essentially about cognition, since they prioritize text that commits “organized violence against cognitive processes” (4). Under this reasoning, a text that appears unreadable may be all the more valuable for being so. Raymond Federman, in fact, made this argument explicitly, quipping that reviewers leveled charges of unreadability at long novels simply because they never got around to reading them (66) before inverting the usual readable-unreadable distinction:

If *readability* is the pleasure of recognition (easy pleasurable referential recognition), then *unreadability* must be the agony of unrecognition.

**Unreadability**: what disorients us in a text (especially in an experimental novel) in relation to ourselves (and I do not mean here the bulk, the thickness, the degree of difficulty, the self-reflexiveness, the tediousness of the text—these are weak excuses for not reading a book). **Unreadability**: what prevents us from recognizing that something is happening, but also prevents us from looking up
and away from the text to relocate ourselves in the world. **Unreadability**: what locks us into the language of the text. (70)

Federman might agree with Steiner and Wilson’s respective descriptions of *J R* and *The Making of Americans* as unreadable, then, but would suggest that that is their most valuable attribute.

However, this thesis needs to be heavily qualified, because inducing failures in the cognitive process is often a bad thing. As Anthony J. Sanford and Catherine Emmott point out, creative deviations often do disrupt text processing and consequently increase neural activity—but so does unintentionally bad writing, because we must waste mental effort to figure out what the text is saying (25-27, 99). Furthermore, while they show that unconventional writing can produce deeper processing in this manner, they also show that the reverse effect occurs if text becomes too confusing or convoluted, because the mind necessarily disengages from text it perceives as unreadable (112-114). After all, how would one process the sequence

`ooeqpcqpovfnxffipsbxpezqgkxmqtptwubplhfixlupuctqjjeqgrqqrwhjqbqtpvlsorevdbhrns puwjqlscvdfqlptsk`? Even an ardent Joycean, I suspect, will tend to pass quickly over this randomly-generated string of one hundred characters (as you probably did just now), because outside of a few brief distinguishable English sequences, none longer than the four-letter “sore,” there is no pattern that might be recognized by Anglophone readers. *Contra* Federman, such text is much more likely to prompt “looking up and away from the text” than to “lock us into [its] language,” because its random letters so obviously refuse the possibility of significance.

This is not a trivial point. Randomness, after all, is text’s normal state, as is demonstrated by Jorge Luis Borges’ story “The Library of Babel,” which figures the textual world as an enormous library of identical hexagonal rooms whose bookshelves contain “all possible combinations of the twenty-two orthographic symbols (a number which, though unimaginably
vast, is not infinite)—that is, all that is able to be expressed, in every language” (115). However, this abundance does not lead the librarians toward a greater richness of understanding, because “[f]or every rational line or forthright statement there are leagues of senseless cacophony, verbal nonsense, and incoherency” (114), like the string produced above. Certainly, this situation forces the librarians to be creative and active readers, constantly constructing ciphers and systems to create meaning out of senseless material, but instead of providing them rich reading experiences, the librarians are plagued by madness and violence due to the futility of their work (115). The librarians consider it nigh-miraculous when they find anything conventionally readable at all, as with the line “O Time thy pyramids” that appears suddenly toward the close of an otherwise entirely nonsense volume (114). At the same point, pure pattern without variation equally frustrates their reading efforts, as the Babel librarians realize upon finding a volume that simply reads “M C V” for 410 pages, which they cannot imagine even “belong[s] to any language, however dialectical or primitive” (113-114). Even though a book of “M C V”s possesses enough structure to signify (e.g., the number 1105), it is not much more readable than the books of random characters, because it ceases to make any semiotic differentiations: after one reads the initial pattern, one will necessarily skim through the rest. The Library, that is, ought to remind us how valuable and rare is the conventionally readable text so often excoriated by experimentally-minded critics, and how much less impressive linguistic transgression appears when viewed in the context of the Library’s vexing books.

If unconventional text only sometimes affects cognition positively, though, how can we analyze the benefits or drawbacks of linguistic innovation? To answer that question, we should follow N. Katherine Hayles’s advice and replace the presence/absence dialectic that has dominated poststructuralism with one derived from information theory, namely
pattern/randomness (*Posthuman* 25-26, 247-249). Formalizing our analysis via information theory will allow us to more rigorously evaluate the extent to which a given passage deviates from normal textual structure, as well as to identify which passages are all too predictable, when we discuss how readers process them. This will require a few key terms. In information theory, the message intended by a sender is called its *signal*, while any text not part of the signal is called *noise*. In Claude Shannon’s foundational essay in information theory, that message’s *information* is a measurement of its statistical unpredictability with respect to its receiver’s expectations (“Mathematical” 10-11): for instance, a string of 100 digits that strictly alternates 1s and 0s has less information than a string of forty random digits, even though it is longer, because while each digit of the second string provides a new, unpredictable bit of information, the first one is largely predictable. Alternately, one might refer to information as roughly measuring a text’s *complexity*. In Andrei Kolmogorov’s definition, complexity is a measure of the minimum text naming a string, which will almost always decrease as the text becomes more predictable: in our previous example, all the second string’s forty digits are needed to describe it, while for the first, the compressed phrase “10 50x” will do (see Li and Vitányi vii). Information’s complement is *redundancy*, a measure of its predictability: for instance, after its few digits, the forty-digit string above is almost totally redundant, since we could easily predict what will come next. Redundancy is obviously increased by adding textual structure, since it makes text less random, and some redundant text often can, if necessary, be eliminated from the message, allowing *compression*. Moving between any given message and the concept or interpretant with which the receiver’s dictionary associates it we may call *encoding or decoding*, while any message that does not decode with respect to the dictionary must have one or more *errors*. Errors are frequently caused by noise and tend to increase information by refusing any
predictable structure. If we can confidently change an errant message to a decodable one, we call this a correction, which is made easier by higher redundancy, because redundant text can provide the information the errant text fails to produce.

An important aside to these definitions is that, in Shannon’s formulation, information is calculated using an equation formally identical to that for physical entropy (i.e., the energy unable to do work in a thermodynamic system), and so the magnitude of a text’s information is often referred to as its entropy. We need to be careful about this term, though, because substantial confusion has been caused by humanists’ muddling of its technical uses and popular overtones over the past six decades, conflating the physical and informational definitions and further dragging in Newton’s Second Law of Thermodynamics, which declares that entropy in a closed system increases over time. While informational and physical entropy are similar—both measure disorder, and since information must be transmitted in a physical channel that often adds noise, both tend to increase—their distinctions are significant enough that jumbling them, as we will see, may confuse us into misidentifying some text as highly entropic even if it isn’t.

Additionally, we should recognize an important corollary to Shannon’s equation: since any ordering principle imposes a pattern on a text, it will consequently make the text more predictable, causing the magnitude of the text’s information to fall. This leads to the counterintuitive result that a) the text with the most order (i.e., the most predictable text) has the least information, and b) the text with the least order (i.e., the most random text) has the most information. For literary critics, who tend to associate complexity and information with order, this may be confusing. Even Hayles gets turned around on this point, claiming “in some instances, an infusion of noise into a system can cause it to reorganize at a higher level of complexity” (Posthuman 25). If we are addressing text, though, the definition of complexity we
ought to use is Kolmogorov’s, in which case Hayles is exactly wrong: while noise typically does make a text more complex, it does so because it disorganizes; if it reorganizes the text, it lowers complexity. After all, as librarian Jan O’Deigh articulates in Richard Powers’ 1991 *The Gold-Bug Variations* while researching the work of pioneering geneticist Stuart Ressler, though we may celebrate such noisy mutations for their innovative effects, mutations are almost never beneficial. A message, carefully crafted over time, is altered at random. The text will almost certainly suffer, if it remains intelligible at all. The introduction of noise into a signal is much more likely to garble than improve. Failure is lots more probable than anything else going.

Typing too late at night, I begin to insert letters that distort my words disasterously [sic]. Rereading, I piece some alterations back into partial sense. Only an infinitesimally few typos—the lucky comma that leaves a sentence more comprehensible—will produce clean, let alone enhanced copy. (330)

Deliberately increasing a text’s information/entropy/complexity, then, is frequently destructive.⁸

This property of textual entropy complicates the relationship of information to literary value. Some critics have attempted to address this problem, such as Eco in *The Open Work*, which on the one hand argued that literary text could primarily be distinguished from ordinary language by its high information density, as “certain unorthodox uses of language can often result in poetry, whereas this seldom, if ever, happens with more conventional, probable uses of the linguistic system” (53-54; italics Eco’s), but qualified this by noting that an artist who opposed conventionality too much put himself “constantly in danger of losing the thread and of becoming a mere photographer of the unrelated and the uniform” (119). Even this position, though, proved insufficiently nuanced when Eco considered postmodern art two decades later,
which seemed to depend less on innovation than on replicating previously extant patterns
(“Innovation”). It is difficult, then, to make sweeping categorical judgment about texts’ quality
from their abstract level of order. However, we may assert three points generally: a) all
worthwhile literary texts must be, at least in part, patterned and decodable; b) all readable texts
are characterized by a balance of textual information and redundancy that, in its absolute value,
remains constricted to a conservative band, no matter how “radical” its devotees claim it to be; c)
there exists no readable text that enacts anything near an absolute principle of order or disorder.

If *J R* and *The Making of Americans* are great novels, then, the former’s apparent
randomness must be counterbalanced somehow by pattern, and the latter’s maddening
redundancy offset by some entropy. How they achieve these mixtures, as I will demonstrate,
comes via the unusual manner in which their pattern and randomness are mixed. Where standard
English more or less efficiently alternates its unpredictable elements with more strictly patterned
ones (e.g., consonants with vowels, nouns and verbs with connectives), *J R* and *The Making of
Americans*’ patterns and randomness are frequently disentwined, allowing each to proliferate to
the point where many passages contain locally unreadable cruft. Often, this causes the text to
expand, as additional text is required to render at least parts of the excessively random or
patterned text readable. Subsequently, readers’ abilities to process the language are challenged
by this unusual balance, because it becomes difficult to immediately determine whether a given
passage meaningfully contributes to communication or is simply nonsense. In this chapter, then,
by examining some characteristic passages that demonstrate how their text accumulates with
respect to their balance of pattern and randomness, we will examine how non-readable text is
used in the dictionary novel by seeing how *J R*’s purported entropic errors are undercut by
regular redundancy and how *The Making of Americans*’ repetitions are broken up by underlying
variety, before concluding with how error and redundancy work together to allow correction in 
*Finnegans Wake*.

**Error: Is J R Readable?**

Certainly, J R’s text frequently appears disordered. Consequently, the book’s main narrative—in which a mathematically gifted but academically unengaged sixth-grader named J R Vansant becomes inspired by a school trip to Wall Street to play the stock market’s esoteric system of regulations, tax credits, and loopholes against each other until he has built his class’s single share corporate stock into a financial empire—features frequent communication breakdowns: information is not received as intended, is sent with errors already embedded, or is decoded improperly. Consider this exchange, where two teachers at J R’s school, aspiring composer Edward Bast and frustrated writer Jack Gibbs, run into each other after the aforementioned Wall Street trip, during which they had both been pressed into service as chaperones by J R’s ailing teacher, Amy Joubert:

—Yes but, Mrs Joubert is she all right?

—Momentary recovery Bast, got inhaled each momentary recovery thought I had a newspaper.

—It’s under your arm yes but was she, what happened …

—Got lost in the dark caverns of her throat Bast, bruised by the ripple of unseen muscles ought to be ashamed of myself, told me I should apologize to you how’s that.

—Well no but that’s not what I …

—Told me you’re talented sensitive purpose Bast sense of purpose need help and encouragement lock yourself in write nothing music, take defeat from
any brazen throat get to be like Bizet only not Bizet where the God damned doors
… he hunched as though with cold, hands buried in pockets —dum dum
dedum…

—Over here yes, but …

—Don’t spit upon the, garden path lead the whole God damned wait,

Bast? Something I’m supposed to give you these right here she forgot to give me
wait, forgot to give them to you here. (130-131)

We may observe that, at least as written, several passages here are unreadable. Gibbs, drunk as
usual, slurs his phrases into a disordered mess, produces phrases that do not parse (e.g.,
“sensitive purpose”), and can’t even keep track of all the text on his person, such as the
newspaper he can’t find and the student train tickets he belatedly remembers to give Bast at the
passage’s end (which, moreover, he has accidentally mixed with his horse-racing stubs). For his
part, Bast speaks at cross-purposes with his interlocutor, failing to pick up on the latter’s
encouragement of his musical endeavors and never finding out about the health of Joubert (with
whom Gibbs is beginning a romantic attachment). Adding to the confusion, no narrative voice
steps in to summarize either man’s garbled speech more cogently, nor explain their thoughts, nor
even identify who is present in the scene: in fact, the narrator’s only appearance in this
passage—“he hunched as thought with cold, hands buried in pockets”—is so unmarked as to
initially appear another incoherent remark by Gibbs. Given all the unintended noise presented
directly in this passage, producing near-random sequences of words, it’s no wonder that the
novel gets as long as it does.

Many critics celebrate this strategy, though, believing it enacts the entropic effects
characterizing the global socio-economic collapse caused by, in John Johnston’s words, “the
destabilizing and entropic effects of capitalism” (*Carnival* 205), creating a world “catastrophically disorganized, as if it had fallen under the baleful spell of some disruptive and noisy machine and that operates by inefficiency, producing only accidents, spillage, waste, breakdown, and misunderstanding” (*Information* 126).\(^{10}\) Invoking Wiener’s characterization of entropy as a force destructive to the higher-level forms of order he associated with meaning and a functioning humanist society (see Comnes 108-109; Schreyer 82-84), they believe entropy corrupts the very surface of the book’s language, often seeming to follow a Wiener quote cited by Gaddis himself as an inspiration for the book claiming, “We are always fighting nature’s tendency to degrade the organized, and to destroy the meaningful. The more probable a message, the less information it gives. Clichés, for example, are less illuminating than great poems” (qted. in *Rush* 130; see also Wiener 21). More philosophically, they also often claim that this disordered text mimics “the essential indeterminacy of contemporary epistemology” (Comnes 14), especially emphasizing the minimal presence of the narrator, which is argued to be a sign that Gaddis has abandoned all “authorial mediation” and only serves as a mute “collector and transmitter” of voices (LeClair 103), which are “thoroughly transmuted and dispossessed” (O’Donnell, “Master’s”) and “decontextualized” into pure transaction (Tabbi, “Technology”) by a runaway system.\(^{11}\)

There is a problem with this view, however, which is rooted in both the aforementioned sloppiness with which humanists discuss entropy and a contradiction within Wiener’s own characterization. As the quote above shows, Wiener attempted to make meaning equivalent to information in his version of information theory, opposing both to entropy. However, signifiers and signifieds do not line up so easily, as Shannon realized in his approach, causing him to insist that meaning could not be incorporated into any mathematical study of information and
redundancy (“Mathematical” 1). We may observe why by using Wiener’s literary example: while clichés are somewhat more predictable than great poems, great poems—which must follow some basic structural principles with respect to their language—are far more predictable than a string of random text, which Wiener certainly would not argue to be maximally “illuminating.” The magnitude of entropy and information must always be equal, not opposed, then, and greater textual meaning, however we define it, cannot always be produced by minimizing entropy.\(^\text{12}\)

Inasmuch as passages like those above are entropic, in fact, they actually “increase the technical information value of any one word” (88), as LeClair notes, which might well require readers, as Steven Moore suggests, to attend each letter more carefully so as to fully understand the complexity of the system it describes, thus potentially making the text more meaningful (Gaddis 64). This dilemma sits unresolved in the criticism on the novel: does \(J\ R\)’s entropic text represent a world in which all meaning has been sapped away, prompting us to reduce our attention so as to escape its mindlessness, or does its increased information instead enhance the text’s meaning and prompt us to focus all the more?\(^\text{13}\)

We may begin to answer those questions by observing that \(J\ R\) does not actually increase entropy everywhere, but adds redundancy in subtle ways to balance out its more obviously unpredictable textual elements.\(^\text{14}\) Consider the passage below, set at \(J\ R\)’s Long Island school, in which Principal Whiteback simultaneously discusses another field trip with Joubert and maintains a phone conversation:

—Yes well of course they’re not taking the ahm, they’re taking buses that is to say the last time we used the train there seems to have been one less youngster coming back out than ahm, yes well that was your trip wasn’t it you
don’t happen to remember the number of youngsters that ahm, of tickets that is to …

—I don’t offhand no but, but you don’t mean a child may have been …

—Yes well no we probably would have heard from a parent by now but of course these days you can’t always excuse me, hello … ? Yes just a minute

Leroy where’s, yes here if you just take this schedule Mrs Joubert you can ahm, I can tell them you’ll meet them at ahm, whatever it says there yes …

—Thank you I do appreciate …

—Yes well thank you for ahm, for coming in Mrs Joubert excuse me, hello…? Yes excuse me I have someone on the other phone here, hello Leroy…?

But what happened to them that many, even that many picnic forks can’t just disap … yes but where transshipped where, who auth … I know it said six J yes she just left I meant to ask her what … no well then do they know where the rest of the shipment went that never got here in the first pla … No I know it, I know we never found them in the budget that’s why they must have something to do with the cafeteria lunch program, if it looks like we’re turning down a federal subsidy they might withhold funds like they’re threatening on the milk if this Coke machine’s installed in the … What…? No now wait a minute just tell him to wait a minute Leroy, we … no there’s nothing in the curriculum that calls for brake linings unless Vogel of course ahm, how many … How many? No well even Vogel couldn’t use that many bra… No I’m not coming down to the freight office no, you … no well that can’t … no now wait a minute, what caliber …?

No well that’s no, no we don’t even have a rifle club unless of course the
government is ahm, yes well just tell them to … no no I don’t want to talk to Agent Teets, no just tell him to … no I have someone waiting on the other phone here just tell him to, to hold everything there I have somebody at the door, yes…?

(237-238)

There are many obvious errors in this passage, which render it less predictable and more entropic. Some are simple noise, like Whiteback’s *ahms*, while others are more complex, like *transshipped*, probably the result of Whiteback’s initial intention to say *transported* and mid-word shift to *shipped*. Similarly, *auth, disap, and pla* appear to be the beginnings of English words but do not themselves decode into English, while many clauses don’t parse because key syntactic elements are left out: verbs are missing (“wait a minute Leroy, we…no there’s nothing”) or lack necessary objects (“Thank you I do appreciate…”), articles never find nouns (“if this Coke machine’s installed in the …What?”), and punctuation is skipped over (“what happened to them that many, even that many picnic forks can’t just disap…”).

Yet large swaths of this passage work against that entropic tendency. After all, much of the rest of Whiteback’s dialogue comprises predictable repetitions, multi-word fillers, and clichés. In this brief passage alone, he repeats consecutively or in parallel the phrases *that many, how many, wait a minute, and just tell them to*; he also uses *of course* four times and *that is to say* twice, while beginning eleven clauses with *yes* (three with *yes well*) and many others with *no* and *no well*. Furthermore, he often deploys clichés like *these days*, compressible circumlocutionary phrases like *seems to have been*, and phrases that decoding would simply erase (e.g., *wasn’t it*, which signifies nothing). Such text has astonishingly little information and complexity, lowering the text’s average entropy. Since critics usually tend to associate entropy with any kind of collapse, they tend to see the book’s “elliptical, fragmented dialogue and a
heterogeneous discourse made up of incongruent diction, specialized jargon, mixed metaphors, and tortuous syntax” (S. Moore, *Gaddis* 109) as interchangeable, but while they all impede meaning in some way or other, their differences with respect to information are extremely important to articulate, because they work to stabilize each other and make text processing possible.

How do we process this passage, then? We can recalibrate our attention so that the redundancy can establish patterns to counterbalance the entropy. For instance, in the absence of speech tags and narrative depiction of consciousness, Whiteback’s clichés provide, strangely, the closest thing to an identity he possesses, and furthermore, they are the only control he can exert on his frantic communications, which otherwise move at a speed, multiplicity, and unpredictability beyond his (and likely our) ability to keep pace. This property is not unique to Whiteback’s speech, as J R’s “I mean” and “holy shit,” as well as Gibbs’ “God damned” function much the same way. Similarly, important material that is not foregrounded in a traditional way is usually repeated several times, as with how the missing child that Whiteback mentions in passing stands out more for having been already been brought up earlier by Bast and J R (136) and how Gibbs’ otherwise incoherent reference to the “garden path” in the passage previously cited echoes a comment he’d made in a previous scene about Wagner’s fear of the outside world (116). In other cases, syntactic context renders errors legible. For example, when Whiteback says *auth* he clearly intends to say *authorized*, because the only other standard past-tense English verbs beginning with those four letters are *authored* and *authenticated*, neither of which decodes in context. (We will discuss this more regarding *Finnegans Wake* at the chapter’s end.) In fact, if we know that the word will be the ten-letter *authorized* after only four letters, then the word’s last six letters must be totally redundant, and in streamlining out such
redundancy with its increased entropy, perhaps the text’s errors are beneficial, which might be what Moore has in mind when he otherwise bafflingly calls *J R* “lean and economical” (*Gaddis* 65).

However, while disentwining information and redundancy allows the novel to be more concise in some places, more often it generates cruft, as the amount of redundancy needed to offset the book’s myriad errors veers into its own unreadability without fully correcting many other problem spots. Whiteback’s many *ahms* are the most obvious case of pure white noise, as are several clauses too incomplete to be decoded or corrected at all, like “no well that can’t ….?” Undoubtedly, this excess is what Jonathan Franzen meant when he scoffed at Moore’s claim, arguing instead that the book “suffers from the madness [of information overload] it tries to resist” (109). It is not enough to say that Gaddis is simply reproducing and thereby critiquing the speech of real life: this, again, is simply the mimetic fallacy, and as Steiner notes, “A governed irony crystallizes; it does not reiterate the object of its anger” (“Crossed” 109, and see Ch. 3). Furthermore, the resulting cruft can cause readers to lose focus on important text, especially when that text’s importance is only clear later, as with how Whiteback’s hemming and hawing throughout the passage nearly overshadows the fork shipment that will propel forward *J R*’s junk empire. In such places, it is not always clear what separates the book’s text from sheer incoherence.

The best gesture toward explaining the distinction might be Moore’s, who claims the book’s real art is in “how *this* particular idiotic comment is chosen from many others and placed next to *that* one, so that together they echo a remark made in a dissimilar context elsewhere, and in turn anticipate a line from Tennyson, and so on” (*Gaddis* 109). This point needs to be explicated further. In an environment in which so much text is being constantly circulated, and
much of it is either so redundant or incoherent as to require substantial processing effort to derive any meaning (much of which turns out not to be that important anyway), one needs to find ways to modulate attention so that white noise can be filtered out and more important text can emerge from the background to be placed in readable relationships with the rest of the book. Just as J R’s characters struggle to retain personal coherence without falling into mere sequences of clichés, J R’s readers must struggle with discovering and keeping track of, over the course of seven hundred pages, which of the text’s errors and redundancies might be eventually rendered readable and which should simply be ignored. The articulation of that valuable text, furthermore, can only come as a result of developing a filtering method capable of identifying and skipping over cruft.

These challenges to our attentional abilities are pushed furthest by the novel’s use of jargon, a textual category that muddies the relation between information and meaning more than any other. Famously, George Orwell lambasts jargon in his essay “Politics and the English Language,” which, like J R, addresses the “political and economic causes” of the “decline of a language” (156). As far as I know, Gaddis critics have not highlighted affinities between the two, though, likely because, despite their shared aims, Orwell’s essay ends by prescribing a prose style at odds not only with J R’s but that of Gaddis’s academic defenders: clear, concise, jargon-free (170). While many have criticized Orwell for what seems to them an endorsement of anti-intellectual simplifications in these pronouncements, Orwell does not, in fact, attack jargon because it is too difficult to read—instead, he attacks it because it is too easy. Though unreadable to outsiders, jargon is quickly breezed over by insiders, for whom it reads as filler, albeit filler that makes them feel very erudite. Consequently, Orwell notes, it allows those who use it to believe their thoughts are sophisticated while “say[ing] mental effort,” because jargon
“will construct your sentences for you—even think your thoughts for you” (164-165). It deceives by presenting redundancy as complexity, allowing it to become “an instrument for […] concealing or preventing thought” (170), because when one uses such language, one may “defend the indefensible” without deeply processing what one is doing (166). If one avoids jargon, at least, “when you make a stupid remark its stupidity will be obvious, even to yourself” (171). Not only does jargon obscure its status as information, then, it also obscures its meaning, hiding whether its author means to communicate or to conceal. How we allocate attention to it in a given situation, then—whether we simply eliminate it to focus on the rest of a text, as is the wont of the symbolic logicians in Isaac Asimov’s *Foundation* (63-64), or examine it all the more for underlying motives, as Orwell does with totalitarian rhetoric (166-167)—profoundly tests our abilities to process language.

This property of jargon may be exemplified best by *J R*’s climax, a twenty-five-page scene set in the hospital room of J R’s aging, ill corporate rival Governor Jack Cates (Joubert’s father), in which Cates barks into the telephone while simultaneously firing off orders to his assistant Beaton. Many pages read like this:

—Planned to miss three dividends in the first place, didn’t we? No damn voting rights on it unless we miss the fourth one, pay that everything’s under control got Beaton here keeping an eye on the … who Freddie? Any word on Freddie Beaton?

—You mean the actual reconstituting hasn’t even excuse me, no sir Mrs. Cutler is placing ads in the pap…

—Still out loose Monty no Wiles thought he saw him in Tripler’s elevator while back with Emily must have been wrong, Beaton says she’s got ads in the
pap…must have got it from the doorman when she moved that drunk into their old place up on Seventy…Joubert no don’t know she…don’t know must have paid him off, damn lulu need it for lawyers job in a Swiss bank there dipped in the cash drawer bought back into Nobili when this outfit ran it up to nineteen turned right around wiped it out with their own Far East market nothing left but what…?

—Lost in transmission but that’s prepos…

—Same damn fool yes got the bit in his teeth there tried to give them away too, launched a big drug donation dates running out thought they’d deduct at retail, IRS disallows it lets them write off at cost under eighty thousand wholesale value damn near two million, drugs show up in every black market in the Pacific dates expire damn druggists returning them hand over first get the wholesale price back nothing left of the company but this happy pill Zona’s on lose that patent suit all they’ve got’s this damn green aspirin FDA’s got them up on not worth …

Depends what Broos comes up with Beaton standing here gossiping on the damn phone trying to reach him on … what, called Broos…? (704)

As Johnston notes, “this is not a human being talking, but money itself” (Carnival 204). The language of cash drawers, deductions, and write-offs comes so easily to Cates that he appears barely to think about them. For many readers, on the other hand, this barrage of technical and otherwise irrelevant financial detail may seem extremely complicated, yet it will still encourage skimming, because each deal’s individual meaninglessness to Cates is matched by its blurred incomprehensibility to us. Yet if we skim these deals so as to focus on events that appear more important to the main plot, we will miss the train of action leading to the novel’s climactic moment, where the heretofore milquetoast Beaton suddenly uses this dialogue’s most wonkish
element, the delayed fourth quarter dividend, in combination with Zona’s dangerous “happy pills” to wrest away the dying Cates’s holdings and transfer them to Joubert. As Moore notes, it is easy to overlook this sequence of events (Gaddis 83-84), likely because their setup occurs within such otherwise apparently interminable cruft. Only by an extremely subtle filtering can the important details be emphasized and the unimportant ones skipped.

In other words, though the book’s famously erudite financial, scientific, and artistic allusions might present real obstacles to the reading process, as might its sheer length, the most substantial difficulty in J R comes from processing the relationships between its highly entropic and highly redundant passages so as to determine which are actually worth attending. In doing so, J R sits just on the right side of the line between productive and destructive difficulty. We ought to keep that in mind, incidentally, when we read about Gibbs’s desire to write a book on the history of the player piano that will be as “Difficult as I can make it” (244), because its difficulty appears less due to any productive delay it induces to text processing than to its incoherent mixture of broken sentences and unincorporated quotes (see 603-605): simply because both Gibbs’s and Gaddis’s books are equally confusing, that is, does not mean they are equally profound. Conversely, we should not praise the frequent mid-novel speeches about the value of art and beauty made by Gibbs, Bast, Joubert, and novelist Thomas Eigen, which are every bit as cliché-ridden and empty as are Whiteback’s and Cates’s dialogue, simply because they happen to fit our aesthetic predispositions. It is the cognitive process that the text forces, rather than its propositional content, which ought to be most important to us, because without the former the latter is likely to quickly decline. When, for instance, I see that the organizers of the Los Angeles Review of Books’ recent online discussion of J R, a book so crucially about the dangers of mindlessly replicating text beyond its meaningful context, decided to name the project
“Occupy Gaddis,” I wonder to what extent we are, in fact, capable of consistently managing text in the way that both *J R* and contemporary life require.

**Redundancy: Is *The Making of Americans* Worth Reading?**

Substantially different challenges to processing are presented by Stein’s multigenerational family epic *The Making of Americans*, which narrates the lives of two wealthy families from the Eastern city of Bridgepoint, the Herslands and the Dehnings, that have moved to the Midwestern town of Gossols. Where *J R* makes use of an expanded vocabulary and fractured syntax, *The Making of Americans* deploys instead a limited arsenal of short words and repetitive sentences. These, however, can prove no less difficult to read. Why that should be so is difficult to articulate, though, given that the most popular estimates of textual difficulty, such as the Gunning-Fog and Flesch-Kincaid grade-level tests, are derived from word/sentence length and perversely evaluate Stein’s writing as extremely *easy* (see Marcus 48-49). How do we discuss, for instance, the difficulty of a passage like this one from the beginning of the “Martha Hersland” chapter?

> To begin then again with a few of them who slowly come to be each one of them a whole one to me.

> Each one slowly comes to be a whole one in me. Each one slowly comes to be a whole one in me. Every one always is repeating. As I was saying sometimes it is very irritating hearing, feeling, seeing repeating in some one, in every one. More and more then when such a one is a whole one to me, more and more then as loving repeating is all my being, more and more then I am happy in my loving repeating being. Now then.
Each one slowly comes to be a whole one to me. Each one slowly comes to be a whole one in me. This is now a description of learning one. (306)

Unlike *JR*, no words in this excerpt are errant or even unusual, and while it possesses a few syntactic irregularities, most of its sentences are short, single-claused, and correctly-constructed. Gunning-Fog grades it just under 7, but there is near-universal agreement that not only should one not expect a seventh-grader to read *The Making of Americans*, but that the book constitutes one of the most challenging reading experiences in Anglophone literature.

The main cause is likely the one cited by Wilson, both exemplified and described by this passage—the book is always repeating itself, to the point where both its redundancy (and consequent extreme length) is likely to wear down its readers’ attention and shift text processing toward skimming. This redundancy is most apparent in those phrases and even whole sentences that recur verbatim through the text, like “Each one slowly comes to be a whole one in me,” which soon become so predictable as to venture toward cruft. Furthermore, other phrases, such as “seeing repeating in some one, in every one,” seem quite compressible (i.e., “in every one” covers everything signified by “in some one”), while still others contain meaningless filler expressions like “More and more” and “Now then.” On first analysis, the text appears information-poor and to resist very deep attention.

In fact, even some Stein scholars seem receptive to the notion that the book is not really readable. Janet Malcolm, for instance, notes that among critics the book “is believed to be a modernist masterpiece, but is not felt to be a necessary reading experience” (111), and even Marianne DeKoven’s monograph celebrating Stein’s experimental language claims that reading the whole book is “an arduous and unrewarding task” (50). This perspective is widespread enough that Tanya Clement claims in her digital corpus study that close reading of the book has
“yielded limited material for scholarly work” (378). Perhaps poet Kenneth Goldsmith articulates the non-reading approach to *The Making of Americans* most boldly, identifying its enormous text as a precursor to the Internet and arguing that since that our daily textual interactions in the digital age face us with text so overwhelmingly abundant as to render concepts such as close reading obsolete, cutting-edge literature should ask us, as he believes *The Making of Americans* does, to “parse” rather than to read: that is, to skim, filter, and browse text instead of processing it word by word (158). “Trying to read Gertrude Stein’s *The Making of Americans* linearly,” he asserts, “is like trying to read the Web linearly. It’s mostly possible in small doses, dipped in and out of” (159).

If this view of *The Making of Americans* were correct, then the necessary balance of pattern and randomness I have articulated for literature might no longer apply, and cruft-heavy text of low complexity—e.g., Goldsmith’s own *Day*, whose 800 pages may be compressed, as he essentially acknowledges, down to a phrase like “one day’s *New York Times* converted to a plaintext monograph”—might become literature’s future. But the notion that close reading is obsolete in a text-overloaded world has already been confronted and rejected by John Barth, whose 1967 “The Literature of Exhaustion,” despite its reputation as a manifesto of postmodernism, is largely a defense of traditional literature against conceptual writing like Goldsmith’s. Barth points out that since conceptual literature is intended primarily to provide an occasion for aesthetic discussion rather than to be read, then “for intellectual purposes [one] needn’t write it at all” (*Friday* 69), which means that the distinction between conceptual writing and literature is really one between “things worth remarking […] and things worth doing” (*Friday* 66). To illustrate that there still exists literature “worth doing,” even at a point of apparent exhaustion, Barth invokes Borges’ story “Pierre Menard, Author of the *Quixote*,” which
centers on a fragmentary *Don Quixote* by a French writer seeking to independently reproduce Cervantes’ work. Such a book might be interesting to contemplate as an illustration of the problems of originality and interpretation in an age when so much text circulates so readily, but as Barth points out, Borges’ story is emphatically not that book. Instead of creating nine hundred pages of compressible text—i.e., a volume reducible to “*Don Quixote*’s textual double”—Borges creates his own brief narrative about an artist’s struggles with originality and, paradoxically, achieves originality in doing so (*Friday* 66-71). In this way, Borges and Barth demonstrate that, despite our age’s rapidly mounting archive of extant textual patterns, a reserve of uncompressible unpredictability still remains available to writers.²⁰

Along these lines, *The Making of Americans* incorporates randomness within the more apparent large-scale pattern it articulates and rewards those who do attempt to read it in a mostly linear way. As Randa Dubnick has pointed out, Stein’s “obscurity” does not derive merely from repetition, but from a manipulated balance between the two axes of language identified by Roman Jakobson, the “vertical” axis of vocabulary (“selection”) and the “horizontal” axis of syntax (“contiguity”). When Stein pushes one axis toward greater unpredictability, she makes the other more predictable. In *The Making of Americans*, Stein severely limits her selection, causing some repetition, but in turn makes her contiguity nonstandard and errant (8-15), as might be seen in the above passage’s brief but unexpected prepositional phrases and irregular participle-gerund sequences. These sorts of moves distinguish *The Making of Americans* from the Library of Babel’s “M C V” volume: its syntax is too strange to be skimmed, even when many individual word-sequences repeat. We may take this point even further by noting that the book’s selection and contiguity also feature an internal dialectic of pattern and randomness. On the one hand, William Gass demonstrates in his introduction to *The Making of Americans* that
while isolated sentences may feature odd syntax, these syntaxes are often paralleled in adjacent sentences (ix), as with the above passage’s six phrases beginning with *in* or four clauses using *is* constructions. On the other, the book’s repetitive words often shift in meaning, altering the way we process identical text, as may be seen in this passage’s use of the word *repeating* itself, which shifts the meaning of later uses of *whole one.*21 (We will come back to this point later.)

DeKoven acknowledges that “the fact that it is *semi-* rather than *un*grammatical”—e.g., that conventional word choice stabilizes unconventional syntax—“is what makes it readable, valid as an option for literature” (11).

The concept of repetition, in fact, long fascinated Stein, and we might conceive *The Making of Americans* as exploring the boundaries of what repetition can express, how variation can be introduced into it, and how it can be read. Stein actually claimed to be “inclined to believe there is no such thing as repetition,” believing that upon words’ reuse they acquire an “insistence” that differentiated them in emphasis (*Lectures* 166-167), remarking elsewhere upon “how everybody said the same thing over and over again with infinite variations but over and over again until finally if you listened with great intensity you could hear it rise and fall and tell all that that there was inside them” (*Lectures* 138). How recurring words may acquire “insistence” in a novel, though, is unclear, since written text lacks the vocal emphases to which Stein alludes. Many Stein critics invoke the concept of the “continuous present” Stein derived from her psychological studies with William James to explain this phenomenon, claiming that these repetitions represent the constantly shifting and reformulating mind at work (see Sutherland 52-66, Farland) or even access presymbolic language and the pure sound of the unconscious (see DeKoven 61, Steidele). However, as perhaps the most important job of extended consciousness is to subordinate or eliminate repetitive and irrelevant mental activity, it
is not clear why a mimetic representation of immediate consciousness would be valuable: indeed, a consciousness that rigorously attended this process would verge on collapse. Sianne Ngai argues, alternately, that Stein’s “hyperbolic uses of repetition, reflexivity, citation, and cliché […] tend to draw us down into the sensual and material domain of language and its dulling and irritating iterability” (266), but why this should be a positive affective result is unclear, especially since she argues the same holds for relatively unreadable books like Goldsmith’s (257-259).

Other critics emphasize repetition’s ability to parody that which it repeats (see Taylor, Bean), but while Chapter 3 will discuss how repetition is vital to satire, a glance at the passage above should demonstrate that this argument is neither sufficient to explain many of the book’s individual repetitions nor the sheer lengths to which they go in the work as a whole.22

To see how Stein creates “insistence” out of apparent redundancy, let’s examine this passage, from the book’s penultimate chapter, describing the final days of the youngest and most philosophical of the central characters, David Hersland:

He was not really needing anything. He was not needing being certain that being living is existing. He was not needing being one going on being living. He was needing understanding that he was being living. He was almost completely needing being one completely clearly thinking. He was almost completely wanting to be feeling needing that any woman he was seeing was completely beautifully something. He was almost wanting to be giving advice strongly enough to some. He was almost being one coming to be beginning succeeding in living. He was completely clearly expressing something. He was completely understanding any one’s understanding anything of that thing.
He was not really needing anything. He was not needing being one going on being living. He was almost completely needing being one completely clearly thinking. He was not needing being one remembering that any one can come to be a dead one. He was not needing being certain that being living is something that is existing. He was not needing to be remembering anything. He was not needing to be forgetting something. He was understanding that he was being living. He was almost needing to be one almost only eating one thing. He was being living. He was understanding that thing. He was clearly expressing something. He was not forgetting anything. He was not forgetting everything. He was not needing to be one remembering anything. He was not needing to be one remembering everything. (900)

The passage’s limited vocabulary causes words to recur frequently. Need and needing alone appear sixteen times (nearly 7% of the total word count, roughly the frequency of the in standard English), which leads to both repeating phrases like “He was not really needing anything” and redundant ones like, “He was not needing to be one remembering anything. He was not needing to be one remembering everything.” This suggests low information density and substantial cruft.

Yet “He was not really needing anything” is not quite the same phrase in its two appearances. When beginning the first paragraph, it may decode into an expression of independence (e.g. “David lacks nothing, because he is self-reliant”), rendering the next two sentences, which merely provide examples of “anything,” apparently redundant. A few sentences later, though, the narrator describes something David does need: “understanding that he was being living” and “being one completely clearly thinking.” To avoid the contradiction, we might wonder if we should’ve placed greater emphasis on the qualifier really in decoding, or
considered *anything* as referring merely to physical things, or emphasize the past-tense formulation of *was*. Similarly, we could consider how different decodings of *understanding*, *being*, *living*, and *thinking* (especially into their gerund forms) might alter our take on David’s *needing*. Regardless, when we come upon the second “He was not really needing anything,” we cannot repeat our original decoding. Under the force of the syntax, the words’ meanings and their attendant probabilities have changed—as, for that matter, they have been changing all throughout the nine hundred pages of the novel leading up to this point. In this manner, *The Making of Americans* redefines the words of our language even as we read them.

However, just as *J R*’s redundancy does not fully balance its error, not all of *The Making of Americans*’ recurring phrases have this kind of dynamism. The most egregious example appears on pages 443-444, recurring almost exactly on page 480. I overlay the two here—the single bracketed letter is the only text from the first occurrence not to appear in the recurrence, and the underlined words are the only text that the recurrence introduces:

Some as I am saying *have sure feeling in them*, have honor in them and religion from the nature of them when this is strong enough in them to make it their own inside them. Some can make their own honor, some their own *living*, some their own religion, some are weak and can do one thing, make one thing their own, some are strong enough and all of it, loving, honor, *certainty* and religion in them, all of it is some one else’s, of some one else’s making, some can just resist and not make their own anything, there are many of them. Some out of their own virtue make a god who sometimes later is a terror to them. Out of their own virtue they make a god who sometimes later is a terror to them. Some make some things like laws out of the nature of them, out of the nature of some other
one. Some are controlled by other people’s virtue, and then it scares them. Listen to each one telling about their own virtue and that grows to make a god for them, grows to be a law for them and often afterwards scares them, some afterwards like it, some forget it, some are it. Some honor what is right to them for them to be doing. Some separate honor from the doing of the thing, have it as a feeling.

(443, 480)

This is not all that repeats: the next paragraph does as well, differing only by one added comma in its recurrence. Since some of the passage’s sentences are already redundant (e.g., “Some out of their own virtue make a god who sometimes later is a terror to them. Out of their own virtue they make a god who sometimes later is a terror to them”), their recurrence seems even more so. Though the two versions of this passage do appear in dramatically different contexts—the first comes as part of a description of Martha’s husband, women’s rights advocate Phillip Redfern (who, upon receiving a university post, has become attracted to a young woman named Cora Dounor, herself desired by the dean, Hannah Charles), while the second appears at the start of the next section, centered on Alfred Hersland and Julia Dehning, more generally describing the narrator’s plan to make a “history of every one”—the potential for an insistent difference between the two is defused by the vague some and sometimes: since some’s relation to loving, honor, and religion is decodable in so many ways, it dissipates any syntactic pressure that might create insistence. The minimal altered text does little to generate insistence, either, especially as the living-loving distinction deployed in the first version is weakened in the second.

Interestingly, despite the tremendous extent of the repetition, this passage has only been rarely noticed by critics (see Clement 367), but perhaps that all the more highlights how so much of the book is flatly repetitive: not even such a lengthy repetition as this really stands out.
We might understand why such repetition might have value in the larger scheme of the book, though, by returning to the final passage about David, especially the claim that he is “almost completely needing being one completely clearly thinking.” Is David actually “completely clearly thinking” here? It is difficult to say, because while on the one hand the passage is constantly repeating, as in phrases like, “He had not been one needing that thing really needing being a dead one. He had not been one needing that thing really at all needing that thing needing being a dead one. He was then understanding something and understanding any one else who was understanding something of that thing” (903), it also frequently self-contradicts, as when the narrator claims “he was one who did not remember everything,” then several sentences later that “[h]e remembered everything” (899). While elsewhere the relation between repetition and contradiction can insist that we produce nuanced shifts in the meanings of words, in these cases the contradiction is so absolute, and the repetition so vague and invariant, that it does not seem to allow any such subtle processing, moving the passage toward an incantatory vagueness. The text, then, seems to live on a very thin border between very precise and very muddled expression. Inasmuch as that language partly characterizes David’s consciousness, it seems that he cannot always tell the difference between the two in establishing his own thoughts, and consequently, we cannot really tell whether he has established a profound peace with himself in his dying days or simply collapsed into a confused rambling.

Finding the line between profundity and rambling is an extremely tricky problem, one that produces probably the biggest challenge in reading Stein’s novel. In describing David’s inability to consistently maintain insistence within the patterns of his thought without falling into contradiction on the one side or repetition on the other (a problem shared by many of the book’s characters), *The Making of Americans* shows us the hidden richness possessed by the mundane
words than govern our lives, but also what muddled use we often make of them, and how maddeningly hard it is to distinguish between our most insightful and most nonsensical thoughts. The tightrope our minds walk in attempting to establish the necessary patterns making consciousness possible without simply becoming calcified and habitual, while at the same time allowing in enough new stimuli without those patterns collapsing, is a treacherous one.

**Correction: How Does One Read *Finnegans Wake***

No mega-novel, though, presses our ability to rapidly modulate modes of attention more relentlessly than *Finnegans Wake*, a book without which any discussion of allegedly unreadable text would be incomplete. Where *J R* may tweak several clauses per paragraph, few sentences pass in *Finnegans Wake* without several words being warped into near-unrecognizability; while *The Making of Americans* may repeat many phrases, the *Wake* constantly repeats the entire Viconian life-cycle through the trope of the Liffey’s daily flow inward and out. Regarding this circularly-plotted, neologism-loaded tome, even Joyce’s friend Ezra Pound—certainly no stranger to long, impenetrable literary works—found himself forced to admit bafflement:

I will have another go at it, but up to the present I make nothing of it whatever. Nothing so far as I make out, nothing short of divine vision or a new cure for the clapp [*sic*] can possibly be worth all the circumambient peripherization.

Doubtless there are patient souls, who will wade through anything for the sake of the possible joke …. But … having no inkling whether the purpose of the author is to amuse or to instruct …. in somma …. 
Up to the present I have found diversion in the Tristan and Iseult paragraphs that you read years ago … mais apart ça … And in any case I don’t see what which has to do with where .... (qted. in Ellmann 584)

It is hard to criticize Pound for this attitude. After all, what would it mean to “read” the following passage:

In the name of anem this carl on the kopje in pelted thongs a parth a lone who the joebiggar be he? Forshapen his pigmaid hoagshead, shroonk his plodsfoot. He hath locktoes, this shortshins, and, Obeold that’s pectoral, his mammamuscles most mouseterious. It is slaking nuncheon out of some thing’s brain pan. Me seemeth a dragon man He is almonthst on the kiep fief by here, is Comestipple Sacksoun, be it junipery or febrewery, marracks or alebrill or the ramping riots of pouriose and froriose. What a quhare soort of a mahan. It is evident the michindaddy. Lets we overstep his fire defences and these kraals of slitsucked marrogbones. (Cave!) (15-16)

Of this passage’s 110 words, thirty-one do not belong to the dictionaries of any known language, so how can they be read? Finnegans Wake, more than any other book, makes critics ask what it means to “read” a text at all, as the cognitive modes that processing it requires are so unusual and markers of success so frequently difficult to establish.

As impenetrable as it may appear, however, the Wake, like J R and the The Making of Americans, is characterized by an unusual mixture of information and redundancy, though each is allowed to proliferate to an extreme degree within its own domain. The relationship between the two may be explicated via the tension Margot Norris long ago articulated in Wake criticism been those critics predisposed respectively toward “a radical and a conservative interpretation of
the book” (1). The radical strand emphasizes the text’s entropic randomness, describing its
text’s random ascription to it a
“quantum” textual status (see Vanderweke, Theall). The conservative strand, conversely,
points out how incredibly repetitive are the book’s motifs and symbols (see Hart), observing, in
Edmund L. Epstein’s words, that the book “repeats its stories and symbols dozens or hundreds of
times,” often seeming simply to replay one “basic story” (71). Even the confusing passage
above manages to allude to the overarching Viconian cycle and to one of Joyce’s paradigmatic
elements of that narrative pattern, the rise and fall of Charles Parnell (McHugh 15). Given how
we earlier established the necessity of balance between information and redundancy, any
adequate method of reading the book requires us to balance the two: that is, the radical and
conservative approaches are not enemies but absolutely depend upon each other. To accomplish
this, we must look to the textual feature upon which both camps establish their arguments, the
book’s errors, described by Vicki Mahaffey as the Wake’s “most far-reaching […] innovation”
(246), which the radicals view as instances of linguistic subversion and the conservatives as
guideposts to the book’s structural patterns. Addressing them will require a technique that places
the pattern and randomness of error in dialectic: correction.

Some Joyceans might balk at the idea of correction, though, because while Wake studies
have long engaged with errors, they are not the kind that readers are supposed to correct. Critics
who address errors made during the book’s composition believe that textual scholars should do
the job, not ordinary readers, if indeed the errors should be corrected at all (see Conley 59-80;
Rose and O’Hanlon); those of the conservative position tend to discuss readers’ errors in
misinterpreting the text, believing that the Wake corrects us, not the other way around (see Senn
59; Sailer 4); and those of the radical position believe that the book’s errors should be celebrated
for their liberating playfulness, not corrected (see Attridge 189; Borg 152). To discuss how
readers correct the text, one must assert a division between correct and incorrect language that
the radicals in particular resist, as may be seen in Derek Attridge’s claim that the \textit{Wake} “insists
that the strict boundaries and discrete elements in a linguist’s ‘grammar of competence’ are a
neoplatonic illusion” (205). Yet this binary is not dispensed with so easily in practice. Indeed, if
anyone could have deconstructed the notion of correctness for the \textit{Wake}, it would have been
Jacques Derrida, and tellingly, his essay on the \textit{Wake}’s phrase “he war” begins by correcting the
text into several grammatically valid variations (“he wars,” “he was,” etc.) before proceeding to
analyze its fecund possibilities (“Joyce” 145). One cannot process text at all, after all, unless one
has some sort of internalized dictionary with which to at least partly decode it, and any
dictionary requires distinctions between correct and incorrect uses of the language.

As we already saw with \textit{J R}, correction can be undertaken with ordinary English because,
as Shannon once demonstrated, our language has a high level of built-in redundancy. Using
letter frequency tables alone, in fact, Shannon calculated a baseline redundancy in English text of
at least 54% and experimentally demonstrated that, in practice, ordinary English text could be
guessed correctly by literate readers about 70% of the time (“Redundancy” 250-254). This
inherent redundancy is not merely waste, in fact, but helps protect communications from being
corrupted: codes without redundancy, after all, are vulnerable to noise, because while, for
instance, a simple binary code in which 1 denotes \textit{yes} and 0 denotes \textit{no} may be maximally
efficient, a single error will cause the receiver to decode the message incorrectly (e.g., 1 is
altered to 0). To detect and correct even one error, consequently, requires substantially more
redundant text (e.g., 111 to signify \textit{yes} and 000 for \textit{no}) (Loepp and Wootters 128-145). For a
book like the \textit{Wake}, though, which introduces many errors, there is often not sufficient
redundancy left in the language’s structure to allow correction. As an experiment I conducted on Joyce’s prose demonstrated, while educated readers are generally able to predict the letters in a sentence from Portrait of the Artist at a rate consistent with Shannon’s findings, a representative Wake sentence lowered their accuracy to 24% (“Redundancy”). 24% redundancy is not total randomness, but it reduces our ability to correct to the point where it is very frequently difficult to process the text, as might be clear by comparing the Wake passage above to any of the passages from J R.

However, the Wake’s entropic errors are partly counteracted by several other sources. Most prominently, the redundancy the Wake loses in its vocabulary is partly replaced by its underlying structure of motifs, which, following the mathematician Charles Bennett, we might call its “buried redundancy,” referring to the patterns underlying apparently complicated text (227-230).27 These would include repetitions like the character sequences HCE and ALP, the closest thing the book has to protagonists, as well as references to Tristan and Isolde, Huckleberry Finn, and the drinking song from which the book takes its name, among many other constantly-recurring bits of text. Furthermore, the redundancy provided by English syntax remains more or less intact, giving us a stable structure into which to place our corrected words (Greetham 21).28 Lastly, the text’s implied phonetics also assist the correction process, especially in the case of the Wake’s famous puns, as in how the tipsy “Comestipple” arriving in “febrewery” mentioned above are easily corrected to the heteronymic, but nearly homophonic, “Constable” and “February.” These structures often help error to be corrected.

As an example, take this relatively uncomplicated (by Wake standards) clause in which Jarl van Hoother gallops out of his castle: “And he clopped his rude hand to his eacy hitch” (23). Prior to the Wake, eacy belonged to no known language, so unless we wish to discard it as
unreadable, we must try to correct it. The syntax requires an adjective, and there are several common English ones with a “Hamming distance” (the number of digits differing between two strings of text) of 1 to *eacy*, such as *easy*, *lacy*, *racy*, or *each*. Though written English give us no mandate as to which we ought to choose, most *Wake* readers will likely correct to *easy* upon analyzing not only the candidate words’ lexical Hamming distances (the difference in letters, henceforth $d_l$) but their phonetic Hamming distances (the difference in phones, henceforth $d_p$). Phonetically, changing *e* to the consonants *l* or *r* would not only add another phone but also change the vowel from a long *e* ([i]) to a long *a* ([eI]), while correcting to *each* would remove a whole syllable; meanwhile, changing the *e* to *s* to make *easy* would merely swap two similar consonant sounds. Furthermore, this error in *eacy* suggests that other words in the clause may also have at least one error within them, even those that decode in English, which should cause us to mentally scroll through the words or phrases that might be created by changing one letter or sound in the passage. The most interesting result comes when we change the initial vowel sound in *hitch* from a short *i* ([I]) to a long *a* ([eI]), which turns “eacy hitch” into *ECH*. In any book other than the *Wake*, this would be unremarkable—we might as well note that those words are an anagram of “Hey, I catch!”—but the HCE sequence and its permutations are repeated so frequently throughout the book that we ought to anticipate it any time a sequence of letters/sounds within a small Hamming distance appears. In inducing this correction process, the *Wake* draws together this specific scene of Jarl van Hoother on horseback with the larger male principle embodied through the book, also embodied by Napoleon and Washington.

The way that these parallel corrections, separately creating two related phrases that blend their meanings into a deeper one, enrich the book’s linguistic richness has long been established in criticism on the *Wake*, most notably in Eco’s early analysis of the book’s semantic web.
This conflation of similar-sounding phrases into a single image occurs most famously in the book’s portmanteaus, such as the “violet indigonation” that Jarl feels later in this passage (23). This phrase’s second word may be corrected, with one additional space, to “indignation,” but if we delete the middle o it becomes “indignation” ($d_f = d_p = 1$). Merging the two corrections together, we may conjure a vision of the powerful Jarl growing so angry that his face becomes not just red but indigo and violet, an event that, given his position, might have great national implications—and, since we are allowing one error, possibly “violent” results. The conceptual blends created by the process of correcting such text are the backbone of the *Wake*’s literary value.

However, the results of correction usually are not as straightforward as this. After all, many other words in the “eacy hitch” passage also have $d_f = d_p = 1$ alternatives: we could change *hand* to *band*, *clopped* to *clipped*, or *rude* to *prude*. We would create further semantic links in doing so, but these new semes both fail to blend particularly well with the existing language and multiply out the sentence’s possibilities so far that it becomes difficult to process it at all. And what do we do with those words possessing more than one error, or that correct to words from non-English languages, or where different kinds of redundancy push us in different directions? For instance, the same passage describes Hooter’s legwear as “panuncular,” which *Wake* annotator Roland McHugh corrects to “peninsular” (23). This seems reasonable, given that Napoleon’s Peninsular War is a minor motif in the *Wake*, but *peninsular* requires not a single correction from *panuncular*, but three. This implies a much noisier transmission: if we had to consider all alternate words with differences of three letters or more to each other word of this section, we would have to cycle through so many different possible permutations as to make the text incomprehensible. The Latin *panuncula*, or bobbin-thread, is closer, at $d_f = d_p = 1$, but that
doesn’t seem especially relevant to the passage, and reaching into another language adds further
distance between these words. What about *avuncular*, which has $d_f = d_p = 2$ to *panuncular* but
seems a bit alien from the military context; or a drawling American-South *nucular*, which is
relevant to that context but has a larger Hamming distance and is slightly anachronistic; or some
conceptual blend of *pan* and *uncle*? Which of these are appropriate corrections? If all, which is
to be emphasized most? If all are to be treated equally, at what Hamming distance do we finally
refuse to add more interpretants, so as to keep from rewriting the book entirely?31

The belief that adding semantic value automatically improves the text, that more meaning
is better meaning, has not been questioned in *Wake* criticism for some time: even otherwise
opposed views on the *Wake*’s language, such as Eco’s structuralist valorization of the *Wake*’s
production of an “infinity of allusions” from its “cunningly organized network of mutual
relationships” (*Aesthetics* 67) and Attridge’s deconstructive claim that “the portmanteau
problematicizes even the most stable signifier by showing how its relations to other signifiers can
be productive” (215) agree on that point. Yet it is time that it is. Why should it be so
unambiguously good that the *Wake*’s language is so energetically productive of relationships,
what it produces is not necessarily of any value? Certainly, that two words happen to be
connected by a few shared letters or sounds doesn’t mean that they provoke any real insight.
Consider the ambivalence about such wordplay expressed by the Anglophone literary critic most
responsible for expanding our attunement to semantic richness, William Empson:

It is in the third type of ambiguity, when the two notions of the ambiguity are
most sharply and consciously detached from one another [e.g., puns], that one
finds oneself forced to question its value. […] When there is no connection
between the two halves of an ornamental comparison, the two meanings of a pun,
except that they are both relevant to the matter in hand, one would think that the
comparison can only give trivial pleasure and the pun not be particularly funny.
[…] To think otherwise, one must assume that \( n + 1 \) is more valuable than \( n \) for
any but the most evasively mystical theory of value. Those who adopt this view
are taking refuge in the mysterious idea of an organism, of all things working
together for the good. (131-132)

Like the other linguistic innovations we have considered in this chapter, the *Wake’s*
portmanteaus will tend to produce mostly junk, and given the enormous amount of error in the
book, the volume of that junk can drown our abilities to see any more meaningful connections
almost immediately if we are not careful. That the *Wake’s* language may be made to decode and
correct polyvalently is not a good unto itself, but only valuable when the polyvalence it produces
is actually meaningful. How we determine which combinations are beneficial and which must
be ignored, though, is a difficult matter. Inasmuch as the *Wake’s* fascinating use of error,
however, gives us the opportunity to examine that question in greater depth than any other book,
we can use it as a starting point to examine the processes by which we make those decisions.

How the *Wake’s* disruption of normal English communication with puns, errors, and
polyglot incursions sometimes impairs dialogue, but sometimes aids the emergence of something
more profound, may be seen in the early dialogue between the inebriated Irishman Mutt and the
approaching Danish explorer Jute, which in its representation of communication difficulty
displays the impact of noisy, errant messages:

Jute.—Are you jeff?
Mutt.—Somehards.
Jute.—But you are not jeffmate?
Mutt.—Noho. Only an utterer.

Jute.—Whoa? Whoat is the mutter with you?

Mutt.—I became a stun a stummer.

Jute.—What a hauhauhauhauhadible thing, to be cause! How, Mutt?

Mutt.—Aput the buttle, surd.

Jute.—Whose poddle? Wherein?

Mutt.—The Inns of Dungtarf where Used awe to be he.

Jute.—You that side your voise are almost inedible to me. Become a bitskin more wiseable, as if I were you.

Mutt.—Has? Has af? Hasatency? Urp, Boohooru! Booru Usurp! I trumple from rath in mine mines when I rimmimirim! (16)

This passage might recall Franco Moretti’s contrasting of Mikhail Bakhtin’s otherwise closely related notions of dialogism and heteroglossia by noting that “if people don’t speak the same language, after all, how is dialogue ever going to be possible?” (Way 194). There is much that is linguistically innovative about the pidgin resulting from the encounter of these two, but because Mutt and Jute have no common language, they cannot communicate with each other extremely well. Further impeding communication, Mutt admits to being a little deaf and soft-spoken: “jeff” corrects to “deaf” ($d_f=2$, $d_p=1$, aided by the proceeding “jeffmute”), and “stun a stummer” not only sounds like a stutter but includes the German word for “mute,” which Jute seems to mock with his “hauhauhauhauhadible.”

As a result, the messages they produce end up having many errors in them, yet these errors end up producing some communications more profound than would have been possible were they speaking the same language fluently. For instance, Mutt’s “Aput the buttle, surd,” is
already errant as soon as he speaks it, because not only are *Aput* and *surd* not English words, *buttle* is a verb rather than the noun the syntax requires, causing most commentators correct to *bottle* and/or *battle*. *Buttle* acquires even more noise when Jute mistakes it for *poddle* in his follow-up question, making it doubly errant.32 Interestingly, however, Mutt’s response, “The Inns of Dungtarf where Used awe to be he,” despite its own errors, is mostly adequate for responding to each of the questions, “Whose bottle?” “Whose battle?” and “Whose poddle?” One might acquire a bottle at an inn, after all, and one might have a battle at “Dungtarf,” which commentators associate with the Battle of Clontarf, a bloody conflict between the Vikings and Irish which saw the death of the latter’s chief Brian Boru and the precipitation of debilitating Irish territorial wars, including some battles over the Poddle River. As Mutt’s “Boohooru!” suggests, this had a historically negative effect on the Irish, and thus by combining these three words in the exchange, the *Wake* suggests how the Irish drown themselves in the bottle in grief over their battles for the Poddle. In the heteroglossic dialogue, this three-way confluence occurs by chance, the result of a noisy channel, yet the correction generates a complex metaphor about Ireland’s aimlessness could not be so well expressed otherwise.

On the other hand, the word Mutt actually says, *buttle*, does not appear to contribute to this blend at all, nor do many other words within smaller Hamming distances to *buttle* than *poddle*, like *bustle*, *huddle*, and *cuddle*. Other words are nearly unreadable, like *Somehards*, and even words that correct easily seem to acquire little additional meaning in the correction process, such as *inedible* (presumably correcting to *inaudible*). That these errors are not entirely beneficial should not be especially surprising: the *felix culpa*, after all—or *foenix culprit*, as the *Wake* has it (23)—is the rarest of *culpas*. While Mahaffey’s endorsement of Stephen Dedalus’s comment on Shakespeare that “A man of genius makes no mistakes. His errors are volitional
and are the portals of discovery” (242-243) is true to a point, we should revise Stephen’s characteristically romantic aesthetic: his errors are *sometimes* the portals of discovery, but often they are portals to nowhere. The substantial cruft produced in the process can swiftly overload readers attempting to make sense of the text, especially if they are convinced it can be corrected to produce some deeper meaning. Even the most ardent Joyceans, staring at a *Wake* sentence for the hundredth time, will find themselves anxiously wondering whether they have missed an important joke, or whether the real joke is that a long-dead Irishman has gotten them to spend hours of their time trying to locate a joke where none exists.

But even in failing to be portals to discovery, the *Wake*’s errors are important to the book’s project. To read the *Wake* requires a mindset constantly warping and deforming words to see how they might be corrected, which each error keeps in motion, even if it leads nowhere. It is a draining process, one that needs a lifetime’s effort to attend adequately. I have not yet devoted the requisite thousand hours that Thornton Wilder recommended to speak to the book as a whole, so I have limited myself to the *Wake*’s first chapter, yet this should not be too problematic, because the cruft in Joyce’s book does not only, or even primarily, derive from actual text’s many errors and constantly-repeating motifs. The book’s six hundred and twenty-eight pages are only the beginning of its real text, because for each word we must also process *the entirety of language*, searching out possible corrections and connections that might enrich it. Almost all of what we come up with will fail to add to what we read, with only the rare breakthrough. All the attempted connections that don’t quite work are the book’s real cruft, as our effort to read it inevitably, in Ruben Borg’s words, “produces a hesitation […] between work and waste” (162). Like the other dictionary novels, the *Wake* places us on the edge between all that should be said but has not yet been formulated and all that has not been formulated because
it should not be said, challenging us to stay as close to the line as we can without, like HCE’s avatar Humpty Dumpty, falling off it.
Chapter 2—The Encyclopedia

One sits and beats an old tin can, lard pail.
One beats and beats for that which one believes.
That’s what one wants to get near. Could it after all
Be merely oneself, as superior as the ear
To a crow’s voice? Did the nightingale torture the ear
Pack the heart and scratch the mind? And does the ear
Solace itself in peevish birds? Is it peace,

Is it a philosopher’s honeymoon, one finds
On the dump? Is it to sit among mattresses of the dead,
Bottles, pots, shoes and grass and murmur aptest eve:
Is it to hear the blatter of grackles and say
Invisible priest; is it to eject, to pull
The day to pieces and cry stanza my stone?
Where was it one first heard of the truth? The the.

—Wallace Stevens, “The Man on the Dump”

The Paradox of Encyclopedic Fiction

Having in the last chapter treated “information” in its technical sense by analyzing the
dictionary novel, this chapter will treat the more colloquial usage of the word by examining a
different type of mega-novel, though one similarly drawing upon a reference genre for its form,
the encyclopedic novel. That term has been more commonly used in critical parlance over the
past six decades, referring to mega-novels that incorporate substantial specialized information
from the sciences, the arts, and history into their narratives.¹  Most famously, Edward Mendelson
defined encyclopedic narratives as those that “attempt to render the full range of knowledge and
beliefs of a national culture” (162), echoing Northrop Frye’s earlier claim that encyclopedic
fiction presents “a total body of vision that poets as a whole class are entrusted with” (55). Even
less traditionalist takes on the genre, like that of Tom LeClair, still argue that only such
“extraordinarily knowledgeable” works (1) are able to “give readers an intellectual mastery [of
their culture] and, in their bulk, an aesthetic tower to counterbalance the towers of material
culture” (17). In gathering and organizing so much data, furthermore, Hugh Kenner notes that such books exploit not only the encyclopedia’s educative concept but the “technological space” of the printed reference book (contra the conventional novel, which resembles a script for oral performance) by inviting annotation and cross-reference, thus creating the conditions under which book like Joyce’s *Ulysses* can “contain, as Homer’s work was reputed to contain, a systematic compendium of arts, sciences and moral teachings; symbols, rituals and practical counsels” (35). Given these ambitious objectives, an encyclopedic novel obviously must be extremely long, and if readers complain that this makes it excessive or too difficult to process, this may merely be a sign that they have yet to adequately comprehend the enormous complexity of contemporary culture.

There are several problems with this argument, however, as might be observed in how other critics have inverted such claims by framing the genre as a critique, rather than a celebration, of the encyclopedic project. Countering Mendelson, Stephen Burn argues, “the encyclopedic urge emerges from a culture’s awareness of its own fragility rather than from a sense of national coherence” (“Collapse” 51), occurring when the “mass of data exceed[s] the synthesizing powers of even [the encyclopedic novelist’s] encyclopedic grasp” (“Collapse” 59); as such, a good encyclopedic novelist “does not simply use the novel to store data, but rather explores the negative impact endlessly proliferating information has upon the lives of his characters” (“After” 163). 2 Other critics, taking up a more overtly poststructuralist attitude, lambast those encyclopedically-minded authors “who bombard us with the certainty of their knowledge” (Strecker 296), asserting that the encyclopedic novel can only present “the illusion of a totalizing system” (Herman and van Ewijk 167) and is at its best where it “debunks totality, highlighting a contemporary shift to fragmentation” (van Ewijk, “Encyclopedia” 220). Most
conclude that encyclopedic novelists should not try to use their fictions to encyclopedize in a conventional way, but instead seek more “open” approaches to knowledge, often invoking Deleuze and Guattari’s notion of the rhizome (see Burn, “Collapse” 61; Strecker 296; van Ewijk, “Encyclopedia” 215; Deleuze and Guattari 3-25).

Though these approaches to encyclopedic fiction obviously conflict with each other, what may be more interesting is the underlying paradox to which they both ascribe, namely that of asserting the qualities of an encyclopedia, which is by nature a reference book, to a work of fiction, which is (in Dorrit Cohn’s formulation) a “literary nonreferential narrative” (1). In other words, if an encyclopedia’s value requires that it accountably and more or less accurately describes referents within the real world, how can its goals be either achieved or criticized by fiction, which has no real-world referents? This is not a trivial point, to be resolved through an appeal to common-sense distinctions of facts from fiction, or even to the theoretical analysis in reader-response and possible-worlds theory that has demonstrated (with confirmation from empirical research) that because no fictional text can tell us every single fact about its fictional world, readers must constantly make use of information from both real and fictional worlds when reading (see Iser 163-179; Pavel 43-72; Sanford and Emmott 45-52). In fact, this necessarily blurred boundary between the factual and the counterfactual can severely impair our ability to handle information. For instance, research shows even when readers know they are reading fiction, they will often accept the inaccurate information it presents as true, and furthermore will sometimes believe that they had “known” this information beforehand (Marsh, Meade, and Roediger 525-535). Ideally, of course, we would associate any information we encounter in fiction primarily with its fictional world, but since, as Lisa Zunshine notes, this kind of “source tagging” is cognitively taxing (47-54), we tend not to mark such information that thoroughly,
which can lead to misconceptions. Combined with the fact that a narrative’s ability to shape its readers’ beliefs has been demonstrated to depend more upon whether it immersively “transports” them than whether it is factual or not (Green and Brock 708-712), we need to be extremely wary of trying to learn about the external world from fiction. We cannot believe what we read without performing additional research, and if we go that far, we have rendered the novel-as-encyclopedia redundant anyway. As we see discuss in later chapters, fiction best addresses the real world through its alteration of perception, rather than through reference.

Fiction’s rejection of any standard of truth, however, also prevents it from really critiquing encyclopedism. It can burlesque it, of course, as might be demonstrated by Jorge Luis Borges’ description in “Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius” of the First Encyclopedia of Tlön, a reference guide to a loopy alternate world ruled by the extreme subjective idealism of George Berkeley, but this says nothing about either the real world we inhabit or our systems for organizing knowledge about it. Michel Foucault, famously commenting on another idiosyncratic Borges encyclopedia that divides the animal kingdom into categories like those “belonging to the Emperor,” that are “fabulous,” and “that from a long way off look like flies,” praised such parodic fictions for “breaking up all the ordered surfaces and all the planes with which we are accustomed to tame the wild profusion of existing things” (xv), but as neuroscientist Rodrigo Quian Quiroga points out, what is really important about this example is how it is individually so “bizarre and clearly useless” (198). To dismantle all forms of order, after all, does not free our minds to access limitless new thoughts, as implied by Foucault, but instead handicaps our cognition, because as Quian Quiroga demonstrates, such categorization is “the key to thought” in the first place, prerequisite to identifying similarities between our disparate perceptions so that we may gradually learn how to group and respond to them (198). As an analogy, consider the
labyrinthine drawings by Giovanni Piranesi and M.C. Escher: by taking advantage of the surreal possibilities of their medium, these can play with space to marvelous effect, but for precisely that reason they cannot critique the law of universal gravitation.

Fictional encyclopedias, consequently, can say very little about the capabilities of real encyclopedias, and while they can use their data for amusement or to develop plot, as information that data is empty. That makes it all the more puzzling, though, that many encyclopedic mega-novels do contain lengthy accounts of obscure subjects that do not seem to serve any diegetic purpose. One example, generally classified as encyclopedic and frequently exhibiting early mega-novel technique, is Herman Melville’s *Moby-Dick*, especially in Chapter 32, “Cetology.” Mendelson, who claims that each encyclopedic novel must “include a full account of at least one technology or science,” believes that this chapter helps qualify *Moby-Dick* as one of only seven true encyclopedic novels (164), echoing mid-century claims like that of Howard Vincent that, “In *Moby-Dick* we have the best popular introduction ever written on the subject of the American sperm-whale fishery” (124). Yet one cannot construe Ishmael’s account of cetology as an accurate account of a science. Early in “Cetology,” Ishmael writes:

First: The uncertain, unsettled condition of this science of Cetology is in the very vestibule attested by the fact, that in some quarters it still remains a moot point whether a whale be a fish. In his System of Nature, A. D. 1766, Linnaeus declares, “I hereby separate the whales from the fish.” But of my own knowledge, I know that down to the year 1850, sharks and shad, alewives and herring, against Linnaeus’s express edict, were still found dividing the possession of the same seas of the Leviathan.
The grounds upon which Linnaeus would fain have banished the whales from the waters, he states as follows: “On account of their warm bilocular heart, their lungs, their movable eyelids, their hollow ears, penem intrantem feiminam mammis lactantem,” and finally, “ex lege naturae jure meritoque.” I submitted all this to my friends Simeon Macey and Charley Coffin, of Nantucket, both messmates of mine on a certain voyage, and they united in the opinion that the reasons set forth were altogether insufficient. Charley profanely hinted they were humbug.

Be it known that, waiving all argument, I take the good old fashioned ground that the whale is a fish, and call upon holy Jonah to back me. (136)

It should be clear that dismissing the founder of modern biology in favor of one’s minimally-educated lunchmates is not how one should begin an account of a science. For that matter, Ishmael’s only argument for his position, the whale’s habitat, is so easily dispatched with (Are plankton, sponges, and ducks also fish?) that it is hard to think that he means this seriously, and nearly impossible to think Melville does.7 This is not the only glaring error, either, even from the perspective of 1851: Ishmael also insists, for instance, that the sperm whale is the world’s largest, instead of the actual title-holder, the blue or “sulphur bottom” (138-141).8

The poststructuralist approach to this chapter, however, fares no better in explaining it. Critics often claim that the book’s cetological sections present a “farcical mass of pseudo-erudition and specialization” that reveals our world’s “epistemological fragmentation and disarray” (Greenberg 1-2), believing that Ishmael/Melville expresses here “the encyclopaedist’s despair over the impossibility of attaining to perfect knowledge” (H. Clark, Fictional 37) and eventually the discovery that “cetological insight […] can never be acquired in the gesture of
mastery” but only “through the renunciation of logic, syllogism, and traditional study” (Duquette 42). However, Ishmael’s failure to achieve a coherent cetology is less due to the inherent limitations of science than because of his own lack scientific ability. As Lionel Trilling argues, there is a tendency in fiction whereby, “if any abstruse discipline is confronted with an actual human being, no matter how stupid—and, indeed, the stupider the better—it is the person who is justified against the discipline,” even though the problem is usually with the human’s stupidity rather than the discipline’s (Opposing 167). Ishmael does not achieve scientific mastery, in other words, because he does not adequately attempt it; it is Ishmael’s pseudoscientific pronouncements that are farcical, not cetology itself.

Still more puzzlingly, though, this farcicality is not consistently developed in Ishmael’s encyclopedia. Consider this representative entry in Ishmael’s taxonomy of whales:

BOOK I. (Folio), CHAPTER IV. (Hump-Back).—This whale is often seen on the northern American coast. He has been frequently captured there, and towed into harbour. He has a great pack on him like a pedlar; or you might call him the Elephant and Castle whale. At any rate, the popular name for him does not sufficiently distinguish him, since the sperm whale also has a hump, though a smaller one. His oil is not very valuable. He has baleen. He is the most gamesome and light-hearted of all the whales, making more gay foam and white water generally than any other of them. (141)

Though there is some whimsy to the taxonomy’s figurative formulations, especially the folio-octavo-duodecimo system for grouping whales by size, for the most part this entry merely relays information in a straightforwardly encyclopedic manner, even though Ishmael has already discredited himself as an accurate source of such information. Since “Cetology” not only effects
a halt to *Moby-Dick*’s plot for the next four hundred pages, but dissolves its narrative voice to the extent that critics often cease treating Ishmael independently from Melville, we would be justified in wondering what purpose there could be to the apparently useless blocks of information on the science, art, and history of whales presented by this and subsequent chapters. No wonder that the greatest challenge reported by those teaching the novel is handling students who are “impatient with these long desert stretches of information” (Milder 37) and find them “boring and irrelevant to the book’s progress and outcome” (Bergstrom 100), to the extent that many teachers let them skip the cetology chapters entirely (Axelrod 70). So what is this encyclopedic cruft doing?

**The Three Casaubons and *Moby-Dick***

To answer this question, we will need a more specific account of how information is organized by encyclopedias, processed by readers, and incorporated into fiction. Though many approaches to encyclopedism have emphasized the impulse toward total knowledge as its defining characteristic, Hilary A. Clark more subtly argues that encyclopedism is better characterized by the discrete processes of “discover[ing],” “ordering,” and “retriev[ing]” knowledge (“Encyclopedic” 99): for our purposes, we will say that information is discovered by a researcher, ordered by an encyclopedist, and retrieved for practical use by a librarian. This division emphasizes knowledge’s collaborative and practical elements: after all, while information cannot be used if it is never discovered, it is equally worthless if it is never placed into context with other information or if it is not readily retrievable.

Furthermore, it shows the centrality of critical selection and compression, rather than total accumulation, to a coherent encyclopedic approach. Though the medieval encyclopedists may have believed they could compile all that had been discovered into one coherently
structured work (Yeo 4), by the Renaissance, they realized that one had to select only the most important information to encyclopedize, or else the encyclopedia would grow unfathomably large (Yeo 6-9). For that matter, the Enlightenment Encyclopédie headed by Diderot and d’Alembert acknowledged that, because its entries were generating so many unruly webs of cross-references, the encyclopedia could no longer be adequately ordered into discrete subject headings; subsequently, the alphabetical arrangement that it and future encyclopedias adopted requires the librarian to be as selective as the encyclopedist, because retrieval now can only be conducted by scanning through different sections of the encyclopedia while avoiding being bogged down by individual articles’ many references (Yeo 16). Though the recent history of encyclopedias has made retrieval somewhat easier through the tagging system first envisioned by Paul Otlet and now implemented in the contemporary electronic database (Reagle 20-24), in other ways, the librarian’s task has become even more complicated, because the many cross-references linking to any given tag might lead to so much data from so many various sources as to be overwhelming. In a world increasingly characterized by the billions of brief and largely inconsequential documents it generates every day (see Guillory, “Memo”), navigating this abundance actually becomes the chief problem of knowledge. Perhaps the most prominent example of this is the great encyclopedic project of our time, Wikipedia, whose highly cross-referenced and up-to-date information on almost every conceivable subject frequently causes its entries to become extremely disorganized and confusing to read.

The goals and challenges involved in these three processes might be illustrated by well examining three literary Casaubons. The first is Isaac Casaubon, the sixteenth-century philologist and literary researcher widely regarded as the most learned man of his time, who made path-breaking translations of many classical texts into modern languages and whose
knowledge of Greco-Roman culture was unparalleled in Europe (Considine). Though the Genevan’s work relied upon ordering and retrieval, his original linguistic discoveries were perhaps his most important contribution to knowledge, which introduced substantial and otherwise unknown data about classical languages to his contemporaries, including the historical derivation of the word *satire* (see Ch. 3). Indeed, given how we earlier demonstrated that the referents of literary language are generally nonexistent, such linguistic discoveries are probably the most valuable knowledge that any person of letters can contribute to encyclopedism.

Ordering, on the other hand, is better exemplified by the encyclopedically-minded Reverend Edward Casaubon from George Eliot’s weighty *Middlemarch*, who works to compose a “Key to All Mythologies”:

[H]e had undertaken to show (what indeed had been attempted before, but not with that thoroughness, justice of comparison, and effectiveness of arrangement at which Mr Casaubon aimed) that all the mythical systems or erratic mythical fragments in the world were corruptions of a tradition originally revealed. Having once mastered the true position and taken a firm footing there, the vast field of mythical constructions became intelligible, nay, luminous with the reflected light of correspondences. But to gather in this great harvest of truth was no light or speedy work. His notes already made a formidable range of volumes, but the crowning task would be to condense these voluminous still-accumulating results and bring them, like the earlier vintage of Hippocratic books, to fit a little shelf.

(47-48)

Casaubon has not discovered original facts, but surveys and collects the facts that have already been discovered. Furthermore, despite the claims of some Eliot scholars, he does not do so to
express the totality of all that is known, but instead to judge how these facts may be combined and condensed into a cogent encyclopedia. However, he is unable to achieve this goal, because in the quarter-century he spends gathering his citations and considering how they should be arranged, his methods are rendered obsolete: even if the project were not ultimately scuttled by his death, Casaubon realizes toward the end of his life that the publication would likely have drawn only ridicule (243-245, 314).

Our third Casaubon, the narrator of Umberto Eco’s *Foucault’s Pendulum*, exemplifies the work of the librarian.\(^\text{12}\) We will examine his struggles more in Chapter 5, but for now we may consider the section in the novel’s middle when the underemployed scholar-protagonist decides to create a bibliographic detective agency catering to befuddled researchers. His clients lack neither information nor the ability to order it, but often cannot retrieve a given datum’s context when encountering it amid their daily mass of heterogeneous facts. For instance, a confused economist comes to Dr. Casaubon to identify a Lord Chandos whom he cannot locate in any historical record, while an Italian publisher is puzzled as to where to fact-check information from an English author about a similarly evasive St. Anselm of Canterbury; Casaubon retrieves out of his elaborate index-card system that Chandos is a fictional Hugo Hofmenstahl character and that Anselm is known as Anselm d’Aosta outside the Anglophone world (215-216). These are not themselves arcane facts, but knowing how to look for them when encountered out of their usual specialized context is not always easy.

The real problems of knowledge presented by encyclopedism, then, are at least as practical as they are theoretical. The futility of projects like the Rev. Casaubon’s are caused not by the Gödel Incompleteness Theorem, as Thomas Pynchon implies regarding a similar omnibus on European politics assayed by *Gravity’s Rainbow*’s Brigadier General Pudding (279), but by
limited resources, such as the reverend’s mortal lifespan and his necessarily slow pace of work. In many cases, these are historically contingent conditions: were Rev. Casaubon to labor with not merely the aid of his wife Dorothea but modern academic institutional support, his speed would be multiplied to the point where the project might become feasible. Similarly, as Eco’s Dr. Casaubon already intuited in the 1980s (217), computer databases and search engines would soon substantially decrease the difficulty in searching for out-of-context information that plague his clients. Yet these advances always create new difficulties. Making material more easily accessible leads to more material overall, and while one might have better tools with which to manage that material, the demands upon one’s ability to filter become increasingly large. Rev. Casaubon would have vastly more mythological texts available to peruse today as he did two hundred years ago, while Dr. Casaubon’s “strict rule, which I think secret services follow, too: No piece of information is superior to any other. Power lies in having them all on file and then finding the connections” (217) would cause him to get constantly lost in the endless web of hyperlinks created by millions of unhierarchized facts. Since everything is preserved in the archive and has equal intrinsic value, it becomes increasingly hard to separate junk from useful material.

Encyclopedism is not, then, primarily about epistemology, totality, or mastery, but about organizing, searching, and filtering an unmanageably vast amount of data into a form wherein it can be retrieved and used for the everyday practical purposes requiring it. Given the ever-increasing amount of information to which we now have access, how we process that information, and especially how we separate out important data from junk, is a vital element of contemporary life. Consequently, while encyclopedic fiction cannot contribute to our discovery of knowledge, because we cannot reliably learn about any subject from reading it, it can engage
and test our abilities to order and retrieve given material. Since the cognitive acts involved in reading fiction and nonfiction are, as we saw earlier, closely related, an encyclopedic novel can engage readers’ information-processing apparatus by challenging us to comprehend its vast amount of fictional data, modulating our attention so as to prioritize and group important pieces of information while deemphasizing less important information.

This is where cruft comes in. Cruft is an inevitable byproduct of encyclopedism, as even the best encyclopedic processes will not be able to ignore or excise every piece of minimally relevant material entirely. Though *Middlemarch* and *Foucault’s Pendulum* discuss this encyclopedic cruft, they do not produce examples of it, as Eliot spares us from having to read Rev. Casaubon’s library of notebooks and Eco does us the same favor for Dr. Casaubon’s mountain of index cards. Other encyclopedic novels, though, do present us with such text directly, as with *Moby-Dick*’s “Cetology” chapter. What should we do when faced with this pointless encyclopedia? I think that Jed Rasula’s claim that this chapter does not derive from an abstract drive to knowledge but instead from “indigence [...] delay, meander, filibuster” (“Textual” para. 23) is a good place to start. After all, Ishmael has gone to sea to escape the “honorable respectable toils” of Manhattan (7), whose rat-race of prudent Protestants has been simultaneously so overwhelming and so predictable as to leave him with “nothing particular to interest me on shore” (3-5). When he finally reaches the water, his desire to purge himself of the draining cognitive practices of clerical life requires him to dramatically reorder his relationship to information, which he achieves by creating an encyclopedia that is, by contrast, useless, leisurely, and idiosyncratic. It does not have value as an encyclopedia *per se*, and outside of its occasional poetic sentence I am not sure that it contains any text worth deeply processing. It does, however, provoke a kind of boredom antithetical to that of the boring productivity required
on land, one that consequently reorients Ishmael’s and the reader’s modes of attention. How we react to this new boredom may vary: many may wish that the plot get back to work, while others may find the encyclopedia’s aimlessness pleasing in relief to the frenzied land life, but only by establishing this opposed pole of cruft can the novel slow down and radically alter its readers’ cognitive modes so that they are prepared for the ruminating, philosophical essays that comprise much of the novel’s middle. Granted, quasi-scholarly chapters like “The Whiteness of the Whale” and “Fast-Fish and Loose-Fish” have too much poetry and economy to be true cruft in the manner of “Cetology,” but without that chapter’s assault on novelistic reading, we would not be able to process these essays at a pace commensurate to the mystical questions they raise.

This is a relatively limited use of encyclopedic cruft, written as a reflection of a society whose abilities to generate and transmit text were beginning to accelerate but were nowhere near as vast as they are today. For the rest of this chapter, we will examine in some more detail several more recent and complex cases of cruft created by authors concerned with progressively later periods’ astounding powers to proliferate information. The next section will primarily involve problems of ordering information, as fictionally undertaken by two befuddled clerks who simply want to retire pleasantly to the country, while following ones will examine some more contemporary examples involving data retrieval in the information age.

The Unhappy Retirement of Bouvard and Pécuchet

Described in his notes as “two rather lucid, mediocre, and simple souls” (xx), the protagonists of Gustave Flaubert’s final, unfinished novel, Bouvard and Pécuchet (initially projected as having two substantial volumes, with only the first completed before his death), meet one evening on the Boulevard Bourdon after finishing their respective days’ clerical work, become friends, then unexpectedly inherit money and merrily retire to the countryside, only to
end up spending their final decades caught in cyclical, ill-fated investigations through various fields of human knowledge. Each time they decide to investigate a subject, they inevitably become so overwhelmed and confused by their reading that they make disastrous decisions leading to financial ruin and personal misery. As a result, due to the pair’s frequent confusion, the novel’s summaries of their attempts to synthesize the age’s encyclopedic information often turn into blank, self-contradictory messes. For instance, in a characteristic passage, Pécuchet has these thoughts while arguing with the Abbé Jeufroy over the source of the Catholic Church’s authority:

But who granted it this infallibility?

The councils of Basel and Constantine attribute it to the councils. But the councils often differ: witness what happened to Athanasius and Arius. The councils of Florence and Lateran confer it on the pope; but Adrian VI asserts that the pope can be as mistaken as anyone else.

Mere pettifoggery! All this has no bearing on the permanence of dogma.

Louis Hervieu’s book lists the divergences: Once, baptism was for adults only. Extreme unction became a sacrament only in the ninth century. Real Presence was decreed in the eighth, Purgatory recognized in the fifteenth, and the Immaculate Conception dates from practically yesterday.

And Pécuchet got to the point of not knowing what to think of Jesus. Three of the Gospels call him a man. In a passage from John, he seems to be the equal of God, but in another passage by the same author he recognizes himself as God’s inferior. (228)
Even though Flaubert’s free indirect discourse minimizes some of the text’s tendencies toward nonsense (see Ch. 3), many critics have still concluded that such catalogs of disordered quasi-facts are pure and near-unreadable junk, only characterizing the heroes’ repetitive failure to understand anything. For instance, Franco Moretti asserts that any honest reader will acknowledge that such text is “boring” and goes so far as to “abolish[1] the difference between a book on stupidity, and a stupid book” (Modern 68-72), echoing the earlier comparison made by Flaubert’s contemporary Hippolyte Taine between reading about Bouvard and Pécuchet’s failures and watching two snails repeatedly try to climb Mont Blanc: “The first time they fall is amusing; the tenth is unbearable” (qtd. in Flaubert xiii). Similarly, Leo Bersani claims the style of Flaubert’s narrative voice makes the information it summarizes self-negating and meaningless, as “Human knowledge is cut off from both its sources and its reception” (130).

Is there any value to such text? The best way to answer that question to discover why Bouvard and Pécuchet’s efforts are always doomed to become nonsense. Famously, at the beginning of the twentieth century, René Dumesnil posed the question as “Are Bouvard and Pécuchet Imbeciles?” More recently, critics have surmised that the problem is not stupidity itself, but a hubristic encyclopedism emblematic of post-Enlightenment Western culture, one abstractly seeking “truth for its own sake.” Bouvard and Pécuchet’s “magnificent dream of scaling the heights” (Sumberg 242) and “Odyssean zest” (Kenner 4) to “master their age’s knowledge” (Codebó 103), they believe, leads them to a “naive reliance on expertise and erudition” (Swigger 356) that is bound to failure. As Burn writes, encyclopedizing as they do can become “a potentially dangerous addiction,” arguing that instead of systematically encyclopedizing, it would be better instead to “take data pretty much as it comes,” because those who do “may seem to know less, but they are in many ways more alive” (Reader’s Guide 21).
However, though Bouvard and Pécuchet are in fact described as seeking “truth for its own sake” once in the novel, Flaubert’s use of that phrase implies something slightly different from what the critics suggest. During the fourth of the novel’s ten complete chapters, when the pair discover that historians disagree profoundly on the French Revolution’s relevant causes, events, and results:

They no longer had a single fixed idea about the individuals and events of that time. To form an impartial judgment, they would have to read every history, every memoir, every newspaper and manuscript, for the slightest omission could foster and error that would lead to others, and on unto infinity. They gave up.

But they had acquired a taste for history, a need for truth for its own sake.

Perhaps the truth was more easily uncovered in earlier periods? (105)

It is true that this passage describes Bouvard and Pécuchet’s pursuit of ancient history as motivated by an abstract desire for knowledge, yet this motivation only arises after a chapter and a half of futile and disillusioning research in other fields, ranging from chemistry to anatomy to architecture. If they are only pursuing “truth for its own sake” now, what have they been doing for the past fifty pages?

They have been trying to achieve very mundane goals, in fact: as Bersani notes, “The relation of Bouvard and Pécuchet to knowledge is highly practical” (130). The great irony in evaluating Bouvard and Pécuchet’s project as one of overweening ambition is that Bouvard and Pécuchet are tremendously unambitious characters. When they meet, the copyists express no desire more profound than to escape the urban bourgeois boredom caused by loneliness, noise (4), and the grind of work (11). They may wish to gain some culture (10-11), but lack real intellectual goals. When Bouvard’s “uncle” (really his biological father) dies and leaves him a
considerable fortune, Bouvard’s first thoughts are not—as are those of Henry James’ heroines and Flaubert’s own thoroughly mediocre Frédéric Moreau of A Sentimental Education—of the great life he might now live, but to exclaim “We are going to retire to the countryside!”, a statement Pécuchet considers “beautiful in its simplicity” (14). Upon settling in a new home in Chapter Two, their main concern is merely to tend some crops and a garden (23)—a task that, a century earlier, another encyclopedically-minded French novelist had presented as the exemplarily humble and self-contained activity for avoiding the snares of Western philosophical, political, and scientific optimism. Questing for total knowledge is the last thing Bouvard and Pécuchet seem interested in doing at this point. How do such characters, then, move from this blissful desire for leisure to spending their retirement agonizing over books?

They do it because, as it turns out, even Voltaire was too much the optimist. Tending one’s own garden is not as simple as it sounds. Bouvard and Pécuchet misuse manure, sow too densely (27), and light their flowers badly (29). They do “take[ ] data pretty much as it comes”: they follow their neighbors’ planting advice (30), purchase recommended tools (31), and follow practical farming wisdom (26), but nothing works—at least not consistently, as their occasional successes only prompt overconfidence and new failures. Finally, when their homemade liqueur still explodes at the second chapter’s conclusion, Pécuchet makes the fateful exclamation: “Maybe we just don’t know enough about chemistry!” (51). Their fruitless learning, then, is prompted not by some abstract drive for total knowledge, but because the motley bricolage that is common sense fails them. As the book’s chapters proceed, Flaubert recounts not merely the clerks’ encyclopedic reading, but alternates episodes of scholarly study with those describing practical endeavors making those studies necessary: they study beauty and literature in Chapter Five with an eye toward courting the women with whom they are infatuated in Chapter Seven;
they study political science in Chapter Six when their town is wracked by the 1848 revolutions; they study religion and spirituality in Chapter Nine because it had led them away from a suicide attempt at the end of Chapter Eight. That their self-education is no abstract exercise is clearest in Chapter Ten, when they try to use all they have learned to raise and educate the orphans Victor and Victorine. These encyclopedic efforts all fail, but only after not encyclopedizing has also failed: their love lives, for instance, had also been unsuccessful before their investigation into literature, the ’48 revolution fizzled elsewhere without their help, and Victor and Victorine terrorized their previous foster household before Bouvard and Pécuchet’s.

Still, why does their encyclopedic research meet with so little success? Some assert that it is the fault of bourgeois society, which has alienated the clerks from everyday life (see Kovács; Codebó 101-118), while others refer to “the contradictions of scientific systems” (Koren and Kauffmann 211; see also Tadié 134), but these charges do not stand up. As Trilling writes:

We therefore naturally suppose that the savageness which the book was intended to express is to be found in the exposition of the studies which the two friends undertake—this surely will constitute the fierce indictment of the bourgeois democracy.

But again our supposition is disappointed. The horrors of the culture of the bourgeois democracy play a considerably smaller part that we anticipate. […] If their tenant farmer cheats them, if their handyman diddles them, we cannot conclude that rural cupidity and the unreliability of rural labor have been brought about by the ascendancy of the bourgeoisie. If Bouvard, in two wonderful scenes, witnesses the terrible power of sexuality, in human beings and in peacocks, and cannot himself go much further in the direction of passion than a warm flush of
inclination, or if Pécuchet contracts gonorrhea from his first sexual experience, we are not exactly being given examples of the effect of the bourgeois swinishness. When the hailstorm destroys the fruit which the two beginners have been almost successful in bringing to maturity, the phenomenon is not cultural but meteorological and, in its context, cosmological. (Opposing 166)

And regarding Flaubert’s supposed indictment of science:

In any vaudeville dialectic the intellectual advantage always rests with the obtuse or primitive person; the straight man, the patient teacher who believes in the subject, is always discredited. No discipline which is confronted with the simplicity, the intellectual innocence, of Bouvard and Pécuchet can long maintain its pretense to value.

Then we must have in mind the large part that is played in the book by intellectual and quasi-intellectual absurdities which are as ridiculous as we want to call them, but about which it is impossible for a sensible man to be seriously troubled. (Opposing 167)

The last point is slightly overstated but basically sound. There is, finally, a deconstructive argument that the real villain is language itself, which can never truly capture reality (Bernheimer; McKenna), but given what we see of their activities, surely Bouvard and Pécuchet would be even more befuddled without language to connect their disparate experiences into some sort of pattern.

No, their real problem is the obvious one, the one that we least like to admit: that the world itself, and not merely its political, epistemological, or linguistic framing, is simply too complicated for any individual to understand. It is not that the world doesn’t make sense—what
tortures Bouvard and Pécuchet most is that from time to time they do understand something—but
that there is too much of the world for any person (or pair of persons) to systematically order it.
Bouvard and Pécuchet’s troubles are perhaps best addressed by Italo Calvino, who concludes
that “However much effort they put into [their studies], the two scriveners are lacking in the kind
of subjective gift that enables one to adapt ideas to the use one wishes to put them to, or to the
gratuitous pleasure that one wishes to derive from them, a gift that cannot be learned from
books” (114). “Gift” is the right word, because it emphasizes the arbitrariness of Bouvard and
Pécuchet’s struggles, so many of which seem rooted in nothing more than “the downright
unpredictability of nature” (Swigger 356) or “because life is as it is” (Trilling, Opposing 166).
That they fail to understand their chosen subjects either by logic or intuition seems no fault of
their own: as Dumesnil noted so long ago, after all, Bouvard and Pécuchet are not actually
imbeciles, and as Ronald T. Swigger further points out, they “have a knack […] for penetrating
to the very conceptual center of whatever field they are studying, for finding the paradox, the
circular argument, or fatal antinomy” (357). They simply cannot order together their information
well enough to have consistent success.

It does not matter that their encyclopedizing is doomed to fail, though, because they have
no alternatives. Encyclopedism might not reliably produce thoughts adequate to the real world,
but without it, as we noted earlier, thought is not possible in the first place. As Robert Burton
wrote in his own futile encyclopedia, The Anatomy of Melancholy, “too much learning (as Festus
told Paul) has made thee mad” (260), but at the same time, there is “no better remedy” for such
melancholy “than this of study, to compose himself to the learning of some art or science” (462).
It is this melancholic, encyclopedic cycle in which Bouvard and Pécuchet are caught, where one
is miserable if one does not encyclopedize, but yet is not made less miserable by
encyclopedizing. Encyclopedizing is not an abstract activity divorced from life, then; it is simply life by another name.

If Bouvard and Pécuchet’s encyclopedizing is fated only to produce gibberish, though, is there any use in our reading it? Trilling is right to an extent when he claims that there are few points in the novel that present real philosophical conundrums for “sensible” readers: professional historians can navigate around conflicting perspectives on historical eras without losing faith in their discipline, for instance (105), while theologians might argue plausibly why one might have faith despite the scriptural contradictions (228), and Balzac scholars can explain why his novels are more than simple ethnography (118). However, Trilling’s “sensible” reader is not likely a theologian, and if so he is not likely also a Balzac scholar, and if somehow he is both, he is certainly not also a political scientist. As articulated by Warren Thorngate’s theory of attentional economics discussed in the Introduction, understanding any subject requires specialized study that precludes time spent at other subjects, and one’s ignorance of those subjects may at some point prove debilitating. Bouvard and Pécuchet may be mediocre, but all of us are necessarily mediocre at almost everything, and yet somehow we have to muddle through life anyway.18 Lacking expertise on most subjects, our confusion will likely bring us to a great deal of information that we will be unable to order into context, and as such will be rendered nonsense. However, even if we do stumble onto something insightful, as Bouvard and Pécuchet occasionally do, how will we know that it is insightful, and not merely more gibberish? That is the great problem the novel presents, and indeed the one that prompted Flaubert himself to accidentally recapitulate the activities of the characters he set out to satirize, reading a reported fifteen hundred books over his final six years in trying to understand the subjects the clerks could not (Flaubert vii). We need to read Bouvard and Pécuchet’s confused thoughts, then, so that we
can distinguish the confusion caused by their lack of knowledge from that which derives from some profound realization about their subjects.

Let’s return to the passage quoted at the beginning of this section from the Pécuchet-Jeufroy exchange. The passage might be considered pure idiocy by two types of readers, one who believes Pécuchet too stupid to understand the clarity of Christian doctrine and another who finds Christianity as whole to be nonsense and believes that Pécuchet wastes his time (and Flaubert ours) trying to make it coherent. Though I am more partial to the second view than the first, neither is quite right. Consider the final passage, in which Pécuchet—who, let us remember, has only been dissuaded from suicide by hearing a hymn to Christ in the previous chapter—begins to question the Gospels. What does their apparent contradiction mean? Does it mean that Jesus was not God, or does it simply point to human writers’ confusion in the face of the divine? Either way, does it imply that Pécuchet’s decision against suicide was illegitimate, or might the hymn have revealed to him some greater spiritual truth independent of Christ? These are not stupid questions—Pécuchet has a vital interest in figuring out the second—but unfortunately, the illogical contradictions of Catholic doctrine swamp this thought so thoroughly that he is unable to focus on it, causing his reasoning to become a disordered blob. As readers, we need to attempt to manage the contradictions of the different sources more adeptly, lest we fall prey to the same conundrums.

Bouvard and Pécuchet, however, are finally unable to distinguish anymore between sense and nonsense. They revert to the simple copying of their working days, jotting down everything they see and collating into alphabetical order, no matter how stupid or trivial, the entries that were to comprise the novel’s unfinished second volume.¹⁹ Doubtless, this would have been even more boring and cruft-laden than the first. While Trilling believes that at the book’s end,
“Bouvard and Pécuchet, sitting at their double copying desk, having a work and each other, but stripped of every idea, every theory, every shred of culture beyond what is necessary to keep men alive and still human, are [...] intended by Flaubert to be among the company of saints” (180), I do not know that it is wise to praise such uncritical mindlessness. Much of what Flaubert did produce, after all, appears a dull collation of his time’s readymade popular wisdom, as with entries like “DARWIN: The fellow who said we descended from apes” (293), most of which deserve skimming. In some cases, though, it does seem as if Bouvard and Pécuchet are almost able to reassert critical judgment and even irony, but it’s not actually clear whether this judgment or irony is intended. Is “CORN (foot): Predicts changes in weather better than a barometer. Removing one carelessly can be very dangerous: cite examples of horrible accidents” (292) a parody of a folk wisdom or an unselfconscious perpetuation of it? It’s difficult to say, and that indeterminacy is perhaps what characterizes the book’s encyclopedic difficulties more than anything else.

This is Bouvard and Pécuchet’s tragedy: they realize the importance of this information to their lives but never develop the ability to order and filter it. Instead of mocking the pair’s stupidity and wondering whom to blame for it, then, we should try to find ways to manage the information, both valuable and useless, that they cannot. Their failed encyclopedizing may be arcane and obscure at times, but it is far more relevant to practical life than we may wish to acknowledge.

The Deadly Endnote: *House of Leaves and Europe Central*

Such are the struggles with knowledge faced by the late nineteenth century. While many of these problems still remain in some form a century and a quarter after Flaubert’s death, though, the accessibility of both data and the expertise necessary to order it has grown
substantially, limiting some of them. This has come, however, at the cost of exponentially increasing the cruft through which we must wade to retrieve any information, furthered first by the expansion of print culture at the end of the nineteenth century and later the introduction of various new forms of media (radio, film, TV) throughout the twentieth, reaching new heights in the early twenty-first with the growth of the World Wide Web. Consequently, the ability to retrieve information from amid all the new cruft that digital culture generates has become an important part of twenty-first-century existence. Though it might seem that the print novel would have increasingly little to say to the cognitive problems presented by this state of affairs, it remains resourceful, as it is more capacious than film or television but more self-contained than the Internet, and in many ways, despite technological advancements in all those media, it remains the most easily manipulated medium among them. We will conclude this chapter, then, by looking at a device unique to the printed book (see Kenner 39) that nonetheless has interesting applications to digital culture, and which has lately become the mega-novel’s exemplary method of incorporating encyclopedic cruft: the note.

This use of notes in literary fiction is a strange development. After all, the note has typically been a scholarly tool for confirming that one has represented factual information accurately and for facilitating its retrieval (which is how it is used in this volume), with the traditional view being, as Anthony Grafton puts it, that “the text persuades, the notes prove” (15). This would seem to render the note especially unsuited for fiction, which, again, is non-referential. Furthermore, even in nonfiction, as Grafton points out, notes are rarely processed with much depth, as they are likely to go unread entirely by anyone but the most invested scholar, meaning that “In the end, the production of footnotes sometimes resembles less the skilled work of a professional carrying out a precise function to a higher end than the offhand
production and disposal of waste products” (6). After all, notes break one’s attention, moving it
to a different part of the page or even to the back of the volume, and if there is not likely to be
much of interest, one is best served cognitively by ignoring them. If they seem like waste
products even in scholarship, of course, they must be even more so in fiction, which is why their
literary use is still, in Shari Benstock’s words, “an aberration, a highly unconventional use of a
prescribed and specialized device” (205).

Even in scholarship, though, the note’s history is not wholly drab. As Hugh Kenner
notes, the development of the footnote allows one “a way of speaking in two voices at once”
(40), which, as Benstock argues, can create a complex, self-reflexive tonal texture not unlike the
kind found in literary narrative (Benstock 204). Such uses have inspired a minor tradition of
notes in literature. While Gérard Genette, in Paratexts, describes a wide variety of possible
types, spanning many authorial intentions and implied recipients (319-343), and Edward
Maloney has divided them more manageably into nine categories with different rhetorical
functions, for our purposes they may be divided into two chief, diametrically-opposed categories.
The first mimics the traditional scholarly use, most famously exemplified by T. S. Eliot’s The
Waste Land, in which an author, though writing fiction, still seeks to establish a factual basis for
its text by referring back to scholarly sources and documents, thus bolstering the authority of his
voice by showing where readers might themselves retrieve the information he uses. The second
type, though, takes advantage of the note’s bivocal possibilities to layer the narrative by letting
playful narrators insert undermining asides, and even can allow additional narrative voices to
chime in. The erudite 18th-century writers who employed it (Swift, Pope, Fielding, Sterne) found
this type of note useful for parodying the scholarly voice, a use taken up in the twentieth century
by the nutty annotators in Borges’ stories (see Fishburn) and in Vladimir Nabokov’s Pale Fire.
This use is obviously opposed to the first, as the note’s creation of multiple narrative planes and potentially conflicting voices are typically construed as “subverting the unity of the text and destabilizing, rather than affirming, the central narrative” (Fishburn 287-288).

Over the past several decades, both mega-novels and other subgenres of experimental literature have made increasing use of notes, which, as Larry McCaffery observes, is due partly how the spread of digital word processing has made inserting them technically easier (qtd. in Hemmingson). Furthermore, notes’ similarity to hypertext has made them appealing to writers with an eye toward the digital (see Hayles and Gannon), allowing them to simulate the way readers retrieve online data. What is different about the recent use of notes in encyclopedic fiction, however, is that they combine elements of the two incompatible types described, both piling on mounds of apparently genuine information while also producing inaccuracies, nonsense, and narrative inconsistency. Because the resulting third type of note can neither be processed as accurate information nor read for a consistently duplicitous literary effect, it creates a texture of cruft that gums up the novel, rendering retrieval of information extremely difficult.

We may observe this in the ninth chapter of Mark Z. Danielewski’s *House of Leaves*, a novel framed as a commentary by twentysomething ne’er-do-well Johnny Truant on a manuscript he’s discovered (one already loaded with notes, fragments, and comments) by a blind old man named Zampanó, which purports to describe a documentary film by photographer Will Navidson (fictional, even within the world of the novel) about a labyrinthine haunted house. (If this were not enough narrative layering, there is an additional editor commenting on Truant’s work.) As this description might suggest, many of these notes can be categorized in the second type described above, but as the passage reproduced in the Introduction might show, many of those in Chapter IX, in which Navidson’s acquaintances explore the labyrinth’s physics-defying
space (107-152), work somewhat differently. Of the chapter’s first twelve pages, fewer than four are part of the main narrative, with the rest taken up by marginal notes, and while half these pages are taken up by Truant’s digressive comments and another two present a blotted footnote about the Minotaur, the rest of Zampanó’s marginal text identifies quotations and suggests books for further reading, many of which are invented. What are we to make of this reading list?

For further insight into mazes, consider Paolo Santacangeli’s *Livre des labyrinths*; Russ Craim’s “The Surviving Web” in *Daedulus*, summer 1995; Hermann Kern’s *Labirinti*; W. H. Matthews’ *Mazes and Labyrinths*; Stella Pinicker’s *Double-Axe*; Rodney Castleden’s *The Knossos Labyrinth*; Harold Sieber’s *Inadequate Thread*; W. W. R. Ball’s “Mathematical Recreations and Essays”; Robinson Ferrel Smith’s *Complex Knots—No Simple Solutions*; O.B. Hardison Jr.’s *Entering the Maze*; and Patricia Flynn’s *Jejunum and Ileum*. (109)

Five entries really do exist (Kern’s, Matthews’, Castleden’s, Ball’s, and Hardison’s), but the other six are unique to the novel. These aren’t particularly funny—as are, say, the fake entries in Michael Martone’s fictional, comic tourist manual *The Blue Guide to Indiana*, which lists both actual Hoosier features and inventions like the Trans-Indiana Mayonnaise Pipeline (39-40) and Musée de Bob Ross (109-110)—nor can they really toy with narrative unreliability in the manner of Nabokov’s demented Charles Kinbote, since the annotating voice is so devoid of personality.

The reason for this cruft grows clearer as Chapter IX progresses. As alluded to in the Introduction, its margins quickly become overloaded with notes listing dozens of architectural terms, but while these are initially overwhelming, the notes turn out to be almost all cruft, mechanically cataloguing only objects and styles *not* contained by the labyrinth. A quick scan demonstrates in each case that there will not be any surprises, insights, or even moderately useful
information as they proceed from one page to the next. The insignificance is further underlined by our gradual realization that, while the labyrinth’s rooms continue near-endlessly, each is completely empty, enabling later chapters to represent them by simply replacing this ornate marginalia with large swaths of white space. The notes’ apparent function, then, is not to be deeply processed in their entirety, which even the novel’s greatest partisans acknowledge is not really feasible (see Chanen 171-172), but to disorient, giving readers the sensation of being overcome by an impossibly labyrinthine void. After realizing that there is little worth retrieving from this glut of data, we can adjust our attention accordingly, skip much of the marginalia, and follow the main text onward.

This is an interesting and playful use of cruft, if not an especially taxing one. Once one has oriented to the space and realized that its long lists are simply blocks of junk information, there is no need any longer to undergo any complex attention modulation in retrieving data from them, allowing one to rapidly move forward through the chapter. This use of scholarly notes in a fictional context, though, becomes more problematic when used in other encyclopedic novels. For instance, William T. Vollmann’s 800-page *Europe Central*, which depicts in impressive historical and aesthetic depth German-Soviet relations from 1914-1975, ends with over one hundred pages of endnotes and bibliography documenting his extensive research for the novel. From these and his author’s note, which insists that though his novel is made up of “parables,” his depiction of the two societies “derive[s] entirely from the historical record” and that he has “researched […] carefully” and tried to be “accurate […] as possible” so as to allow “poetic justice [to be] rendered” (753), it may appear that Vollmann intends to seriously use the endnotes to verify his authority to educate readers.²¹ However, *Europe Central*’s endnotes often have an ambiguous relationship to the factuality of the data they supposedly aid readers in retrieving. For
instance, the author’s note admits that though the endnotes document some of the novel’s central moments, they are unable for practical reasons to rigorously cite every historical element of which the novel makes use (753). Consequently, it often becomes unclear, even on important matters, which incidents from the novel are based on the historical sources and which Vollmann has made up. Some scholars of Dmitri Shostakovich, for instance, have complained that nearly everything in the novel about the composer’s romantic life, a major plot thread, has been fabricated (Christensen 97), even though Vollmann’s frequent reference to real biographical resources give the impression of historical accuracy (Christensen 100). Similarly, the crucial chapter on the Russian general Andrey Vlasov’s defection to the Nazis is substantially endnoted, but these notes are littered with disclaimers that Vollmann “loosely” adapted his sources and sometimes even changed them altogether (774-777). Exactly how loose was this adaptation? It would take substantial independent research to find out, and, again, this would render the book’s encyclopedism redundant, raising another question: what is the function of an endnote that explicitly admits its source does not verify the main text?

This is a serious matter, because any claim that the novel’s encyclopedic use of notes helps transmit knowledge about how modern Europe was shaped by the moral dilemmas faced by those caught between these two “impossibly evil” regimes (278) depends upon the fact that they adequately index their underlying data for retrieval. This problem might be circumvented if the notes more self-consciously undermined the narrative voice, but as Michael Hemmingson has observed, Vollmann’s notes, in stark contrast to those of House of Leaves or Pale Fire, are usually devoid of polyvocal play or metafictional layering, with far more Waste Land-esque erudition to their bland (and usually quite accurate) citations than there is postmodern gamesmanship. Granted, Vollmann’s frequent references to the standard German and Soviet
encyclopedias of the time, *Meyers Lexikon* and the *Great Soviet Encyclopedia*, do nothing if not demonstrate how works that are held, like the latter, to “contain the entire sum of useful knowledge” (372) may be corrupted when designed by perverse power systems: as one character ominously pronounces, to such entities, “encyclopedias are subject to revision” (646). The former’s prewar entry on Adolf Hitler, for instance, is quoted as asserting, “He is no dictator, suppressing the disenfranchised, but Führer of a believing people, who fully trust in him and enclose him in their utter love” (104), while the latter is cited to justify postwar Soviet atrocities like the blockade of Berlin by construing them as a defense against “the Western Powers [who] increasingly sabotaged the work of the Allied Control Council, and in March, 1948, wrecked it completely” (640). Yet our rejection of the German and Russian encyclopedias likely derives not from disapproving of their overweening grasps at unreachable knowledge, but, conversely, from our own confidence in knowing that they are factually wrong about Hitler and Stalin. They do not, that is, seem to make any critique of encyclopedism itself.

It might still be argued that Vollmann’s endnotes validate his effort at “poetic justice” by assuring us of his deep study of the historical period, yet such poetic justice regarding this darkest of subjects can and has been achieved on this topic with much less pretense to historical veracity. Roberto Bolaño’s brief fictional encyclopedia *Nazi Literature in the Americas*, which presents thirty short narratives in the form of encyclopedia entries describing American Nazi writers, is every bit as profound as Vollmann’s, even though each of Bolaño’s tales is fiction: by inventing literarily-minded aristocrats, aesthetes, and psychopaths whose reprehensible political views are treated as artistic eccentricities, Bolaño attacks the same psychic insulation most of us have constructed against the allure of Nazism as Vollmann does by emphasizing World War II’s Eastern front. While Bolaño’s book also concludes with an extensive bibliography, though, the
hundreds of secondary resources it lists in its “Epilogue for Monsters” (205-227) differ from Vollmann’s endnotes in one key respect: none of them actually exists. Considering Bolaño’s scholarly references beside Vollmann’s, though, should highlight that the latter might as well be made up, given how freely he has adapted them, how rarely readers will consult the works he has listed (or even read the endnote text at all), and how little they are capable of communicating within their fictional context.

The primary function of both Europe Central and Nazi Literature in the Americas’ notes, then, seems not to be facilitating the transmission of any particular information, but implying via their vast catalogs of supplementary titles the overwhelming amount of information available on this most overwhelming of subjects. There are so many different cross-references emanating from their bibliographies, and so little context to provide a sense of which may be significant, that they ought to impress upon us some humility in the face of the incredibly voluminous information that any scholar must face in retrieving information about it—and, perhaps, a similar humility upon anyone who presumes to comment upon the enormous and intricate nature of Nazi crimes against the world. The limitations against which our attentions are likely to come in processing even all the titles of such books suggest how cognitively draining it can be to try to retrieve adequate data about anything related to an issue of such consequence. Their cruft is a reminder that while books remain our most potent tool to communicate information, so many are being published at a given time, and on so many subjects, that retrieving sufficient information on even the most important topics can be unfeasible.

“Handling Information in a Grown-Up Way”: Navigating Infinite Jest

Even Vollmann and Bolaño’s elaborate bibliographic cruft, though, has limited impact on how we process their novel’s information on a word-by-word basis. This is not the case for
David Foster Wallace’s *Infinite Jest*, which centers respectively on the obscenely gifted Incandenza family that runs the Enfield Tennis Academy, the recovering addicts at nearby Ennet House, and geopolitical intrigue involving legless Québocois terrorists’ search for a film cartridge so pleasurable it permanently supersedes its viewers’ desires for anything else. Many critics have described at length how the book’s unusual and encyclopedic structure, comprising not only 981 pages of multi-threaded and chronologically-scrambled narrative but a further 388 endnotes covering subjects as diverse as pharmaceutical chemistry, calculus, political history, and tennis has a disorienting effect upon the reading process. As Frank L. Cioffi writes, “As I read on, I realized that this novel was having a curious impact on me, was penetrating my consciousness in a way that struck me as unusual,” because “it is at once an easy, pleasurable novel to read—full of narrative action, excitement, local delights— and at the same time a trying, annoying, difficult novel that is constantly interrupting itself,” admitting, “I did not abandon it, though I confess I was tempted to” (“Anguish” 162).

These difficulties are probably posed most potently by the endnotes. As with the other fictional encyclopedic notes we have discussed, they do not fill a traditional literary-note function, as on the one hand they undermine the authority of the narrative voice too seriously to be used for regular data retrieval—as when the nutty Dr. Dolores Rusk’s reference to the “Coatlicue Complex” keys to a note that merely glosses “No clue” (516, 1036)—but on the other present too much straightforward, minimally relevant information to really parody encyclopedism, like that “B.P.D.” stands for “Boston Police Department” (251, 1000) and that fake B-Movie blood is made of potassium thiocyanate and ferric chloride (711, 1054). In many cases, this data is barely even readable. Early in the novel, for instance, when the narrator
introduces us to Enfield, he provides a categorization of its students’ recreational drug preferences keyed to five rapid-fire endnotes (53). Note 8 is a representative example:

8 I.e., psylocibin; Happy Patchesa; MDMA/Xstasy (bad news, though, X); various low-tech manipulations of the benzene-ring in methoxy-class psychedelics, usually home-makable; synthetic dickies like MMDA, DMA, DMMM, 2CB, 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, usually MDMA or Muscimole, with DDMS or the over-counter-available DMSO as the transdermal carrier. (984)

How does one read this note? If one does not have a background in pharmaceutical chemistry and/or practical knowledge of synthetic street drugs, one simply can’t. Since the narrator declines to explain the distinctions between, or qualities common to, the drugs he lists, the note’s sequence of acronyms and Greek prefixes will be illegible to uninformed readers. At the same time, those with the knowledge to successfully differentiate these terms have nothing to learn: for them, the passage is entirely redundant. In either case, the note adds nothing of practical use to our understanding of the narrative, appearing to be pure cruft.

One might decide, then, that the notes are similarly unreadable to those we examined from *House of Leaves*. However, one should not merely skip through the notes, because as it turns out there actually *is* quite a lot of important data in Wallace’s endnotes. As Marshall Boswell writes:
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, comedy, and readerly pleasure. (120)

Though he mentions this merely in passing, I think Boswell may have identified the novel’s most strange and profound narrative element. How we “devise some way to read through the book” is not just an interesting side-effect of the novel’s structure: it is central to the way our minds interact with *Infinite Jest*’s data. Some of the most important information for understanding the book’s overall narrative is contained in the notes, yet to identify it one has to wade through lots of cruft, which threatens to terminate any attention one might try to spend on it. Consequently, the notes’ alternating pointlessness and importance require a constant modulation in the rhythm of one’s reading between focused attention and different levels of skimming in seeking out vital information.

Note 24, the filmography of the alcoholic and self-destructive *auteur* James O. Incandenza, provides a microcosm for how the endnotes deploy cruft. Taking up eight and a half pages, it comprises the production details and plot summaries of all Incandenza’s 78 films. The note is loaded with cruft, the extent of which has not been fully appreciated: even Jeffrey Karnicky, who claims that the filmography’s entries reveal the work’s “asignifying stasis,” really claims that they *represent* that stasis via how the films’ characters are made catatonically passive by the spectacles they watch (91-123). However, many entries do not even signify so much as this, like the five that merely read “*Untitled. Unfinished. UNRELEASED*” (990, 992). These
entries are pure cruft: their inclusion cannot further or enrich the novel’s plot or characters, because Wallace tells us nothing about them, nor are they necessary for factual completeness as in a real filmography, because these unfinished films only exist inasmuch as they are invented by Wallace in the note. Such entries do not represent pointlessness—they are pointlessness. Other entries are barely less insignificant, like the eight undescribed, hyper-ironically self-negating and “conceptually unfilmable” works called “found dramas” (989-990).22

Even some substantial entries are clearly cruft, because as Wallace’s narrator acknowledges, “a lot of [Incandenza’s oeuvre …] was admittedly just plain pretentious and unengaging and bad” (64). Consider this one:

*Fun With Teeth.* B.S. Latrodectus Mactans Productions. Herbert G. Birch, Billy Tolan, Pam Heath; 35 mm.; 73 minutes; black and white; silent w/ non-human screams and howls. Kosinski/Updike/Peckinpah parody, a dentist (Birch) performs sixteen unanesthetized root-canal procedures on an academic (Tolan) he suspects of involvement with his wife (Heath). MAGNETIC VIDEO, PRIVATELY RELEASED BY LATRODECTUS MACTANS PROD. (987)

Like most of the entries, almost half of this entry comprises boilerplate technical specs, which are basically cruft. But the film summary is not much more significant itself, since the way that *Fun With Teeth* merely reproduces, at enormous length and redundancy, its targets’ clichés rather than exaggerating them into a *reductio ad absurdum* is precisely the sort of empty postmodern irony against which Wallace railed in his essays (see *Supposedly* 21-81 and also Ch. 3). Other films approach cruft for other reasons. *Kinds of Light*—a sequence of “4,444 individual frames, each of which photo depicts lights of different source, wavelength, and candle power, each reflected off the same unpolished tin plate and rendered disorienting at normal projection speeds
by the hyperretinal speed at which they pass” (986)—is described explicitly as so sensually
overwhelming that a reader cannot train focus on it without attention breaking. Such passages’
near-unreadable overload and redundancy ravages cognition while diverting reading from a main
narrative—which, incidentally, has been interrupted while in the midst of its vital overview of
Incandenza family history—to which they seem largely irrelevant. It becomes very tempting to
skip the note and return to the main text.

Yet amid the cruft, many entries are important to examine. For instance, if one abandons
note 24 at Fun With Teeth, deciding that the note’s next six pages will likely be no more readable
than the earlier notes’ pharmaceutical catalogs, one will not read the summary of It Was a Great
Marvel That He Was in the Father Without Knowing Him (992-993), a filmed version of a scene
described earlier in the book wherein Incandenza posed as a therapist as a pretext for having a
conversation with his eleven-year-old son Hal, which fails after Hal recognizes him (27-31).
This entry is not mere redundancy, as it not only recounts the prior scene but adds material about
Incandenza inaccessible in the main text, where Incandenza comes off not only as bewilderingly
overbearing but as both so poor at responding to his son (whose speech he seems at times unable
to hear) and so bafflingly inept at disguising his appearance that readers would be justified in
questioning his sanity. The film summary, however, acknowledges that the father-therapist
character is “suffering from the delusion that his etymologically precocious son […] is
pretending to be mute” (993), demonstrating both that Incandenza is aware of how unhinged his
own behavior appears and that he understands that the discussion’s failure rests largely with him
and not Hal. This insight into Incandenza’s recognition of his inability to communicate is
necessarily incommunicable elsewhere in the novel. Other entries similarly reflect on other
events in Incandenza’s life—As Of Yore (991) appears to be a filmed version of a rambling
monologue delivered by Incandenza’s father during the former’s childhood (157-169), while the passage in which Incandenza describes his inspiration in developing annular fusion (491-503) becomes fodder for the film *Valuable Coupon Has Been Removed* (990-991). In particular, a perusal of the films starring an actor named Cosgrove Watt—alluded to only a handful of times otherwise (16, 941, 944-945, 971)—creates a sequence of meditations on Incandenza’s anxieties about the difficulties of fatherhood nowhere else in the novel articulated so well, not even when Incandenza tries (in wraith form) to discuss the issue directly with Don Gately late in the novel. Retrieving this portrait of an artist unable to express his emotional intelligence anywhere except his films, however, requires readers to dig through lots of junk data that does not contribute to it.

Again, “taking data as it comes” is insufficient to achieve this result: one needs to be disciplined and systematic to keep moving through the endnotes’ cruft without becoming bored and skimming so as to return to the main narrative. That system, however, must allow for the modulation of attention, because trying to analyze the whole maddeningly “pretentious and unengaging and bad” filmography at constant focused attention—especially this early in the novel—would be so frustrating and overwhelming as to prevent one from seeing the honest anguish behind it. This difficulty in modulating between levels of attention is itself represented in the novel, during the scene in which we see how the teenaged Hal is only able to watch his father’s touching (though not brilliant) film *Wave Bye-Bye to the Bureaucrat* (687-689) as part of a wallowing “weird self-punishment” (689) marathon of the latter’s work, also involving *Fun With Teeth* and the putrid *Blood Sister: One Tough Nun*, whose amalgam of endless genre clichés proceeds at such excruciating, soul-sapping length as to render the movie’s intent to satirize religion totally invisible to Hal and his fellow spectators, who must retreat into a mode of glazed-over, passive sarcasm to cope with its inanity (703-706, 711-714). That Hal’s own mode
of self-insulating irony is not sufficiently flexible to allow modulation is among the chief reasons he suffers a nervous collapse near the book’s climax.

Furthermore, how these films test readers’ cognitive processes figures how the notes work in the novel as a whole, especially regarding its political background. For instance, the larger motives of “Les Assassins des Fauteuils Rollents” are only revealed at the end of an otherwise tedious seventeen-page note mixing unrelated (and at times extraneous) documents and dialogue about the Incandenza family (1004-1022). Note 304’s description of why the A.F.R. are legless in the first place (1055-1062) is even more cumbersome to retrieve, as the note is only keyed at page 732 despite being q.v.’d in no fewer than four earlier endnotes, 39 (994), 45 (995), 173 (1031), and 302 (1055), the middle two of which do nothing but q.v. the later note. This offers readers the dilemma of either losing focus on the main narrative to skip ahead or maintaining attention on the main narrative while remaining ignorant of a key fact, gratuitously making data retrieval more cognitively onerous. That the novel’s baroque politics are only visible to those who have found some way to modulate their attention to effectively retrieve data is perhaps best exemplified by note 114, keyed from an otherwise innocuous description of Incandenza’s father’s career as the Man from Glad (313), reading “© B.S. MCMLXII, The Glad Flaccid Receptacle Corporation, Zanesville OH, sponsor of the very last year of O.N.A.N.ite Subsidized Time (q.v. Note 78). All Rights Reserved.” (1022). In the midst of two lines of cruft corporatese, we are suddenly and unceremoniously told that the last year recounted chronologically by the book is also the final year of the novel’s dystopic North American state’s calendar. It is not clear as to whether this proclamation portends the restoration of political sanity or the end of civilization as we know it, yet in a book whose plot is left largely unresolved, this is one of few clues we have toward the fate of the novel’s characters and imagined world.
The ability to filter out pointlessness resonates outside the endnotes, too. Cruft’s distinctive combination of expansiveness and emptiness also characterizes the recursive, paralyzed thoughts of the novel’s many addicts. One character describes (in, what else, a footnote to endnote 269) the cycle of “Marijuana Thinking,” in which many of the novel’s characters are caught, as a tendency to “involuted abstraction” wherein addicts are hypermotivated to the point of being functionally unmotivated, stuck fighting through “labyrinths of reflexive abstraction that seem to cast doubt on the very possibility of practical functioning” (1048). Not only are the self-negating thoughts this attitude produces essentially cruft, but in attempting to escape this state (which is experienced analogously by the novels’ overachieving student-athletes, crazed politicians, and manic depressives), addicts often veer into a different type of cruft, exemplified by the clichéd mantras of the novel’s 12-Step programs. As one disgruntled AA member points out—again, in an endnote, number 90—“If you have some sort of Substance-problem, then you belong in AA. But if you say you do not have a Substance-problem, why then you’re by definition in Denial, and thus you apparently need the Denial-busting Fellowship of AA even more than someone who can admit his problem” (1002). Such formulations pointedly circumvent all critical or independent thought.

Interestingly, though critical response has recognized the dialectic between these two states and how dangerous the addicts’ encyclopedic overthinking can be, it has tended to naïvely champion the 12-Step programs’ approach (see Aubry; van Ewijk, “‘I’ and the ‘Other’”; Freudental). In fact, the enthusiasm amongst admirers of a novel as enormous and wildly inventive as *Infinite Jest* for a philosophy that one addict, Geoffrey Day, approvingly describes as turning one’s “will and life over to the care of clichés” and associates with the *Reader’s Digest* (270-271) would be extremely puzzling were it not for the way those clichés provide
relief from the manic textual overload that the addicted characters produce in the novel’s other sections. It’s probably not an accident that, in the Ennet House scenes, the endnotes are cut back significantly, nor that the clinic is not introduced until two hundred pages have passed and we have had time to absorb how overwhelming Infinite Jest will be. Only after having endured the inescapable involutions of Kate Gompert’s depression (68-78), the coked-up violence and semi-decipherable English in yrstruly’s monologue (128-135), and the painfully detailed analysis of how Americans’ endlessly reflecting physical anxieties destroyed the videophone (144-151) can the mantras that Day recites seem even remotely appealing (see Aubry 210).

Fundamentally, though, Ennet’s clichés are nearly as meaningless as the addicts’ overthinking, tranquilizing attention to the point of making it incapable of modulation. Their cruft should be tolerated only as a temporary cure for the greater destructiveness of addiction. Perhaps this is best seen in how Day himself—not a week after praising AA’s focus on clichés—goes on the rant quoted above from note 90. While the endnotes always bring with them the possibility of endlessly proliferating junk, they also allow the possibility for independent critical reflection, because to read them at all requires the kind of subtle attention modulation at the basis of all higher-level thought. If readers seek to escape not just the hyperactive mindlessness exemplified by the addicts but mindlessness entirely, they cannot simply be repelled by the endnotes’ frequent overload but must keep returning to them, hopefully better able to skim and filter out the junk to retrieve valuable information. James Incandenza himself realized this principle late in life, understanding how AA forced its members to simply exchange one “slavish dependence” for another (706), characterized by intolerable “vacant grins and empty platitudes” (1053). He sought to overcome both forms by addressing them in his films—as we are told most directly in an endnote, number 289—but attempting to create meaning from waste is an unstable
and dangerous process, something surely known by the designer of the annular fusion program employed in the novel’s Great Concavity, a multi-state trash heap that vacillates dangerously between desiccated wasteland and mutation-inducing verdancy as it processes garbage to power the continent. That Incandenza finally sticks his head in a microwave, however, is as much caused by submitting to recovery-program clichés as by resisting them, because they have rendered his mind incapable of distinguishing the language necessary to sustain a meaningful life from cruft.

In reading through *Infinite Jest*, we can only hope to develop our attention modulation to the point where we can avoid Incandenza’s fate. Whether we can reliably do so is unclear. In the years prior to his own suicide, Wallace expressed increasing anxiety about the mounting obstacles to adequate information ordering and retrieval posed by the information age. In his forward to the 2007 volume of *Best American Essays*, Wallace chastises Americans that “There is just no way that 2004’s re-election [of President George W. Bush] could have taken place […] if we had been paying attention and handling information in a grown up way” (xxi). Yet as soon as he makes this criticism, Wallace acknowledges that this grown-up information-handling is all but impossible. For each of the major world issues that a twenty-first century American would need to consider when making such informed decisions, he notes, “the relevant questions are too numerous and complicated” to adequately investigate: if one really wants to understand any of the important political issues of our time, one would have to pore over so much specialized economic, historical, and sociological research in search of the core problems that “You’d simply drown. We all would. It’s amazing to me that no one much talks about this—about the fact that whatever our founders and framers thought of as a literate, informed citizenry can no longer exist” (xxii).²⁴ That’s probably true, unfortunately. The difficulties that rendered
Bouvard and Pécuchet incapable of managing their lives’ information in the nineteenth century have so dramatically escalated that it’s not clear how anyone can confidently avoid the sorts of catastrophes that befell them.

This insight is one that Wallace critics, trained professionally to reject the kind of critical subjecthood to which the quote above aspires, have appeared reluctant to embrace. In his essay on encyclopedism in *Infinite Jest*, for instance, Matt Tresco suggests that the inconsistent importance of the endnotes’ information reveals “the absence of an ordering or categorizing principle,” which allows the “release and an enlargement of possibilities,” favorably comparing the novel to Wikipedia in that both are “are always threatening to overspill, to negate the purpose of their organizing principles” and thus challenge hierarchization (120-121). Though the similarities between *Infinite Jest* and Wikipedia are interesting, more important is their markedly divergent incorporation of cruft. Wikipedia’s frequent inability to distinguish between important and trivial information, which often results in unchecked cruft, does little to help its users to keep from drowning in the “tsunami” of information of which Wallace writes: in fact, it becomes part of that tsunami. *Infinite Jest*’s much more carefully and centrally calibrated use of cruft could not be more different in this respect, because its directed impact upon attention is better able to reveal the inadequacies of our cognitive processes and guide us toward developing better ones. Inasmuch as there is any hope of mitigating the worst effects of information overload, we must develop our abilities to order and retrieve information to their maximum capacities, and encyclopedic novels are a powerful tool for doing so, not because they include information that is valuable itself, but because they force us to learn how to navigate around their junk data to find text that is actually important.
Chapter 3—The Menippean Satire

As she laughed I was aware of becoming involved in her laughter and being part of it, until her teeth were only accidental stars with a talent for squad-drill. I was drawn in by short gasps, inhaled at each momentary recovery, lost finally in the dark caverns of her throat, bruised by the ripple of unseen muscles. An elderly waiter with trembling hands was hurriedly spreading a pink and white checked cloth over the rusty green iron table, saying: “If the lady and gentleman wish to take their tea in the garden, if the lady and gentleman wish to take their tea in the garden…” I decided that if the shaking of her breasts could be stopped, some of the fragments of the afternoon might be collected, and I concentrated my attention with careful subtlety to this end.

— T. S. Eliot, “Hysteria”

“Dull, Difficult, Dreary, & Disgusting”

Though the previous chapters have used mega-novels’ relationships to two non-literary genres to examine how cruft can overload readers’ attention capacities and subsequently prompt them to modulate their methods of text processing, cruft is not limited to the small-scale cases of the incoherent word and the irrelevant datum. The following three chapters will examine how mega-novels’ incorporation of elements from several literary genres produces more extensive but equally pointless cruft, inducing the same characteristic frustration and boredom to provoke a similar reorientation of attention. We will begin by looking at cruft’s place within a genre whose reputation for scale and heterogeneity has encouraged its application to several otherwise hard-to-categorize works in the mega-novel canon, the Menippean satire.¹

Before we examine the genre’s particulars, however, we must start by justifying our investigation into cruft’s relationship with humor at all. To be sure, as the chapter will observe later, mega-novel humor is frequently described as excessive and overwhelming, implying the presence of cruft, but since we have defined cruft as objectively pointless text, to call it cruft must imply it is somehow objectively not funny, and since even cognitive researchers
acknowledge that “no one seems to know exactly what a sense of humor is” (R. Martin 193) except inasmuch as it “is not a unitary construct” (R. Martin 225), our basis for analytically examining whether or not something is funny might seem questionable. After all, the commonsense view of humor has always been that we must leave most judgments to individual readers’ subjective impressions rather than trying to determine them objectively, an attitude famously expressed by E. B. White’s quip that “Humor can be dissected, as a frog can, but the thing dies in the process and the innards are discouraging to any but the pure scientific mind” (xvii). Anyway, since many mega-novels have undeniably amused a large number of readers with their outrageous gags and set-pieces, why should we doubt that their text is funny?

We may do so because there is a type of gratuitous text within mega-novels that, though apparently comic, resists this latitudinarian principle by being flagrantly dull and stupid. Consider this excerpt from Part II, Chapter VII of William Gaddis’ *The Recognitions*, depicting a Christmas party held for New York’s artistic set by Esther Gwyon, estranged wife to protagonist Wyatt Gwyon:

–Who’s Esther?

–Why, my dear, she’s our hostess. There, talking with the tall fellow in the green necktie. She turned, as her husband approached with a martini. –What an interesting group of people, she said. –And what interesting music.

–It’s Handel, he said, handing her a glass. –*The Triumph of Truth and Justice.*

She looked around her, and raised the glass to her lips. –Do you think next year we might get to the Narcissus Festival in Hawaii?
Drinks were spilled, another brown line burnt on the mantel, people collided, excused themselves and greeted one another, and Ellery, tucking the green silk tie back in his jacket, said, –Just stop talking about it for a while. Who’s that? He added, nodding at a blond girl.

–I don’t know. She came with somebody. She’s going to Hollywood.

–I want another drink, Ellery said, and went toward the blonde.

–Ellery, please … But he was gone. She sat, holding her kitten.

–What does it mean, said a heavy voice near her. –The garbage cans in the street, the kids on the East Side playing in the gutters, swimming in that filthy river, see? What does that mean?

–Well she says Paris reminds her of a mouthful of decayed teeth, but I think Paris is just like going to the movies …

–A lovely little hotel near Saint Germain, I don’t think I crossed the river more than twice all the time I was there. I really lived on the left bank, it’s so much nicer, the architecture, the cloud formations over there …

–Of course if you like the Alps. I found them a fearfully pretentious bore myself … I mean, what can you do with an Alp…

–He’s still in Paris. He wrote that he’s just bought one of those delight Renaults…

–Oh yes, I do love them. An original? (568-569)

These inane, disconnected sputterings by superficial twits dominate the astonishing seventy-three additional pages of this scene. While one might suppose that the rest of chapter’s context would clarify the narrative purpose of this dialogue, most of the characters, in fact, are as faceless in the
larger work as they are in this excerpt, and their speech is equally irrelevant to the novel’s main events. Consequently, the scene is usually explicated by scholars as social satire, ridiculing the “Cliques of dishonest critics, backbiting literati, the entire rout of cocktail-party intellectuals and pen-pushers” that comprise the chattering classes (Salemi 50). But is this supposed mockery actually funny? Its only real joke, after all, appears to be the unnamed husband’s Superman-influenced corruption of Handel’s *The Triumph of Time and Truth* into *The Triumph of Truth and Justice*, which might provoke a chuckle only from those few readers with extensive enough knowledge of Handel’s second-tier oratorios not to need Steven Moore’s *Reader’s Guide* to explain the reference, and who would furthermore consider the husband worthy of derision for his mistake. If most of what is said in this passage is simply banal rather than humorous, isn’t it simply propogating idiocy instead of satirizing it?

The few principles that have been established by systematic research in humor further suggest how this passage might be objectively unfunny. Though there is no generally accepted definition of humor, many believe that it can be broadly characterized as “nonserious social incongruity,” often based in “bisociation” (R. Martin 6-7): in other words, we consider something funny when we are primed for certain cognitive processes by one social schema, but then suddenly see those expectations violated. This causes us, according to Reuven Tsur, to become disorientated and undergo a rapid “shift in mental sets” (11-12; see also R. Martin 85-101). The most important subclass of this social incongruity is the one articulated a century ago by Henri Bergson, who claimed we laugh when we see human behavior lacking the flexibility commensurate to the flux of consciousness, instead displaying a “rigidity” that “reminds us of a mere machine” (29; italics his). The primary sign of this mechanism, Bergson continues, is repetition, since “a really living life should never repeat itself” (34)—though this repetitive
behavior itself is often not funny itself, but simply a symptom of lifelessness until made more obviously incongruous by a comedian’s exaggeration (32). Looking back to Gaddis’s dialogue, then, we may see that while it has plenty of mechanism, it is not actually made incongruous by comic exaggeration or schema-switching, as it simply continues its parade of shallowness unimpeded over dozens of pages. Indeed, this scene is characterized not merely by clichés but clichéd representations of clichés: there is no more ham-handed a remark, after all, for Gaddis to have put into the mouth of a bore than the one about how “interesting” she finds everything, except, perhaps, to have her call something else “such a pretentious bore” moments later. The text appears not merely about dullness or stupidity, then, but is dull and stupid itself. Given this point, it is understandable that the novel’s initial critics, to quote the alphabetic pastiche made by Gaddis’s pseudonymous proselytizer Jack Green, considered The Recognitions “baffling, and a Bore […] dull difficult dreary—&disgusting […] repulsive or repelling” (17).

This kind of excess, which occurs throughout not only The Recognitions but a number of mega-novels, should suggest how we can discuss the role of cruft with respect to humor, rather than simply leaving the matter to taste. To understand what exactly is going on in this sort of text, however, will require us to more rigorously analyze both the satiric genre as a whole and the specific Menippean variety. Ever since Juvenal, after all, satire has built its reputation upon depicting the vicious, ugly, and stupid, and to articulate how mega-novel satire differs from this traditional satiric writing demands some explanation. In particular, we will need to go over several important aspects of and misconceptions about the genre so as to examine what function cruft might serve when incorporated into it.
The Fallacies of Exposure and Subversion

Historically, satire’s depiction of the worst of social vices has made it controversial among moralists (see Griffin 24). Just as frequently, however, it has been defended on the grounds that it does not approve of, but rather censures, those vices by mocking them, with even John Dryden celebrating the genre by writing, “‘Tis an Action of Virtue to make Examples of vicious Men” (lxxiv). Yet the constant tension between these two positions may suggest how tenuous is satire’s rhetoric. Its duality may be best appreciated through Edward Rosenheim’s famous definition of it as “an attack by means of a manifest fiction upon discernible historic particulars” (31; italics Rosenheim’s). Satirists, in other words, always say two things at once: they must claim that their narratives are made up, but also that they depict the real social world; they must make their characters behave in deleterious ways, but only because they believe themselves superior to such behavior and wish to criticize it. That is why juxtaposed comic incongruity, whether of the relatively benevolent Horatian kind designed to “laugh men out of their follies” or the more caustic Juvenalian invective “composed to carp at human vices” (Griffin 7-9), is so crucial to satire—especially, as Frank Palmeri notes, in prose narrative satire, which deemphasizes the central satiric voice (1-5). Satire’s best method for signaling this duality is first to prompt one preconceived social script, but then derail that script by exaggerating and distorting it to the point where it no longer functions (see Rosenheim 21), which, as Tsur notes, is aimed to disorient and alter its audience’s cognitive patterns, because, “When something suddenly seems to go wrong, one has to check the tuning of one’s own schemata” (24). Laughter, in other words, is the body’s way of discharging cognitive dissonance, which is why it is so useful in responding to social hypocrisy.
In producing this calibrated incongruity, however, satirists walk a fine line: should they make their material too incongruous, the satire might be dismissed as a perverse or even libelous fantasy, but should they make it not incongruous enough, they might be charged with either heavy-handed dullness or, worse, insufficiently distinguishing themselves from that which they depict. The list of satires threatened with censorship resulting from overly fanciful exaggerations is considerable—including, for instance, Robert Coover’s fantastic mega-novel satire on the Rosenberg execution, *The Public Burning*. For that matter, dangerous confusions have been caused by satires that were not sufficiently incongruous to cause cognitive dissonance, as famously occurred when Daniel Defoe’s *The Shortest Way with the Dissenters* mimicked the voice of a blowhard Anglican zealot so closely that many contemporary readers took its argument for the mass execution and banishment of dissenting congregations seriously; indeed, even after it was revealed as satire, those congregations’ members felt endangered (J. Martin 126). As Michael Seidel notes, “Satire is ‘easy’ because its subjects are so tantalizingly manifest, but it is difficult because it strategies are so deceivingly imitative of what it purports to attack” (10). Put a bit differently, Kurt Vonnegut, introducing his *Mother Night*, about an American double agent working undercover as a Nazi radio propagandist, writes, “We are who we pretend to be, so we must be careful about what we pretend to be” (v). As with many of the textual experiments discussed in Chapter 1 and the faux-encyclopedic information in Chapter 2, badly-executed satire can cause serious cognitive problems. It is apt, then, that Fredric Bogel should observe that satire’s closest aesthetic relative is the counterfeit, since two genres share the ability to create “a space where distinctions are rendered problematic rather than reinforced” (23), making crucial the ability recognize what is similar between the real and the fake while still distinguishing them.
Given the essentialness of fictional incongruity to satire, then, we must preliminarily reject as fallacies two common critical justifications for satire’s most dreary elements, both especially common when addressing mega-novel satire. The first is that a satire’s wildest exaggerations may be justified on the grounds that they “expose” society’s faults. That verb, echoing the muckraking “exposé,” is obviously ill-suited to the novel. As Bogel notes, a satirist does not “expose the satiric object in all its alien difference,” but instead invents it as a fiction (42). After all, the satirist is deprived of the journalistic social critic’s two most valuable tools, the ability to cite evidence directly from the real world and the authority to unequivocally present an argument in his own voice. As we saw in Chapter 2, though reading fiction can and should affect our overall information-processing apparatus, we must be vigilant against our natural tendency to accept the facts presented by fiction as if they were true, especially in a genre that muddies the boundaries so much. Indeed, even literary scholars appear vulnerable to this tendency, as might be seen in how The Public Burning’s critics bash conservative intellectual Norman Podhoretz for calling it “a lie […] because it hides behind the immunities of artistic freedom to protect itself from being held to the normal standards of truthful discourse” (34), even though they make the same mistake by trumpeting how the novel “exposes the American spirit that overlooks no opportunity to dominate, dehumanize, and humiliate the vulnerable” (Estes 255), especially when they believe it presents of “a huge amount of verifiable historical information and multiple coiled patterns connecting the facts” (LeClair 111) that ought to make us question specific historical details regarding Eisenhower and the Supreme Court (Gordon 55). To debate the historical veracity of a book which sets the Rosenberg execution in Times Square—a Times Square connected by a magical swinging door to Sing Sing, no less, and one attended by a cavalcade of VIPs including the “Rat Pack” of Mickey, Minnie, and Goofy—is
clearly ridiculous: the problem with Podhoretz’s conclusion is not his politics but the belief, apparently shared by Coover’s supporters, that a satire may be judged by how well it proves a “thesis” (27). Similarly, when Joseph Salemi claims that, in the *The Recognitions*’ party scene, “the world of shallow art and intellectual falsity […] is parodied and attacked, mostly through the devastating technique of quoting its representatives verbatim […]—all are mercilessly exposed” (Salemi 50), he does not seem to realize that since these characters are Gaddis’s inventions, Gaddis’s dialogue does not “quot[e] verbatim” their stupidity but independently creates it.

It is equally fallacious, however, to justify satire’s ugliest elements on the mimetic grounds that, in an effort to accurately represent of the state of contemporary existence, they must dissolve all stable distinctions between truth and falsity or between moral and immoral, as is frequently argued by partisans of both the “black humor” trends of the fifties and sixties and their postmodern descendants. In its most basic form, this position often argues that reality has gotten so dreary and grotesque that any representation of it could not help but itself be dreary and grotesque, too (see B. Friedman 20-23). More philosophically, Max Schulz claims that while in traditional satire “there are false versions of reality and true versions,” black humor, best exemplified in his view by mega-novelist John Barth, reveals that “all versions of reality are mental constructs” (*Black* 17): if a satire is absurd, it is only because reality has become absurd. Similarly, Steven Weisenburger argues that the traditional view by which satire rhetorically corrects specific social vices by reference to universal norms is rendered obsolete by postmodern satires like those by Gaddis and Coover, which present only “degenerative, subversive fantasy” (*Fables* 14-29). If satire actually did this, however, it would necessarily render itself incapable of any kind of critique, even of the mainstream culture that most partisans of this view wish it to
excoriate. Indeed, summations like Weisenburger’s of *The Public Burning* as, “An outraged catalogue of American self-deceits and lies masking themselves as genii of progress […] the single most unrestrained condemnation of American civic identity to appear in the postwar decades” (*Fables* 198) seem to suggest that when faced with specific works, such critics are more committed to universal norms and clear rhetorical opposition than they let on. 8

**The Menippean Grotesque**

For all its limitations, however, the postmodern perspective does try to account for the excessiveness we find in mega-novel satires like *The Recognitions* in a way that most traditional approaches to the genre do not. Historically, satire has emphasized concision and targeted focus, as in Dryden’s insistence that satire must “only to treat of one Subject; to be confin’d to one particular Theme” (xcvi). However, mega-novels bearing a satiric impulse tend to increase their breadth in an almost uncontrolled manner—indeed, to the point that Alastair Fowler goes so far as to call them “generically inept, as well as too long” (64). 9 Only one traditional satiric subgenre, in fact, has typically expanded to any real length, namely the Menippean satire. Though named for a Greek Cynic who wrote three centuries before Christ, this term only became absorbed into mainstream literary-critical discourse after mid-twentieth-century reclamations by Mikhail Bakhtin and Northrop Frye, both of whom stretched the term to cover a wide range of prose narrative satires of substantial size and variety. Frye, for instance, identifies the genre as an exemplar of the “extroverted intellectual” prose fiction strain that he dubs “anatomy,” noting the genre’s “tendency to expand” its “single intellectual pattern,” so as to “overwhelm [its] pedantic targets with an avalanche of their own jargon” (309-312). Bakhtin, meanwhile, uses the term to group works that are “multi-styled and hetero-voiced” (*Dostoevsky* 108), addressing “current and topical issues” while creating a hybrid of opposed tendencies such as “slum
naturalism,” “philosophical universalism,” and “experimental fantasticality” (*Dostoevsky* 114-119). Even Howard Weinbrot’s more recent attempt to curb Bakhtin and Frye’s broad inclusiveness makes no effort to restrain the scope of individual works, asserting that a Menippean satire targets no less than the whole of “a dangerous, false, or specious and threatening orthodoxy” (6).

The lack of a consensus definition for the term, however, has created a certain ambiguity in how its satiric rhetoric is to be experienced. For Frye and Weinbrot, the Menippean is simply satire writ large, its subject not one vice but society as a whole. For Bakhtin, though, Menippean satire derives less from classical satire than the medieval carnival (*Dostoevsky* 108):

Let us say a few initial words about the complex nature of carnival laughter. It is, first of all, a festive laughter. Therefore it is not an individual reaction to some isolated “comic” event. Carnival laughter is the laughter of all the people. Second, it is universal in scope; it is directed at all and everyone, including the carnival’s participants. The entire world is seen in its droll aspect, in its gay relativity. Third, this laughter is ambivalent: it is gay, triumphant, and at the same time mocking, deriding. It asserts and denies, it buries and revives. Such is the laughter of carnival.

Let us enlarge upon the second important trait of the people’s festive laughter: that it is also directed at those who laugh. The people do not exclude themselves from the wholeness of the world. They, too, are incomplete, they also die and are revived and renewed. This is one of the essential differences of the people’s festive laughter from the pure satire of modern times. The satirist whose
laughter is negative places himself above the object of his mockery, he is opposed to it. *(Rabelais* 11-12)

Via a “grotesque realism” aimed at total “degradation,” carnivalesque laughter is based in a “material bodily principle” that mocks our upper halves’ pretensions by submitting them to the lower half’s ineluctably corporeal fallibility and fecundity (18-19). In other words, unlike in classical satire, mocker and mocked are identical in the Menippean: no specific vice or ideology is attacked, but all humanity sprawls out into total ridiculousness. Along the lines of Tsur’s suggestion that, instead of allowing a witty resolution between two incongruous schemata, the grotesque “prevent[s] the reader from achieving any kind of consistent orientation” with respect to their cognitive mechanisms (439), this seems to deconstruct satiric rhetoric in a manner consist with the postmodern approach to satire described above.\(^{10}\) However, crucially for Bakhtin, carnivalesque laughter is as rejuvenating as it is degrading; were the former affirmative principle removed, he argues, we would be left with only “cold humor, irony, sarcasm” (38), adding that “A grotesque world in which only the inappropriate is exaggerated is only quantitatively large, but qualitatively it is extremely poor, colorless, and far from gay” (308). Gargantua’s drunkenness, for example, does not merely cause him to urinate all over Paris, but inspires his characteristic merriment and love of companionship. Yet this affirming principle often appears absent from mega-novels, whose grotesqueness at times evinces both the carnivalesque’s omnivorous maw and the satire’s cool distance, leading to what Bakhtin would surely consider an impoverished sensibility. For long stretches, there is no incongruity, resolved or otherwise, but merely catalogues of the trivial and inane.

In this chapter, I will argue that the mega-novel Menippean satire, though sometimes engaged in conventional satire or Bakhtin’s carnivalesque, often experiments with unbalancing
the former’s calibrated distortions and the latter’s encompassing scope to create monstrosities either so fantastic as to be indecipherable or so dull as to be boring. In other words, I will examine how they deploy cruft that, instead of satirizing, creates a grotesque text that challenges less society’s ills than its reader’s ability to attend a bloated representation of them. By creating a counterfeit world too expansive to process, in fact, what they satirize is the limits of their readers’ own minds. Their cruft places us into a state in which, no matter how hard we try, we are likely to lose focus on what we are reading, causing our attention to fluctuate and our processing to lose its depth. The incongruity might provoke laughter, but mostly an unfocused, disoriented kind deriving more from the termination of processing than its continuation. Consequently, we can easily lose track of what exactly we are laughing at, how we ought to process it, or what is even going on at all.

**Comic Overload: A Few Words on The Sot-Weed Factor**

Some relatively straightforward examples might be seen in John Barth’s *The Sot-Weed Factor*, a comic *künstlerroman* set in the 1690s about a naïve and resolutely chaste poet named Ebenezer Cooke who is sent to manage his father’s Maryland plantation. Based upon a colonial satiric poem by a self-proclaimed laureate of the same name, *The Sot-Weed Factor* is frequently a very conventionally funny book: opening to a random page, for example, I come upon the scene where a rum-peddler who has intoxicated a justice, cheated him at cards, urinated onto him, and had sex with his similarly-inebriated wife takes the couple to court so that he may sue for the price of the rum and the recovery of coins that fell from his pockets (389-392). However, the book also presents some more unusual instances of humor, especially in the form of incredibly long lists. The list, of course, has an extensive history as a device within Menippean satire: Dustin Griffin notes how the genre often transforms the ugly into the pleasurable via a
“great feast of words” (167-169), especially list-like devices such as the contest (89) and the
catalogue (109). Though the list might tend toward repetition and thus encourage skimming, the
lists of a great Menippean satirist, like Rabelais, are usually varied with invention and fancy to
comic ends.11

Mega-novel lists, however, are often longer as a whole and more predictable item-by-
item. Hugh Kenner has dubbed this technique “the comedy of the Inventory,” which is a
“comedy of exhaustion, comic precisely because exhaustive” in the way it aims to include the
entirety of long, finite lists within the novel’s text, as with the ninety-four figures of speech
scattered through one chapter of Ulysses or the six hundred rivers included in one from
Finnegans Wake (54-55). Kenner believes these are inherently funny, invoking Bergson’s essay
by asking, “what is more mechanical than a checklist?” (55). However, we must remember that
while for Bergson the mechanical is worthy of mockery, it is not funny itself until it is made
obviously incongruous by a comedian—though, paradoxically, among the comedian’s chief
tactics for generating such incongruity is further repetition of the mechanism (90-93). This
raises the tricky question of when the length of a list is funny and when it is simply becomes
boring—“the continuity of custom,” in Bergson’s words, “having deadened […] the comic
quality” (39).

The Sot-Weed Factor’s famous insult contest provides a good case study on this question,
especially as it derives directly from a scene in the original poem, which will help us distinguish
between the structures of traditional satire and those of mega-novel excess. In the original poem,
the real Cook attempts to lambast a lawless colony “Where no Man’s Faithful, nor a Woman
Chast” (31) by stringing together several vignettes about a tobacco merchant’s misadventures
among the colonial populace, including this encounter with some women playing cards:
I thought them first some Witches bent,
On Black Designs in dire Convent.
Till one who with affected air,
Had nicely learn’d to Curse and Swear;
Cry’d Dealing’s lost is but a Flam,
And vow’d by G——d she’d keep her Pam.
[… ] D——m you, says one, tho’ now so brave,
I knew you late a Four-Years Slave;
What if for Planter’s Wife you go,
Nature designed you for the Hoe.
Rot you replies the other streight,
The Captain kiss’d you for his Freight;
And if the Truth was known aright,
And how you walk’d the Streets by night
You’d blush (if one cou’d blush) for shame,
Who from Bridewell or New gate came:
From Words they fairly fell to Blows,
And being loath to interpose,
Or meddle in the Wars of Punk,
Away to Bed in hast I slunk. (26-27)

This is a traditional, if not especially virtuosic, instance of satire, wherein the perceived tendency of uneducated women, especially when away from supposedly polite society, to descend into uncouth violations of social custom is ridiculed and made incongruous by exploiting its
similarities to both a brothel and witches’ coven. Though the gags regarding the women’s social class and sexual promiscuity have aged, their intended rhetorical goals should still remain clear.

Barth’s revision of this scene, however, creates its comic effect differently. It does begin similarly, with Ebenezer coming upon the women at cards while seeking out Susan Warren (whom he will later discover to be his beloved, Joan Toast) inside his father’s estate, Malden, which has been turned in his absence into an opium den and brothel. He proceeds to ask the women for assistance:

“I beg your pardon,” Ebenzer interrupted. “If you are servants of the house—”

“Non, certainement, I am no servant!”

“The truth is,” said the dealer, “Grace here’s a hooker.”

“A what?” asked the poet.

“A hooker,” the woman repeated with a wink. “A quail, don’t ye know.”

“A quail!” the woman named Grace shrieked. “You call me a quail, you—gaullefretière!”

“Whore!” shouted the first.

“Bas-cul!” retorted the other.

“Frisker!”

“Consoeur!”

“Trull!”

“Friquenelle!”

“Sow!” (441)
Though its comedy has more dirty-minded delight than the original’s moralizing stance, Barth’s version initially works similarly to Cook’s, exaggerating bad behavior to satiric lengths.

However, this changes when readers turn to the next page and see—

“Usagère!”
“Bawd!”
“Viagère!”
“Strawgirl!”
“Séraune!”
“Tumbler!”
“Poupinette!”
“Mattressback!”
“Brimballeuse!”
“Nannygoat!”
“Chouette!”
“Windowgirl!”
“Wauve!”
“Lowgap!”
“Peaultre!”
“Galleywench!”
“Baque!”
“Drab!”
“Villotière!”
“Fastfanny!” […] (442)
—and another two hundred further insults, filling up the following six pages with an almost perfectly symmetrical, invective-laden layout (441-447).

A half century of criticism confirms that many readers find this scene funny, but what are we actually laughing at here? To an extent, it is probably at the satire on a recognizable cultural obsession with generating insults based on female sexual promiscuity, as well as both the psychosexual release from social custom discussed by Freud (97-102) and readers’ appreciation of Barth’s playful linguistic facility. Mostly, though, I think we laugh at our own inability to read the text. After all, it is only upon perceiving the multiple facing-page complements of arcane pejoratives as a whole, far surpassing what one would’ve suspected available to both languages, that most readers really begin to guffaw. As Charles B. Harris asks, “how many of us read carefully every item in these catalogs? And need we? Is it not, rather the idea that Barth has matched 114 English synonyms for whore with an equal number of French synonyms that interests and delights us?” (62). Indeed, that the passage’s humor derives from overloading readers’ processing abilities rather than simply exhausting the inventory of French and English epithets (see Schulz, Black 25; Walkiewicz 48) may be seen in the fact that one insult that would not only would fit comfortably in this exchange, but is in the original “Sot-Weed Factor” scene, is absent, namely “punk.” Even William Gass, as indefatigable a reader as any—and while writing an essay on his pleasure in the linguistic fecundity of lists, no less—claims that within this scene, “invention flags, the name calling becomes mechanical, vocal exhaustion ensues, and it’s over” (38). What does it say about our cognitive abilities, though, that merely looking at these pages makes us start chortling at our inability to read them? Laughing and skipping to the end might demonstrate healthy text processing, but it ought to remind us how easily our limited channel capacity can be overloaded.
In fact, the ease with which the world’s abundance can overpower our abilities to process it troubles Ebenezer throughout the novel, as he is constantly forced to determine whether his mind is too rigidly narrow to understand the world or whether the world itself simply possesses far more possibilities than it ought to. Though the contest above is *The Sot-Weed Factor’s* most excessive list, the book features not only several similar catalogs—such as Ebenezer and his chameleon tutor Henry Burlingame III’s extended contest of rhyming one-upmanship involving near-universally unknown words like “autoschediastic” and “catoptromancy” (384-385), Burlingame’s catalog of twins worshipped by foreign cultures (most with polysyllabic names unlikely to catch in Anglophone ears) (496), and the page-long menu of the number and species of fish, fowl, rodent, fruit, and vegetable consumed at an Ahatchwhoop tribal feast (563-564)—but many other narrative passages similar in spirit, prominently the dozens of proleptic and metaleptic plots whose apparently gratuitous convolutions and fantastic events endlessly frustrate its hero’s efforts to make sense of the New World (see also Ch. 4). If at his journey’s outset in England, Ebenezer had been so exasperated by the shopkeeper Bragg’s elaboration of the sixteen types of notebook for sale as to attack the wares with a sword (108-113), he is nearly driven mad in America by the much more various possibilities hidden within what appear to be simple matters. Just as the would-be poet attempts twice during the whores’ insult contest to cut them off and return to the question with which he had started, he often attempts to arrest others’ extended stories from elaborating any more monstrously, like during Burlingame’s account of Maryland’s history while in the guise of Lord Baltimore (77-93) and the narration of his life’s adventures (129-157), his valet’s Bertrand’s story of the events that caused him to gamble away Malden (271-273), and Mary Mungummory’s tales of her mother’s sexual initiation at the hands of a lecherous priest and her own wild escapades with Burlingame’s half-brother Charley.
Mattasin (405-423). However, just as the card players “possessed with mirth […] paid him no heed” (443), no one will stop for his sake, and his comic inability to keep up with the elaboration of possibilities proceeds unabated.

We ought to sympathize with Ebenezer’s situation, though, because we are not immune to these problems. After all, that Ebenezer seeks to limit the range of his world’s possibilities is not because he dislikes variety, but because he understands its implications all too well. During his student days, he writes to his sister, “it were an easy Matter to choose a Calling, had one all Time to live in! I should be fifty years a Barrister, fifty a Physician, fifty a Solider! Aye, and fifty a Thief, and fifty a Judge! All Roads are fine Roads, beloved Sister, none more than another […]: to choose ten were no Trouble, to choose one, impossible!” (10), and as he shuttles about Maryland, perpetually forced to change identity and allegiance, he finds the matter of how to manage life’s over-abundance no easier to negotiate. As Manfred Puetz has noted, while some strains of philosophy may emphasize how “human beings inevitably fall into despair when they lack possibility […] Ebenezer Cooke has found out […] that the reverse is valid too: human beings invariably fall into despair when confronted with too many possibilities” (455). His classical education encourages him to seek the Golden Mean (see 213), but to even attempt to calculate the Golden Mean would require him to comprehend the scale of his unlimited options as a whole, and that is well beyond his, or anyone’s, capabilities.

Confronted with this same variety, many of the novel’s early critics similarly suggested the whole book might be too overcomplicated to bother with. Gerhard Joseph, for instance, wrote that in the novel’s erudite catalogues of ideas, or in his name-calling contest between the prostitutes, Barth tries to convey the impression that sheer exhaustiveness for its own sake...
contributes to a meaningful comic order. The longer and more contrived the
shaggy-dog fiction, the better. But because of Barth’s intellectual passion […] his
characters frequently do not have much emotional depth. (29-30; see also Hipkiss
89)

Yet one can achieve an emotional sympathy with Ebenezer if one seriously attempts to manage
the cacophony of words that he must face, instead of either dismissing or absorbing it. That the
book is wonderfully comic, after all, derives from how one cannot merely skip over all these
expansive catalogs, since many passages that at first appear unreadably byzantine end up being
important. As David Morrell notes, when Barth’s editors, assuming the book’s episodic nature
would make it easy to trim, suggested cutting out several chapters, they found “The Sot-Weed
Factor was so carefully and integrally plotted that no part could be eliminated without damage to
the whole” (47). Ebenezer’s sensible impulse to ask Mary Mungummory to skip over the
subplot she wishes to tell about her sister’s conception (410), for instance, serves him poorly
when it later causes him to have her withhold the tale of Charley Mattasin’s carnal secrets, which
might’ve helped him learn sooner about the eggplant aphrodisiac required to avert Maryland’s
war with the Ahatchwoops (414, 421).

For similar reasons, though, we cannot simply embrace the book’s profusion of language
and ideas, either. While many critics describe the book as a satire on “remaining obstinately
constant in a changing world” (Morrell 55) by enacting a “metaphysics of multiplicity” (Schulz,
Black 17), in which Ebenezer’s stubborn fidelity to core principles finally yields to Burlingame’s
openness to fluctuating “cosmophilist” possibilities (see Walkiewicz 53-57), this view ignores
that, as with most satire, the book eventually does depend upon establishing clear distinctions
between the real and the counterfeit, the authentic identity and the mask, meaningful language
and wasteful blabber. Constancy’s opposites, after all, are insanity and hypocrisy, and surely were Burlingame as inconstant in his attitudes toward Ebenezer as toward his own personae, he would win far less critical approval. In fact, the satire’s apparent rhetorical attitude toward Burlingame’s constant multiplicity of identities is complex, because throughout the book, its characters’ abilities to recognize each other as stable individuals are both absurdly unreliable and entirely crucial. Despite perceiving their likenesses, for instance, Ebenezer frequently fails to recognize the three people dearest to him when disguised (72, 264, 301, 599), yet in the end, the coherence of their identities not only does not remain in perpetual doubt but is necessary to the book’s affective resolution. Similarly, it may be endlessly amusing to see yet another character revealed to be Burlingame incognito, but his identity finally does possess some essential qualities beyond that of a simple sequence of masks.

Facing our own inability to reliably manage these multiplying possibilities, there may be nothing to do except laugh. Perhaps the novel’s oddest feature is the way both its most mechanical and its most grotesque events—the violent deaths, the frauds and robberies, the countless attempted rapes—somehow all dissolve into the general comedy. Reflecting on the transmogrification of Don Quixote’s similarly disturbing moments, Erich Auerbach writes, “So universal and multilayered, so noncritical and nonproblematic a gaiety in the portrayal of everyday reality has not been attempted again in European letters” (358), and he might have come to a similar conclusion about The Sot-Weed Factor. The laughter is made possible, though, because the inability to manage life’s fecundity is so general among the characters, as are the subsequent humiliations to which they are subjected, that power relations are leveled, as in Bakhtin’s carnivalesque, preventing anyone from laughing at others without laughing at themselves. The pirate Boabdil, for instance, may violently rape a prostitute, but he proceeds to
contract her debilitating venereal disease and appears absurdly diminished whenever he later shows up (266); similarly, Tom Tayloe, who makes his living swindling migrants into indentured servitude, gets hoodwinked into servitude by his own techniques (434-436). In the novel’s later stages, Ebenezer, having been taken captive by the Ahatchwoops and hearing his fellow captives admit the ways in which they have impersonated him in hopes of gain, remarks, as if channeling the end of *The Marriage of Figaro*, “‘Tis too late in the day for aught but general absolution” (536). The world’s variety—much valuable, most pointless—is too much for us, but after a certain point that goes equally for us all: since none of our brains is any more than a clunky machine liable to break down at any moment, we might at least share a laugh over it.

*The Public Burning* and the Butts of Satire

Just like *The Sot-Weed Factor*, Robert Coover’s *The Public Burning* is an engagement with the very nature and limits of comedy and satire. Not only do its two central characters—a fictionalized Richard Nixon and an embodied Uncle Sam—respectively derive from the traditions of classical clowning (see Pearce, “Circus”) and American folk humor (see Estes), but the novel’s central event is surrounded by a sequence of routines Coover has imagined for mid-century American comedians like Jack Benny, Edgar Bergen, and the Marx Brothers (447-456). It is easy to see why Thomas Pughe writes of the book, “At the centre is laughter itself” (81). Much of the book, granted, is conventional satire, targeted, to the annoyance of conservatives like Podhoretz, at the Eisenhower’s administration’s prosecution of the Rosenberg case. This is especially so in its early chapters, where, by setting historical documents to verse—e.g., articles by the “national poet Laureate” *Time* magazine and the “Spirit of History” *New York Times*, as well as portions of Eisenhower’s speeches and the Rosenbergs’ letters—Coover makes incongruous the theatrical elements of public speech, even though this does not really “expose”
anything about the case.\textsuperscript{12} Even the famously grotesque scene in which a cinema-goer fails to take off his 3-D glasses after seeing the film *House of Wax* and perceives Times Square as an extension of the grisly film creates a satiric duality via its use of altered perception (282-288).

However, also as with Barth’s book, *The Public Burning*’s catalogues and contests progressively spill beyond their traditional satiric use and generate cruft. Speaking for many initial reviewers, Robert Towers observed the ways in which the book seems to invoke satiric convention without really fulfilling it: on the one hand, he points out that though the novel lists many historical particulars surrounding the Rosenberg case, it often does not make them especially incongruous, and consequently “the documentary effects of *The Public Burning* degenerate into mere cataloguing or recitation”; on the other, the more overtly fictional elements are often so incongruous as to be merely bizarre fantasy, and that consequently “Coover, relying upon the strategy of excess, puts the reader in the position of a jaded sadist who must devise more and more exquisite elaborations of his tortures in an effort to catch up with a fast receding gratification.” Even Tom LeClair, in celebrating the book, agrees that the novel’s panorama of American society at times presents “too much elaboration, too much information” (114-115). Collectively, this excess engenders a grotesque more strange and disturbing than of the conventional satire, and as a result, in many passages toward the novel’s end, one’s cognition can become so disoriented that it becomes difficult to know where the book’s satire is directed and how to process it.

From the book’s beginning, its comic excessiveness is rooted in the voice of Uncle Sam. Towers articulates this well, both complimenting the “foulmouthed and amusing” pastiche of Americana comprising Uncle Sam’s dialogue, but subsequently adding, “how tiresome and unrelenting that voice becomes in the long haul!” To claim a satire has too much humor is an
odd charge, but it does well to describe the overwhelming nature of Uncle Sam’s voice. Take this characteristic monologue, uttered shortly after his introduction:

Time is money! No pent-up Utica contracts our powers, but the whole boundless continent is ours, it’s as much a law of nature as that the Mississippi should flow to the sea or that trade follows the flag! Fear is the fundament of most guvvamints, so let’s get the boot in, boys, and listen to ‘em scream, let us anny-mate and encourage each other—whoo-PEE!—and show the whole world that a Freeman, contandin’ for Liberty on his own ground, can out-run, out-dance, out-jump, chaw more tobacky and spit less, out-drink, out-holler, out-finagle and out-lick any yaller, brown, red, black, or white thing in the shape of human that’s ever set his unfortunate kickers on Yankee soil! It is our manifest dust-in-yer-eye to overspread the continent allotted by Providence for the free development of our yearly multiplyin’ millions, so damn the torpedoes and full steam ahead, fellow ripstavers, we cannot escape history! (8)

This amalgam of American quotation contains funny satire, drawing out the tendentious exuberance latent within even the highest-minded American rhetoric by using dialect and distortion to tweak its recognizable quotations into a coarse redneck tone (e.g., “manifest dust-in-yer-eye”). Arnold Weinstein probably puts it best when he says Coover “take[s] clichés of the coarsest and plumpest sort and […] make[s] a rich rhetoric of them” (239). However, we should observe that not all are converted to “rich rhetoric.” At times, the passage’s repetitiveness approaches cruft, as with the list “out-run, out-dance, out-jump, chaw more tobacky and spit less, out-drink, out-holler, out-finagle and out-lick.” As with Barth’s lists, one laughs less because one has deeply processed its jokes than out of astonishment that it keeps going as long as it does.
However, because these repetitions are so closely mixed with conventional satire, the passage develops a sort of propulsive, infectious laughter, complicating our ability to understand exactly what we laugh at. For instance, do we mock Uncle Sam for how his official decorum descends into unsophisticated jingoism, or do we laugh with him for successfully fusing a wide swath of American culture and tradition into a single voice? After all, though many criticize Sam’s catchphrase-laden dialogue as the blabbering “rants” of a mere “cartoon figure” (see Anderson 124), John Ramage notes that “Sam also seems to contain the best of the American psyche—humor, spirit, resourcefulness” (55). It may be overstating the matter to say that Uncle Sam’s voice provides “most complete replenishment of the language since Whitman and (in a different way) Mark Twain” (Green, Greiner, and McCaffery 5), but perhaps not by much: there is something to be said for a sensibility that so effortlessly achieves a seamless national whole from many individual parts. As Richard Walsh notes, “if satire is to remain functional as a critical tool, a distinction between laughing at and laughing with must be retained. Uncle Sam problematizes this distinction” (345). Put another way, the overwhelming barrage confuses our ability to recognize to what extent Sam represents either our ideal or real conceptions of an authentic American myth and, as a result, how we should understand ourselves with respect to him (see also Ch. 5).¹³

The novel’s catalogues of historical data also contributes to this disorientation, though in a somewhat different way. Often invoking the “overabundant flow of events” in contemporary life (320), the narrator sometimes presents this flow directly, as shown by this account of the articles laid out around The New York Times’ daily Rosenberg coverage:

Circumscribing all these speculations: the picture of a man sweating behind bars in a B. Altman & Co. advertisement (“Are you facing a 90-day sentence?”), a
movie review of *Devil’s Plot*, and a floor-level peek up the skirt of a woman strapped into the seat of a Colonial Airlines plane to Canada. Father’s Day ads for sizzling steaks. “The Mighty Atom” is dead. TONIGHT AT 8:30.

“Something to fit every taste.”

[…] What compels the attention and taps the wellsprings of prophecy on these pilgrimages is not this announcement that little Arlene Riddett, 15, of Yonkers, won the girls’ championship in the 28th annual marbles tournament in Asbury Park, New Jersey, nor that picture of two East Berlin demonstrators throwing stones at Russian tanks on Leipzigerplatz, but the fact that these things touch each other. […] The government of Argentina orders the price of theater tickets cut by 25% and the President of the United States is given a large toy model of Smokey Bear. The execution of an unemployed housepainter in Berlin takes shape beside the report that a new collection of wall coverings and shower curtains offers a variety of choices to homemakers who wish to decorate the bathroom: BATH WALLPAPERS / ARE EASY TO CLEAN. “Panorama” is one of the wallpaper designs, made up of impressionistic scenes of the country against a background of abstract motifs reminiscent of ancient calligraphy. (190)

Even while acknowledging these stories’ inapplicability to the rest of the novel, however, the narrator suggests we should find consider these passages part of the general humor of the event, calling them an expression of “Arbitrariness as a principle, allowing us to laugh at the tragic” (190). Why laugh at the tragic and arbitrary, though? Presumably, for reasons similar to those that make us laugh in *The Sot-Weed Factor*: even sorting through all the irrelevant information in the news required to recognize the tragic events of the day is more than we are able to reliably
manage. As Elisabeth Viereck Bell writes regarding the novel, we are faced with “Uncertainty no longer springing from the lack of information but stemming from information itself” (77). Similarly, a Sing Sing guard tells Nixon later in the novel, “It’s funny, isn’t it, Mr. Nixon? […] How billions and billions of words get spoken every day, like all these we’ve been speaking on the way down here, for example, and for some reason—or for maybe no reason at all—a few of them stick, and they’re all we’ve got afterwards of everything that’s happened” (409). All we may understand from these mostly pointless words is our likelihood of focusing on the wrong ones, and since this failure of filtering is unavoidable, perhaps it’s best to laugh.

However, the equalizing force of *The Sot-Weed Factor*’s carnivalesque cannot take hold because of the presence of Uncle Sam. Barth’s characters, no matter their pretensions, are each at the mercy of plot strings and internal coils beyond their control, with even Burlingame’s fantastic impersonations always reduced to the fallible uncanny; Coover’s Uncle Sam, though, appears legitimately marvelous and will not be so readily leveled. His authority over the nature of authentic American identity forces other characters to constantly fear being made the butt of everyone else’s mockery. In *The Sot-Weed Factor*, the ungoverned New World finally allows everyone some authenticity because, in the still-forming nation, no one can really make a claim to total authenticity, but in the Cold-War-era United States of *The Public Burning*, featuring both an incarnated American spirit and an apparent threat to it—as Molly Hite reminds us, the Rosenbergs were often tarred as “inauthentic,” impostor Americans (“Parody” 87)—the characters are unable to reach that resolution.

This becomes most obvious in the novel’s final part, taking place at the ritual Times Square public execution, where the cruft produced by the excessive spectacle causes ceaseless laughing, but frequently shifts that laughter’s focus. As the execution approaches, readers are
initially overloaded by excessive lists. In the scenes recounting the preparations in Times Square, beginning in earnest around Chapter 20, the heretofore controlled back-and-forth between cruft and satiric commentary soon becomes unbalanced in the former’s direction. Chapter 20 names seventeen categories of VIP in attendance (355), as well as fifteen human movie stars, several more cartoon ones (356), and dozens more popular singers, athletes, and other celebrities. This, however, is nothing in comparison to Chapter 24’s list of the nicknames of thirty-four presidents reanimated to parade on the square, adjacent to a list of fifty-four American archetypes (e.g., “[...] Roving Gamblers, Lumberjacks, Johnny Rebs and Damyankees, Shepherders and Cattle Kings [...]”) (423-424), all marching while the crowd affirms an avalanche of the blandest Cold War slogans (“Our world is now divided into two groups [...] Communism with hammer and sickle, and America and Christians with cross of Christ!” [418]). Even Chapter 24’s excesses, though, appear concise next to Chapter 26’s account of dozens of generic functionaries from dozens of generic institutions on hand (e.g., “all the auxiliary personnel who serve the three federal branches, all the agencies, bureaus, departments, commissions, institutes, foundations, boards, councils, societies, administrations, appeal and claims courts, funds, organizations, banks”), or to Betty Crocker’s roll call of forty-two Congressional Representatives and ninety-six Senators (458-461).

When this cruft is combined with a series of absurd comic sketches, produced under the conceit of a contest among the nation’s celebrities to make entertainment out of the Rosenbergs’ letters, the scene becomes overwhelming to the point of being infectiously funny, yet the very overwhelming nature of the laughter makes it difficult to understand the direction of the humor. Though several critics have claimed that these comedy routines suggest Hollywood’s ideological complicity with the government (see LeClair 127, Viereck 72, Pughe 70), the bits that Coover
invents are too zany to either scapegoat the Rosenbergs or satirize American ideology. For the most part, the stars’ characteristic physical and linguistic creativity—e.g., the Astaire-Rogers dance number incorporating a mesh visitation screen, an Abbott & Costello number about “who goes first” to the execution, a Hope-Crosby-Lamour “Road to Radiance” sketch (425-427)—comprises not hostile mockery or exaggerated self-parody but the slapstick, punning comedy of vaudeville, creating grotesque incongruities out of the execution materials. This approach climaxes during the Marx Brothers’ routine, paced so quickly (in the brothers’ characteristic style) that the audience laughs mostly at the pure speed of schematic switches. Here is Groucho as Julius Rosenberg and Chico as the jailkeeper:

GROUCHO: I’ll name anybody! My mother, my agent, even my mistress!
CHICO: Whatta you sayin’? You ain’t got a mistreiss! You ain’ even got a cockyerbine!
GROUCHO: I’ll name her too!
CHICO: Whatta you gonna name her?
GROUCHO: (singing and rolling his eyes) I think I’ll name her “Jasmine”…
CHICO: Jas’yours?
GROUCHO: (continuing) … Cuz she’s mighty lak’ a rose!
CHICO: Oh, a Pinko, eh? We’re getting to da bottomma dis!
GROUCHO: You been there, too, hunh?
CHICO: She’sa da one what’s stole-a da bum’ eh?
GROUCHO: She didn’t steal it, she was born with it!
CHICO: And she gave it to da Russians?
GROUCHO: She gave it to everybody! (454-455)
These jokes—combined with the juxtaposed image of Harpo (as Ethel) playing with the electric chair’s wires—less satirize the Rosenbergs than send up the usual targets of both the Marxes and the carnivalesque, the frailties of language and the body.

Consequently, the citizens expecting to mock the Rosenbergs in this scene—and the critics wishing to vindicate them—find laughter directed back from their intended targets toward themselves. The citizens themselves attempt to submerge themselves within the communal experience of laughter, but the conflicted aims of their laughter prevent them from realizing Bakhtinian rejuvenation:

Out front, a hundred million mouths open wide, a hundred million sets of teeth spring apart like dental exhibits, a hundred million bellies quake, and a hundred million throats constrict and spasm, gasp and wheeze, as America laughs. At much the same things everybody laughs at everywhere: sex, death, danger, the enemy, the inevitable, all the things that hurt about growing up, something that Americans especially, suddenly caught with the whole world in their hands, are loath to do. What makes them laugh hardest, though, are jokes about sexual inadequacy—a failure of power—and the cruder the better[.] (450)

While some critics believe that the scene satirizes the crowd’s mindless conformism (Maltby 102), the crowd does nothing stupid or immoral here by laughing at dirty jokes: their laughter is explicitly universal rather than particular to a historical moment. It is unclear, though, whether they are laughing at themselves communally, implicating everyone’s sexual inadequacy, or targeting others to assert their own superiority over them. To do the former would require them to identify with the soon-to-be-executed Rosenbergs, which the political context forbids, even though some may recognize how closely their uncontrollable spasms of laughter resemble those
shortly to be provoked by the Rosenbergs’ electrocution. Given the stakes, they would likely prefer their laughter to be more clearly oriented, just as most critics would prefer Coover’s scene make a clearer satire of the American establishment, but the question of who or what is being mocked here is not clearly resolved.

Likely for this reason, everyone is relieved when a bewildered Nixon stumbles onto stage—magically transported from his encounter with Ethel at Sing Sing, where he has achieved a parodically overwrought epiphany about the American Dream during an inept and messy seduction (429-446)—with his pants down, the words “I AM A SCAMP” written across his ass in Ethel’s lipstick, allowing him to become (appropriately) the joke’s new butt. Ever the clown, Nixon is unable to get his pants back up, but manages to convince the crowd that, since the Rosenberg affair has demonstrated national vulnerability, they ought to recommit America to openness together with a communal gesture, and with the rhetorical flourish, “I am asking everyone tonight to step forward—right now!—and drop his pants for America!” (482), he successfully redirects the laughter away from himself. But where has the laughter now been turned? The crowd is uncertain: many appear enthusiastic about a carnivalesque communal nudity, “staggering about in tight little circles to cheer the others on,” but others seem ashamed of the coerced exposure, as there are “scattered screeches of protest from the timid,” especially Nixon’s wife Pat, “the strain showing on her thin sad face from trying to hold back the tears” (483). Meanwhile, Nixon’s novel-long vacillation between identifying with the Rosenbergs as fellow Americans and demonizing them in hopes of political advancement makes his intentions in diverting the crowd similarly muddled.

Uncle Sam’s arrival onstage to refocus the event on the Rosenbergs finally settles the confusion. When Nixon and the crowd insist that Sam drop his pants too, he objects they are
“going too far!” (484): Sam may be willing to let individual Americans degrade themselves by exposing their lower halves, but America itself will not do so. Though the crowd does badger him into exposure, the revelation of his penis causes a blackout, at which point the fiction shoots so far into the marvelous that any satiric recognition becomes impossible. Flying through the darkness and casting fireballs like a mad genie (485-494), Sam regains control of the situation and brings the event back to its original purpose of executing the Rosenbergs—though only after the first attempt to electrocute Ethel fails and the event’s VIPs rush to the stage to re-pull the switch, sending Ethel’s body, in a final opaquely grotesque image, “held only at head, groin, and one leg, […] whipped like a sail in a high wind, flapping out at the people lie one of those trick images in a 3-D movie” (516-517).

What exactly are we to take from this bizarre conclusion, whose assault of comedy, cruft, and the fantastic prevents either crowd or readers from understanding their own laughter? Regarding this ambiguity, Pughe notes that “there is nothing that is truly liberating, nothing that is ‘other’ about this episode […]—it appears merely bizarre and ridiculous” (67), adding that, the “comedy confronts us with the problem of working out our own position” to the point where readers “will laugh a halting, painful and lonely laugh, provoked by the crisis of his or her reading experience” (80-81). I think this conclusion is basically correct, though actual readers will often dodge this crisis by simply asserting clearer satiric motives. I would only add that its comedy’s ambiguity is propelled by its submergence within cruft. The general disorientation caused by the overwhelming cruft prevents readers from processing the scene as a clear satire or carnivalesque.

That may be why the final scene—in which Uncle Sam sodomizes Nixon so as to “incarnate” his spirit for a future presidency—is more repulsive than the rapes in the The Sot-
Weed Factor, yet also more narratively pat. It is repulsive because, unlike Barth’s rapists, Uncle Sam does not share his victim’s weaknesses: when he concludes the book by quoting George M. Cohan’s “Always Leave Them Laughing When You Say Goodbye” (534)—a patter song, incidentally, about an estranged father who advises his son to keep acquaintances in stitches with rapid-fire slapstick so as to avoid being tied to them emotionally—the laughter to which he refers appears less about communal acknowledgment of weakness than overwhelming and exercising power over others. The narrative stability, though, derives from how the rape returns the book to conventional satire, creating a bisociational incongruity by rooting the source of our presidents’ recognizably wearied and damaged mannerisms (“Hoover’s glazed stare, Roosevelt’s anguished tics, Ike’s silly smile” [533]) in their penetration by the extreme weight of American heritage and culture. If the climactic spectacle is too overwhelming for us to recognize what relationship we hold to our nation, we can at least recognize that its power is incomparably beyond that of our individual minds, and if we try to mock it, the joke will very likely be turned back at our expense.

The Fraudulent, the Satiric, and The Recognitions

Still, this discussion of cruft and laughter will not help us explain the passage with which we began the chapter, from the party scene in The Recognitions. It is excessive inasmuch as its lengthy dialogue goes on much longer than appears necessary, and it is might be construed as satiric inasmuch as it depicts socially negative behavior it appears, but it simply isn’t that funny. Even Moore admits that “the ferocity of Gaddis’ satire, the contempt he heaps upon nearly everyone in the novel, betrays the stern moralist who doesn’t so much invite the reader to laugh at the human foibles of his characters as to recoil in horror” (41). The rest of the plot’s events, for that matter, nominally centered around a commercially unsuccessful mid-twentieth-century
painter named Wyatt Gwyon who is recruited to forge “newly discovered” pictures by fifteenth-century Flemish masters, but also featuring myriad subplots involving frauds and duplicities crafted by other aspiring criminals and artists, are simply too bleak and brutal to create much genuine humor. It would have probably been impossible to sustain the leavening impulse of The Sot-Weed Factor’s carnivalesque, after all, through a thousand-page parade of (by my approximate count) four rapes, two castrations, eight characters institutionalized or otherwise gone insane, four attempted murders (three successful), four deaths by gruesome disease, five deaths by gruesome accident (including two in separate building collapses), and countless suicide attempts, not to mention many other fates so bizarre as to defy categorization.16

Given the caustic invective of the narrative voice, though, there might be an argument that it is of the harsh, Juvenalian variety of satire. In fact, excepting some critical dispute as to whether any positive values, like the redemptive power of love or art, are implicit in the narrative (see Weisenburger, Fables 210-222), there seems to be general consensus that that is the book’s goal, aimed at “exposing” the fraudulence of a whole range of things, including contemporary mainstream society (Safer 112), New York’s upper-class and bohemian subculture (C. Knight 16-19),17 religious and scientific epistemology (S. Moore, Gaddis 15; Comnes 49-50), and modernist concepts of authenticity, tradition, and originality (Weisenburger, Fables 216).18 These views are perhaps best summed by John Johnston’s claim that the book is “an extended contemporary Menippean satire directed against everything sham, fake, and imitative—artworks, ideas, identities, products, even languages—in the nascently consumerist, mass-media-directed American society of the 1950s” (Carnival 152). The incongruence is highlighted primarily by Wyatt, who is praised more than any other character in the novel for the “transformational power of [his] artistic imagination” (Comnes 81), which uniquely enables him to make the “symbolic
voyage from spiritual darkness to enlightenment” (S. Moore, *Gaddis* 17), highlighting by contrast the other characters’ depravity. Scenes like the party cited at the chapter’s start, then, might be justified as bleak diatribes against behavior that is, in Johan Thieleman’s view, “all embedded in one overall thought. They are all signifiers with one signified: the decline of all values” (“Energy” 109).

However, valorizing Wyatt in this way is problematic if we are to consider *The Recognitions* as a satire on fraudulence. Wyatt’s most distinct characteristic, after all, is his ability to create forgeries indistinguishable from paintings by his Flemish idols, which, in Klaus Benesch’s words, all but destroys the “clear-cut division between originals and their reproductions” (30-31), and, according to Johnston, “goes so far as to throw into question even the existence of some founding first or authentic version,” erasing the original-reproduction distinction via the poststructuralist notion of “simulacra” (*Carnival* 7). As we noted earlier, however, that distinction between real and fake is necessary to any definition of fraudulence in the first place. In other words, critics appear to first justify Gaddis’s swaths of banal text on the grounds that they expose fraudulence, but then apotheosize the book’s protagonist for entirely deconstructing fraudulence as a coherent concept.¹⁹ As Tony Tanner asks, “if the best artist is the best forger, what does ‘originality’ mean?” (*City* 394), and we may extend his question by asking why, if the character most skilled in falsehood is the one critics most admire, they are so confident in attacking inauthenticity. This paradox extends more generally toward the novel’s satiric status. To again invoke Bogel, if the counterfeiter and satirist are analogous, then they both possess the ability to make distinctions between false and true problematic, but if that distinction vanishes, they cannot produce their desired effects. Postmodern critics may be wary of reifying a distinction between authentic and inauthentic, but if one deconstructs the distinction
entirely, one does away with the difference between satire and satirized, too. As a result, one could no longer argue that the representation of doltish characters critiques superficiality, because the clear norm from which that superficiality is critiqued vanishes; instead, one must believe, to recall Franco Moretti’s comment on *Bouvard et Pécuchet*, that the book “abolish[es] the difference between a book on stupidity, and a stupid book” (*Modern* 72).

Yet outside some hostile early reviewers, no one argues *The Recognitions* has done this. It is among the book’s great achievements that its readers can neither consistently rely on nor reject its characters’ personal authenticity, and consequently must struggle to consider how seriously to consider their attitudes on art, morality, finance, religion, and every other issue of importance. What do we do, though, about the long stretches of purely stupid dialogue that the book contains? Thielemans’s claim that each is designed “to deal with chaos, by being chaotic in itself” (105), will not suffice to explain this tactic, because Western literature has spent centuries developing literary techniques by which satire may treat the dull without being dull. As we suggested in Chapter 2, for instance, despite Moretti’s comment, Flaubert’s last novel is an example of how these tactics may be skillfully deployed, as in the passage below, in which the title friends survey their new country estate:

> Bouvard, passing near the arbor, discovered the plaster statue of a woman beneath its branches. She was pulling up her skirt with two fingers, her knees bent, looking over her shoulder as if afraid of being discovered.

> “Oh, pardon me! Don’t mind us!”

> And they found this joke so hilarious that, twenty times a day, for more than three weeks, they kept repeating it. (21)
The passage’s satiric craft is especially apparent in its final sentence’s use of the free indirect style to compress the tedious repetition of a drab joke yet still exaggerating those repetitions enough to satirize, while its close focalization maintains enough proximity to the friends’ mindset that it becomes easier to recognize our own tendency toward mechanism. In Gaddis’s party scene, though, no remark is treated as dull or stupid enough to warrant elision into narration: they read the way Flaubert’s vignette might have if the he’d directly represented each of the four thousand utterances of Bouvard’s joke over dozens of pages, each accompanied by a line or two of approximated laughter and inept explanation to baffled acquaintances.

This style is particularly striking because The Recognitions’s first chapter, a searing novella about the Puritan Rev. Gwyon’s confrontation with the shadows of older traditions, brilliantly employs such Flaubertian nuance and concision. This approach, though, all but vanishes after the first chapter—indeed, from Gaddis’s corpus entirely—and the remaining scenes’ following Wyatt’s artistic career feature substantially more direct discourse. Here I must make an argument that will not be popular among The Recognitions’ admirers, but which is necessary to articulate the book’s weirdly brilliant innovations: as a result of this shift, much of the novel’s middle suffers, and particularly fails as satire. This is not to say that there are not good satiric moments—the fates of Rev. Gwyon and Stanley are only two among many of the novel’s ironically incongruous parallels (see Lathrop)—but the narrative voice does not play off recognition and exaggeration as masterfully as it does in the opening. At its worst moments, it devolves into heavy-handed diatribes, themselves little more than the warmed-over clichés spouted by postwar highbrows about the impact of mass media and capitalism on a mass public they clearly held in contempt.
However, this strategy allows Gaddis to cultivate an idiosyncratic cruft in the lengthy, lackluster dialogue created by his refusal to write traditional satire. These passages first occur early in the second chapter, where after following Wyatt to Paris, the narrator scans the city’s cafés and reports several sets of disconnected speech like these: “–Voici votre Perrier m’sieur. –Mais j’ai dit café au lait, pas d’eau Perrier … A small man in a sharkskin suit said, –Son putas, y nadas mas. Putas, putas, putas … Someone said, –Picasso … Someone else said, –Kafka … A girl said, –You deliberately misunderstand me. Of course I like art. Ask anybody” (65). Given that this chapter begins by proclaiming the city’s “infinite vulgarity” (63), it would seem this dialogue intends to satirize Parisian superficiality, yet upon inspection there is nothing blameworthy or even interesting about it: it reflects upon no one poorly to have mentioned Picasso or Kafka, mistaken a drink order, insisted on their own appreciation for art, or called a few women whores. Perhaps the narrator has so little regard for the Parisian intellectual climate that he assumes the mere mention of Picasso ought to suggest vacuity, but this would be an extremely conservative and presumptuous form of critique.

What the passage even more notably lacks, though, is Wyatt, whom the narrative has not yet rediscovered in Europe. Given that none of these voices appears to develop into anything more than a line of dull speech on its own, we likely assume that our protagonist must be among them: why bother describing such dull café conversation at such length otherwise? Only after unsuccessfully seeking some attribute of Wyatt’s voice in these bland exchanges over four and a half pages do we learn that, “With no idea of Paris when he arrived, [Wyatt] had been fortunate enough to find quarters in this neighborhood which maintained anonymity in the world of arts” (67). In other words, while prompting us to scan for a sign of recognition, the book has not only delayed providing one but has placed it somewhere unexpected, first heightening our attention
but then discouraging it by making the text through which we comb so little worth attending. As Gregory Comnes notes, among *The Recognitions*’ odder stylistic moves is how it does “not distinguish[sh] between meaningful and irrelevant background detail, as most traditional novels do” (70): the textual space taken up by the novel’s events is often far out of proportion to its importance, with unimportant passages given enormous space and important ones minimized.

As befits the novel’s title, then, as the novel moves to New York, it constantly uses imbalances like these to impede readers’ ability to recognize the importance of what they read. That clutter’s cognitive (or recognitive?) impact is the real source of the novel’s famous difficulty. It is telling that while the vast majority of *Recognitions* criticism focuses on Wyatt, he appears in only about forty percent of the book, and his name goes unmentioned after the third chapter: the narrative both proliferates inconsequential exchanges among minor characters to an extreme degree while consistently obscuring the presence of its most important plot thread, forcing us to look for telltale behavioral tics or speech patterns to register his presence and even going so far as to refer to him in the later chapters only by his adopted pseudonym Stephen Asche. Many similar tactics may be observed throughout the book. For instance, in one mid-novel subplot, the would-be playwright Otto seeks to have a reunion with his father, who turns out to be the otherwise undistinguished company man Mr. Pivner, the subject of several brief scenes otherwise unrelated to the plot. Though most criticism treats this relationship as self-evident, Gaddis delays making it explicit for three hundred pages after Pivner’s first appearance. In particular, Otto’s last name is never stated, and Pivner is only described as seeking to meet his son just before their planned meeting. There are several hints tossed in during this time about their relationship, but these are extremely oblique: the narrator mentions, for instance, that Pivner wears rimless glasses (286), and later Otto hears his father describe those glasses so that the
latter may be recognized when they meet (309); similarly, Otto hears that he should wear his green scarf to the meeting to match his father (309), and Pivner is later described as wearing a green scarf (505). Not only are these very minor details, however, listed among the novel’s great many other unimportant ones (e.g., Pivner’s receding hairline, the color of his suit), but Gaddis goes to especial lengths to obscure them, as the rimless glasses are mentioned in each case only parenthetically and the references to the green scarves are made two hundred pages apart. This seems designed so that readers are overwhelmed by the sheer volume of surrounding activity and fail to make the recognition—just like Otto, who misrecognizes counterfeiter Frank Sinisterra as his father when Pivner has a brief seizure outside the hotel where they are to meet (514-520).

This tactic of disorientation via unimportant details is most evident in the extended party and bar scenes, featuring large casts of intermittently-identified minor characters engaged in dull cross-conversations over subjects of little importance, culminating to a head in the one with whose opening exchanges we began this chapter. Again, this scene’s dialogue is characterized not by clichés but clichéd representations of clichés, combined with context-free non sequiturs that are neither insightful nor satiric (e.g., “–Mendelssohn Schmendelssohn, someone else said. –I’m talking about music” [574]). As pointed out at this chapter’s start, it cannot succeed as satire because it does not generate incongruity between different schemas for social behavior, but simply plays out one tedious script to great length. What it does do, however, is to be so stupid and dull as to render the characters and readers unable to pay attention to or recognize more important things going on around them.

For instance, after appearing and disappearing several times in the scene’s first half (see 578, 585, 593), Esther’s kitten gets lost. This already speaks to how distracted the hostess has become, since earlier in the book she is described as “threatening the strain of life in [the kitten]
with her attention” (367). After going unmentioned for over thirty pages, the kitten finally reappears at the chapter’s end, when a fight breaks out between Anselm and Don Bildow. The partygoers’ response begins here with the Argentine trade commissioner, to whom Ed Feasley has been trying to sell a battleship:

–Yes I was told to expect this sort of thing in New York.

–Yes but I mean Chrast don’t go away, or we’ll both go, let’s both go to your hotel, I’ll stay there tonight.

–But in another room.

–Chrast yes.

–I was warned about that sort of thing in New York, his companion commented, adjusting his perfectly adjusted tie.

–Oh Rose, Esther said to where her sister sat on the floor in the dark with the records. –Aren’t you tired?

–Are you having a nice party?

Esther put her face in her hands, and felt her sister’s arm round her neck.

–Oh Rose. Rose.

The hand under her became rigid, the paralysis ran up her arm, through her shoulders and neck, her face yellowing as the blood drained from behind its bronzed canvas. –Stanley … Agnes Deigh whispered, staring at him bent over Anselm, an arm around Anselm.

–You see, it’s all right now, Stanley said, gripping his shoulder but unable to raise it from the floor. Anselm opened his eyes.
In the hand she drew from under her, the white nails clutched a limp cinnamon-colored body. —I thought…it was something. Agnes Deigh said weakly to herself. Then she looked around quickly, opened her bag and pulled handfuls of things out which she stuffed in her coat pocket, to snap it closed a moment later upon the lifeless kitten. She summoned her voice in, —Stanley…

—And now, you don’t have to fight it any more, you … Anselm’s arm was flung around him, and Anselm’s unshaven face tore at Stanley’s face with the kiss. (637)

As with most speech throughout the scene, the dialogue communicates nothing to anyone: Feasley and the Argentinian simply repeat phrases they have thrown at each other for the past forty pages, which finally go for naught; Esther speaks to her mentally-impaired sister merely for the sake of speaking, since she has nothing to say and her sister would not understand her if she did; Stanley mutters clichés to Anselm. However, though no one is saying anything of importance, their propagation of the party’s chatter prevents anyone from realizing what has happened to the cat, whom Agnes has sat on and killed.

Gaddis works hard to obscure this moment from his readers as well as his characters. There is so much chatter, so many comments filling space without being worth listening to, that everyone’s ability to distinguish the important from the unimportant is crippled: even Agnes does not realize what she has done, apparently, given her worried reaction to her purse being stolen several pages later (643). Furthermore, the cat’s death is only recounted in a prepositional phrase concluding an aside between speech tags, and the previous paragraphs’ anticipation of the event are misleadingly described: when Agnes reaches beneath her and suspects what she has done, the her (“The hand under her”) is placed so that its antecedent appears to be Esther, not
Agnes, making the sentence about the former’s embarrassment rather than the latter’s horror; similarly, most of Agnes’ reaction to the kitten’s death is reported before what she has done has been revealed, prompting us to misattribute it toward one of the other things that has been disturbing her through the novel, like her relationship with Stanley or her anxiety over her lapsed Catholicism. Even the phrase “cinnamon-colored body” does not express exactly what has happened, since the cat’s coloring has not been previously described. In other words, the cat’s death is only clearly reported to readers by two words dissolved into an entire scene’s worth of cruft misdirection, to the extent that it becomes very easy to glaze over and miss the dead cat as entirely as the partygoers do.

This is not the only example in the chapter. None of the scene’s three most consequential plot threads—Agnes’s accidental crushing of the kitten, Maude Munk’s abduction of the unexplained baby crawling around the apartment, and Charley Dickens’s unsuccessful suicide attempts—take up more than a page of text, most of which is scattered several lines at a time scattered across the scene’s four-score pages, almost all of which pointless jabber. Frankly, this includes many passages popular with critics, including Stanley’s stuttering thoughts about fragmentation and tradition (616-617), Benny’s blather about how the intellectual class doesn’t understand “real life” (602-603), and Otto’s conveyance of Wyatt’s half-baked criticism of America’s youth-centered culture and the need to do something “crucial” (591-592, 620-621). To take any of these passages as either serious philosophical statements or as satires of their speakers’ self-importance would reflect poorly upon the book’s craftsmanship; better we see them as blending into the rest of the stupidity to disorient readers. As with the Brueghels that Wyatt forges, the scene’s suffering, in Auden’s famous lines, “takes place/ While someone else
is eating or opening a window or just walking dully along” (3-4), unnoticed as Icarus’s leg in the bottom right corner of his most famous landscape.

*The Recognitions*’ readers, then, must decide how to avoid getting bogged down in the constant hum of idiocy while also observing the important events that occur in that background. As the novel comes to its close, moreover, this process becomes quite hard. On the one hand, some sections descend so purely into cruft that any concerted attempt to recognize anything within them would be wasted mental effort. Agnes’s five-page letter of apology to Dr. Weisgall, whom she’d accused of child abuse, may go unread by its diegetic recipient because her handwriting is so poor (757-763), but even the book’s readers will be unable to make much of its typed transcript, because it contains barely a coherent sentence. Yet abandoning such totally recalcitrant text is dangerous, too, as may be seen in two of the book’s final scenes, in which Arny Munk and Stanley each decide to ignore a brief, incomprehensible message they assume is too unimportant to be worth bothering about, respectively a warning in French encountered while the former is trying to put out a hotel-room fire and one in Italian while the latter is practicing an organ composition; we all ignore stimuli like this every day, of course, since we are constantly faced with a million sources of white noise beyond our understanding, almost all of which are of no consequence. Arny and Stanley are not so fortunate, however, because ignoring these messages causes each to have a building collapse upon and kill him (942, 956). These warnings’ difficulty is contingent, of course—their opacity is not necessarily experienced by readers who understand French and Italian—but this is illustrative of why *The Recognitions* is relatively humorless when compared to the other two novels we have discussed in this chapter. First, unlike the enormous catalogs in *The Sot-Weed Factor* or *The Public Burning*, *The Recognitions*’ cruft is not always so obviously and universally overwhelming: individual readers may at times
be able to recognize potential importance within apparently tossed-off text, and though the odds are that at some point we will fail. Second, moreover, the penalties Gaddis administers upon his characters for even the briefest slips in attention and memory are more sadistic and arbitrary than in the other books. One hopes that Gaddis did not mistake the asymmetrical relation of author and audience for an exemption from human limitations, knowing when the satirist returns to the real world, his mind does not so easily encompass its unimaginable variety as it does in his fictional one.
Chapter Four—The Frame-Tale, the Picaresque, and the Circumfabulation

And then went down to the ship,
Set keel to breakers, forth on the godly sea, and
We set up mast and sail on that swart ship,
Bore sheep aboard her, and our bodies also
Heavy with weeping, and winds from sternward
Bore us out onward with bellying canvas,
Circe’s this craft, the trim-coifed goddess.
Then sat we amidships, wind jamming the tiller,
Thus with stretched sail, we went over sea till day’s end.
Sun to his slumber, shadows o’er all the ocean,
Came we then to the bounds of deepest water,
To the Kimmerian lands, and people cities
Covered with close-webbed mist, unpierced ever
With glitter of sun-rays
Nor with stars stretched, nor looking back from heaven
Swartest night stretched over wrecked men there.

—Ezra Pound, Canto I

Too Much Plot

At one point during the twentieth century, the most common complaint about literary fiction was that its over-absorption with artistry prevented it from “telling a good story.” Summarizing this view in his 2001 “Reader’s Manifesto” for the Atlantic, critic B. R. Myers groused that “any accessible, fast-moving story written in unaffected prose is deemed to be ‘genre fiction’ […] never literature with a capital L” (108). Given that several touchstone twentieth-century theories of the novel significantly deemphasized story in favor of character or language (see Ortega y Gasset 80-87, Forster 42), this criticism is not totally without justification, but it is markedly inapplicable to many mega-novels. Instead of being devoid of story, they are often stuffed with it, sometimes to the point of inducing critics who have argued for story’s importance in other contexts to criticize them for having too much. For instance, James Wood has pejoratively termed extravagantly-plotted mega-novels as “hysterical realism,” because these books, Wood claims, “want to abolish stillness, as if ashamed of silence—as it
were, a criminal running endless charity marathons. Stories and sub-stories sprout on every page, as these novels continually flourish their glamorous congestion” (*Irresponsible* 179). For Wood, Thomas Pynchon’s *Mason & Dixon* provides a case study in this phenomenon, because its profusion of subplots—which, as Wood notes, detail the adventures of “a talking dog, a mechanical duck, a giant octagonal cheese, and two clocks having a conversation,” among many others (*Irresponsible* 178)—end up not increasing but depleting the book’s richness, because “however dissimilar each new adventure is from its predecessor, it resembles it in its mere adventurousness. The variety becomes homogeneous” (*Broken* 204). They may have plot, but in Wood’s view, that plot is so excessive as to be gratuitous.

What does it mean to suggest a novel’s story is pointless, though? After all, if one takes a classically structuralist narratological perspective, there can be no such thing: though any narrative might be reduced to a single sentence representing primary plot motion, as in Gérard Genette’s famous boiling down of the two million words in *À la recherche du temps perdu* to “Marcel becomes a writer” (*Narrative* 30), structuralists generally believe that, in Roland Barthes’s words, “there are no wasted units, and there can never be any, however long, loose, or tenuous the threads which link them to one of the levels of the story” (“Introduction” 249). Obviously, some plot functions are more important than others for achieving that overall syntactic expression, as even in a conventional novel like *Pride and Prejudice*, Franco Moretti notes, a full ninety-seven percent of scenes are low-importance “catalyses” rather than major “turning points” (“Serious” 369-370), but even the least important vignettes provide some small movement toward achieving the plot’s realization.

If one instead adopts the “natural narratology” put forward by Monika Fludernik, pointlessness becomes more possible, but only at the cost of more or less disqualifying a text as
narrative. Following the work of William Labov, natural narratology elevates a story’s “point” into a theoretical concept, namely the unusual or surprising segment of experience that motivates a speaker to recount a story and gives its audience something to focus upon (244-248). A narrator could fail to establish a point, but in that case, the story would lack tellability and readers would neither be especially inclined or able to pay it much attention. Fludernik acknowledges that some well-regarded literary texts do not quite hit this threshold of tellability, especially experimental works lacking a stable narrative voice, but that is because their aesthetic effects are essentially poetic, not narrative (259). Such texts have recently been described as exhibiting Brian McHale’s notion of “weak narrativity,” which he claims is a way of “telling stories ‘poorly,’ distractedly, with much irrelevance and indeterminacy, in such a way as to evoke narrative coherence while at the same time withholding commitment to it” (165), but as McHale explicitly suggests, these poorly-told stories are recounted not for their own sake but to create a space for the kind of unconventional, avant-garde literary effects we discussed in Chapter 1.

However, mega-novel plots are not adequately accounted for by either of these approaches, because they are clearly more focused on narrative than on poetry, yet still frequently manage to tell irrelevant and indeterminate stories. Returning to the example of Mason & Dixon, for instance, while we might condense its overall narrative into a schema like “The Reverend Wicks Cherrycoke tells a family gathering about how Charles Mason and Jeremiah Dixon surveyed their eponymous line,” we would have difficulty assimilating all of the book’s stories into that formulation. It is not merely that the novel subverts the logic of both plot construction and narratorial stability by frame-breaking, most prominently when it introduces as an excursus from Cherrycoke’s tale the captivity narrative of Eliza Fields in an issue of the
sensationalist series *The Ghastly Fop*, as read by the children Tenebrae and Ethelmer, but transitions that story back into Cherrycoke’s voice without signaling any shift by the end of the next chapter; this sort of thing, after all, might be put down as “antinarrative” or “unnatural narrative,” its point relying upon readers’ consciousness that the book is upending typical narrative rules (see Alber and Heinze). More importantly, some sections of the novel generate *so many* possible stories at once that each is rendered indeterminate and irrelevant.

For example, when the aforementioned Fields arrives at Mason and Dixon’s camp, she brings with her the Chinese *feng shui* devotee Captain Zhang, who fears that he has been followed by his Jesuit nemesis, Father Zarpazo. Since the latter is purportedly a master of disguise, Zhang begins to suspect that the most unlikely members of the company might be him, and at one point, disguised in Jesuit robes so as to better anticipate the Spaniard’s motions, he accuses a woman of being Zarpazo. That prompts this exchange:

“‘He’s [i.e., Zhang’s] not a real Jesuit,’” Mason assures her.

“‘Or, perhaps, all too real!’” the Captain with a look of evil glee,—“for suppose I never was Zhang, but rather Zarpazo, all the Time! HA, —ha-ha!” His Laugh, tho’ hideously fiendish enough, seems practis’d.

“‘Or,’” replies Mr. Barnes, “that you are neither, but yet another damn’d Fabulator, such as ever haunt encampments white or Indian, ev’ry night, somewhere in this Continent.”

“‘Too many possible Stories. You may not have time enough to find out which is the right one.’” (552)

At least four plotlines are suggested here—that “Zhang” is really Zhang, that “Zhang” is really Zarpazo, that “Zhang” is neither of them (both, perhaps, simply being characters from *The*
Ghastly Fop) and has been deliberately playacting, or that “Zhang” is merely, as he is described a few pages later, “crazy” (573)—and as Zhang implies, we might with a little creativity expand these possibilities much further. All of these indeterminate plots, however, are mutually exclusive, effectively negating each other and providing no basis on which to even begin considering which is most accurate.¹ If we take any of them seriously, we must also take seriously an indefinite set of others, which would render any processing of this scene meaningless. As these possibilities are furthermore never revisited as the novel progresses, what is the point of suggesting them?

Now, obviously, interpretive indeterminacy does not necessarily render narrative pointless. As Umberto Eco long ago noted, the narrative questions raised by a movie like Michel Antonioni’s L’avventura might be constantly left open, but their very lack of resolution is what ends up driving its plot, redirecting frustrated characters’ and viewers’ energy toward new narrative motion (Open 116-118).² Furthermore, as H. Porter Abbott notes, the necessary incompleteness of any fictional world means there will always be narrative gaps in which “multiple incompatible stories, together with their incompatible worlds, reside […] but only as possibilities,” which he calls “shadow stories” (“Shadow” 1). However, we cannot merely accept all these story possibilities as equally and positively enriching the narrative, because their ability to iteratively generate further possibilities quickly overrides our ability to process them. As Abbott points out, “It would, of course, require a mind of great and inhuman capability to entertain more than a fraction of all possible event sequences together with all the exponentially increasing numbers of possible event sequences nested within them” (“Shadow” 4).³ Were we to capitulate entirely to the terms of Zhang’s game, that is, we would have to pose further perhapses and supposes ad infinitum: in addition to questioning Zhang’s identity, for example,
we would have to wonder whether Mason has really been Dixon the whole time, or Dixon Mason, or both of them other people entirely and both not really in America but Mongolia, which the other characters have artificed to exactly match the pair’s expectations of the New World. Such possibilities, of course, tie themselves into dead ends so immediately that they can have no purpose to either the plot or to a speaker, and since they may be thrown into any narrative at any time with no particular cost, they are purely gratuitous.

How we process and compress an excess of narrative possibilities has significant implications for the relationship between narrative and consciousness. As Antonio Damasio has suggested, consciousness itself may be the product of internal neural narrative, generating the self out of a sequence of observations of the organism’s state and sensory perceptions (see 168-171). Furthermore, Reuven Tsur points out that this self-generating narrative depends upon linearity, as “without this, we could not be conscious of stable objects” (16). Of course, the ability to non-linearly imagine alternate states of affairs is crucial to any mind’s successful planning and directed action (M. Turner 3-11), but when those alternate realities multiply to the point that the main linear narrative dissolves into one of indefinite possibilities, the basis of the conscious self begins to erode. The stakes of this problem might be illustrated best by Jorge Luis Borges’s Dr. Yu Tsun in “The Garden of Forking Paths,” whose adoption of his ancestor Ts’ui Pen’s view of space-time as a timeless, infinite array of co-existing possible worlds allows him to suspend any feelings of personal agency or culpability in murdering his friend Stephen Albert, since he would have done so in some other possible plotline anyway (123-128). Analogously, if a fiction’s sequence of events becomes too overloaded with alternate possibilities, the conscious mind reading it can very quickly begin to fail.
For many years, “linearity” was a dirty word in studies of twentieth-century fiction, and describing a narrative as “non-linear” doubled as a positive aesthetic evaluation: that position needs now to be reevaluated. We must realize that the non-linear possibilities presented by mega-novels are constantly engaged in dialectic with the linear needs of consciousness, and subsequently ask how one distinguishes between storytelling that creatively exploits the alternate worlds of fiction from that which is simply tangled nonsense. *Mason & Dixon*, in fact, is an excellent place for us for to do that, because while the book’s disparate subplots sometimes appear about as linear as freehand doodles (Duyfhuizen, “Reading” 140), the novel is, of course, very much about the establishment of linearity, its plot guided by the two near-exactly perpendicular lines its title characters survey between Pennsylvania/Delaware and Maryland (Clerc 124). To do that, however—and, more broadly, to examine how we can adequately process excessive mega-novel story—we will first need to examine two narrative genres that have not only both been frequently linked to the mega-novel but have historically included abundant and relatively inessential plots without being charged with pointlessness or boredom, the picaresque and the frame-tale.

**Plotting Space and Time in the Picaresque and Frame-Tale, and Introducing the Circumfabulation**

Both older narrative forms than the novel—the one by at least some decades, the other by many centuries—the picaresque and the frame-tale are perhaps the exemplary genres of episodic narrative. As a result, they often appear less like coherent linear narratives than boundless structures for story, meandering arbitrarily in all directions and consequently often increasing their narrative threads to an arbitrarily large size, as may be seen in the seven hundred pages of Mateo Aleman’s *Guzman de Alfarache* or, to even greater extremes, the thirty volumes of the
shelf-filling Indian classic *The Ocean of Story*. Moreover, though, despite the Aristotelian objection that “episodic [plots] are the worst” because “the sequence of episodes is neither necessary nor probable” (51b), both the picaresque and the frame-tale demonstrate how narrative may retain the potential to generate a wide variety of possible stories while still maintaining coherent narrative purpose.

The picaresque and frame-tale sustain their episodic plot structures by taking analogous but opposed approaches to what Bakhtin referred to as the “intrinsic connectedness of temporal and spatial relationships that are artistically expressed in literature,” or “chronotope” (*Dialogic* 84). Picaresque and frame-tale chronotopes, appropriately, are grounded in the differing storytelling situations of their narrators. For instance, the picaresque, though often defined within the Anglophone world simply as any narrative about wandering adventures, \(^5\) initially grew its plot structure out of a specific need to narrate the lives of *picaros*, peripatetic social outcasts roaming from town to town in search of work, food, and money, who often got involved in various illegal activities along the way. \(^6\) The resulting “loosely episodic” plot—“strung together,” in Claudio Guillén’s words, “like a freight train and apparently with no other common link than the hero” (84)—has frequently been critiqued as lacking structural cohesion, for instance in René Wellek and Austin Warren’s claim that, “In the picaresque novel, the chronological sequence is all there is: this happened and then that. […] A more philosophic novel adds to chronology the structure of causation” (215). However, in critiquing the genre, this objection articulates well how the *picaro*’s chronotope sustains its stories’ point. The *picaro*’s spatial progress is so discontinuous, and consequently so episodic, because he is forced to experience only the most stable, linear progression of time: pressed by his moment-to-moment needs for survival, and lacking any education or intellectual sophistication, he is incapable of
contemplating pasts, futures, and other worlds. For this reason, incidentally, Peter Brooks sees in
the picaresque not an exception to conventional plot but a quintessential example of how
plotting is driven by the narrator’s desire: the “tricks and stratagems” comprising the disparate
adventures of a *picaro* like Lazarillo des Tormes are held together because they are each
“devised to overcome a specific form of the threat [i.e., the unifying fear of starvation], and thus
literally to enable life, and narrative, to go forward” (38).

The frame-tale’s chronotope, on the other hand, is precisely reversed. As Robert
Clements and Joseph Gibaldi have described, the “cornice”/“novella” structure of the frame-tale,
where a skeletal outer frame recounts how one or more storytellers narrate several autonomous
tales to an audience, guarantees that even tales whose temporality diverges wildly from
chronological time must be mediated through a static ground state restraining the storyteller(s) to
a single spatial location (5-6). The tales of the *Thousand and One Nights*, for instance, no matter
how far they reach into legendary time or how freely their adventures seem to proceed, are told
only in Shahryar’s bedchamber, and while the Florentine aristocrats of *The Decameron* might
visit a different bucolic setting on some days during their plague-induced exile and Chaucer’s
pilgrims might advance gradually on the long journey toward Canterbury, for all intents and
purposes they stay in the same space. Furthermore, as Clements and Gibaldi suggest, the
individual novellas are each granted a point by the cornice’s establishment of that spatially-
restrictive situation, which is often a national disaster, because it allows the storytelling either to
help resolve that problem or at least soothe its audience by allowing them to explore a wide
range of temporality (42-49). Like the *picaro*, Brooks notes, frame-tale storytellers like
Shahrazad provides an archetypal example of plotting, even though the structure of their stories
seems to wander aimlessly at times, because their temporality-manipulating storytelling is “life-
giving in that it arouses and sustains desire, ensuring that the terminus it both delays and beckons toward will offer what we might call a lucid repose” (60-61).

However, there are two reasons why the picaresque and frame-tale’s justification of multiplied story possibilities do not necessarily transfer to mega-novels like *Mason & Dixon*. First, despite the balances these genres strike between spatial and temporal freedom, each does still bear the potential for cruft. As Ulrich Wicks notes, while picaresques’ individual episodes usually have coherent plots, as a whole they can tend toward a “Sisphus rhythm” leading nowhere (55), while frame-tales, as Bonnie Irwin points out, can similarly tend toward boring repetitiveness because they were not expected to be read from start to finish the way contemporary novels are (36-39): after all, not only were frame-tales often performed aloud (with varying faithfulness to the manuscript) rather than read privately (34-35), individual editions were cobbled together out of different manuscripts, causing stories to be added or removed from a given edition haphazardly (Gittes 146), so it did not matter as much if a given story was redundant or disconnected from the whole, because that whole tended to be “paratactic, open-ended, and unfinished” (Gittes 14). To maintain their points in a contemporary context, then, each story in a frame-tale or picaresque would both need to stand on its own as a distinct tale and serve a purpose either in the rogue’s progress or the cornice ground situation.

Second, moreover, many mega-novels, though often identified as picaresques or frame-tales, are better described as belonging to a third genre combining elements of the pair, which, though it has been long established, has been little theorized. *Mason & Dixon*, for instance, may seem at times like a picaresque, with its main section following the historical Mason’s episodic logbook chronologically across the diffuse space of a lawless border territory, but on the other hand seems also to be a frame-tale, as their story is only recounted to us decades later by
Cherrycoke, with his distillation of the duo’s chronology frequently broken up both by his own parenthetical asides and by other characters’ embedded tales. To my knowledge, this structure does not even have a generally-accepted name, though Walter Reed may have come closest when constructing a genre he called the “quixotic novel,” which, in contrast with what he perceived as the picaresque’s total anti-conventionality, dialogically engages narrative conventions to their fullest extent (71-92): certainly, he is right to name *Don Quixote* as belonging to this genre, given that book’s alternation between temporally pedestrian but spatially expansive episodic adventures and spatially static but temporally complex interpolated narratives. It would be misleading, though, to imply it was invented by Cervantes, as Homer’s *Odyssey*, after all, contains these features as well, as do many other works ranging across centuries and national borders, including Alain Lesage’s *Gil Blas*, Henry Fielding’s *Tom Jones*, and, as discussed in Chapter 3, John Barth’s *The Sot-Weed Factor.*

Due to these books’ roundabout methods of storytelling, we might call them “circumfabulations.” To adapt Cherrycoke’s description of History, a circumfabulation’s narrative might be conceived as a “great disorderly Tangle of Lines, long and short, weak and strong” (349), given its individual episodes’ freedom in both the temporal and spatial axes. Distinguishing the circumfabulation from the picaresque and frame-tale is useful, then, because its profuse narrative possibilities are designed not to prolong the hero’s life, as in the picaresque and frame-tale, but to challenge the hero—or more typically heroes, as the circumfabulation’s dialectical structure usually benefits from having two central characters—to maintain stable identities in the face of story conditions that shift constantly in both time and space. Consider, for instance, how Quixote must struggle with the cognitive dissonance caused by his vacillations between material and fantastic worlds, or how the obstacles Odysseus faces in various different
lands question his status as a man, husband, and king. Lacking either chronological or spatial stability, then, circumfabulations must rely all the more upon the protagonist’s identity-seeking process to create linearity: each individual episode, no matter how strange, can be given a point if we view it as part of the hero’s progressive admission of new perceptions into his consciousness and subsequent attempt to maintain a consistent self in light of the encounter.

Obviously, however, such freedom on both the spatial and temporal axes can tend the circumfabulation toward gratuitousness, just as with picaresque and frame-tale. Tangles, after all, often contain superfluous individual threads that merely gum up the whole to no real end, and frequently, the mega-novel circumfabulation includes threads that twist in too many directions for either protagonist or reader to attend coherently. This chapter will proceed, then, by using *Mason & Dixon* to discuss how episodic narrative pressures the consciousness’s abilities to move linearly forward, which will allow us, later in the chapter, to examine how mega-novel picaresques and frame-tales, though often lacking such reader-figuring central characters, similarly present readers with episodes lacking any apparent point, challenging them to plot out their mysterious overall structures without having their attention deadened by narrative cruft.

**The Line and the Tangle in *Mason & Dixon***

Let’s return to Zhang’s suggestions about his true identity. The realm of possibilities Zhang opens up in this passage bear significant implications for how we read the whole book, because the problem of trying to plot “too many possible stories” figures the novel’s entire central section. In surveying (i.e., plotting) the territory between Pennsylvania and Maryland, Mason and Dixon have wild, episodic encounters with settlements stretching into the interior of the prenatal United States, which, though officially belonging to either the Calverts or Penns, are ruled ambiguously in practice: what occurs is bound to no particular rules of law and order, nor
even, as Wood notes, to rationality. As is mentioned several times in the novel, the land exists in a “subjunctive” state of many possibilities. By structuring the novel’s central section this way, Pynchon allows himself to incorporate limitless variety, ranging from a castle that functions on quantum principles (410-435), to an Indian golem supposedly created by one of the lost tribes of Israel (485), to a garden of enormous produce purportedly left by a race of ancient giants (656-657)—even though, by the novel’s end, the gradual extension of European settlements and scientific progress, both furthered by Mason and Dixon’s survey, has necessarily erased many of these possibilities.

Most critics treat this erosion of possibility as a great loss, often citing Cherrycoke’s suggestion that the survey’s very linearity corrupts America, altering the land “from subjunctive to declarative, reducing Possibilities to Simplicities that serve the ends of Governments” (345). As Francis Collado Rodriguez argues, “in Mason & Dixon the term line is frequently used to suggest its pernicious and finally useless condition. Lines are continuously trespassed not only in the main story but, as we have seen, also between narratorial voices and different narrative levels” (75). Similarly, many critics endorse Zhang’s claim that the Mason-Dixon Line does violence upon the authentic spiritual power expressed by the land’s jagged natural boundaries:

Ev’rywhere else on earth, Boundaries follow Nature,— coast-lines, ridge-tops, river-banks,—so honoring the Dragon or Shan within, from which Land-Scape ever takes its form. To make a right Line upon the Earth is to inflict upon the Dragon’s very Flesh, a sword-slash, a long, perfect scar, impossible for any who live out here the year ‘round to see as other than hateful Assault. (542; see Thomas 36)
Consequently, then, many believe the Pynchon’s circumfabulating redeems the surveyors’ work by retangling the border territory. “If surveying is conceived as a process of codifying the landscape,” David Seed, for instance, writes, “Pynchon’s novel subverts its apparently straightforward representational purpose by proliferating signs and signifying systems” (96).

At the same time, however, as Zofia Kolbuszewska notes, “the subjunctive offers not only utopian possibilities but also demonic ones” (205), and we must observe that the more nonlinear plot possibilities the novel encompasses, the more it tends toward nonsense. After all, Zhang, the guru of subjunctivism, becomes “dement[ed]” and “oblivious” by the book’s conclusion (630), and Mason and Dixon are at times vulnerable to that fate as well. For instance, midway through their commission, Dixon postulates that “something invisible’s going on” and that the pair are “being us’d” to profit vested capitalist interests, to which Mason responds with these baroque speculations:

    If it were all true, — ev’ry unkind suspicion, ev’ry phantastickal rendering, — would we, knowing all, nonetheless go on? Do what’s clearly our Duty? […] Then as we’ve no choice, I may speak freely and share with you some of my darker sentiments. Suppose Maskelyne’s a French Spy. Suppose a secret force of Jesuits, receives each Day a summary of Observations made at Greenwich, and transcalculates it according to a system known to the Kabbalists of the Second Century as *Gematria*, whereby Messages may be extracted from lines of Text sacred and otherwise, a Knowledge preserv’d by various Custodians over the centuries, and since the Last, possess’d by Jesuit and Freemason alike. The Dispute over Bradley’s Obs, then, as over Flamsteed’s before him, would keep ever as their unspoken intention that the Numbers nocturnally obtain’d be set side
by side, and arrang’d into Lines, like those of a Text, manipulated till a Message be reveal’d. (478-479)

Like Zhang’s hypotheses, none of these paranoid allegations is ever corroborated elsewhere: they are, in Mason’s words, “Drivel, of course” (479) (see also Ch. 5). However, their sheer abundance has a paralyzing impact, as not only is the plot Mason puts forward too convoluted to which to adequately respond, its implicit suggestion of infinite other ifs evacuates all of meaning. If plotting is integral to the maintenance of self, such tangles are not only incomprehensible themselves but erode Mason and Dixon’s identities in contemplating them, which is likely why the pair ask several times some version of the multivalent question, “What are we about?” (253).

If such moments demonstrate why perpetual subjunctivity is generally not a good thing, perhaps they might also suggest the benefits of linearity. After all, the Mason-Dixon Line represents not merely the destruction of natural potential, but the creation of connections between that which was previously incommensurable: while the parallel may divide North from South, creating the division that would later engender the Civil War (Greiner 81), it also unites East and West (Huehls 34-35), bringing realms as diverse as Philadelphia’s coffee houses, outlying colonial farms, and independent settlements into a sense of shared community. When Mason and Dixon begin moving West, the territory is defined by the lawless, violently anti-Indian Paxton gang that kills wantonly and without check (304); by the end of their survey, one can see the beginnings of something “already, unmistakably, American” (see 570-571). As Samuel Cohen notes, “lines are not simply to be condemned,” because they allow “[t]he possibility of connection across difference” (280). Just as measuring the parallax in the Transit of Venus brings together scientists “all over the World all day long that fifth and sixth of June, in Latin, in Chinese, in Polish, in Silence,—upon Roof-Tops and Mountain Peaks, out of Bed-
chamber windows, close together in the naked sunlight” (97), watching different communities become drawn together by the Mason-Dixon Line is among the book’s greatest pleasures. This requires, however, fidelity to the surveyors’ precise calculation of what does and does not belong on the Line. The multiplicities of “all that may yet be true” must be diminished when possibilities are converted to reality, but the ranks of the realized will remain forever empty if one does not eliminate nonsensical or incompatible possibilities: one cannot subjunctively have one’s cake while indicatively eating it, too.

What to make, then, of all the quirky, digressive episodes and shadow stories encountered along the way? Are they beneficial for allowing us to imagine alternate worlds, or merely cruft that threatens the maintenance of consciousness? Interestingly, many of Wood’s examples share a certain indeterminate value for the characters, because as the Line progresses they become partly “disnarrated,” Gerald Prince’s term for when events “do not happen, but, nonetheless, are referred to” (2). For instance, Mason implicitly begins to doubt the existence of Chapter 3’s talking Learnèd English Dog when a similar-looking Norwich Terrier refuses to speak to him later (644), while the French chef Armand Allègre loses faith in his miraculously animated mechanical duck, who spends so much time invisibly flying into the western frontier as to fade into myth (666-669). To plot one’s experiences into a narrative that can sustain consciousness, after all, requires coherence between them, and since the advance of the Age of Reason is finally not compatible with talking dogs and flying robotic ducks, these stories must eventually be erased. However, because the world’s ideas about what may and may not be resolved into a scientific worldview are being so massively revised during the time the novel is set, this is not immediately clear: after all, Prof. Voam’s electric eel Felipe, at first, appears every bit as supernaturally marvelous to Mason and Dixon as does Allègre’s duck. How to decide what
may be plotted cogently and what must be cast away as nonsense, then, vexes the surveyors to
the ends of their lives, with Dixon maintaining a heterotopic but somewhat incoherent
perspective in which scientific calculations can coexist with incompatible theories about hollow-
earth underground civilizations (739-741) and Mason dying while attempting to devise “a great
single Engine, the size of a Continent” that will plot all the wonders of existence without
contradiction (772).

Similar decisions must be made by the audiences for Mason and Dixon’s narrative, which
includes not only Mason & Dixon’s readers but also Cherrycoke’s audience and even
Cherrycoke himself. The stories may seem equally amusing and preposterous as they happen,
but they accrete meaning differently: some become indispensable to characters within the
narrative (and to readers outside it), while others are easily disposed. Which of the novel’s many
fanciful-sounding stories have resonance for America’s future, like Mr. Everybeet’s search for
the semi-mystical Oölite ore that will later be mined for munitions (547)? Which end up being
nonsense but attract motivating emotional interest nonetheless, like Allègre’s duck (371-381)?
Which are merely gratuitous, like the Scandanavian ax-man Stig’s yarn about a nation of albinos
living north of Sweden (612-613)? The answers only become clear after we have progressed
through the whole novel, by which time these possibilities must be whittled down from all those
that may be imagined to all those that may be held together in a plot. Even the subjunctivist
Cherrycoke realizes this principle upon reviewing for his audience his Day-Book speculations
regarding the infamous Black Hole of Calcutta. Though he had imagined for himself in detail
the various difficult ways one might survive such an experience, as “one might either transcend it
spiritually, or eroticize it carnally,” his elaborations are abruptly interrupted by the narrator’s
parenthetical disnarration, “(Tho’ he does not of course read any of this aloud,— choosing rather
to skim ahead to the Moral.)” (152-153). Some possibilities, after all, whether because they are too painful or too perverse, are simply cannot be considered for long by a sane mind.

Yet imagining counterfactual possibilities is often all that propels consciousness onward, as may be best seen in the ambiguous coda to the novel’s climax. Upon returning east, Mason and Dixon may have become convinced that, due to the Line’s conduciveness to colonization, it is a “conduit for Evil,” (701), but the narrator’s recounting of a “more hopefu[l],” counterfactual version of their journey in Chapter 73 is somewhat at odds with this view, because instead of destroying the Line, it imagines its complete extension toward Ohio, the West Coast, and around the world (706-713). The possibility of new discoveries, after all, is what has always driven not only the scientific but the social and political mind to venture forward. However, while these unexamined possibilities might be conceived as coexisting *if*s, they can only be pursued as linear *then*s— *if* we followed this path, *then* we might discover that, etc. That is why this passage, despite being little more than a collection of nearly arbitrary stories—an encounter with a half-breed sidekick named Vongolli, a visit with a tribe that worships the newly-discovered planet Uranus, etc.—is so touching and yet so melancholy. Necessarily propelled by Mason and Dixon’s desire to keep discovering more of that which may exist, the Line must eventually run out of space, all possibilities finally validated or excised. The pair’s minds have linearly resolved all they have encountered, but there is nowhere else for them to proceed. That is why all that is left, in this alternate plotline, for Mason and Dixon is to retire as mid-Atlantic ferrymen, unable to settle upon exactly where in such a various and yet fully-mapped world they belong, but they know that they have no choice but to try to determine the answer by navigating upon their line.
The Useless Room: The Frame-Tale and *Life A User’s Manual*

Hopefully, this illustrates plotting’s stakes for the conscious self, especially regarding how it must deal with cruft. We may now move our focus to the mega-novel picaresque and frame-tale, which can experiment with cruft significantly more than can the circumfabulation. After all, since these genres derive some narrative stability from their respective cornice and chronology, they are able to remove their central narrative voice without falling below the threshold of narratability. However, in doing so, the point of the narrative may frequently vanish, causing certain episodes to appear excessive. Consequently, readers encounter numerous mini- or pseudo-narratives that seem to require plotting but are too bizarre or disjointed to allow it. Such episodes recall Brooks’s famous claim that in all narrative, the reader plays the role of detective, deducing *fabula* from the clues within *sžujet* (23-29), as these mega-novels implicitly ask readers to puzzle out whether these stories may be plotted at all. The mega-novel reader, then, must learn to sort out the plottable events from those that suggest either too few or too many possible plots to be understood.

The frame-tale mega-novel might be well exemplified by Georges Perec’s Oulipo masterpiece *Life A User’s Manual*. As with the frame-tales of Boccaccio and his imitators, which are not labeled as singular works but as groups of “novellas,” Perec’s book is subtitled *Romans* (“novels”) rather than *Roman* (“a novel”) (Burgelin 173-174). Also like the *Decameron*, *Life A User’s Manual* is programmatically divided into a ten-by-ten structure, though where Boccaccio gave each of ten storytellers ten days in which to spin a fiction, Perec creates a ten-story apartment building at 11 Rue Simon Crubellier with ten rooms on each floor (counting the staircase as two), each of which is the focus of one’s chapter’s story. As if to further establish its debt to the tradition of Shahrazad, the book’s voluminous index
alphabetically labels the book’s stories as if they were entries in *Thousand and One Nights* (e.g. “The Puzzle-Maker’s Tale,” “The Tale of the Actor who faked his own death”) (649-653), and like that work, the actual number of chapters just misses a round decimal number: since Perec intentionally skips the left-most room of the cellar, only ninety-nine rooms are the subjects of stories.¹⁹

However, unlike in the classic frame-tales, *Life A User’s Manual* has no explicit, dramatized storyteller whose personal situation gives the tales a point, so consequently, the book’s only cornice is the literal one atop the building. There is a narrator of a sort, but we learn little about him directly (see Magné, *Perecollages* 63-98) except through the Preamble, a sly three-page essay on the relationship between the makers and solvers of jigsaw puzzles. The narrator hints at his purposes by noting that “despite appearances, puzzling is not a solitary game: every move the puzzler makes, the puzzle-maker has made before” (xviii), and we might infer that if constructing a book like *Life A User’s Manual* is like creating a jigsaw puzzle, the narrator’s motivation may be his desire for this intimate relationship. Such an urge, however, is less clearly purposeful than that expressed by either Shahrazad or Boccaccio’s aristocrats: at a given moment, after all, the puzzle-maker’s intentions might be loving or hostile, cooperative or antagonistic, evident or ambiguous. In fact, the Preamble notes that the puzzle-maker’s guidance to the puzzler must be interspersed with “falsified elements, carrying false information,” perhaps in the form of pieces that appear to fit in one part of the puzzle but belong somewhere else entirely (xvii-xviii). When we add that the satisfying closure achieved by a puzzle’s completion is far neater and more exact than the resolution of even the tidiest fiction,²⁰ it should be clear how *Life A User’s Manual*’s stories have the potential to generate cruft.
Chapter 4, describing the outer room of the fourth-floor-right apartment, is a good early example of this phenomenon. In later chapters, we learn that this flat is inhabited by the record producers Caroline and Phillipe Marquiseaux, who have inherited it only after the death of the former’s miserable mother and who are currently having sex in the inner room’s shower while two musicians await them in the middle room (152-155, 205-209). Chapter 4 tells us nothing about any of this, though. Instead, it merely comprises—

An empty drawing room on the fourth floor right.

On the floor there is a woven sisal mat, its strands entwined in such a way as to form star-shaped designs.

On the wall, an imitation of Jouy cretonne wallpaper depicts big sailing ships, Portuguese four-masters, armed with cannon and culverins, making ready to put into a harbour; the headsails and spankers billow in the wind; sailors have climbed up the rigging to clew up the others.

There are four paintings on the wall.

—followed by descriptions of the paintings (a still life, a cityscape, a mythic beast, and an English narrative painting) (15-18). As with many similar descriptions in the book, they have little apparent connection to the rest of the narrative. Given the book’s all-but-explicit self-identification as a frame-tale, not to mention the frequent critical valorization of the novel’s richness of storytelling (see Schwartz 98), this chapter’s has puzzlingly low narrativity. Similar chapters occur throughout the book, notably including the scenes on the staircase, such as Chapter 68’s list of things dropped there over the years (369-371), which Myoung-Sook Kim has termed narrative “black holes” (59-64). As a result, no less a lover of baroque frame-tales than Barth wondered whether the whole thing was an indulgent exercise in style (Final 116). As one
initial reviewer complained, “by withdrawing himself from his creation, has the creator not left it empty?” (qtd. in Bellos 647).

The enigma posed by these useless rooms becomes especially important when we consider that uselessness is itself central to the novel’s most prominent storyline, about the building’s British millionaire Percival Bartlebooth. Even more than the narrator, Bartlebooth lacks clear motivation: unlike the heroes of most frame-tales, he is not under any spatial restriction, because he has inherited an enormous fortune from his great-uncle James Sherwood that not only satisfies all his material needs but allows him to travel anywhere he likes. Though for Bouvard and Pécuchet such a windfall meant an opportunity to retire to the country, Bartlebooth finds he needs something more substantial, and yet less purposeful, to motivate him. “[I]n the face of the inextricable incoherence of things,” the narrator tells us, “Bartlebooth resolved one day that his whole life would be organised around a single project, an arbitrarily constrained programme with no purpose outside its own completion” (133), one which would be “useless […] a series of events which when concatenated would nullify each other” (134). This program develops into is a fifty-year plan involving several of the building’s other residents, in which Bartlebooth spends the first ten learning to paint watercolors with Serge Valène; the next twenty painting five hundred seascapes in locations around the world, which are sent to puzzle-maker Gaspard Winckler to be converted into jigsaws; and the last twenty reassembling the puzzles in his apartment, after which they are chemically restored and sent back to their place of composition to be dissolved. Lacking intrinsic purpose, in other words, Bartlebooth decides to plot the rest of his life so that each of his actions is directly negated by another, rendering his entire existence useless.
Ironically, the relationships Bartlebooth forms with those whom he has enlisted in his scheme, most obviously Winckler, end up motivating many of the book’s tales. As Paul Schwartz points out, “the gratuitous perfection envisioned by Bartlebooth” is not possible in “a universe obsessed with traces” (87). However, the questions about uselessness he raises become more interesting when considered in light of those chapters, like the one about Marquiseaux’s outer drawing room, whose tales have nothing to do with it. How useless must a room be, after all, when it does not even relate to a plot about uselessness? Such chapters may be Perec’s best attempt to realize a thought experiment he posed in his reflective essay *Espèces d’espaces* about the possibility of a truly useless room—not a spare room, a junk room, or an all-purpose room, but one with absolutely no purpose at all. He imagines many rooms that asymptotically approach this condition, like “a room reserved to listening to Haydn’s Symphony Number 8 in C […] , another devoted to reading the barometer or to cleaning my right big toe […] a room without either doors or windows” and so on, but finds that “Language itself, seemingly, proved unsuited to describing this nothing, this void, as if we could only speak of what is full, useful, and functional” (33-35).

*Life A User’s Manual* attempts to achieve this goal by generating each room out of an elaborate Oulipean constraint system. As displayed by the novel’s *Cahier des charges*, Perec prepared the book by developing forty-two themed lists of ten elements (e.g., fabrics, colors, nationalities, furniture, famous authors), from each of which one element would be incorporated into every chapter. Though Perec rarely managed to include of all his intended constraints, the strategy still gives much of the book’s narrative a nearly arbitrary quality, which is likely what provokes the conflicting suggestions from the book’s critics that the novel is devoted to purely mimetic descriptivism (Motte 68-83) and that its self-conscious construction renders it “an
emphatically anti-mimetic text” (P. Harris 56). For instance, if we return to the paintings in the Marquiseaux drawing room, we may see that the fourth is generated almost automatically out of a score of near-comically disjunctive constraint elements: the painting, a reproduction by the British painter Forbes, depicts an outlandish 19th-century scene in which a white-leather-uniformed domestic who is climbing a Chinese-style chair accidentally smashes an alabaster jeweled egg (one he had spent much time repairing) that is owned by his mistress, an old lady, with whom he had developed a late-life romance (à la Philemon and Baucis), believing it to be a rat hidden behind the muslin curtain (alluding to Hamlet).

This capricious construction not only makes some chapters appear pointless, but makes it difficult to plot larger narratives between chapters. While the flats of any urban apartment building often might as well be on different planets for all that their inhabitants have to do with each other, in Life a User’s Manual, even chapters set in different rooms of the same apartment sometimes have no apparent connection. This is furthered by the “Knight’s Tour” structure Perec planned for the novel, in which the chapters are not sequenced by the flats’ horizontal or vertical order in the building but by how a knight chess-piece would visit each in turn, constantly breaking readers’ attention on what is going on in each apartment and obscuring how its rooms might be related. For instance, the apartment directly below the Marquiseaux’—justly labeled a “ghost flat” (525), since no one has ever seen its purported owner, M. Foureau (15)—is represented by three chapters, respectively the twenty-ninth, ninety-second, and third, which have no apparent relation to each other. In the outermost room, two unidentified young girls recover from a party, with most of the chapter devoted to a list of uncleaned junk that tells no story and seems largely designed to satisfy constraints (e.g., “several odd shoes, a long white sock, a pair of tights, a top hat, a false nose, cardboard plates in piles,” and so on for two and a
half pages) (148-151); the middle room contains little besides twenty-one wall engravings apparently filling a similar purpose (525-527); and the inner room features an unusual scene in which a Japanese pseudo-guru initiates three victims into an elaborate pyramid scheme called “The Three Free Men” (12-14), the potential interest of which is largely counterbalanced by its utter opacity. How these men got into the apartment, whether either the girls or initiates are related to Foureau, or if any of these people are aware of the others’ presence goes unmentioned. These chapters decidedly resist plotting.

However, despite such apparently pointless tales as these, it is not quite right to argue, as Gabriel Josipovici does, that in Life A User’s Manual “time and chance […] emerge with the force they have in life but which the traditional novel, committed as it is to a metaphysic of destiny and revelation, is never able to convey” (191). Though the constraint system does give much of the book the air of chance, many of its other stories are plotted with flourishes so sensational as to match the most melodramatic novel. Consider the tragedy of Elizabeth de Beaumont, who runs away from home, takes a job as an au pair, flees upon accidentally drowning the child she has been asked to watch (causing his mother to commit suicide), and is later tracked down and killed by the child’s father, though not until after she has fallen in love with François Breidel and borne him two daughters—a sequence later reconstructed by the vengeful husband and then re-reconstructed by Madame de Beaumont’s lawyer Léon Salini (156-173). Can such a story really be construed as contributing to an anti-teleological narrative? In fact, one key element of the Bartlebooth plot, the swindle that two con men perform on his uncle Sherwood, succeeds only because Sherwood believes that the discovery of a valuable manuscript and the “lucky” sighting of the possessor of a legendary vase by an Massachusetts workman are related only by “time and chance,” when in fact they have been set up by the
swindlers (94-109). *Life a User’s Manual* is a book, after all, that begins by telling us that Gaspard Winckler “is dead, but the long and meticulous, patiently laid plot of his revenge is not finished yet” (6) and ends with that devious plot being realized when Bartlebooth dies holding a single W-shaped piece for an X-shaped hole in one of his final puzzles (565): its plot cannot be construed as lacking destiny and fate.

What does one make of this set of tales, then, in which some episodes are intricately plotted, some are autonomous but interesting on their own, and some seem simply useless? Well, for one, as with much cruft we have discussed, many episodes that at first appear wasteful end up having some importance. For instance, the painting of the coachman is revealed, sixty-two chapters later, to have been given to the Marquiseaux as a wedding present by the antique dealers Clara and Léon Marcia; furthermore, it is suggested that its morbidly Gothic narrative sheds light upon their attitude toward Caroline Marquiseaux, who had rejected their son David before marrying Phillipe (366-367). What had seemed a detail expressing life’s randomness, then, turns out to be relevant to the rest of the narrative: it only appears random because Perec’s chapter structure challenges his readers’ ability to remember and plot it. This attention-straining strategy even impacts how we plot together scenes that do not appear individually pointless: for instance, when we first visit the Réol apartment in Chapter 12, we see a merry middle-class family cleaning their dining room furniture, forming a sharp contrast to what we hear of the life the prior working-class tenant, Mme. Hourcade (46-47), a scene that may easily be forgotten by the time we return in Chapter 98 and learn of the years of financial strain their furniture caused them (550-560).

Plotting such stories against the grain of the Knight’s Tour structure is made even more difficult by how so much of the book’s narrative does not have similar hidden significance. For
instance, none of the Marquiseaux’ other three paintings from Chapter 4 appears to have a meaningful story behind it the way that *A Rat Behind the Arras* does, nor do the score of pages of antique junk housed in the Marcias’ private and shop rooms (116-120, 173-175, 359-367, 393-395, 518-519). We can try to plot them, but doing so would either be totally fruitless or would generate so many uncorroborated shadow stories that we would never continue on with the book. This problem is faced in exemplary form within the novel by Cinoc, the building’s dictionary employee, who is responsible for pruning from the dictionary those obsolete terms no longer in use. While mourning the “hundreds and thousands of tools, techniques, customs, beliefs, sayings, dishes, games, nicknames, weights and measures” that he feels responsible for eliminating, Cinoc decides to restore eight thousand of them in a “dictionary of forgotten words,” but soon realizes that, no matter how mysteriously alluring they are, these words—“ursuline,” “loquis,” “russon”—only “contain, obscurely, the trace of a story it has now become almost impossible to hand on” (327-329). Whatever tale might have been behind them once can no longer be plotted, and so they must be abandoned.

Determining when these “traces” may be expanded into plots and when they cannot, of course, is not a simple process. As Bernard Magné notes, the most important tool in distinguishing the cruft from the plottable material, is the Index, which tags and cross-references the book’s proper names and other key terms so that we may more easily make connections (“Index” 88). If we wonder during Chapter 4, for instance, whether *A Rat Behind the Arras* will be mentioned again, or for that matter cannot recall in Chapter 66 whether it had been previously mentioned, we need only look up “FORBES (Stanhope Alexander), English painter” in the Index (593). Just as importantly, the Index can help us decide what stories cannot be plotted: for instance, of the twenty-seven items listed as having been left on the stairs in Chapter 68, the
Index only marks further cross-references for one, the empty blueberry tart box from *Aux Délices de Louis XV*, which the Index helps us discover was the longtime workplace of Mme. Crespi and a favorite eatery of Winckler’s (31, 458, 576). Similarly, the Table of Contents and Floor Plan facilitates connecting stories from the same apartment treated in separate parts of the book, while the Chronology at the book’s end helps us to create linear temporal narratives out of the chapters’ constant prolepses and analepses.

The paratexts also help reveal that many parts of the narrative do not fall neatly into either the categories of pointless cruft or useful plot, prompting us to decide how much attention we ought to spend trying to plot them. On the one hand, cruft and plottable narrative frequently appear in close proximity, as in Madame de Beaumont’s cellar, which looks like a mere collection of broken furniture and discarded papers until we discover the photos establishing the friendship between Véronique Altamont and Anne and Béatrice Breidel (413-415), which, when considered alongside their entries in the Index and Chronology, emphasizes the girls’ shared interest in plotting their family’s genealogies and histories, a key theme running through the book (202, 495-500; see also Ribaupierre). On the other, the paratexts sometimes suggest weak shadow stories that we may or may not want to develop. How much attention should we give, for instance, to the Breidel girls’ speculations on their grandmother’s dressing gown, which bears the image of a cat and a spade and keys to several cross-references in the Index (199-200)? Should we, for example, spend any time plotting a connection between Madame de Beaumont’s professorial lover Arnold Flexner, to whose thrillers about a cat burglar Anne thinks the robe alludes, and the other Ohio professor to whom the Index directs us, the Nazi chemist Wehsal (336)? Probably not, but it is a tempting coincidence—one wants to do something with it. That problem is emblematic of the one faced by all of *Life A User’s Manual*’s many collectors and
specialists: we do not lack material with which to work, but are at a loss regarding how to manage it all. The jigsaw puzzle may be an apt metaphor for the book, but if one were to design a jigsaw correlate to *Life a User’s Manual*, it would not look like those available at a store: instead, such a puzzle would contain a thousand pieces (or thousand and one, perhaps), of which only two hundred would actually connect, and those pieces that did connect would form not a rectangle but a starfish, or a giant W, or something even more irregular. To correctly solve the puzzle would entail not only linking up the pieces that fit, but staying away from those intriguingly misleading little chards that appear as if they should slide in somewhere but don’t.

Arguing against those who found *Life a User’s Manual* overstuffed yet empty, Perec’s fellow Oulipo member Italo Calvino claimed:

> Someone might object that the more the work tends toward the multiplication of possibilities, the further it departs from that unicum which is the *self* of the writer, his inner sincerity and the discovery of his own truth. But I would answer: Who are we, who is each one of us, if not a combinatoria of experiences, information, books we have read, things imagined? Each life is an encyclopedia, a library, an inventory of objects, a series of styles, and everything can be constantly shuffled and reordered in every way conceivable. (124)

Of course, the “unicum of *self*” and the messy inventory of objects are always in dialectic with one another, related by the shuffling and reordering process we alternately call consciousness or plot. Putting more objects into the inventory might give it a greater range of possibilities, but it may also impede our ability to make a self out of them. This may best be seen in Bartlebooth’s death, holding a final piece to a puzzle in which it does not quite fit. Winckler has tricked him, but whether he has done so by supplying Bartlebooth with a piece that cannot be placed or by
getting him to put the puzzle together the wrong way is not clear (see Bellos 632-635). The puzzlemaker’s revenge is not only that Bartlebooth can’t fill the hole in his puzzle; more cruelly, it is that he can never know whether or not he has completed it correctly. If the book’s narrator is a puzzle-maker and we are his puzzlers, this is an ominous place to be left, as for all our reader-detective work, it may be impossible to know if our plotting is adequate.

On the Picaresque Road to 2666

In fact, if a mega-novel’s reader plays the role of intrepid detective, then the narrator must be his nemesis, the master criminal working to obscure the story hiding behind the narrative. The original literary narrator-criminal, of course, is the pícaro, though precisely for this reason his narrative is minimally mysterious: since the criminal tells us his actions and motives so straightforwardly, there is little for readers to puzzle out. Creating a picaresque mega-novel, then, would necessitate removing the pícaro’s direct presentation of motive and plot, or indeed removing his narrative voice entirely, perhaps by closely tracing his episodic actions at a remove, without ever providing an explanation of the immediate purpose motivating each one. Such a structure might produce substantial cruft, as the pícaro’s desires would remain constantly distanced and perhaps never be brought to resolution.

This is the approach taken by Chilean-born Roberto Bolaño’s two mega-novels, The Savage Detectives and 2666. Both deal with the episodic activities of outlaws on society’s margins, the former addressing the global journeys of “visceral realist” poets Arturo Belano and Ulises Lima (modeled on Bolaño himself and his friend Mario Santiago) as they flee the repercussions of a violent encounter with a well-connected pimp in the Sonora Desert, and the latter centered on hundreds of separate, unsolved murders of women around a border city near Arizona. That both novels are set principally in late twentieth-century Mexico, where official
institutions’ practical jurisdiction dissolves quickly into a large periphery of extralegal economies, contributes to the picaresque atmosphere: as Frederick Monteser notes, the picaresque thrives in a state whose bureaucratic structure is so non-functioning that there is a “[s]urplus population, in the sense of human beings to be thrown away as useless” (118).

Perhaps this is why Bolaño’s two mega-novels also feature searches for lost literary figures, Belano and Lima’s quest for visceral realism’s spiritual godmother Cesàrea Tinajero and several European professors’ attempt to track the mysterious German novelist Benno von Archimboldi, as the contemporary world does not seem to have much of a use for them, either.

That lack of purpose contributes to a proliferation of cruft in the novels. Though Javier Cercas is correct to distinguish Bolaño from some other great Latin American writers by noting that he “was never a hermetic or difficult author […] busy with autophagic experimentalism,” his subsequent claim that Bolaño was “a compulsively legible narrator, an immediately cordial, captivating, and endless storyteller” (qted. in Medina 551-552) is mistaken. As we have discussed, non-standard prose is not the only text that poses challenges to reading: when large parts of a text lack apparent purpose, no matter how straightforward their sentences might be, they can quickly become difficult to focus on. In the central sections of Bolaño’s mega-novels, we encounter dozens of distinct episodes, but they are narrated only by faceless investigators seeking something that they never quite find for purposes that they never quite explain while running into numerous dead ends along the way. In a given episode, it is often difficult to know precisely what the point is supposed to be, and even in retrospect, it can be either difficult or impossible to establish the story’s function in the overall novel.

*The Savage Detectives*’ link to the traditional picaresque is probably the closer of the two, and as such it generates less cruft. Its first hundred and forty pages, set in 1975-1976, do have
a dramatized narrator, Juan García Madero, and though he is a relatively well-off law student rather than a classic *picaro*, his diary entries evoke the picaresque’s chronological, autobiographical nature, especially when his involvement with the visceral realists brings him into contact with the Mexico City underworld and eventually causes him to flee from the pimp Alberto along with Belano, Lima, and a prostitute named Lupe. However, this relatively conventional plot cuts off as soon as the visceral realists drive to the desert in their Chevy Impala. The ensuing four hundred pages track them not through a chronological narrative but instead present interviews conducted by unnamed detectives over the following twenty years with Belano and Lima’s friends and associates. As such, though most passages recount episodes in Belano and Lima’s travels on society’s margins, they only do so at a distance: the subjects describe occasional encounters with the pair without being able to regularly pinpoint their whereabouts or understand their motivations, sometimes making the episodes seem aimless. Some, like English student Mary Watson’s story of her hitchhiking trip through France, meander for many pages before eventually discovering Belano or Lima (253-269), and others don’t involve Belano or Lima at all, but only figures peripheral to their circle, as with Luis Sebastián Rosado’s stories about the tribulations of minor visceral realist Luscious Skin (see 173-177, 287-291, 366-373, 384-386). As the interviews proceed almost entirely along chronological lines, and as Belano and Lima’s long-term trajectories frequently become no clearer as a result of them, the novel can sometimes evoke Wellek and Warren’s denigration of the picaresque as merely an arbitrary “this happened and then that.”

However, the episodes rarely descend entirely into cruft. Though their functions in the larger plot are sometimes tenuous, each of the interviews does, eventually, connect back to the visceral realists’ philosophic quest. They are aided in doing so by the one exception to the
interviews’ chronological arrangement, the account of Amadeo Salvatierra, which is also the only interview spread out over the entire middle section rather than recounted in its entirety at once. Conducted in January 1976, prior to the showdown with Alberto finally recounted at the novel’s end, Salvatierra’s narrative both begins and ends the novel’s second part. In defying the otherwise linear chronology, the interview’s topic—Belano and Lima’s search for Cesàrea Tinajero—is suggested as the key to all that spirals around it and helps suggest the point of the pair’s otherwise aimless wanderings, the lack of fulfillment in their quest for poetic truth and a larger meaning to their generally marginal existence.

2666, though, takes this approach further, employing episodes so disconnected as to appear entirely pointless. This is especially true of its middle third, “The Part About the Crimes,” based on the notorious wave of “femicides” over the past two decades in Ciudad Juárez, Mexico. According to Daniel Zalewski, this section “may be the grimmest sequence in contemporary fiction,” because it provides a “sickeningly comprehensive account of the killings, written in the frigid tone of a forensic report” (88): 110 narratives, presented one by one, of female corpses discovered between 1993 and 1997 in the fictionalized border city of Santa Teresa. Their grimness may come less from the detached tone or forensic detail, grisly though its litany of crushed hyoids and vaginal bruising may be, than by the scenes’ sheer obtuseness to plotting. The description of the last murder, presented here in its entirety, might exemplify why:

The last case of 1997 was fairly similar to the second to last, except that the bag containing the body wasn’t found on the western edge of the city but on the eastern edge, by the dirt road that runs along the border and then forks and vanishes when it reaches the first mountains and steep passes. The victim, according to the medical examiners, had been dead for a long time. She was
about eighteen, five foot two and a half or three. She was naked, but a pair of
good-quality leather high heels were found in the bag, which led the police to
think she might be a whore. Some white thong panties were also found. Both this
case and the previous case were closed after three days of generally halfhearted
investigations. (632-633)

As the final sentence implies, we discover nothing more about this body, just as with dozens of
other corpses described in almost identical fashion. Though some murders have a little more
detail than this one—the victim’s name, say—for the most part, their information is little more
than differing permutations of physical attributes, crime scene locations, and causes of death,
signifying nothing. In seventy-seven cases, there is not even a chief suspect. While some do
spin out into more capacious individual narratives, whether because the police manage to solve
them (as with the case of Erica Mendoza) (509-512), or simply because they put in more effort
(as with the headline-grabbing dual kidnapping of Estefanía Rivas and Hermina Noriega) (527-
534), most of these accumulations of pointless facts cannot be plotted.

The summaries cannot even be imbued with clear purpose by being grouped under the
larger rubric of “the Santa Teresa murders.” From the very first murder, the narrator admits that
the list has no real criteria other than pure chronology. Regarding the “first” victim, Esperanza
Gómez Saldaña, we are told “Maybe for the sake of convenience, maybe because she was the
first to be killed in 1993, she heads the list. Although surely there were other girls and women
who died in 1992. Other girls and women who didn’t make it onto the list or were never found”
(353). In other words, the section title “The Part About the Crimes” is misleading, because it
implies the murders it lists are a coherently-linked group of killings, when in fact the section
simply records every violent female death discovered between 1993 and 1997. The start date
could easily have been moved back a year, or for that matter forward to 1995, when the murder rate doubles (i.e., there are twenty-eight deaths described in 1993-1994 and about twenty-eight per year in 1995-1997). It also likely misses many bodies never discovered, as highlighted by the case of Kelly Rivera Parker discussed by reporter Sergio Gonzalez and congresswoman Azucena Esquivel Plata toward the section’s end, while also including several that clearly have nothing to do with the others, as with the eccentric La Vaca, who starts a fist-fight with her two best male friends when they interrupt her movie and is accidentally killed in the process (417-419). This is not to mention the unresolved affair of the “Demon Penitent,” a man who visits several churches to urinate upon their sacred objects and occasionally attack their inhabitants (361-372), apparently unrelated to the killings but nonetheless recounted along with them. As only thirteen cases are successfully brought to conclusion by the police, and as these have so little to do with each other that they provide little insight into the remaining ninety-seven, it can be almost impossible to see what purpose each new, repetitive murder bears.

One might speculate that the episodes’ disconnectedness is unintentionally exacerbated by the fact that Bolaño was unable to finish the novel prior to his death, but the book’s editor, Ignacio Echevarría, insists that “the novel as it was left at Bolaño’s death is very nearly what he intended it to be. […] Not just the foundations but the whole edifice of the novel had already been raised” (2666 895). In other words, there is no missing, unwritten resolution, à la Charles Dickens’ The Mystery of Edwin Drood, that would have explained everything. One might also suggest that, due to the historical Mexican authorities’ lack of progress in solving the killings upon which the section is based, the narrative could not have been made any easier to plot, but the lack of a real solution to a historical mystery has rarely hampered authors from positing one in fiction: for instance, one of Bolaño’s favorite American writers, Edgar Allan Poe, offered a
solution to his era’s unsolved Mary Rogers murder in “The Mystery of Marie Roget,” and indeed there seems to be an entire subgenre of popular fiction based on the Juárez killings that generally lacks the indeterminacy of 2666. The individual murders’ strung-out parataxis, in other words, appears to be a deliberate literary choice by Bolaño.

Critics’ preferred method to render these episodes legible to plotting, of course, has been to attribute them to large-scale societal factors rather than surreptitious individual actors. Sharae Deckard exemplifies this view by claiming, “Bolaño replaces the political violence of the dictator novel with the systemic violence of millennial capitalism, staging the femicides and narcoviolence attendant on structural adjustment in post- NAFTA Mexico in relation to the ascendency of neoliberal capital after the fascist and Stalinist political cultures of World War II” (354). That several of the victims are found in dumps or trash cans literalizes how their deaths might be viewed as industrial byproducts. While the shifting global economy obviously plays some role in the murders, however, to refer to the crimes as “the maquiladora murders,” as Grant Farred does (694), is misleading. Not only are just twenty-seven of the victims current or former factory works, and only nineteen others even linked to the maquiladoras in any way, in several of the cases about which we know most, neoliberalism is clearly not the problem. For instance, fifty-year-old Felicidad Jiménez Jiménez does not seem to be a victim of global capitalism—even though she is a maquiladora worker—because her killer appears to have been her mentally disturbed son Ernesto and his motivations no more complicated than the usual domestic ones we might find in any culture (392-393).26

Similarly, while a misogynist “climate of impunity” regarding violence against women certainly contributes to the killings as well, as is argued by many of the novel’s female characters (see 607), this is not an adequate explanation either. Granted, as Yolanda Palacio, the only
member of Santa Teresa’s Department of Sex Crimes, notes, ten women are raped every day in
the city, and her division receives little support from the rest of the department (563), whose
male members seem to spend much of their time sharing uncreative misogynist jokes (552-553).
However, even Palacio admits that the murders have only raised the male-female murder victim
ratio from 10:1 to 10:4 (563): in other words, while the aforementioned 110 women listed in
“The Part About the Crimes” are being killed, a further 275 men have also suffered violent
deaths, yet receive little mention. In fact, the narrator comments that, in early 1997, “the city got
a break” because there were no violent deaths of women, only of men, which was “to be
expected”: “people who started off celebrating and ended up killing each other, uncinematic
deaths, deaths from the real of folklore, not modernity: deaths that didn’t scare anybody” (540).
If attacks on women have become disturbingly routine, it only underlines how long this had been
true for Santa Teresa’s men.

The flaws in these large-scale societal explanations illustrate the challenges to plotting
that this section poses. On the one hand, in hopes of responding to the killings as whole, they
overstate their own explanatory power, clearly attributing the wrong cause to a number of deaths.
On the other, their emphasis on cultural and ideological factors ignores evidence pointing to a
group of persons committing a significant percentage of the murders. One must not get carried
away with this idea, as the police do when, infatuated with the modus operandi of Hollywood
serial killer films, they decide the key to all the murders is the “signature” breast mutilation that
has occurred by then in only three cases (470-471). To attribute the deaths to a single twisted
psychopath might reassuringly absolve the city of larger social responsibility, but, as becomes
clear every time the police awkwardly try to pin additional murders on the suspects they arrest,
many separate actors are responsible for the killings. However, the similar methods of death and
disposal among many of the killings, not to mention the frequent presence of mysterious black sedans, suggest that some subset might well be committed by one or several of the city’s powerful criminal organizations, consciously taking advantage of elements within Santa Teresa’s culture that allow them to get away with murder.

How could we actually plot out the causes of these crimes, though, when so many of the narratives tell us only meaningless details? Perhaps, as Poe’s C. Auguste Dupin notes in analyzing the Roget case, “a vast, perhaps the larger, portion of truth arises from the seemingly irrelevant. […] The history of human knowledge has so uninterruptedly shown that to collateral, or incidental, or accidental events we are indebted for the most numerous and valuable discoveries” (752). Of course, we ignore this “collateral” material most of the time because it usually is irrelevant, and so vastly out-masses useful information as to make devoting any attention to it cognitively prohibitive. That approach, however, will often lead us to arbitrarily focus on the handful of attention-catching murders that settle most easily into our working memory, which may not be representative of the aggregate problems in Santa Teresa. What this situation may call for, instead, is to abandon close reading and to practice a more distant and shallow form of processing so that we might mine the passages for certain types of details useful to plotting the crimes as a whole. 27 We are not guaranteed clear results from such an analysis, but given our minds’ inability to simultaneously process dozens of distinct narratives at once, it is, I believe, a substantially better way to orient our attention for this part of the novel.

What does the data tell us? First, that all but three of the victims are girls or women past puberty and under the age of thirty-five, with twenty-five being sixteen or younger. Second, most of these inhabit a vulnerable societal position: of the seventy-three identified bodies, thirty-nine have low-wage hourly jobs and six more are sex workers. Third, except for the two
murders committed in public, there are no independent witnesses to any of the murders, and except for ten found in their homes, the bodies are dumped in public but secluded areas, most often by the side of a road (twenty-nine) or in an industrial or waste area (sixteen). Fourth, at least forty-eight victims show signs of rape, and six victims’ are breasts mutilated in a consistent pattern. Fifth, though the causes of death are sometimes ambiguous, thirty-nine appear to have been strangled, thirty-three stabbed, fifteen shot, and seven beaten, with the strangling and stabbing victims several times more likely to have been raped than the others. Lastly, ten cases report sightings of expensive and otherwise mysterious black sedans near the last place the victims were seen.

These details are not much to go upon; in many cases, in fact, they tell us almost nothing. Based upon them, however, I believe we can make a few modest but specific conclusions. The deaths fall into roughly seven groups. Group 1 contains four deaths that are clearly not part of any larger pattern of deliberate violence toward women: La Vaca, Jiménez, Perla Beatriz Ochoteren (who hangs herself, albeit possibly in response to the killings), and Esther Perea Peña (who is shot accidentally). Group 2 contains five deaths that may be related to various underworld activities but diverge from the others in key respects, including the method of death and the demographic of the victims: reporter Isabel Urrea (shot while getting into her car), Sofia Serrano (overdosed on cocaine in a hotel), nightclub owner Marisol Camarena (dropped in a vat of acid), and the drug-running Reynolds sisters (shot near Pueblo Azul). Group 3 includes twelve domestic disputes that, though they might be related to an atmosphere of misogynist violence, appear isolated otherwise. These three groups seem largely independent of the other murders, except in the broadest sense, and if we add to their twenty-one deaths some of the nine cases in which evidence is so sparse that even whether the body was murdered is not clear (we’ll
call this Group 0), we end up with a figure approximating the twenty-seven violent female deaths that Palacio implies would have been typical in a five-year period for Santa Teresa prior to the crime wave.

Though the remaining eighty cases may be divided into three more groups, each is grounded in an overall set of shared characteristics. Generally, they involve the corpse of a socially-vulnerable young woman, found either strangled or stabbed to death, usually in a partly-obscured public area, with her body bearing signs of sexual abuse. Group 4 contains thirteen cases, which share some characteristics of the larger wave of murder-rapes but go against them in others; for instance, the lab reports may be confident that the woman had definitely not been sexually abused. Group 5 comprises twenty-six killings that, according the narrator’s summary of the official reports, share most key characteristics of the larger pattern, but lack (for reasons we will discuss in a moment) confirmation of some others. Finally, Group 6 contains forty-one murders, each of which bears all the killings’ common characteristics. Given the close match between the total number of these murders comprising Groups 4-6 and the increase in violent deaths during the period in question, it is primarily here that we probably ought to look for the influence of larger societal forces; tellingly, too, these groups also contain all ten sightings of the ominous black sedans. Furthermore, it is particularly in Groups 5 and 6 that we we ought to look for the work of a specific organization of actors perpetrating a particular kind of murder-rape among at-risk young women, given the similarity of the crimes.

These conclusions are obviously not iron-clad, especially as my categories are entirely dependent upon information supplied by a dozen different investigators who, despite the narrator’s uniform tone in summarizing their accounts, have wildly different approaches to and competence at police work. Unlike the unified vision provided by the classic picaresque, or even
the unnamed investigators of *The Savage Detectives*’ middle section, the differences in Santa Teresa’s detectives has a significant impact on the way we can process the murders. Though this is never explicitly stated in the text, distant reading makes clear that the better the investigator assigned to the case, the more plottable is the evidence is produced by it. For instance, Epifanio Galindo, among the police force’s most effective and least corrupt members, manages to collect and put together enough evidence to successfully close several cases, though his zeal to plot connections out of his leads him to some unsound conclusions, as when he wrongly pins several unsolved murders on Klaus Haas. Other investigators range in ability from the talented Juan de Dios Martínez to the inept Ángel Fernández and José Marquez, the former of whose case reports often fail to recount vital evidence and the latter of whom rarely even manages to bring in a suspect. Consequently, the cases investigated by the better detectives are more likely to fit into Group 1 or 3 (most of which are solved), implying that some number of the Group 4-6 murders (almost none of which are solved) might be classified elsewhere were their investigators more adept at their jobs. In other words, we should not assume limited evidence implies a shadowy conspiracy especially skilled in covering its tracks: some of the Group 6 deaths might easily be mundane killings that, due to chance or incompetence, simply produced few traces. Alternately, some of the Group 3 cases might’ve been wrongly closed to protect the criminal acquaintances of corrupt officials.

However, even if this process only takes us so far, its insights do a better job plotting the otherwise impenetrable morass than most methods, including those pursued by the book’s characters. The murders themselves, after all, are not the only source of cruft in the novel: at least as much is generated by characters’ failed investigations, which is entirely understandable given how disparate are the killing and, consequently, the extent to which they resist easy pattern
recognition in working memory. Even as good an officer as Martinez gets caught up in nonsense theories not worth either his or our attention sometimes, as when he wonders at length about a victim’s discarded clothes: “[It was a]s if the killers had removed the victim’s pants before tossing her in the bushes. Or as if they had brought her up there naked, with her pants in a bag, and later discarded the pants a few yards from the body. The truth is, none of it made sense” (595). The TV seer Florita Almada, meanwhile, attracts the attention of Santa Teresa’s citizens with claims that she has had visions of the murders, but her rambling television addresses (always quoted at great length) provide even less insight, as they mostly comprise oddball dietary advice and mystic treacle like this:

[...]
The consumption of vegetable fiber, even though it doesn’t provide us with usable energy-producing elements, is beneficial. When it isn’t absorbed, the fiber causes the bolus, in its passage through the digestive tract, to retain its volume. And that causes pressure to be generated inside the intestine, which stimulates intestinal activity, assuring the easy passage of waste through the whole digestive tract. Diarrhea is hardly ever a good thing, but going to the bathroom once or twice a day brings serenity and balance, a kind of inner peace. Not great inner peace, why exaggerate, but a small and shining inner peace. What a different between vegetable fiber and iron and what they represent! Vegetable fiber is the food of herbivores and it’s small and provides us not with nourishment but with peace the size of a jumping bean. Iron, in contrast, represents harshness in our treatment of others and ourselves, harshness in its most extreme form. [...](457)

Even the lengthy retracings made late in this section by the renowned American criminologist Albert Kessler, though set up to produce expectations of some resolution, end up going nowhere
That also appears, at first, to be the fate of Harry Magaña, arrived from Huntsville, Arizona to investigate the death of American Lucy Anne Sander, who follows his few leads in circles around Mexico for several pages without getting results, though this apparent pointlessness comes to an end when he stumbles onto the last person to see Sander attempting to dispose of a body, at which point he is surrounded by other men and likely killed (438-449). His narrative suddenly appears to be more meaningful than Kessler’s or Almada’s, but it is promptly cut off before it can help us connect the plot together.

These attempts fail because the characters try to close-read cruft that, like the words of Cinoc’s dictionary, only suggests the barest traces of plot. Without skimming over them and undertaking the kind of plotting I have described, it is almost impossible to define and address the problems faced in Santa Teresa, which are so dire not because there is an all-powerful criminal conspiracy controlling life and death but because there does not seem to be one—or, rather, because there is a complex network of agents behind the crimes, which may include several moderately-powerful (but not all-encompassing) criminal groups but are probably not exhausted by them. Some number of the killings may be deliberate serial murder-rapes perpetrated by one or more of Santa Teresa’s several criminal organizations; others are likely just byproducts of the city’s abundance of organized crime, whose success in the city is likely abetted by the socioeconomic changes globalization has brought to the border area; a number are probably localizable incidents, though encouraged by recent cultural changes in the city and the overall sense of police incompetence; and some are simply the violence that our species perpetrates upon itself everywhere it settles.

This cannot really be a solution to the crimes, of course, but still, I believe this plot better accounts for the stories behind the narrative than any otherwise produced by the police, the
protestors, or the book’s critics. What the cruft in “The Part About the Crimes” ought to remind us, then, is that large-scale social phenomena are always composed of small-scale individual events, and that while we must consider large-scale causes when addressing large-scale problems, many of the constituent events defy obvious plotting in terms of those large-scale causes. In fact, sometimes they defy explanation entirely, but their frequent mysteriousness cannot stop us from attempting to explain them, because sometimes they are less opaque than they may at first appear. To adequately respond to any socio-political trends of this magnitude, then, requires a mode of cognition capable of addressing them at a resolution less zoomed-in than that which their individual narratives’ affective nature will tend to invite.

As may be implied by the convergence of characters from around the world on Santa Teresa in the novel’s other parts—the European literary critics, the American journalist Oscar Fate, and Archimboldi—Santa Teresa condition’s is increasingly characteristic of the contemporary world, less because it is especially violent (global violence, after all, continues to trend historically downward) than because it presents us with an enormous amount of narrative that resists straightforward processing. All of these characters, after all, encounter a tangled mess in Santa Teresa out of which they need to extricate themselves, despite the general impenetrability of their situations: Fate, for instance, must navigate himself and his acquaintances Guadalupe Roncal and Rosa Amalfitano (daughter of the literary critics’ professorial liaison Professor Amalfitano) away from the seemingly omnipresent gangsters with which his work covering a boxing match has brought him into contact, while Archimboldi, existentially unmoored since his participation in the German army during World War II, has come hoping to break through his nephew Haas’s inextricably labyrinthine legal limbo. The totality of these messy conditions is well beyond their conscious understanding, which, like all of
ours, is structured to comprehend simple, linear narrative, but they must compress and rearrange what they find as best they can to survive. Perhaps this is best expressed by two of the literary critics, Jean-Claude Pelletier and Manuel Espinoza, whose long quest to find a writer toward whose work they are inexplicably and profoundly drawn is no different in nature from the novels’ other knotty mysteries. Upon realizing they will never quite find Archimboldi, the pair conclude, “The important thing is something else entirely. […] That he’s here […] and we’re here, and this is the closest we’ll ever be to him” (158-159). Truly, “close enough” is usually about as well as we can do.

Perhaps the struggle to plot the crimes might best be understood through the narrator of “The Part About the Crimes” himself. He is not nearly so detached as critics describe him: as some of the quotes above show, he is by turns critical of the police efforts and bemused with them, yet he is aware he can do little beyond work from what they have discovered. His efforts do make a little progress beyond theirs, noting some clues they don’t investigate and observing at which points they lose track of evidence, but he does not get very far. In fact, Echevarría tells us that Bolaño planned the narrator to be none other than his alter ego Arturo Belano (898): what better voice to make the attempt of synthesizing so many recalcitrant materials into a plotted sequence of events, yet to fail in doing so? As Roncal ambiguously tells Fate during a half-dreamed sequence in which they interview Haas in prison, “No one pays attention to these killings, but the secret of the world is hidden in them” (348). In one sense, the “secret” could have something to do with violence or with economic conditions and misogyny during globalization, but it probably has as much to do with the first half of the sentence as the second—that is, with paying attention. That so many victims have died for such variegated causes renders those attending the crimes nearly incapable of focusing on any one without doing
them injustice as a whole, and vice versa. When we ask who’s killing the women of Santa Teresa, we also must ask how we are to plot at all when there are “too many possible stories” to which to attend.
Chapter 5—The Epic and the Allegory

Slowly the poison the whole blood stream fills.
It is not the effort nor the failure tires.
The waste remains, the waste remains and kills.

It is not your system or clear sight that mills
Down small to the consequence a life requires;
Slowly the poison the whole blood stream fills.

They bled an old dog dry yet the exchange rills
Of young dog blood gave but a month’s desires.
The waste remains, the waste remains and kills.

It is the Chinese tombs and the slag hills
Usurp the soil, and not the soil retires.
Slowly the poison the whole blood stream fills.

Not to have fire is to be a skin that shrills.
The complete fire is death. From partial fires
The waste remains, the waste remains and kills.

It is the poems you have lost, the ills
From missing dates, at which the heart expires.
Slowly the poison the whole blood stream fills.
The waste remains, the waste remains and kills.

—William Empson, “Missing Dates”

The Problem of Contemporary Figural Narratives

We discussed in the last chapter James Wood’s claim that mega-novel storytelling
sometimes becomes gratuitously overrun with arbitrary stories. Wood, however, does not stop
there, but proceeds to make a more serious attack upon the very process through which mega-
novels aspire to meaning. Wood illustrates his complaint with this parody of mega-novels’
 attempts to accrete significance:

If, say, a character is introduced in London, call him Toby Awknotuby (that is,
“To be or not to be” — ha!) then we will be swiftly told that he has a twin in
Delhi (called Boyt, which is an anagram of Toby, of course), who, like Toby, has
the same very curious genital deformation, and that their mother belongs to a religious cult based, oddly enough, in the Orkney Islands, and that their father (who was born at the exact second that the bomb was dropped on Hiroshima) has been a Hell’s Angel for the last thirteen years (but a very curious Hell’s Angels group it is, devoted only to the fanatical study of late Wordsworth), and that Toby’s mad left-wing aunt was curiously struck dumb when Mrs. Thatcher was elected prime minister in 1979 and has not spoken a word since. And all this, over many pages, before poor Toby Awknotuby has done a thing, or thought a thought!

(Irresponsible 178-179)

This pastiche (which, as Wood argues, isn’t far from some of what many mega-novelists have produced) is characterized by relentless mythologizing, with the cataclysmic bombing of Hiroshima converted for literary purposes into the origin of a fictional family, the silencing of the Left during the 1980s made supernaturally literal, and several other cultural touchstones and coincidental parallels from the postwar period littered throughout. Wood implies, though, that such narratives merely play at myth: myths, after all, require an overarching integrated system in which to function, and the individual mythic connections here are so random as to be incapable even of satirizing mythos. They gesture toward the idea of a larger worldview, but do not create one. Wood exemplifies this criticism in his dismissal of Thomas Pynchon by contrasting Pynchon’s books to those of an older literary genre, claiming “his novels behave like allegories that refuse to allegorize […] they move meaning around, they displace meanings, but they do not inhabit meaning,” leading to a situation in which “there are scenes that mean too much and there are scenes that mean too little” (Broken 200-202).
This criticism threatens to undermine the biggest ideas addressed by mega-novels. In an era during which writers cannot take for granted what T. S. Eliot called a “framework of accepted and traditional ideas” (“William Blake” 278), in fact, it implies that contemporary fiction may not be capable of embedding large-scale concepts into narrative at all, and that any obvious figural narratives—ones in which, for instance, political occurrences can have mystical correlative effects upon individuals and coincidental likenesses communicate trenchant symbolic connections—become inherently ridiculous. After all, if we agree that Toby Awknotuby’s father’s birth at the exact moment of the Hiroshima explosion is a pseudo-mythic overreach, how can we say any differently about the birth of Saleem Sinai in Salman Rushdie’s *Midnight’s Children* at the exact moment of Indian independence, prompting his epic claim to embody the Indian nation? Similarly, if having Toby’s aunt being struck mute upon Thatcher’s election is a transparently silly metaphor, why should Toru Okada’s receipt of a blue mark upon his cheek when afflicted with the psychic malady plaguing postwar Japan in Haruki Murakami’s *The Wind-Up Bird Chronicle* be any less so? And if twinning the fates of the British and Indian nations through Toby and Boyt’s shared genital deformation is strained and unconvincing, isn’t Don DeLillo’s attempt to intertwine white and black America in *Underworld* via Nick Shay and Cotter Martin’s mutual attachment to the Bobby Thomson home run ball similarly empty?

To address these questions, we will need to look at mega-novels’ relationship to the two oldest and most venerated genres of figural narrative, the allegory and the epic, to examine how these forms create semic structures to which more recent fiction seems less suited. Due their shared figural nature, in fact, allegory and epic’s definitions have long overlapped, which may also be because the epic, going back to Plato, has been traditionally considered a formal mode or genre (Genette, *Architext* 12), while allegory often instead suggests a mode of interpretation, the
“meanings ascribed to or discovered in a text, without (it has been supposed until quite recently) regard to considerations of literary form” (Treip 4). As such, the terms may often be used with respect to the same works: in fact, epics have been read allegorically for millennia (Treip 55), even predating the writing of any full-scale narratives intended to be allegories (Quilligan 19). Hopefully this overlap will help justify, in the absence of a fully systematic treatment of many centuries’ worth of writing on these genres, the somewhat ambitious approach this chapter will take. In light of the profound challenges to cognition posed by seismic shifts in world culture since World War II, I argue that allegory and epic essentially merge in the contemporary mega-novel, producing a volatile hybrid whose resulting abundance of both signification and cruft pressures to its greatest extent our ability to imagine ourselves with respect to the contemporary nation and world. To see why, however, will require us to examine the nature of these genres and how the postwar mega-novel diverges from them.

**Allegory, Epic, Metanarrative, and Paranoia**

As I mentioned, the allegory and the epic are united by their shared use of figural narrative systems. As Gary Johnson has noted, allegory is primarily distinguished from other major figures like metaphor and simile by its emphasis on narrative (6), while epic may be distinguished from other narrative forms through the figurativeness of its central characters and events, as suggested by Georg Lukács’s argument that “The epic hero is, strictly speaking, never an individual. It is traditionally thought that one of the essential characteristics of the epic is the fact that its theme is not a personal destiny but the destiny of a community” (66). These figural narratives tend to be explicitly mythic in their engagement with culture: according to Edwin Honig, in fact, allegory is based in “an earlier mythic fusion of belief with worship embracing fundamental ideals and customs upon which the structure of society depends” (21), while
Frederick Turner claims that epics “gather the scattered myths, legends, and fairy tales into a coherent architechtonics” (212). This systematicity, consequently, allows them to gesture toward the universal: Deborah Madsen argues that in allegory “Narrative truth and absolute truth are conflated in the same quasi-transcendental source of legitimation that is invoked for both culture and society” (3), while Lukács adds that “the epic answers the question: how can life be essential?” (35) by asserting a “transcendental structure” that provides its readers with a metaphysical “home” (40-41).

Similarly, both epic and allegorical texts access this figural-narrative fusion via rifts in temporality that the contemporary novel, grounded in homogenous time (see B. Anderson 24-26), generally does not allow. As Mikhail Bakhtin notes, though the epic is narrated as if historical, it is really set in an “absolute past” (Dialogic 15), and allegories tend to begin with a dreamy excursus from their specific historical moments toward a timeless environment (Honig 68-81). Upon entering this suspended temporal space, both focus on generative moments of traumatic conflict, with Angus Fletcher claiming allegory’s action is a dramatized “battle” that “turns out always to be a conflict of ideas and ideals” (Allegory 157), while Turner notes that “[every] epic quest involves a great battle, which is either the climactic episode of the work or its entire substance,” containing in its result implications for “world consciousness” (117). The mixing of temporal modes to depict figural conflict, of course, recalls Claude Lévi-Strauss’s definition of myth as “both a sequence belonging to the past […] and a timeless pattern which can be detected in the contemporary” (430). We should also note that these narratives have the potential to be drawn out to substantial scale, observed in epic as early as Aristotle (59b)² and as true, though less obviously, in allegory: as Fletcher notes, even though many individual
allegories are short, because an allegorical system might be expanded to cover anything, “the typical allegory threatens never to end […] it has no inherent limit” (*Allegory* 367).

If the two are to be distinguished, it is by the type of schemata by which readers are supposed to process their personal relationships to the work’s large-scale concepts. Readers are supposed to understand epics as expressing a tangible national narrative—the “absolute past” to which Bakhtin refers is a “national epic past” (*Dialogic* 13; emphasis mine)—while readers are supposed to conceive allegory as expressing a supranational and supernatural theo-philosophic system like Christianity. As a result, the epic leans toward the exemplary rather than hermeneutic: when Philip Sidney, for instance, praises Virgil’s Aeneas, he claims not that the Trojan signifies Virtue but asks, “Who readeth Aeneas carrying old Anchises on his back, that wisheth not it were his fortune to perform so excellent an act?” (145). Allegory, on the other hand, in Fletcher’s straightforward definition, is text that “says one thing and means another” (*Allegory* 2), requiring the reader to interpret a deeper meaning that is not literally stated. The overall difference in the way the two are supposed to be read might be well expressed by contrasting Theodore Steinberg’s claim that the epic is “a narrative that focuses simultaneously on the lives of its characters and on a pivotal moment in the history of a community” (29), with Maureen Quilligan’s argument that reading an allegory is always about accessing the “pretext […] the source that always stands outside the narrative […] the text that the narrative comments on by reenacting” (97-98).

Such figural narrative systems are powerful cognitive aids for conceiving one’s place within an otherwise unimaginably vast and varied world. As Mark Turner points out, the “The projection of one story onto another […] is a fundamental instrument of the mind” (5), noting how allegorical narratives aid us in understanding complicated social and psychological events.
like “homecoming” or “journey of the soul” by blending simpler events and spatializing them (35, 44). Essentially, they provide us with scripts that ground the overwhelming and unassimilable particularities of individual experience into a larger framework. Furthermore, as Benedict Anderson’s *Imagined Communities* shows, among the most powerful of such projectable stories has always been the national narrative, of which the epic is the most prominent example, as it encourages cooperation and moral behavior by spatializing a shared humanity onto physical space. As Anderson put it, “In an age when it is so common for progressive, cosmopolitan intellectuals (particularly in Europe?) to insists on the near-pathological character of nationalism […] it is useful to remind ourselves that nations inspire love, and often profoundly self-sacrificing love” (141). Without national narratives, everyone outside an individual’s local kinship network might seem an irreducibly alien being; with them, empathy and communication become more possible.

However, poststructuralist theory has often argued against the use of such large-scale conceptual systems. Since Jean-François Lyotard defined postmodernity as “incredulity toward metanarratives”—the latter term defined as any all-encompassing “discourse of legitimation” (xxiii-xxiv), among which he explicitly includes epic and allegory as examples (27-29)—many have joined his critique of the potential “totalitarian effect” of such “unitary and totalizing truth” (12-13). Frederick Turner, in fact, attributes the “relative absence of serious literary critical attention to epic as a world literary genre for at least the last sixty years” to this very attitude that epic is “the grand narrative of oppression, essentialism, and the marginalization of the subaltern” (3-4). Similar criticisms regarding allegory’s alleged dogmatism go back even further, at least to Samuel Coleridge calling it “a translation of abstract notions into a picture-language which is
itself nothing but an abstraction from objects of the senses; the principle being more worthless even than its phantom proxy, both alike unsubstantial, and the former shapeless to boot” (437).

Consequently, epic or allegoric elements in narrative are often only accepted by contemporary criticism when they are construed as subverting the transcendent concepts traditionally associated with those genres. For instance, when allegory was revived by deconstructionists like Paul de Man, it was construed as dramatizing the gap between textual figure and meaning, rather than allowing access from one to the other (see 187-208).³ A similar argument regarding epic was suggested by Linda Hutcheon’s elucidation of “historiographic metafiction,” a literary genre within which “theoretical self-awareness of history and fiction as human constructs […] is made the grounds for its rethinking and reworking of the forms and contents of the past” (5), undermining the authority of historical metanarratives like epic until “the narratives or systems that once allowed us to think we could unproblematically and universally define public agreement” are challenged (6; see also Morley 2-3).

This total rejection of metanarratives in literature, however, is theoretically problematic. As many critics have pointed out (I cite here Fredric Jameson), “the disappearance of master narratives has itself to be couched in narrative form” (Postmodernism xi): that is, one cannot not have a metanarrative, because any overarching opposition to metanarratives creates a new metanarrative. Furthermore, it is ethically questionable: as Eric L. Berlatsky argues, refusing all metanarrative erases the grounds on which, say, groups against whom historical injustices have been committed can articulate that the injustice committed against them should be universally regarded as unjust, that its occurrence is historically true, or their collective identity as a group at all, and considering that this approach was supposed to enable critiques of authority, these flaws rather undermine its value (Real 26-34). Contemporary criticism’s difficulty in dealing with this
tension might be observed in Jed Rasula’s comment regarding the encyclopedic novel (which he defines so as to overlap with my treatment of the allegory-epic mega-novel)⁴ that “The adjective ‘encyclopedic’ is equivocal: as an enticement to comprehensiveness and mastery, it is awkwardly shadowed by its Enlightenment provenance and tainted by its association with master narratives. Yet the sort of narratives associated with encyclopedism are the very ones most insistently cited for their burlesque heterogeneity” (“Textual”). Despite Rasula’s formulation, this is not really a paradox: if one does not seek to encompass as much as possible, one is by definition suppressing and excluding something.

We are left, instead, with dialectic: how does one construct a metanarrative adequately large to allow the subject a coherent relationship with the world without doing prohibitive violence to particularity? This simultaneous tendency toward and repulsion from figural narrative systems, in fact, is perhaps the chief subject engaged by allegory-epic mega-novels, primarily via their tropes of paranoia and conspiracy theory. On the one hand, the conspiracy theorist is an allegorist on an epic scale, explaining how events that appear to speak only to a local situation really refer to some historical metanarrative. As Richard Hofstadter wrote in “The Paranoid Style in American Politics”:

The distinguishing thing about the paranoid style is not that its exponents see conspiracies or plots here and there in history, but that they regard a “vast” or “gigantic” conspiracy as the motive force in historical events. History is a conspiracy, set in motion by demonic forces of almost transcendent power, and what is felt to be needed to defeat it is not the usually methods of political give-and-take, but an all-out crusade. (29)
One would think, then, that literary critics opposed to totalizing metanarratives would be opposed to paranoid interpretations. However, they often end up embracing them. Consider, for instance, critical response to Pynchon’s *Gravity’s Rainbow*, whose main characters attribute much of what happens in Europe’s immediate postwar moment to a conspiracy perpetuated by a military-industrial cabal dubbed “Them.” Pynchon critics frequently see in Them’s malevolent power a vicious “total system” and consequently, they tout paranoia as the best way to identify and oppose it (see Maltby 150). This apparent contradiction derives from the fact that paranoia is, as Eve Sedgwick noted, “reflexive and mimetic” as well as “a strong theory”: if one wants to oppose all-encompassing systems, then one must adopt a paranoid interpretation capable of seeing such systems anywhere and everywhere they might instantiate themselves, which can quickly lead to the kind of totalized dogmatism one is trying to critique (130-136).5

Granted, paranoia does lend those who adopt it at least two important cognitive benefits. The first is that it compresses innumerable particulars into one or two major forces, making it much easier to conceive the world. As Samuel Chase Coale puts it, paranoia:

underscores a particular narrative pattern and process that writers have employed to grapple with their own doubts and intimations about how the world is run, or not run, and how the individual, acutely aware of his or her personal impotence in the face of labyrinthine bureaucracies and global forces, feels that he or she has become a function or instrument of some invisible, anonymous, but omnipotent and coercive power. (6)

One is always aware that too much is going on for one to fully perceive, even though much of what one cannot understand might be tremendously important, and paranoia gives one a way to articulate the forces behind such events, if not understand the events themselves. As Salman
Rushdie once remarked in an editorial praising paranoia, “If the crimes of the past are only now being uncovered […], how long will it take before we know about the crimes of the present?” (Step Across 319). This process of condensing such an enormous number of sensory perceptions to a coherent set of relations has been termed “cognitive mapping” by Jameson, though he consequently claims that “Conspiracy, one is tempted to say, is a poor person’s cognitive mapping” (“Cognitive” 356). As with all mapping, of course, cognitive mapping must be drastically reductive, as we may recall by remembering Jorge Luis Borges’s short piece about the imperial map designed to record all the particularities of the land, “whose size was that of the Empire,” and consequently rather useless (325).

The second benefit to paranoia is how it strengthens the self’s sense of importance. Since attempts to realize the world in its totality will inevitably impress upon the individual mind its own crippling insignificance, paranoia can rejuvenate subjectivity by ascribing to it privileged access to a reality invisible to others. As Paul Ricoeur pointed out in articulating the “hermeneutic of suspicion” popular in critical theory since the late nineteenth century (which Sedgwick identifies with critical paranoia), even writers like Marx, Nietzsche, and Freud, who “look upon the whole of consciousness primarily as ‘false’ consciousness” (33), suspend their suspicion for one act of credulity, because “liberation is inseparable from a ‘conscious insight’ which victoriously counterattacks the mystification of false consciousness” (34-35): in other words, they believe nothing in culture is free from the corrupting force of ideology except their own minds in theorizing that ideology. This specialness is especially pronounced for those paranoids who believe themselves specifically at the center of the conspiracies they articulate. Reflecting on The Truman Show, whose protagonist is the hero of a 24/7 reality show of whose existence he only gradually becomes aware, Patrick O’Donnell notes that paranoia may be “the
last refuge of identity,” because it “allows us to perceive what might be called a self-referential
depth in the fantasy of the totalized world of available objects, folding back into it a kind of
personal history, destiny and temporality” (*Latent* 9). Conceiving oneself as a combatant against
an all-powerful Them in this manner, even if such a crusade is inherently unwinnable (perhaps
*especially because* it is unwinnable), makes one’s actions more narratively and cognitively
legible.

However, paranoia also has serious drawbacks. For one, it narrows one’s focus so
severely as to make it inadequate for handling that which lies beyond its predetermined purview.
As empirical research has demonstrated, conspiracy theorists are especially vulnerable to
confirmation bias, since they fill in informational gaps with whatever invented facts best suit
their ideology (Swami and Coles 562). As Sedgwick notes, however, this resistance to empirical
reality renders paranoia quite bad at making predictions, even though it is designed to insulate its
adherents against surprise (141-142). The implausible “conspiracy” to which the pejorative
“conspiracy theory” refers, after all, isn’t the one necessary to execute a plot, but the much vaster
conspiracy *required to plant all the evidence suggesting there isn’t one*. Holocaust deniers, for
instance, are unbelievable not because the Allied forces couldn’t have conspired to propagandize
against their enemies, but that faking the Holocaust would have required an enormously
complicated bureaucracy seamlessly generating millions of physical records and survivors’
testimonies, all the while remaining totally invisible to all but those initiated into Holocaust
denial.7 In less severe cases, competing conspiracy theories often prompt their partisans into
games of paranoid one-upmanship,8 each new theory proposing ever more encompassing
paranoid schemes to articulate why other paranoids have come to mistaken conclusions, as with
how Jameson’s critique of postmodern paranoia has itself been critiqued as paranoid for insisting
that all legitimate cognitive mapping can only be understood through the all-encompassing terms of Marxist dialectic (see Simons).

Perhaps most importantly, paranoids’ self-aggrandizement isolates them and prevents either empathy or collective action with others. Conspiracy theorists’ paranoia has been found both to reduce their political activity and to cause them to otherwise make poor social decisions: for instance, those who believe that AIDS is a government plot to exterminate African-Americans are less likely to practice safe sex (Swami and Coles 561, 563). For this reason, as Scott Sanders noted in an early essay on Pynchon, “a nation of paranoiacs would be a totalitarian’s dream” (158). This is particularly so for a totally reflexive paranoia, articulating not a particular conspiracy but that all events are probably to be part of some conspiracy or other: as Thomas Schnell writes, “The world of undiscriminating cynicism, where no one is trusted and nothing is believed, is in many ways a comfortable one. Every citizen enjoys the automatic right to a sly, knowing, and superior attitude toward all authorities but has no obligation to do anything about them.” (qted. in Coale 1). Such a position would render the most ridiculous theories equally plausible to those deserving real attention, eliminating anyone’s ability to do anything about them.

This problem of establishing what constitutes an adequately-sized cognitive mapping is why, I believe, allegory and epic must converge in the mega-novel. Since allegory has traditionally relied upon abstract ideologies like Christianity, then in an era when even nominal Christians often do not subscribe to many major tenets of the faith, allegory must find a different system on which to base its figuration, and as Anderson observed, the nation is the strongest available system (1-4). Similarly, while a classical epic might conceivably have spoken to all of an ancient city-state through one exemplary event from the absolute past, for larger modern
nations, epics require more elaborate figuration to encompass its citizenry. In other words, contemporary epics require allegory to achieve epic scale, while contemporary allegories require nationalism to provide a sufficiently solid conceptual structure. The resulting narratives, however, are unstable, because their tendency toward universal meaning is tempered by a suspicious recoiling toward particular event, though that desire for particularity is itself drawn back almost immediately to seek context for itself in the larger world. As a result, this process produces lengthy narratives in which any given element might, at any moment, be imbued with great significance, but also might be reduced into meaningless cruft.

**How Is Everything Connected in Underworld?**

The exemplary cases of how this process works involve the mantra Timothy Melley called “the official slogan of postwar paranoia”: “everything is connected.” As Brian McHale had earlier noted, the sentiment appears in many mega-novels, including *Gravity’s Rainbow* and Umberto Eco’s *Foucault’s Pendulum* (*Constructing* 87-88), and continues to be disseminated in popular and literary culture. Its appeal likely derives from its simultaneously affirmative and terrifying connotations, suggesting both that the most particular and humdrum elements of our lives might be tremendously significant and that even these mundane things might be complicit in some pernicious scheme to which we are oblivious.

It is also, however, a basically meaningless statement. To claim that “everything is connected” is trivially true: semiotically, Eco showed long ago that one can hop from any linguistic sign to any other given enough connections (*Aesthetics* 67), and materially, physics has long since demonstrated that every particle in the universe was once compacted into the same infinitely dense ball and thus might be “connected” by calculating its historical trajectory from that point. What “everything is connected” fails to address is the more important question of
how closely everything is connected. As the paranoia of, say, the contemporary American right ought to remind us, things are often connected despite a general lack of relevance to each other: for instance, that President Obama once had a professional “connection” with the middle-aged academic Bill Ayers should not cause us to interpret Obama’s politics as akin to the younger Ayers’ violent anti-government Marxism. “Everything is connected” can be a dangerous maxim, then, suggesting that those who speak it bear some special wisdom when, in fact, it does not convey any meaningful knowledge at all.

The phrase’s contradictions might be explicated well via its two appearances in Don DeLillo’s *Underworld*. The first occurs in a conversation between waste management specialist Nick Shay and his colleagues Simeon Biggs (Big Sims) and Jesse Detwiler regarding a mysterious container ship nicknamed The Flying Liberian that has supposedly been traveling for years unable to dock. The men somberly theorize the ship could be the key to conspiracies involving anything from the mob’s incinerator waste (279) to a heroin shipment overseen by the CIA (289). Aware, though, that they have no particular evidence for these speculations, Detwiler decides to justify their paranoia by saying, “You know why [we believe this]? Because it’s easy to believe. We’d be stupid not to believe it. Knowing what we know” (289). The irony, of course, is that they construct these theories precisely because they don’t know what, if anything, is going on, which Detwiler implicitly admits when he elaborates that “what we know” is merely that “everything’s connected” (289). There is something ridiculous about the men’s sharing of such junk theories, resembling as they do the waste products the Flying Liberian is supposedly trying to dump. As Wood remarks, “If what you start out from is what you do not know, this is an infinitely extendable mystical spectrum. One can always not know more” (*Broken* 219).
That conclusion, though, is complicated by the men’s parallel discussion of their profession’s central concern, garbage, the great recurring motif of allegory-epic mega-novels. Superficially, garbage is “connected” to “everything” but in only the weakest way, as is made clear by Nick and Sims’s discussion of the enormous amount of food waste produced by the restaurant industry (283). However, Detwiler argues that this attitude has “everything backwards”: instead of garbage being a byproduct of civilization, he thinks, “garbage rose first, inciting people to build a civilization in response, in self-defense” (287). Waste is so voluminous, he points out, that it requires one to devise a holistic response to keep oneself from being overwhelmed by it, and such a response would necessarily generate an exemplary system of connectivity, the kind out of which societies are made. Detwiler suggests, then, that there might be something both socially valuable and aesthetically creative in finding new ways to connect trash to our lives, which is likely why he suggests we “Make an architecture of waste. Design gorgeous buildings to recycle waste and invite people to collect their own garbage and bring it with them to the press rams and conveyors. Get to know your garbage” (286), a goal shared by characters like Klara Sax, who attempts to make an art installation out of junked WWII bombers (68-71). Similarly, perhaps composing paranoid theories of culture out of disparate, unverifiable rumors might be a valuable way to manage an atmosphere otherwise overloaded with cruft.

However, just because junk can be connected doesn’t mean it should be. As Wood points out, most garbage comprises “objects of indifference, convenience, and hatred” (Broken 215)—and, we might add, toxicity. Eco himself implicitly acknowledged this in Foucault’s Pendulum, whose scholar-protagonist insists on gathering as much trivial data as possible for his index-card system, as we discussed in Chapter 2. Later the novel, however, to avoid boredom at
his menial publishing house job, he and his friend Jacopo Belbo use a computer program to randomly combine fragments from the conspiracy-theory manuscripts about the philosopher’s stone, the Freemasons, and the Holy Grail that they have been assigned to vet into their own elaborate master allegory explaining all European history. This proves not to be difficult, because as the book’s narrator, Dr. Casaubon, notes, “Concepts are connected by analogy. There is no way to decide at once whether an analogy is good or bad, because to some degree everything is connected to everything else. [...] If tout se tient in the end, the connecting works” (602). One variation of their allegory, for instance, interprets Marx and Engels’s “specter haunting Europe” as the Illuminati’s hunt for a secret Plan, which, betraying the Kabbalistic elite, Marx and Engels attempt to recover for the proletariat. Though this allegoresis is amusing, it is entirely gratuitous: as Casaubon’s lover Lia points out, the most obvious interpretation of the puzzling medieval document that starts off their quest is that it is a shopping list (521). Such gratuitousness, no matter how entertaining, however, does not come without cost. The Plan ends up not being redemptive, nor even benign, but destructive, because the circle of conspiracy theorists from whom the scholars had taken these materials (“the Diabolicals”) becomes convinced of its truth and convene an ad hoc ritual at the Paris Conservatory of Arts and Crafts that ends up murdering Casaubon’s colleague Jacopo Belbo (565-581). As Lia had earlier insisted, “Your plan isn’t poetic; it’s grotesque” (525).

Are the efforts by Underworld’s characters to suggest that “everything is connected,” then, similarly ill-conceived? The answer is not clear, because their consequences are much less straightforward than those of the Plan. The ambiguity is most pronounced in the memorabilia collector Marvin Lundy, who believes in the “dot theory of reality, that all knowledge is available if you analyze the dots” (175), which leads him to paranoid theories about how Bobby
Thomson’s Shot Heard ‘Round the World connects to the first Soviet nuclear test and about the prophetic significance of Gorbachev’s birthmark (171-174). Even though these theories are as ridiculous as anything in *Foucault’s Pendulum*, Nick’s friend Brian Glassic feels “shamed” upon visiting Lundy because these theories “exposed his own middling drift” (177). Glassic, like many of the characters, feels lost in the haze of conflicting paranoias characterizing the Cold War era, and had indeed earlier also tried to use the Thomson home run to articulate his location in national history, claiming, “When JFK was shot, people went inside. We watched TV in dark rooms and talked on the phone with friends and relatives. We were all separate and alone. But when Thomson hit the homer, people rushed outside. People wanted to be together. Maybe it was the last time people spontaneously went out of their houses for something” (94). However, he is not able to develop it much further, and from the unmoored perspective in which it leaves him, even Lundy’s near-absurd belief in the national significance of his accumulation of detritus, that is “is history, back-page. From back to front. Happy, tragic, desperate” (174), looks appealing.

Where is the boundary, then, between a poetic allegory of trash and a grotesque one? DeLillo’s essay on the novel’s creation, “The Power of History,” seems to suggest that at least some of these theories might be on the poetic side, as he valorizes the Thomson home run as “beautifully isolated in time—not subject to the debasing process of frantic repetition that exhausts a contemporary event before it has rounded into coherence,” which allows it to “draw people together in ways that only the most disastrous contemporary events can match.” When he proceeds to claim fictional re-creations of such moments are “all about reliving things,” he implies that, if we were only able to connect up all the junk of the past again, we might finally understand our place in “the sweeping range of American landscape and experience.”
protagonist, however, is not so confident. Nick purchases from Lundy the home run ball, hoping it will lead him back to “the days when I was alive on the earth, rippling in the quick of my skin, heedless and real” (810), but as time passes, he notes, “I tend to forget why I bought it,” and it sits on his bookshelves in a tenuous gray area between allegorical emblem and trash, “wedged between a slanted book and a straight-up book […] a beautiful thing smudged green near the Spalding trademark and bronzed with nearly half a century of earth and sweat and chemical change” (809). Though Catherine Morley is not entirely right, I think, to call the male characters’ apotheosis of the ball a “political construction” that “works to aestheticise and erase national politics” (145)—so many readers have responded so strongly to the opening chapter depicting the home run that DeLillo’s claim has some credibility—both the historical significance Nick and Glassic attribute to it and the way they distinguish it from more recent history seem overstated, created at least as much for their own narrative needs as anything else. It is unclear to what extent we can take it, or any of Nick’s many unfulfilling adventures in the novel, as especially meaningful, yet at the same time it is unclear whether we can totally dismiss it.

This interpretive conundrum is brought to its climax by the book’s other use of “everything is connected,” toward the conclusion, in which the batty Bronx nun Sister Edgar perceives the mystic apparition of a martyred Hispanic girl named Esmeralda on an overpass billboard, then dies and is absorbed into the nascent World Wide Web, where she becomes “open—exposed to every connection you can make in the world,” having in the process a variety of visions: a nuclear explosion, her double J. Edgar Hoover, and the eyes of God (824-826). They culminate in her realization that “Everything is connected in the end” and this final page:

Fasten, fit closely, bind together.
And you can glance out the window for a moment, distracted by the sound of small kids playing a made-up game in a neighbor’s yard, some kind of kickball maybe, and they speak in your voice, or piggyback races on the weedy lawn, and it’s your voice you hear, essentially, under the Glimmerglass sky, and you look at the things in the room, offscreen, unwebbed, the tissued grain of the deskwood alive in light, the thick live tenor of things, the argument of things to be seen and eaten, the apple core going sepia in the lunch tray, and the dense measures of experience in a random glance, the monk’s candle reflected in the slope of the phone, hours marked in Roman numerals, and the glaze of the wax, and the curl of the braided wick, and the chipped rim of the mug that holds your yellow pencils, skewed all crazy, and the plied lives of the simplest surface, the slabbed butter melting on the crumbled bun, and the yellow of the yellow pencils, and you try to imagine the word on the screen becoming a thing in the world, taking all its meanings, its sense of serenities and contentments out into the streets somehow, its whisper of reconciliation, a word extending itself ever outward, the tone of hail and farewell, a word that carries the sunlit ardor of an object deep in drenching noon, the argument of binding touch, but it’s only a sequence of pulses on a dullish screen and all it can do is make you pensive—a word that spreads a longing through the raw sprawl of the city and out across the dreaming bourns and orchards of the solitary hills.

Peace. (827)

There is a certain breathless magic to this passage, especially in its bravura one-sentence middle paragraph, propelling us to the book’s end with the feeling that we might finally have been given
the key, finally, to understanding the novel’s missing connections. Yet that sense of ecstasy is manufactured almost out of sheer syntax, because when we actually read it closely, it is obvious that nothing it lists is connected at all. Much of it, in fact, is literally trash, like the apple core, the melting wax and butter, and the weeds. It is difficult to imagine that these words were meant to be read at any depth at all, but rather giddily raced past in hopes of communicating the idea of connectivity, rather than any specific connections. How Nick and the other characters relate to America, then, or how we might imagine such a relationship for ourselves, is left unresolved amid this final pile of rubbish.

Regarding Foucault’s Pendulum, McHale once argued that the paranoid interpretation he associates with modernism ought to be scrapped in favor of “counter-paranoiac” reading, which he associated with Lia’s approach (Constructing 186-187). However, Lia is not really counter-paranoid: she connects everything, too, just more plausibly than Casaubon does. This final page of Underworld is what counter-paranoia would really look like, juxtaposing a bunch of objects without any apparent figural relationship between them, and certainly not any with national implications. There has been some debate as to what degree Underworld is properly paranoid, “an extended demonstration of the hypothesis—at times even the faith—that everything is connected” (P. Knight 239), or “post-paranoid,” depicting a world in which people “don’t have to believe […] that what they don’t know is the deep, secret, missing truth. In less paranoid ages ignorance may just be ignorance” (M. Wood 3). The answer to that question is probably that it is not so much either paranoid or post-paranoid as it experiments across the spectrum of paranoia, examining the relationship between what James Wood refers to as the “centrifugal” tendency of theories like Lundy’s and scattered “centripetal” text like the final page (Broken 213). While none emerges are absolutely correct, some are more cognitively tenable than others.
What, then is the role of cruft in the paranoia-laced allegory-epic mega-novel? It emerges on the extremes of both tendencies. As Wood notes, the paranoia of *Underworld*’s characters does not resemble the “private paranoia” of, say, Dostoevsky’s Underground Man, which grows organically out of a fully-realized psychological state and not only motivates all his actions but can be contrasted against what we are told of a real external world surrounding him. Instead, it is a “political paranoia,” targeted less at one subject’s imagined conspiracy than vague musings shared more or less by several characters on the world at large, with minimal implications for the plot (*Broken* 215). The fact of the characters’ paranoia might be important, but the specific form their paranoia takes is insignificant in a way unthinkable for the classic psychological novel: you don’t need to attend the particulars of DeLillo’s paranoia in the way you do Dostoevsky’s. Both produce bad cognitive mappings, in other words, but while private paranoias inextricable from the narrative they spawn, most paranoid theories in *Underworld* (e.g., Lundy on Gorbachev’s birthmark, Sims on the Flying Liberian’s cargo) might be excised, moved, or altered with no impact on the larger narrative. Such theories, moreover, are often accompanied by contrasting passages that lack much connectedness, rendering them unassimilated and illegible within the novel’s larger texture. In between these two poles of cruft, the novel presents a large gray area of possible modes of connectedness of greater or lesser plausibility. Though Wood is right to note the incongruity in how mega-novelists’ admirers can never decide whether they are “great occultist[s]” or “visited hoaxer[s]” (*Broken* 200), even if many individual moments “mean too much” or “mean too little,” there is value in the cruft they produce. By pressuring us from opposed directions, they call into question what would constitute an adequately large, but not overdetermined, figurative understanding of the world. Repelling us from a paranoid position, the narrative might push us toward a relatively counter-
paranoid attitude, but that perspective will likely render us incapable of managing other narrative elements and encourage us to develop a different form of paranoia. This sequence of feedback and calibration is the distinctive cognitive process provoked by the allegory-epic mega-novel, and with which the rest of the chapter will be concerned.

World War II as the Contemporary Allegorical-Epic Event

This dual narrative motion probably derives from how traditional figurative ideological systems have unraveled over the past few centuries of economic and cultural globalization, a process whose impact on epic literature is sketched out in Franco Moretti’s analysis of “world texts” in *Modern Epic* (see 50). If we were to select a specific moment as the diachronic, mythic event grounding the contemporary allegory-epic mega-novel’s approach to figural narrative, though, especially with respect to global mega-novels, it would probably be World War II. As Edward Mendelson claims, the “technologies of instant communication and the economy of world markets” emerging after the war display “the existence of a new international culture,” causing works with epic pretensions to reformulate the way they figure global communities (164-165). Though neither the authors nor principal characters of *Foucault’s Pendulum* and *Underworld* were directly involved in the war, it appears no less formative for that: in fact, their sense of belatedness with respect to it often makes it even more influential, as with how Glassic claims the Thomson home run was “Like a footnote to the end of war” (94), the Edenic moment that closed off the forties and began the Cold War, while Belbo’s ambitious but insular literary sensibility seems to have originated in his pubescent inability to have been involved with either the Italian Fascist or Resistance movements (106-107).

Given how the war generated or upended so many national narratives, as well as significantly advancing internationalist sensibilities, it should not be surprising that it has
substantively shaped ensuing epic narrative and conspiracy theory. Interestingly, in contrast to how World War I is often considered the defining event for modernism, World War II has never been associated as strongly with postmodernism, even though many of the great postmodern novels from around the world, especially mega-novels, are responses to World War II in the same way *Mrs. Dalloway* or *The Magic Mountain* is to World War I. If one were, for example, to describe a long, challenging novel in which a male protagonist—sympathetic in his way, but naïve and unreliable in matters both perceptual and ethical—wanders across a weird landscape created by the war’s wake, driven at any given moment by specific goals but unsure about what he ought to be doing in any larger sense, one might easily be discussing Günter Grass’s *The Tin Drum* if that nation were Germany; but if it were Japan it could be Haruki Murakami’s *The Wind-Up Bird Chronicle*; India, Salman Rushdie’s *Midnight’s Children*; the United States, not only *Underworld* but *Gravity’s Rainbow*, William Gass’s *The Tunnel*, and any of a number of other novels.

World War II and its legacy, however, have long defied straightforward artistic treatment. For World War I, as Samuel Hynes notes, there had been a unified “Myth of the War” (x), equally accessible to a British poet like Wilfrid Owen and a German novelist like Erich Maria Remarque, about communal terror at modern military technology and the betrayal of innocent young men by doddering generals (449). No such myth exists for World War II. There is, after all, a plausible interpretation of the conflict as “clean, straightforward, and unambiguous” (Jarvis 96), the Allies good and the Axis bad, and while good novelists, especially those who had served in or witnessed the fighting, resisted this narrative (Homberger 174-179), simply appropriating World War I’s myth in the new postwar era would create an unpalatable equivalence between, say, the Nazis and their victims (see Barnouw). In attempting to write about the conflict, authors
from different countries are faced with distinct difficulties: for writers in Axis countries, acknowledging their nations’ role in the war at all has proved difficult (see Guest 216); for those in Allied nations, admitting the human tragedy of Hiroshima, Nagasaki, Dresden, Tokyo, and other areas immolated by Allied campaigns within the war’s larger narrative has been problematic (see Rau 207-208); and for writers in nations decolonized after the war, finding a balance between the lineages of Allied universalist humanism, with its attendant imperialist heritage, and self-determined local values, with their sectarian and regressive tendencies, has provided serious challenges (see Brennan 85-100, Ten Kortenaar 12-13).

However, each group is confronted with the postwar period’s characteristic obstacles to articulating personal identity with respect to the contemporary environment. As Jameson famously remarked, our environment “has finally succeeded in transcending the capacities of the individual human body to locate itself, to organize its immediate surroundings perceptually, and cognitively to map its position in a mappable external world,” which he believes “can itself stand as the symbol of the incapacity of our minds, at least at present, to map the great global multinational and decentered communicational network in which we find ourselves caught as individual subjects” (Postmodernism 44). This concern is probably why Jameson hopefully mused around the same time that “third-world” literature might show a path out of this cognitive conundrum, because, he believed, it was always written “in the form of national allegory: the story of the private individual destiny is always an allegory of the embattled situation of the public third-world culture and society” (“Third-World” 69; emphasis his). This position was immediately critiqued as a dramatically inadequate simplification of the actual experience of writers in the countries in question, of course (see Ahmad), leaving the question of how to figure one’s place in the contemporary world lacking any clear answer.
This might be what makes paranoia-drenched mega-novels so attractive in the postwar world. They tend to present their characters (and readers) with several potential mappings of a complicated national situation involving many bizarre phenomena, usually rooted in World War II, ranging from rigid allegory to near-total disconnection. In some cases, the national allegories turn out to be valuable to the characters’ construction of a coherent sense of place, but in many cases they merely generate cruft. The characters’ quest becomes how to distinguish which modes of interpretation are too paranoid to be cognitively tenable from those which are not paranoid enough, an exceedingly difficult task given that often apparently ridiculous theories end up being empirically justified while apparently stable conceptions regarding communal identity easily disintegrate. The rest of the chapter will examine the different ways in which these books deploy and dismantle figuration, forcing us to develop more cogent ways of responding to the situations to which they are applied.

Varieties of Catachresis: LETTERS and The Wind-Up Bird Chronicle

The first kind of allegorical cruft we will examine is the empty or inapposite figure. Conventional rhetoric does not have a term for an apparent figure that does not actually figure anything, but the closest is probably catachresis. In contemporary use, it refers to any figurative connection between two concepts “marked by the feature of illogicality, often close to absurdity, and generates far-fetched, strained associations” (Chrzanowska-Kluczewska 41), so it should not be too much of a stretch to have it cover empty figures as well. More has been written on catachresis’s implications for language than can be discussed here, but most prominently, as Elżbieta Chrzanowska-Kluczewska notes, their “lack of definite reference and interpretation” has led them to be associated with “certain experiments in twentieth century modernist, but especially postmodernist, prose,” which she links to “the demise of master narrations” (49).
Though there is a credible deconstructionist defense of catachresis claiming that the disjointed transition between tenor and vehicle provides “the chance for insight” (Goldblatt 80), clearly there is a point beyond which these become more wasteful than illuminating. Mark Turner calls this the “invariance principle,” the rule that, for the sake of our cognitive stability, “Conceptual projection [...] shall not result in an image-schematic clash in the target” (108-109). What makes catachreses especially difficult to manage, though, is that they usually cannot be identified immediately as catachrestic: in fact, they often seem potentially intriguing until one has had time to play out their implications and determine otherwise. That is frequently the case with their use in conspiracy theories, wherein signs are often attributed meanings that seem plausible at first but eventually break down into partial or total incoherence upon analysis.

For instance, consider the longest section of John Barth’s epistolary fiction LETTERS, which comprises over two hundred pages (out of a total 772) of letters by the descendants of The Sot-Weed Factor’s Burlingame and Cook families (see Ch. 3), beginning with Andrew Burlingame Cook IV’s 1812 missives to his unborn son Henry Cook Burlingame V about family history and extended by Andrew Burlingame Cook VI in 1969. Broadly, the letters reinterpret the complex web of conflicts constituting early American history as revealing both a secret conspiracy to instigate a Second Revolution and the Burlingame-Cook family’s tragic Pattern of being unable to successfully influence that history. Their failures largely derive from each generation’s misinterpretation of the previous one’s place in the Pattern: as protagonist Lady Amherst summarizes in 1969, “Andrew [IV] declares, in effect, that the whole line have been losers because they mistook their fathers for winners on the wrong side; he announces his intention to break this pattern by devoting the second half of his life to the counteraction of its first, thus becoming, if not a winner, at least not another loser in the family tradition” (253).
However, interpreting national history in a way that is simultaneously rebellious (i.e., indicating personal agency), allegorical (i.e., indicating the omnipotence of the Pattern), and duplicitous (i.e., indicating interpretive fallibility) renders the whole thing even more illegible than the self-negating Patterns Barth experimented with in *Giles Goat-Boy* and *Chimera*. For instance, observing Andrew IV’s stated reorganization of his goals around the belief that his Revolution-era father was not a Loyalist but a double agent for General Washington, Amherst notes, “Had Andrew IV really changed his mind about his father’s ultimate allegiances, or was he merely pretending to have done, for ulterior reasons? Was his avowed subversiveness a cover for subverting the real subversives? And might his exhortation to his unborn child have been a provocation in disguise?” (254).

This self-canceling paranoia comes to a head in the book’s final pages, when Andrew VI’s final letter contains a postscript by his purported son, Henry Cook Burlingame VII, declaring that most of what the former has written (including his presentations of Andrew IV’s letters) is false. Laying out the possibilities for Andrew VI’s true motives with respect to the Pattern, the younger man speculates that—

1. He wishes the Revolution to succeed and hopes that I shall support it, since he believes me a “winner”; therefore
   a. he works for it himself, because he considers himself also a “winner” and does not believe that I shall rebel against him; or
   b. he works *against* it, because he regards himself (as he regarded his namesakes) as a “loser,” and/or because he believes that I shall work against him.
2. He wishes the Revolution to succeed and hopes that I shall oppose it, since he believes me a loser; therefore
   a. he works for it himself, considering himself a winner and trusting me to rebel against him; or
   b. he works against it, believing himself a loser and trusting me not to rebel against him. [...] (753)

—and similarly through bullets 3 and 4, playing out these combinations in the cases in which Andrew VI opposes the Second Revolution. While Henry VII asserts that “Such displays confuse only the naïve. To Cook, as to me, the actual state of affairs is as easily sorted out as the ABCs, no more finally equivocal than the authorship of this letter, or its postscript” (754), it ought to be clear that there is no way for us to determine that Henry VII (if he’s even the true author of this postscript) presents the “true” interpretation of the Pattern. If the allegories in either Andrew IV or VI’s letters might be total nonsense, then so might be Henry VII’s.16 As with Zhang’s riddle in Mason & Dixon, this merely presents an infinite and incomprehensible array of shadow stories, rendering the Pattern’s value as a master figure basically nil.

Were this real history, we might conceivably research further and generate an ad hoc method of evaluating plausibility, but as it is, everything in the Cooke-Burlingame letters is catachresis, incapable of meaningfully signifying one thing as opposed to another. Unlike with a classic unreliable narrator, there are no outside cues suggesting a sounder interpretive guide.17 As Max Schulz puts it, LETTERS is a “quirky, wasteful, fascinating thing” (Muses 46), and though O’Donnell attempts to redeem it by claiming “the ‘wastes’ of narrative coincide with its circulatory purifications; its significances are engendered as a process that amasses its own quantities to the point where a significant, qualitative change occurs” (Passionate 57), it’s not
clear that any changes occur as a result of these repetitions and negations: the novel ends, after all, with its characters mostly either getting remarried or killed off. The modern-day characters’ relationships, granted, gain some of their sympathy as a result of the bewildering environment they must live in, but for readers the possibilities of the Pattern’s meaning are exhausted by Amherst’s comments.18 Even Tom LeClair, who otherwise exalts mega-novel excess, realizes that there’s something wrong with LETTERS’ “bewildering intricacies of counter-plotting,” finally deciding that the book relies too much on “its top-down codes and plans, its tightly drawn correspondences and determinisms” (202), and though I think exactly the reverse is the case—the “codes and plans” fall apart all too obviously—this accurately points out that it does not take long to realize that the Cooke letters cannot create a meaningful allegory.

The cruft generated by Haruki Murakami’s The Wind-Up Bird Chronicle poses more difficult problems, perhaps because rather than the fanciful scenario of Barth’s novel, Murakami directly engages the legacy of World War II and Japan’s occupation of Manchuria.19 In some ways, of course, the book does seem neatly allegorical. For example, the narrator, Toru Okada—who has recently lost his paralegal job and finds himself with no interest in new employment—has become gradually estranged (emotionally, then literally) from his wife Kumiko, who has herself long felt an inner psychic split associated an abortion several years prior, which contributes to the fact (observed by Toru upon receiving a serious of anonymous dirty phone calls) that the pair have not had sex in some time. Several supporting characters face similar psychological troubles, like the quasi-telepathic Creta Kano, a “mental prostitute” with a history of psychosexual dysfunction, as well as the psychic healer Nutmeg Akasaka and her son Cinnamon, the latter of whom has been mute ever since an enigmatic childhood dream involving a bird that sounds like a wind-up toy and two men burying something in his backyard. As the
novel proceeds, though, these psychological holes are linked to the war figuratively, often via literal ones. Toru, for instance, receives a bequest from his late friend Mr. Honda by way of a Lieutenant Mamiya, who recounts how he has suffered from existential emptiness ever since being thrown down a dry well by the Mongolian army while stationed in Manchuria, prompting Toru to venture into the dry well across the alley in the vacant Miyawaki lot to meditate. The personal and political are further linked when we discover the involvement of Kumiko’s economist brother Noboru Wataya—who has just inherited the Diet seat held by his uncle Yoshitaka, the logistician in charge of Japanese imperial strategy during the war—in both Creta and his sister’s sexual trauma, suggesting the abusive tendencies in Japan’s rapid adoption of Western-style politics and economics. The narrative’s epic and allegorical strands, then, might be interpreted as suggesting World War II created a national psychic rift, with the cultural diseases expressed by pre-war imperialism and postwar capitalism combining with the nation’s brutal defeat in the war to impede the political and psychosexual functioning of its citizens. This sense of malfunction coalesces in the image of the wind-up bird itself, which shows up not only in Cinnamon’s dream but in his grandfather’s account of an episode from the war and in Toru’s walks through his neighborhood and tends to vanish when characters are stricken by the psychic rift, providing a paradoxical sense both of the world’s orderly functioning and the tenuous, artificial nature of that order. That the book climaxes with Noboru suffering a stroke in Nagasaki and Mamiya forging a new life with Creta in Hiroshima seems to resolve this allegory quite neatly, the two cities destroyed by atomic bombs figuring the nation’s rebirth.

Yet things are not quite so pat as this account suggests. Between the initial publication of the original edition’s second and third books, in fact, Murakami’s Japanese critics pointed out that many of the novel’s apparent figures, rather than tying themselves up cleanly, were going
entirely unexplained, “hang[ing] aimlessly like threads in an unfinished tapestry” (Amitrano 32). Though by the end of the novel many figures that had seemed illegible earlier have been incorporated into the allegory—for instance, Toru’s anonymous caller is finally identified as a splintered element of Kumiko’s psyche, and the odd blue mark on Toru’s cheek becomes associated with the Akasaka family’s healing mission—others are catachrestic, presented as if they will eventually acquire clear figurative meaning, but never do. One example is the overture to Rossini’s *The Thieving Magpie*, from which the novel’s first book takes its name. The overture plays on the radio during the novel’s first page (5), causing Toru to unconsciously whistle it several chapters later (60), and its emblematic nature is apparently confirmed when it is constantly hummed in the dream realm Toru visits while meditating in the well by the waiter walking toward a mysterious hotel room (243). However, the opera’s narrative does not seem to apply to the novel’s allegory: even the two works’ title birds, in fact, have almost nothing in common, as one is an emblem of vulnerability and the other a mischievous trickster. Furthermore, Toru neither has nor wants any deeper associations with the piece: as he ponders late in the novel, “If things ever settled down, I would have to go to the library and look it up in an encyclopedia of music. I might even buy a complete recording of the opera if it was available. Or maybe not. I might not care to know the answers to these questions by then” (554). As Jay Rubin notes, in fact, Murakami’s own sense of the opera was much the same, as he spent many years idly wishing to find out what kind of opera was attached to the overture without ever doing so. Rubin elaborates that “The opera features prominently in the book not because its plot provides a key to the novel but precisely because it is just out of reach […] for Toru *The Thieving Magpie* will always be something he hasn’t quite understood. It is familiar, and yet its meaning eludes him” (218). Like Toru’s missing-then-retrieved polka-dot necktie and
the bequest from Honda that turns out to be an empty box, it is only connected to the allegory very weakly.

This is intriguing, because as Giorgio Amitrano notes, associative “connection,” rather than novelistic causality, appears to be the main principle holding together Murakami’s narratives (29). Wind-Up Bird’s characters, in fact, frequently adhere to the paranoid principle articulated by the Sheep Man in Murakami’s earlier Dance Dance Dance that “It’s all connected” (124). Late in the novel, for example, Toru ponders:

[Nutmeg and Cinnamon’s] “clients” and I were joined by the mark on my cheek. Cinnamon’s grandfather (Nutmeg’s father) and I were also joined by the mark on my cheek. Cinnamon’s grandfather and Lieutenant Mamiya were joined by the city of Hsin-ching [e.g., where they had been stationed during the Manchurian occupation]. Lieutenant Mamiya and the clairvoyant Mr. Honda were joined by their special duties on the Manchurian-Mongolian border, and Kumiko and I had been introduced to Mr. Honda by Noboru Wataya’s family. Lieutenant Mamiya and I were joined by our experiences in our respective wells—his in Mongolia, mine on the property where I was sitting now. Also on this property had once lived an army officer who had commanded troops in China. All of these were linked as in a circle, at the center of which stood prewar Manchuria, continental East Asia, and the short war of 1939 in Nomonhan. (497-498)

Yet many elements in the novel don’t quite fit into this pattern. Finishing the above passage, Toru asks, “But why Kumiko and I should have been drawn into this historical chain of cause and effect I could not comprehend. All of these events had occurred long before Kumiko and I were born” (498). He is not the only one to feel that way, either, as his teenaged neighbor May
Kasahara writes, upon dropping out of school to work in a wig factory, that her life seems as if “one disconnected thing led to another disconnected thing, and that’s how all kinds of stuff happened. [...] I don’t have any idea what’s happening to me” (461-462).

Perhaps the book is prompting us not to be satisfied with establishing that “Everything is connected,” but to ask “How closely is everything connected?” When we have put together what would otherwise seem like a plausible network of figurative connections, yet have left many apparent figures unincorporated, we should ask, as does Matthew Strecher, “whether these connections are real, imagined, or coincidental? What are we to make, then, of the ‘histories’ they seem to contain[?]” (167). The elaborate connections Toru constructs may merely exist to cover up his own sense of emptiness and expendability. Early in the book, after all, when discussing with Kumiko the mysticism of Malta Kano and Mr. Honda, he suggests that all that all such explanations are essentially arbitrary: “I mean, the world’s full of things we can’t explain, and somebody’s got to fill that vacuum. Better to have somebody who isn’t boring than somebody who is. Right?” (48). His allegorical narrative, intertwining his own malaise with that of millions of other Japanese, could well be elaborate nonsense—which easily could get rather boring.

Amitrano, I think, articulates the best way to approach this problem when he notes in Murakami, as Wood does in DeLillo, a “tension between a centrifugal tendency towards the values of exactness and clarity […] and the centripetal force that leads characters, events, themes so far from the center of narration as to become virtually invisible or disappear altogether,” which he hypothesizes “may be read as a contrast in which the divided sensibility of readers in this last portion of the millennium can be reflected with symbolic effectiveness” (34). I would only add that “reflected,” invoking as it does the mimetic fallacy, is not quite the right word. A
better way of putting it is that as we read, we come across any number of potential emblems, some of which might be meaningful and some of which are simply cruft, but we don't know which is which until we have finished the book. As a result, we need to be prepared to read any figure as possibly having deep resonance but also as possibly being a waste of our attentional resources. As Rebecca Suter notes, Murakami intended in *Wind-Up Bird* to create an “open” version of Ellery Queen’s habitual “challenge to the reader,” one prompting his audience to solve the mystery prior to the climax, except without explicitly providing the solution as Queen did (105). As in *Underworld*, the opposing centrifugal and centripetal tendencies create a spectrum of meaningfulness amongst the novel’s potential figures, requiring that we be primed to invest substantial attention in any image at any point, but also that we distribute it in such a way that we do not become too invested in something that ends up being meaningless.

For instance, at first we might interpret Toru and Kumiko’s cat, who is named after Kumiko’s brother Noboru, as figuring the same malignant forces the economist represents, especially when the cat vanishes at the novel’s start and helps precipitate their psychic maladies. As the book proceeds, though, the connections between the human and feline Noborus grow weaker: the Okadas, after all, see their pet representing not their repulsion at her brother but “something good that grew up between us” (603). Furthermore, though the human Noboru’s actions continue through the novel’s middle sections to figure larger societal ills and prolong Toru’s anguish, the cat not only does not add further malevolence, but suddenly reappears at the book’s midpoint without resolving anything. This crashes the metaphor into the invariance principle. As if to admit the cat’s limited figurative function from this point forward, Toru renames him “Mackerel” (378). To insist either that the cat reveals the novel’s deeper figurative
structure or that he subverts all such structures would be to miss the point: instead, we should note that he has an important figurative function for some time, which suddenly ceases.

This method of interpreting individual figures, of course, will have an impact on how we interpret the larger figural narrative system of which it is part, such as national identity. Many of the book’s characters, for instance, are mystified about their relationship to Japan, none more so than Mamiya. Being Japanese, for him, is not exactly determined by geography, because prior to the war, the land officially part of the Japanese empire waxed and waned with the state’s imperial fortunes: while posted in Manchuria, for instance, he had felt that “To protect my homeland, I too would fight and die. But it made no sense to me at all to sacrifice my one and only life for the sake of this desolate patch of soil” (146). Nor, however, is his national identity exactly determined by shared ethnicity or culture, as the postwar shift in global power relations causes many of the nation’s institutions and allegiances to be Westernized, partly exemplified by how after being captured on the Soviet front, Mamiya attempts a realpolitik alliance with a Russian power-broker that alienates him from his fellow Japanese prisoners-of-war (538-547). When his last tie to Japan, kinship, dissolves upon his family’s deaths in the nuclear strike on Hiroshima, Mamiya becomes incapable of relocating himself within Japan. His lack of nationality does not liberate but cripples him, and his inability to feel resonance with anything upon his return makes him think that “real life may have ended for me deep in that well in the desert of Outer Mongolia […] There was nothing left for me. I felt truly empty, and knew that I should not have come back there” (170). The catachrestic nature of his Japaneseness, then, should make us think through what would constitute a meaningful attitude toward the nation.

Similarly, the novel’s catachreses should make us wary about how we interpret the resolution of the novel’s allegorical national crisis. At the novel’s climax, Toru enters the dream
world, locates the lost Kumiko in the hotel room, sees a TV news report about how a baseball-bat-wielding man resembling him has bludgeoned Noboru Wataya into critical condition, then takes a blood-stained bat from Kumiko and kills an invisible monster who challenges him, prompting Noboru’s real-world collapse (574-587). As a subconscious figure, Toru seems to have received the bat—a complex symbol of both Japanese nationality and Westernization—from Cinnamon’s account of his grandfather’s role in the war’s late stages, which depicts a Japanese officer ordered to execute an escaped Chinese prisoner using the baseball bat that the escapee himself had used to kill his jailers (517-520). When Kumiko gives the bat to him, then, it appears to complete a circle of connections to World War II. Yet the bat also has a literal existence that is almost total cruft. Near the novel’s midpoint, Toru is followed by a guitarist who proceeds to attack him with a bat until Toru wrests it away and knocks him unconscious (335-336), subsequently keeping the bat and bringing it with him to the well. Just before he enters the well for his climactic battle, though, the bat inexplicably disappears (549). Any attempt we might have made to tie the literal bat into the figurative web is destroyed, as its existence is revealed to be entirely gratuitous. However, the opaque link between the actual and imagined bats might prime us to consider more exactly the link between the two murders committed with the figurative bats. After all, the World War II execution is pointlessly brutal, the act of an imperial power too inflexible to acknowledge its impending defeat—not to mention totally ineffective, as the prisoner revives and has to be shot anyway. Is Toru’s own ritual violence, then, merely an extension of the same cultural disease he attempts to eradicate? Or can it still serve its purgative function despite this association?

The uncertainty these questions imply may be why the novel’s conclusion only partly resolves the myriad problems it raises. On the one hand, a malevolent politician dies, Toru
locates Kumiko and begins to resume written communication with her, and several minor characters experience happy endings. On the other, the fates of the disappeared Malta Kano and May Kasahara are left unresolved, and perhaps more importantly, we do not know whether Toru and Kumiko’s relationship will ever be fully restored: Kumiko is imprisoned after she removes her brother’s life support and is not yet ready to speak to Toru in person (601-605). Similarly, it is not clear to what extent Noboru’s death will actually cleanse Japan of its postwar malaise, or whether the psychic rift will persist. It is tempting to be clunkily Lacanian about such gaps, but the book’s final words suggest that the problem is, fundamentally, a cognitive one. Pondering his situation as he takes the train home from visiting May, Toru tells us, “I closed my eyes and tried to sleep. But it was not much later that I was able to get any real sleep. In a place far away from anyone or anywhere, I drifted off for a moment” (607). The novel’s events have given Toru a stronger sense of local and national connections, but his continued inability to maintain a cognitive schemata establishing his relationship to the rest of the world leaves him unable to sustain consistent focus. He remains “far away from anyone or anywhere” because his mind is still adrift, not quite able to process the world.

The Elephantiasis of Midnight’s Children

The narrator of Salman Rushdie’s Midnight’s Children, Saleem Sinai, has no such lack of conviction about his place within the nation. His introduction to the autobiographical chronicle about the first decades of Indian independence following World War II claims, after all, that “there are so many stories to tell, too many, such an excess of intertwined lives events miracles places rumors, so dense a commingling of the improbable and the mundane! I have been a swallower of lives; and to know me, just the one of me, you’ll have to swallow the lot as well” (4). Being born at midnight on August 5th, 1947—the exact moment of independence—means,
he believes, that his “destinies [are] indissolubly chained to those of my country” (3). This is an ambitious claim, but it is not totally unfounded. For one, his heritage is a near microcosm of India’s history: though he is raised by the well-off Sinai family, who comprise both Western-educated professionals and Muslim traditionalists, he was born of a poor Hindu woman and a departing British officer, himself descended from the founder of Bombay. Furthermore, Saleem’s face is reminiscent of the Hindu god Ganesh, to whose scribal role he aspires (170, 176). Lastly, his moment of birth has given him telepathic abilities, allowing him to communicate with the thousand other supernaturally-endowed children born during the first hour of independence, whom he dubs Midnight’s Children. When Prime Minister Nehru addresses Saleem as “the newest bearer of that ancient face of India which is also eternally young” (139), it seems quite plausible to suggest that his life might allegorically represent the entire history of India and all its hope for the future.

Early on, though, Saleem begins to worry about how to manage the scope of such a narrative. While recounting how his mother Amina’s lover Nadir Khan fled the assassination of Mian Abdullah, Saleem tells us a brief story about Nadir’s roommate, a painter whose works “had grown larger and larger as he tried to get the whole of life into his art,” causing him to wail “I wanted to be a miniaturist and I’ve got elephantiasis instead!” Subsequently, and with no other explanation, the painter commits suicide (49). As this vignette has only modest relevance to the story of which it is an excursus, Saleem likely means to communicate by it anxieties regarding his own elephantastic endeavor. Those worries become clearer a few chapters later, when he ruminates upon whether the spectacular, but apparently coincidental, events that shape his life are motivated by chance or fate:
if everything is planned in advance, then we all have a meaning, and are spared
the terror of knowing ourselves to be random, without a why; or else, of course,
we might—as pessimists—give up right here and now, understanding the futility
of thought decision action, since nothing we think makes any difference anyway;
things will be as they will. Where, then, is optimism? In fate or in chaos? (86)

Believing everything is strongly connected, that is, may provide a sense of collectivity, but does
so at the price of emphasizing one’s own insignificance to the enormous, predetermined pattern
of fate. Yet Saleem cannot refuse fate, either, because its absence would render his actions
insignificant for the opposite reasons, the lack of larger context to (and privileged place in)
which to relate them. As Neil Ten Kortenaar writes, “what frightens Saleem is not excess or
incongruity but rather the probable lack that excess can imply” (93). It is no coincidence, then,
that Jameson’s “national allegory” framework has both been enthusiastically applied (see
Kane)\textsuperscript{21} and emphatically rejected (see Mossman) by Midnight’s Children’s critics: the book
both prompts such a large-scale approach as necessary for conceptualizing an immense nation
like India, while also resisting it as fatalist and potentially dogmatic.

Consequently, Midnight’s Children is concerned not merely with the premise that
“everything is connected” but how to best pursue the question “how far should everything be
connected?” As the narrative proceeds, Saleem has increasing difficulty determining the lengths
to which he should extend his allegory. For instance, when explaining why his ten-year-old self
had sent a letter to Commander Sabarmati revealing the commander’s his wife Lila had been
sleeping with the film producer Homi Catrack—leading in sequence to Lila and Homi’s murder,
the commander’s imprisonment, and Saleem’s filmmaker uncle Hanif committing suicide—
Saleem assigns blame to fated narrative archetypes:
Radha and Krishna, and Rama and Sita, and Laila and Majnu; also (because we are not unaffected by the West) Romeo and Juliet, and Spencer Tracy and Katharine Hepburn. The world is full of love stories, and all lovers are in a sense the avatars of their predecessors. When Lila drove her Hindustan to an address off Colaba Causeway, she was Juliet coming out on to her balcony; when cream-scarfed, gold-shaded Homi sped off to meet her […], he was Leander swimming the Hellespont toward Hero’s burning candle. (297)

None of these love stories, however, is a remotely adequate figure for the relationship of Lila and Homi, as none involves love triangles. The overextension of Saleem’s figuration suggests his struggles with conceptualizing personal agency in a larger context, as at first he tells us, “As for my part in the business, I will not give it a name” (297), using the power of fate to erase his culpability, but only a few pages later he uses it for precisely the opposite reason, declaring himself the commander’s “puppet-master” (300). Neither is true—he has some, not total, responsibility—yet for someone who both feels the importance of understanding his life as imbricated in the national future, but also acutely realizes his own insignificance as only one citizens among hundreds of millions, that idea is difficult to articulate.

An even greater overextension occurs when Saleem notes after his grandfather Aadam Aziz collapses on the road to Pakistan to mourn Hanif that Nehru has fallen sick at around the same time. Recapping the past hundred pages, Saleem thinks:

If I hadn’t wanted to be a hero, Mr. Zagallo would never have pulled out my hair.

If my hair had remained intact, Glandy Keith and Fat Perce wouldn’t have taunted me; Masha Miovic wouldn’t have goaded me into losing my finger. And from my finger flowed blood which was neither-Alpha-nor-Omega, and sent me into
exile; and in exile I was filled with the lust for revenge which led to the murder of Homi Catrack; and if Homi hadn’t died, perhaps my uncle would not have strolled off a roof into the sea-breezes; and then my grandfather would not have gone to Kashmir and been broken by the effort of climbing the Sankara Acharya hill.

And my grandfather was the founder of my family, and my fate was linked by my birthday to that of the nation, and the father of the nation was Nehru. Nehru’s death: can I avoid the conclusion that that, too, was all my fault? (319)

Despite its position at the end of several somewhat more plausible connections, the answer to the last question is obviously “no,” especially since Nehru dies some months after Aadam anyway. The passage, in fact, demonstrates in miniature Saleem’s difficulties with circumscribing the endless web of relations in the manner that Henry James wrote was necessary for any narrative (see Introduction), as a plausible set of local connections gradually extends into a paranoid effusion of cruft too overdetermined to be coherently sustained.

The problem, however, is not simply an excess of figuration. Though Timothy Brennan argues that “Saleem is a culprit not because he fails to resist, or because he conspires for personal gain, but rather because he proliferates metaphor” (98), the narrative’s problems cannot be solved by simply rejecting Saleem’s expansive figurative impulses. Granted, an overuse of figuration does cause real problems for Saleem, most visibly through his allegories’ competition with (and similarity to) Indira Gandhi’s totalitarian view that “India is Indira and Indira is India” (483), which justifies her climactic confinement and sterilization of the Midnight’s Children. However, a Saleem who refused to understand his actions’ figural place within the state would likely end up like The Tin Drum’s Oskar Matzerath, the lifelong Danzig resident who similarly narrates the twentieth-century history of his city in autobiographical terms.
Notably, Oskar notably refuses to adopt any conscious Polish nationalism: he insists there is no connection between his anti-authority agitation, such as his literal refusal to grow up and his disruption of government gatherings with his drumming, and any political motivation, but that he is motivated purely by “private and what is more esthetic reasons” (93). Even when he does link himself to public events, he reveals a total lack of national engagement in doing so, as when he mentions the Nazi “secret weapons” program only to adopt the phrase as a nickname for his glass-shattering voice (290). His deliberate innocence does keep him from helping the Nazis, but it also makes his resistance to them narcissistic and destructive, prompting him toward theft, vandalism, and a near-sociopathic lack of empathy. Such negative consequences might illustrate why Roger Clark writes that *Midnight’s Children*’s national mythos is not “a mere postmodern game. Rather, it derives from the great hope of a nation finding its way toward harmony and tolerance, and from the great fear of collapsing into chaos” (62). In fact, such moments often do provide real insight for Saleem: as Berlatsky points out, in many cases, “Saleem’s explicit references to metaphor imply that they have the potential to reveal reality, not obscure it” (*Real* 121), as with the novel’s “literalized metaphors,” like when Saleem observes that the skin of India’s businessmen grows whiter as the nation’s economy integrates with Western capitalism (204).

The debate over whether Saleem’s figuration is good or bad, of course, misses the point. As an abstract concept, metaphor has neutral value: it can be extremely beneficial or quite dangerous, depending upon how it is used. An extremely expansive figuration, like that between Midnight’s Children and India itself, might be valuable through the way it imagines how native Indian abilities might guide the country toward an otherwise unimaginable independent identity and prosperous future. However, other similarly-scaled allegories, like Saleem’s account of
Nehru’s death, lead only into nonsense. Saleem addresses this problem near the novel’s midpoint:

“Our life, which will be, in a sense, the mirror of our own,” the Prime Minister wrote, obliging me scientifically to face the question: *In what sense?* How, in what terms, may the career of a single individual be said to impinge on the fate of the nation? I must answer in adverbs and hyphens: I was linked to history both literally and metaphorically, both actively and passively, in what our (admirably modern) scientists might term “modes of connection” [...] : actively-literally, passively-metaphorically, actively-metaphorically and passively-literally, I was inextricably entwined with my world. (272-273)

Saleem acknowledges shortly afterward, though, that “the Midnight’s Children Conference [...] never became what I most wanted it to be; we never operated in the first, most significant of the ‘modes of connection.’ The ‘active-literal’ passed us by” (273). That the active-literal mode is the most difficult to achieve, in fact, suggests why Saleem’s figuration is both necessary and dangerous. Since very few individuals in a nation of India’s size can ever have a direct active-literal impact on the whole, effecting change only becomes feasible if one reduces the nation into figurative concepts embodied in specific persons and events.

However, this leads to the basic paradox of modern democracy: giving voice to millions of individuals creates a disorienting cacophony that no one can adequately attend, but restricting those voices to a small number of representatives inevitably concentrates power in an anti-democratic hierarchy and thus deprives the populace of speech. It is not for nothing that several of the novel’s characters are desperate for the country to contain its exploding population, as with Dr. Narlikar and his anti-fertility proselytizing and tetrapod venture (200-202), Indira and
Sanjaya Gandhi and their sterilization program (492-497), and Saleem’s own vision of being “trample[d…], the numbers marching one two three, four hundred million five hundred six, reducing me to specks of voiceless dust […] sucked into the annihilating whirlpool of the multitudes” (533). Not only does population pose logistical and humanitarian problems, it makes the nation impossible to coherently conceive. Even the allegorical representation of India’s hundreds of millions via the hundreds of surviving Midnight’s Children cannot evade this problem: in blurring their voices, Saleem admits that “my narrative could not cope with five hundred and eight-one fully-rounded personalities” (262), which is probably why the telepathic meetings Saleem orchestrates for the group quickly dissolve into a “hundred squalling rows” over objectives, leadership, and personal agendas (292).

Saleem’s failure to be either a representative leader or cognize a vast multiplicity of voices causes him to vacillate between unstable figural systems through the novel’s latter stages. As Ten Kortenaar notes, Saleem sometimes gets turned around to the point where he “insists that national history is as often an allegory of his life as his life is an allegory of national history” (31). For instance, consider his figurative charting of the 1965 Indo-Pakistani war. There is nothing inherently wrong with relating the war figurally to his family, as the trauma of their own displacement from India to Pakistan puts them in good position to experience the divisive and destructive nature of this conflict between the two formerly united states. However, bombarded with both the official Indian and Pakistani media’s allegories of national invincibility, each so overextended as to totally revise reality—“Voice of Pakistan announced the destruction of more aircraft than India had ever possessed; in eight days, All-India Radio massacred the Pakistan Army down to, and considerably beyond, the last man” (388)—Saleem is left no coherent space into which to project his own self, causing him to create another unsustainable allegory in
response: “Let me state this quite unequivocally: it is my firm conviction that the hidden purpose of the Indo-Pakistani war of 1965 was nothing more nor less than the elimination of my benighted family from the face of the earth” (386). He is so unmoored that he believes this claim is a fully *objective* one, arguing that anyone who would “examine the bombing-pattern of that war with an analytical, unprejudiced eye” (386). This is transparently not true, of course: if anyone were to do so, they would likely come up with a Poisson distribution similar to Roger Mexico’s in *Gravity’s Rainbow*, a probabilistic distribution expecting bombs to cluster in apparent patterns, but only as a matter of chance (54-58). Devising a sounder theory under Saleem’s cognitive conditions, however, is not easy: since not only has his own national allegiance been forced to waver between India and Pakistan over the course of the book, but the countries’ national narratives themselves have grown alien and unacceptable to him, it is no wonder that his personal figuration becomes horribly distorted.²⁴

A brain injury caused by an explosion-propelled spittoon, however, causes Saleem to be “cleansed” of his “yearning for importance” (403) at the war’s end, turning him into a meditative Buddha figure with a supernatural sense of smell but no other acknowledgment of worldly or political matters. Yet instead of leading him to enlightenment, this anti-figural attitude prevents him from understanding the larger implications of his actions. When he is inducted into the Pakistani army prior to the 1971 Bangladesh Liberation War, he blithely follows his unit’s orders to covertly kidnap Sheikh Mujib, leader of the independence movement, without any consciousness of what he is doing (409). His inability to conceive himself as a Muslim Pakistani mindlessly hunting down a fellow Muslim Pakistani—or, for that matter, as a patriotic Indian further fragmenting an already fragmented subcontinent—allow him to be used for pernicious nationalist purposes. Saleem understands this when narrating his tale years later, but by that
point it is too late. Reflecting at that point upon a passing vagrant who brags that he can generate a fifteen-inch turd, the narrating Saleem tells us:

> Once, when I was more energetic, I would have wanted to tell his life-story; the hour, and his possession of an umbrella, would have been all the connections I needed to begin the process of weaving him into my life, and I have no doubt that I’d have finished by proving his indispensability to anyone who wishes to understand my life and benighted times; but now I’m disconnected, unplugged, with only epitaphs left to write. (527)

Though any figuration can be taken so far as to become nonsense, the flexibility to extend and contract figures, to consider different blends of concepts before deciding upon one, is extremely valuable. By the novel’s end, though, Saleem has exhausted this ability, his cognitive powers so decimated by three decades of attempting to manage the problem of his country’s size that he lacks the focus to continue his efforts.

Given the wildly divergent evaluations of Saleem’s narrative, the book’s critics don’t seem to have figured out how to manage that problem either. There is an odd contrast between the near unanimity in critical evaluation of *Midnight’s Children* as an aesthetic success, culminating in its victories in the 1993 and 2008 “Booker of Bookers” competitions, and the substantial disagreement over what it actually succeeds in doing. In particular, there is widespread disagreement over whether Saleem, in composing his epic, satisfies what he calls the subcontinent’s “national longing for form” (344). John Su, for instance, believes that *Midnight’s Children* succeeds only inasmuch as Saleem fails, claiming that the novel “rejects the heroic myth as the basis for an epic of India” (548) and “locates in the unrepresentability of the future the possibility of unraveling deterministic national narratives and discovering political
formations that are presently unimaginable” (562). However, despite this, Ten Kortenaar points out that the book “is most often read, inside and outside of India, as a triumphant celebration of the nation and as the first novel commensurate with India” (12). Søren Frank, arguing this point, claims Saleem’s unstable figurations amply demonstrate how “the world itself is in constant motion, open-ended and subject to continuous revision” (197). Perhaps Michael Gorra lays out this problem best, as he on the one hand celebrates how Rushdie presents a new “way to deal with politics on a large scale, rather than in terms of individual ethical dilemmas” (147) but on the other worries that “the whole narrative of *Midnight’s Children* remains so firmly under the thumb of [Rushdie’s] self-regarding style that at times I find it hard to distinguish because the writer’s fantasies on the one hand and the Widow’s on the other, between the book and the totalitarian world it purports to attack” (145). Just as Saleem is so overwhelmed by his nation’s size that he cannot find his place within it, his readers are so overwhelmed by the range of possible figurations he presents that they cannot decide which are or are not adequate to the problems of mapping the contemporary world.

What the book does do is present acutely that predicament, in which the expanding networks comprising our society continue to outpace our ability to conceptualize them. Its cruft is emblematic of all the possible national figurations possible in the contemporary world, and how many of them quickly descend into absurdity. *Midnight’s Children* requires us to consider how far we must allegorize any given event to make it comprehensible, but also where we must cease to allegorize so as not to make nonsense of its individual meaning. As the “two three, four hundred million five hundred six” souls that crush Saleem in its final pages increase to billions, that task only grows more difficult.
Us and Them in *Gravity’s Rainbow*

If it were inevitable that this book’s last chapter would be about allegory and epic, it may have been similarly inevitable that it would end with *Gravity’s Rainbow*. Though any of the preceding four chapters could’ve addressed Pynchon’s masterpiece, since it possesses extremes of high and low textual entropy, presents large amounts of junk information, satirizes so broadly as to be often indistinguishable from that which it mocks, and weaves together plot threads that often lead nowhere, this is a book that demands to be addressed terminally, and with a breadth of scale to which only the allegory and epic are truly appropriate. This is not merely due to its eschatological nature or its sizable cottage industry of commentaries, but because it has that rare property shared by only the greatest books: it turns us all, despite our best efforts, into hypocrites. It does so by vacillating so rapidly between dazzingly profound allegory and absurd conspiracy theory that it reveals, perhaps more strikingly than any other book, how frighteningly inadequate are our interpretive apparatuses for distinguishing the two.

As with *The Wind-Up Bird Chronicle* and *Midnight’s Children*, *Gravity’s Rainbow’s* backdrop is the aftermath of World War II, out of whose demolished global ideologies it attempts to reassemble a new understanding of human civilization. It involves an epic quest, namely American Lt. Tyrone Slothrop’s journey through lawless post-surrender Germany (“the Zone”) in search of a mysterious, apocalyptic rocket called the 00000, which is made up of a synthetic material (“Imipolex-G”) to which he may have been sexually conditioned during infancy by a representative of an evil military-industrial cabal that he dubs “Them.” While fleeing Their pursuit, Slothrop becomes imbricated in the Zone’s numerous cultures and subcultures, as well as their attendant mythological systems, ranging from the Puritan eschatology of Elect and Preterite to Nordic tales of Tannhäuser to invented legends like that of
“Plechazunga, the Pig-Hero who, sometime back in the 10th century, routed a Viking invasion” (577). In this way, the novel figures the shifting borders and uncertain trajectory of the postwar global moment through Slothrop’s own struggle to establish his identity, as might be observed by considering side by side the American’s musing that “maybe for a little while all the fences are down, one road as good as another, the whole space of the Zone cleared, depolarized, and somewhere inside the waste of it a single set of coordinates from which to proceed, without elect, without preterite, without even nationality to fuck it up” (566) and the narrator’s quip that “Slothrop […] is as properly constituted a state as any other in the Zone these days” (295).

This allegorical sensibility, however, as well as Slothrop’s conviction he is at the center of a conspiracy, lead him toward extreme paranoia. Anticipating the narrator’s famous claim that paranoia is “the leading edge of the discovery that everything is connected” (717), Slothrop feels even before he enters the Zone that Their “plot against him has grown” to include almost everyone he encounters, a conspiracy that at times seems to him “monolithic, all-potent” (240). The gradual expansion of Slothrop’s plotting of this conspiracy against him onto ever higher levels of organization is exemplified well by the passage in which he and Blodgett Waxwing infiltrate Shell’s British headquarters to investigate the multinational’s role in the creation of Imipolex-G, finding there “not [Churchill son-in-law and Minister of Supply] Mr. Duncan Sandys cowering before their righteousness […]—but only a rather dull room, business machines arrayed around the walls calmly blinking, files of cards pierced frail as sugar faces.” Subsequently, he thinks:

Duncan Sandys is only a name, a function in this, “How high does sit go?” is not even the right kind of question to be asking, because the organization charts have all been set up by Them, the titles and names filled in by Them, because
Proverbs for Paranoids 3: If they can get you asking the wrong questions, they don’t have to worry about answers.

Slothrop finds he has paused in front of the blue parts list that started all this. How high does it go…ahhhh. The treacherous question is not meant to apply to people at all, but to the hardware! (255)

Even hardware, Slothrop believes, might be conspiring against him. By entering the Zone, he seeks to investigate the very nature of connectedness itself, hoping to better understand the nature of a world that seems to be conspiring against him more and more each moment.

However, how to go about interpreting this vast network of connections, which Leo Bersani claims makes Ulysses look like “play for a child-detective” (187), has caused the novel’s critics four decades’ worth of headaches. One established tradition of Pynchonists read this omniconnectedness in a traditionally epic and allegorical manner, respectively exemplified by Thomas Moore and Kathryn Hume’s claims that Gravity’s Rainbow, especially in the sections set in the Zone, generates a “style of connectedness” based in Jungian archetypes or a syncretic “mythography” of all Western culture. The other major tradition, however, suggests that if there is value in how the Zone has been “cleared, depolarized,” then book must instead constitute a “denial of any encompassing patterns” (A. Friedman 69) such as those that allegory and epic presuppose. Calling critics like Hume and Moore “good paranoid readers,” for instance, McHale claimed that while Gravity’s Rainbow “engages our paranoid tendencies as readers,” it “also solicits our participation at a higher, reflexive level of reading [...] by confronting us with irreducibly ambiguous, or, better, multiguous features” (Constructing 113). Either the novel generates the postwar era’s most rigorously structured figural narrative system, that is, or it is a quintessentially uninterpretable postmodern text. Even criticism attempting to reconcile these
two positions often does so unsatisfyingly, as with Deborah Madsen’s analysis of allegory in Pynchon, which insists that the book’s “allegory works subversively from within, to expose the operations of a dominant signified” (25) but also acknowledges that “the possibility remains that a signified invisible order may reside in reality and that absolute meanings may be revealed amid the free play of allegoric signs” (12-13). For all her nuance, she cannot finally say whether the book’s allegories are “a construction or a cryptomorph” (111), falling back on the late twentieth-century critic’s standard thesis that Pynchon simply “problematize[s] the whole issue” (25).

Yet this division reflects less two distinct interpretations than two starting points tending toward the same contradiction. On the one hand, those in the poststructuralist camp, like Peter Cooper, claim that within the book there is “no stable perspective from which we can know and describe the world” (219) because it “defies a 1 or 0 method of reading” (212), yet they often end up inscribing a rigid allegorical binary anyway, by insisting there is “clear internal evidence of an evil and manipulative cabal,” thus reifying a total Us vs. Them structure (161). Conversely, though those in the first camp often claim that “creative paranoia” is most valuable for how it allows us to identify and oppose Their system of “synthesis, control, and rationalization” (Khapertian 139) with a “We-system” that “does not proceed rationally […] but […] appears to function, at least on one level, simply by violating the behavior They would predict” (Siegel 19), this is no more logically consistent, because as Hofstadter wrote, “the paranoid mentality is far more coherent than the real world, since it leaves no room for mistakes, failures, or ambiguities. It is, if not wholly rational, at least intensely rationalistic” (36). Indeed, generating schemes heroically pitting oneself in a cosmic battle against a demonized Other is characteristic not of those seeking to sympathize with a downtrodden preterite, Hofstadter points out, but “the megalomaniac view of oneself as the Elect, wholly good, abominably persecuted” (38).
Regardless of the position with which we begin, that is, *Gravity’s Rainbow* tends to twist it back against itself. I have written elsewhere about how this emerges in critical treatments of the novel’s preterite vs. elect binary, especially with regards to the head of British paranormal research at the White Visitation, Dr. Edward Pointsman (“Character”). To address these issues in the novel as a whole, though, will require a bolder claim about how to approach the novel’s paranoia, one that, though it has been gestured toward by a number of critics, has not been fully embraced: “They” do not actually exist.\(^{27}\) This might seem a ridiculous assertion, as They are referred to by many characters throughout the narrative, but nevertheless, They are mere “pasteboard,” and being able to acknowledge that while still navigating the book is probably the most serious challenge for *Gravity’s Rainbow*’s readers.

Few critics have actually been able to explain exactly what is meant by “Them.” Most are forced to describe Them in the way one of Pynchon’s best early readers, Tony Tanner, does here:

> What emerges from the book is a sense of a force or system—something, someone, referred to simply as “the Firm” or “They”—which is actively trying to bring everything to zero and beyond, trying to institute a world of nonbeing, an operative kingdom of death, covering the organic world with a world of paper and plastic and transforming all natural resources into destructive power and waste: the rocket and the debris around it. “They” are precisely nonspecific, unlocatable. There is always the possibility of a They behind the They, a plot behind the plot; the quest to identify “Them” sucks the would-be identifier into the possibility of an endless regression. But, whatever Their source and origin, They are dedicated to annihilation. This is a vision of entropy as an extremely powerful worldwide, if not cosmos-wide, enterprise. (“Games” 134-135)
I am reminded of Foucauldians discussing “power,” wherein a critic’s acknowledged inability to define a term does not limit the confidence with which it is wielded. This characteristic fuzziness, though, leads Tanner and many other Pynchonists into error. Most importantly, Tanner wrongly identifies Them with the Firm, even though the latter is only ever used to refer specifically to the British intelligence bureaucracy (T. Moore 92), while Them is used to refer not only to the Firm but several other real or hypothesized power structures, such as the German military bureaucracy (see 406-428). The distinction is important, because while the Firm is up to all sorts of objectionable activities, their objectives are often directly opposed to those of their German counterparts and other forces construed by various characters as part of Them. No wonder Joseph Tabbi grouses that “the paranoid plot-makings attributed to the catchall terms ‘Them’ and ‘The Firm’ are less successful, and generally less important, than are the more particular forms and methods of control that modern technology instills in us” (Postmodern 89): it’s not clear that the term “Them” means anything specific at all.

In other words, while there are clearly “conspiracies here or there,” in Hofstadter’s words—for example, Slothrop’s uncle Lyle Bland definitely conspires with German scientist Laszlo Jamf to perform experiments upon the infant Slothrop (85-86, 288-291), and Pointsman conspires to trace Slothrop into the Zone (see 230-231)—and furthermore while those individual conspiracies are often “connected” through corporations like IG Farben—who, for instance, buy some of Bland’s companies and incorporate the work done on Slothrop into the German war effort (290)—whether these connections can be mapped as a conspiracy of Them constituting “the motive force in historical events” is not nearly so clear. Even in passages where it seems like “the existence of the opposing They-system and We-system is asserted” by the narrator himself (Kolbuszewska 125), the evidence is not as straightforward as it might seem. Consider
the assault on Shell quoted above. As with most of the novel, the narrator does not speak directly here but uses a loose indirect discourse, melding his voice with the characters’ thoughts (see Hägg, *Narratologies* 93-121; Hardack 94). (This often goes unrecognized, causing the misconception that the novel has flat characters, when it actually constitutes one of the most profound depictions of consciousness in all literature.) The final paragraph confirms that the passage’s characterization of Them comes primarily not from the narrator but Slothrop’s imagination, which is often barely reliable for perceiving what’s directly in front of him. In fact, Slothrop explicitly refers to Them here not to exhibit any epiphany about Their true nature but simply to admit he has no idea who or what They are.

The slipperiness with which Slothrop refers to “Them” increases when he enters the Zone. For instance, when he takes up with a bohemian Berlin collective led by Säure Bummer, he begins making wildly off-base political readings of the objects he encounters, such as that a poster of Stalin is really of his ex-girlfriend and that the Reichstag is a defecating King Kong (374). Looking at photos from recent Allied conferences, he thinks:

> Whoever it was, posing in the black cape at Yalta with the other leaders, conveyed beautifully the sense of Death’s wings, rich, soft and black as the winter cape, prepared a nation of starers for the passing of Roosevelt, a being They assembled, a being They would dismantle.

> Someone here is cleverly allowing for parallax, scaling, shadows all going the right way and lengthening with the day—but no, Säure can’t be real, no more than these dark-clothed extras waiting in queues for some hypothetical tram, some two slices of sausage (sure, sure), the dozen half-naked kids racing in and out of this burned tenement so amazingly detailed—They sure must have the budget, all
right. Look at this desolation, all built then hammered back into pieces, ranging body-size down to powder (please order by Gauge Number), as that well-remembered fragrance Noon in Berlin, essence of human decay, is puffed on the set by a hand, lying big as a flabby horse up some alley, pumping its giant atomizer…. (380)

Even the most paranoid critic ought to admit this is interpretation is dangerously narcissistic, its allegorical reading of the ruins Berlin as signifying Their manipulation of Slothrop deriving not from real knowledge about how “everything is connected” but from Slothrop’s scrambled mental state. And in fact, if we look through the novel, nearly every mention of Them similarly derives more from psychological needs of specific characters rather than any reliable narrative statement, as with the mentally-broken German physicist Franz Pökler’s suspicion that his superiors are replacing his daughter Ilse with lookalikes on her annual visit, which he admits he has no way of determining (424-425); Herero Oberst Enzian’s methamphetamine-driven speculation that “this War was never political at all […] secretly, it was being dictated instead by the needs of technology,” usually quoted without his subsequent rejection of this belief, as it “puts you in with the neutered, brother” (529-530); and even Mexico’s rationalization of his ineffective resistance to his superiors that “The Man has a branch office in each of our brains” (727).

Given their outspoken distaste for “binary thinking,” why do so many of the novel’s critics go along with this Us vs. Them framework? A telling hint might come through Slothrop’s worry that the manipulative, well-connected Bummer might be one of Them, a thought he rejects a moment later because he feels Bummer “can’t possibly be on the Bad Guys’ side. Whoever They are, Their game has been to extinguish, not remind” (445). That logic is quite flimsy—Hilary Bounce’s “reminders” about Shell’s political connections helped Slothrop theorize
“Them” in the first place (243-247)—so it ought to draw our attention to the phrase “the Bad Guys,” a term that, like so much of Slothrop’s consciousness, derives from genre novels and Hollywood movies, where all persons, instead of possessing the complex mix of motivations common in life and literary fiction, may be neatly divided into Good Guys working for society’s best interests and Bad Guys working against it. This worldview, of course, is almost always condemned by literary critics as oversimplified, liable to encourage violent jingoism and erode readers’ capacity for empathy, yet as this passage should make clear, it maps directly onto the Them-Us division assented to by most critics. They exist because, like Slothrop, Pynchonists want to be able to identify the Bad Guys.

Given his situation, Slothrop may be forgiven for that desire. After all, he has just discovered his father and uncle have “sold [him] to IG Farben like a side of beef” (291), learned from Stephen Dodson-Truck that he’s being used by a British intelligence community with which he had thought himself allied (214-223), and gotten chased from Nordhausen by his own country’s military under the command of Major Marvy (313-319): his only real ally in the Zone has been the German Geli Tripping, lover of the Soviet officer Tcitcherine (334-336). Since his sense of national and kinship allegiances have totally collapsed, it’s understandable that, for the sake of his mental stability, he would merge multiple agents exploiting him into one group and subsequently imagine himself at the center of a conspiracy. It is not until late in the novel, when Seaman Bodine tells him “Everything is some kind of a plot, man,” and Solange adds “And yes but, the arrows are pointing in all different ways” (613) that he is capable of realizing that “the Zone can sustain many other plots besides those polarized upon himself” (614).

Elaborating upon Solange’s point, we might imagine the forces against Slothrop as several converging vectors, each characterized by opposing x-y components and a small but
uniformly downward $z$ component; the vectors themselves are quite distinct, but *as experienced at the point where they converge*, the $x$-$y$ components cancel each other out and resolve into one strong downward force that acts *as if* it were a vector on its own, which is doubtless how Slothrop sees Them. Critics, though, should not mistake this abstract resolution for the real vectors. Granted, in a novel as elaborate as *Gravity’s Rainbow*, we will often need to simplify that which is complex: as H. Porter Abbott notes, “all events, real or imagined, are infinitely decompressible […] any event contains a number of events, each one of which contains an even finer number of events, and so on” (“Narrating” 10), so it is often necessary to compress toward “narratable linearity, which is the domain in which our minds were designed to abide” (“Narrating” 13). However, as Abbott notes, if we go too far in compressing events whose “interconnectedness” is “detailed and complex,” we will end up with a model that is “either false or seriously misleading” (“Narrating” 12). That is exactly what Slothrop does at his most paranoid moments. Even though the novel’s complexities will often drive us to a similarly baffled state, we need to avoid that tendency.

However, refusing to allegorize entirely and indulging instead Fran Mason’s view that “there may be no moral and that the events were ‘just a bunch of stuff that happened’” (169) leads to equally serious cognitive problems. For instance, after leaving Bummer to head for Cuxhaven seeking a discharge, Slothrop witnesses this “great frontierless streaming”:

Volksdeutsch from across the Oder, moved out by the Poles and headed for the camp at Rostock, Poles fleeing the Lublin regime, others going back home, the eyes of both parties, when they do meet, hooded behind cheekbones, eyes much older than what’s forced them into moving, Estonians, Letts, and Lithuanians trekking north again, all their wintry wool in dark bundles, shoes in tatters, songs
too hard to sing, talk pointless, Sudetens and East Prussians shuttling between Berlin and the DP camps in Mecklenburg, Czechs and Slovaks, Croats and Serbs, Tosks and Ghegs, Macedonians, Magyars, Vlachs, Circassians, Spaniols, Bulgars stirred and streaming over the surface of the Imperial cauldron, colliding, shearing alongside for miles, sliding away, numb, indifferent to all momenta but the deepest, the instability too far below their itchy feet to give a shape to, white wrists and ankles incredibly wasted poking from their striped prison-camp pajamas, footsteps light as waterfowl’s in this inland dust, caravans of Gypsies, axles or linchpins failing, horses dying, families leaving the vehicles beside the roads for others to come live in a night, a day, over the white hot Autobahns, trains full of their own hanging off the cars that lumber overhead, squeezing aside for army convoys when they come through, White Russians sour with pain on the way west, Kazakh ex-P/Ws marching east, Wehrmacht veterans form other parts of old Germany, foreigners to Prussia as any Gypsies, carrying their old packs […] (558-559)

I imagine most readers skim this passage. (You probably did just now.) With the exception of a few vivid images, it is little more than a list of twenty-three Central and Eastern European ethnicities in stock images of displacement. That it is described so flatly and in one sentence (which, incidentally, continues a few more lines) seems to characterize it as pure perception, filtered by minimal narrative compression or figuration. That approach prevents Slothrop from committing his earlier paranoid absurdities, but also keeps him from creating meaningful patterns or illuminating synecdoches. When Slothrop uses this list format elsewhere, in fact, it is primarily to describe waste products—e.g., “rusted beer cans, rubbers yellow with preterite seed,
Kleenex wadded to brain shapes hiding preterite snot, preterite tears, newspapers, broken glass, pieces of automobile” (638)—about which the narrator laments our inability to “make sense out of, to find the meanest sharp sliver of truth in so much replication, so much waste…” (601).

This anti-paranoid way of perceiving the landscape appears to be a backlash to the cognitive unsustainability of Slothrop’s earlier paranoia. After several weeks in which his desire to discover the truth about the 00000 is overtaken by moment-to-moment survival on his assorted journeys with Bummer, he realizes that he’s forgotten what he’s doing in the Zone at all:

Slothrop perceives that he is losing his mind. If there is something comforting—religious, if you want—about paranoia, there is still also anti-paranoia, where nothing is connected to anything, a condition not many of us can bear for long. Well right now Slothrop feels himself sliding onto the anti-paranoid part of his cycle, feels the whole city around him going back roofless, vulnerable, uncentered as he is, and only pasteboard images now of the Listening Enemy left between him and the west Sky.

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…. (441)

Anti-paranoia, in other words, is as mentally destructive as paranoia. Its lack of selective differentiations renders the subject into something like Borges’s Ireneo Funes, who lives in “the teeming world of […] nothing but particulars” and, as we saw in the Introduction, is consequently “not very good at thinking” (137). Slothrop’s perception that he is losing his mind is, in that sense, quite accurate.

Considered as an abstract dilemma, of course, paranoia and anti-paranoia present something of a false choice. As Molly Hite has argued, “the contradictory of ‘everything is
‘not everything is connected,’ a proposition that leaves ample room for the possibility that some things are connected, and in innumerable different ways” (Ideas 17). There are indeed options available for us on the continuum between paranoia and anti-paranoia: it is quite possible to be moderately paranoid and become more or less so as the situation warrants. However, Slothrop faces not just an epistemological problem regarding his paranoia but a cognitive one: he must decide not only where to place himself on the paranoid continuum but also how to determine where he is on that continuum at any given moment. To discover only in adulthood that one had been used in infancy as a test subject for a notorious psychological experiment might suggest that one has gone through life insufficiently paranoid, but to assume similar paranoid links regarding everything one sees will quickly lead to madness. Consequently, Slothrop’s level of paranoia vacillates wildly in respond to feedback from his environment, unable to find an approach that consistently works.

These fluctuations, after all, are what cause Slothrop’s eventual disintegration, not any aggression by Them. When we are told midway through Slothrop’s journey in the Zone that he “has begun to thin, to scatter,” the proximate cause is explained in terms of Mondaugen’s Law, that “Personal density […] is directly proportional to temporal bandwidth” or that “The more you dwell in the past and in the future, the thicker your bandwidth, the more solid your persona. But the narrower your sense of Now, the more tenuous you are” (517). Fundamentally, this principle is about attention: the longer one maintains focus, the more stable one is, but as attention span diminishes, “It may get to where you’re having trouble remembering what you were doing five minutes ago, or even—as Slothrop now—what you’re doing here” (517). Paranoia, conversely, extends temporal bandwidth by locating one within a longstanding geopolitical framework. Many Pynchon critics valorize Slothrop’s scattering as a victorious evasion of the System (see
Bersani 195, Madsen 102, Pöhlmann 355-358), but to my knowledge, none have sought to, like Slothrop, “spend whole days naked, ants crawling up his legs, butterflies lighting on his shoulders, watching the life on the mountain, getting to know shrikes and capercaillie, badgers and marmots” (635), incapable of communication even with one’s closest friends (755-757). Logistically, there is nothing difficult about deciding to live this way: it is simply cognitively intolerable, a state of dissolution so total that one might as well have been hit by the 00000.

The sense of national and spiritual identity provided by epic and allegory, of course, has long been a method of avoiding these problems. That is probably why “the one ghost-feather” of Slothrop’s self that is last to dissolve is “America. Poor asshole, he can’t let her go. She’s whispered love me too often to him in his sleep, vamped insatiably his waking attention with come-hitherings, incredible promises” (635). While there are any number of potentially pathological things about nationalism, it is also the most powerful concept through which, as Anderson notes, “pasts are restored, fellowships are imagined, and futures dreamed” (154). Though Sascha Pöhlmann is not totally incorrect to claim that “the Zone as a textual device can be used as an exemplary space for postnationalism” (286), he is also right to add that this is not necessarily a positive thing, because “The Zone is born out of war, the migrants that traverse it are far from migrating by choice, and its openness is only the result of continent-wide destruction” (292). The only thing separating the “great frontierless streaming” from pure paratactic gibberish, after all, is its residual national divisions, which may also be all that makes it bearable for those traversing it.

Can one conceive an allegorical system adequate to these challenges that does not turn into an overdetermined paranoia? The “We-System” created by Slothrop’s fellow functionaries in British intelligence, the Counter-Force,29 seeks to do so. As Pynchon’s source R. D. Laing
once remarked, “The invention of Them creates Us, and We may require to invent Them to re-invent Ourselves” (60-61). In other words, the Counter-Force does not rebel against a preexisting Them but allegorically creates Them as its raison d’être. This self-definition, though, dooms the Counter-Force to be “schizoid” and “double-minded,” as Mexico reflects (727), though not for the reasons he thinks: since the Counter-Force constructs Their rationality as the enemy, its paranoid rebellion forces it into performing a stilted and hypocritically rational irrationality, as when Osbie Feel tells a fellow member of We, “They’re the rational ones. We piss on Their rational arrangements,” while belly-dancing for no particular reason (651). This tension is likely why the Counter-Force tries to stabilize its figural cosmos via the disintegrated Slothrop, whose recovery is one of its formative acts. However, as a spokesperson for the Counter-Force says decades later, “Opinion even at the start was divided. It was one of our fatal weaknesses. […] Some called [Slothrop] a ‘pretext.’ Other felt he was a genuine, point-for-point microcosm” (753). They agree that he is to be considered figuratively, but cannot decide what use to make of him, as epic hero or allegorical figura. The Counter-Force’s inability to resolve its contradictions dooms it to incoherence.

A more successful approach may not exist, but if it does, it must be based in a method of figuration adequate to the book’s complexities, able to consistently follow the meaningful connections while ignoring those that descend into cruft. I am not sure there are general principles to be articulated regarding how to do that, so close in appearance are meaningful and meaningless figural narratives. Inasmuch as our minds slowly form and revise them while reading the book, though, such principles become more possible. The role of criticism on Gravity’s Rainbow, then, ought to be how to slowly and collectively explain how to determine which of the book’s figurations are valuable for understanding our place in the contemporary
world and which are not, as well as which of those moments that refuse figuration productively disassociate us from totalitarian allegory and which simply render themselves unreadable.

For instance, how should we interpret the book’s use of Tarot? As with all fortune-telling, Tarot is based in a highly figurative system that promises its subject access, via apparently unrelated signs, to a larger Pattern. Also as with all fortune-telling, it is nonsense: as professional psychic Ian Rowland writes, Tarot and other forms of “cold reading” are “the biggest, most enduring, and most popular scam of all time” (9). Consider, for example, the Tarot drawn up for Major Weissmann, the mastermind behind the 00000: his cards include the Tower, which we are told resonates phallicly with the Rocket’s destructive portents; the Queen of Swords, which alludes to his queerness; and the King of Cups, which previews his future as a von-Braun-like sage in America (760-764). This reading feels insightful, but as Rowland notes, “the actual significance each card is deemed to have [in a Tarot reading] is irrelevant. A serious book on interpreting tarot cards may tell you that ‘The Tower’ signifies change in existing relationships. However, the cold reader can attribute whatever significance she wants to any card […]. All that matters is that it sounds convincing” (75). 31 That Weissmann’s spread is actually meaningless might be best seen in the card representing his future, The World: though according to A. E. Waite’s standard guide this card represents “the state of the soul in the consciousness of Divine Vision, reflected from the self-knowing spirit” (156), Pynchonists generally interpret the World to mean precisely the opposite of that—“there is no escape, no transcendence” (Tatham 587; see also Weisenburger, Companion 374-375)—because to associate The World’s positive transcendence with Weissmann would be contrary to their view of him as the concatenation of Western evil. If the cards may simply be interpreted to reinforce whatever preconceived notions either narrator or reader holds, they tell us nothing: it would be
simple enough, after all, to create a convincing reading about Weissmann from almost any possible Tarot spread, or to re-read these cards as describing literary characters with nothing in common with Weissmann.\(^3\) As the passage acknowledges, Tarot’s allegories, like Slothrop’s hallucinated Them, are “pasteboard” (763).

Yet we cannot entirely dismiss the Tarot session as mere mumbo-jumbo, even though it comes from a narrator who, during this passage, reveals himself zoned out smoking in front of the TV after failing twice to get his preferred spread (752),\(^3\) because some cards do present intriguing lines of thought. For instance, we are told that the card representing Weissmann himself—the industrious Page of Pentacles—is likely identical to that of his enslaved lover from his days as a colonial administrator, Enzian (763). This is counter-intuitive, at odds with a rigid Them-Us division, but there are real links between the two, dramatized in their parallel quests to understand the meaning of the Rocket. Neither the card nor its reader has authority to identify the pair, of course, but our imagination of a blended space that they jointly occupy might not dissipate so quickly even upon realizing that. Furthermore, if we dismissed Tarot, should we do the same for references to the mythic-religious system from which much of it derives, Kabbalah? As with many esoteric systems, much of Kabbalah appears ridiculous to the uninitiated: when we read “Kabbalist spokesman Steve Edelman,” tell us, while high on Thorazine, that “although the Rocket countdown appears to be serial, it actually conceals the Tree of Life, which must be apprehend all at once, together, in parallel” (768), we probably ought to roll our eyes and skim ahead to the actual launch. Yet having earlier heard Ensign Morituri’s story about how prior to the war German actress Margherita Erdmann, one of Slothrop’s contacts in the Zone and among those connected to the 00000, had nearly sacrificed a small Jewish boy under the guise of
“Shekhinah, queen, daughter, bride, and mother of God” (486), we might take more seriously the relationship of mythic archetypes and human behavior.

The problems with evaluating such figurative systems come to a head in the final scene, in which the Imipolex-G-coated 00000 (loaded with Weissmann’s sex slave Gottfried) is fired from Germany on Easter 1945 and reappears in 1970s California. The scene describes how the 00000’s fuel is ignited, launching the rocket parabolically upward until the fuel runs out, at which point its trajectory quickly decays, freezing the rocket at its highest point momentarily before it begins to fall. This arc is determined by real and unavoidable physical laws, which, inasmuch as they unite all action into a universal pattern, might justly be called allegorical. However, the narrator builds further allegories on top of these. He states “This ascent will be betrayed to Gravity,” echoing earlier, apocalyptic allegorizations of scattering and heat death as portending the species’s collapse, and his subsequent “The victim, in bondage to falling, rises on a promise, a prophecy, of Escape” characterizes the rocket’s propulsive force as a figure for humanity’s attempts to surmount it, with the moment of suspension in between (“The first star hangs between his feet”) serving as something like enlightenment (774-775). These additional figurations, though, are not so ineluctable as the physical equations. The latter feeling of transcendence is rooted at least as much in purely biological unease at the imagination of complex natural and synthetic forces working in concert upon one’s body, and on a larger scale, the destruction of one theater by one rocket does not necessarily portend any more cosmic destruction. On the other hand, asked to imagine the planet from a heretofore unseen perspective, it is hard not to think about what new or terrible knowledge might be gained from it, nor how the 00000’s real analogues contributed to postwar America’s two most sublime
creations, the space shuttle and the ICBM, which bear within them many of our postwar era’s largest-scale hopes and fears about who we are and how we relate to the universe.

In considering this final image, we should keep in mind that, despite the long line of Pynchon criticism that blames the destruction that the 00000’s landing heralds on synthetic military-industrial control, the novel’s two most common tropes for apocalypse, gravity and entropy, are entirely natural. It is not rationalist analysis but nature that is the true source of death, in which none are elect and all are preterite, everything destined to be reduced eventually to undifferentiated particles. What exists otherwise are competing allegories that attempt to circumvent this principle. They are not all equally valid: some are so necessary to conceiving the world that we might as well call them true, while others are so contradictory, constricting, or destructive that we must call them false. Managing the spectrum between the two is the great challenge of human civilization, and as society becomes increasingly complicated, we need to become increasingly adept at filtering which of these to allow to orient our attention and which to dispatch.

Famously, McHale claimed that the greatest difficulty in reading fictions like *Gravity’s Rainbow* is their irresolvable ontological conflicts between different diegetic planes (*Postmodernist* 10), but if *Gravity’s Rainbow*’s reality were simply indeterminate, the book could be dismissed as one incoherent novel among many. Instead, the book presents us with a more difficult set of contradictions, those within our own modes of cognizing the world. Whether we perceive reality through the frames of religious or scientific epistemology, through universalist or relativist morality, through the Left or the Right, no matter how sound it appears when we are not reading the book, it will appear all too visibly inadequate when we do, its inconsistencies and holes dragged into the open and exposed. Though McHale has at times
implied that postmodern fiction “post-cognitive” (*Postmodernist* 10), this problem is very much a cognitive one, and no book raises it more profoundly than *Gravity’s Rainbow*, the exemplary experimental work of figural narrative systems, the subtlest distributor of cruft in our fiction, and the greatest of mega-novels.
Conclusion—The Fate of the Mega-Novel

The past five chapters have analyzed how we process text in the mega-novel, ranging from its sentence-level lacunae up to its macro-scale figurations of nation and world. Given how utterly mega-novel text overwhelms our limited working memory and how often it dissolves its most important text into a large amount of cruft, I have argued that this requires us to hone our ability to modulate attention to an extremely fine degree, filtering the latter so as to better perceive the former. Furthermore, through my analyses of specific mega-novels, I hope to have demonstrated that there is no single attentional mode optimal for all literary texts, and that one must frequently switch modes, sometimes drastically, so as to best apprehend what one reads: some passages should be processed closely and slowly, while others should be read more quickly; some are best read distantly, while others are best passed over entirely. Refining this procedure can be cognitively beneficial, I believe, because learning how to modulate attention in the mega-novel’s controlled environment will allow us to apply this ability to the more unrestrained cascades of information we regularly encounter in our everyday lives.

Having made this argument in its particulars over the past several hundred pages, I would like now to articulate a few general conclusions. First, I would like to extrapolate some practical pedagogical implications. As N. Katherine Hayles suggests in her essay on hyper and deep attention, many university professors, afraid of boring their students, are reporting an increased reluctance to assign novels of any length (Hayles, “Hyper” 188), and since mega-novels have always clashed with what one of my graduate professors termed the Economy of Course Syllabi—approximated by Mark O’Connell’s quip, “Why commit yourself to one gigantic classic when you can read a whole lot of small classics in the same period of time?”—there is reason to worry that mega-novels may start to fall out of literature courses entirely, save a small
handful that can justify an entire semester’s focus. While this trend is understandable, I think there is reason to push against it. As I pointed out in the Introduction, literary education has long been principally concerned with the training of attention—a point we might remember, incidentally, when taking up our periodic defenses of the humanities—and while other literary genres have their own unusual relationships to that crucial element of cognition, the mega-novel, as I have shown throughout this book, pressures its nuances more than any other.

How to teach mega-novels so as to maximize this impact is a more complicated matter. Doubtless, the problem admits a variety of solutions, whose success will vary based on the particular teacher, students, and mega-novel. However, I hope that this book has at least demonstrated that in the classroom setting, mega-novel difficulty should not simply be papered over. Instead, it needs to be foregrounded and discussed, with the frustration and boredom it produces in students both acknowledged and validated. Those responses are not mere obstacles in the paths’ of students’ understanding, but the most vital effect mega-novels produce. The strategy I alluded to in Chapter 2 of allowing students to skip *Moby-Dick*’s whaling chapters, then, is half astute and half misguided: it understands how these chapters will bore students and are often a bit pointless, but misses how important they are to shaping attention. When one’s students complain of being bored with a mega-novel, one should not simply try to work around those passages, or for that matter grouse about students’ unwillingness to commit sufficient effort to the book or their deficient knowledge of, say, the prerequisite economics and world history to fully appreciate it. One should take it, instead, as the starting point from which to examine students’ cognitive processes and gradually alter them so that they can better attend the passages that warrant attention.
Second, I’d like to address in a broader context some points I have already articulated in piecemeal fashion regarding critical misconceptions about mega-novels. One is the problem caused by the Reader’s Guide approach, the view that everything in a mega-novel can be understood as deeply meaningful once one has corrected one’s ignorance of its allusions and paid close attention to its text, which will allow a labyrinthine but lucid structure to be deciphered. For one—as I painfully learned during a summer spent at a publishing house vetting lengthy, unsolicited fantasy manuscripts, many of which came supplemented with obsessively-detailed maps and appendices—simply because a book contains an extremely complicated fictional world does not mean, necessarily, that puzzling out that world is worth anyone’s time: there needs to be more to a mega-novel than gratuitous elaboration. Of course, I do not dispute the tremendous service done by the major mega-novel Reader’s Guides—those, for instance, by Steven Moore, Steven Weisenburger, Greg Carlisle, the entire Joyce industry, etc.—in systematically articulating ways in which parts of their text that many of us might otherwise have failed to give much notice can be more closely attended. However, we must realize that many readers’ difficulties in understanding mega-novels are at least as much caused by paying too much attention in the wrong places, to passages whose apparent connections never end up coming to fruition, and over whose surface mega-novel veterans have learned to skim. This view needs to acknowledge that mega-novel excess is often simply insignificant.

Another misconception is the critique that mega-novels’ outsized scope exhibits an overweening and “totalizing” ambition, which readers in an enlightened, pluralist society should reject. This view has always been inherently self-contradictory: if one is going to imagine what it means to live in a heterogeneous, diffuse environment, rather than a provincial, blinkered one, one’s fictional world needs the breadth and scope to match it. As Italo Calvino wrote of the
literature of “multiplicity,” “Overambitious projects may be objectionable in many fields, but not in literature. Literature remains alive only if we set ourselves immeasurable goals, far beyond all hope of achievement. Only if poets and writers set themselves tasks that no one else dares imagine will literature continue to have a function” (112). I will add that literature is exempt from these dangers of ambition because, by its very fictionality, it can never assert the truth of any interpretive system, ethics, or epistemology. Its value comes through the range of thought it helps make possible, and mega-novels, by exploring the possibilities of imagination as widely as they can, do this better than any other genre.

However, we can only appreciate this multiplicity in a manner apposite to our minds’ limited channel capacity. The poststructuralist perspective that we should celebrate mega-novels for their anti-hierarchical subversion of order and flux—inspired, in many cases, by Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari’s concept of the rhizome, an approach to “multiplicity” in which “There are no points or positions […] There are only lines” (8), making it “open and connectable in all of its dimensions” (12), because it “has neither subject nor object, only determinations, magnitudes, and dimensions” (8) and consequently rejects any “hierarchical systems”(16)—is also misconceived. Given the unimaginably numerous stimuli we encounter in every waking moment of our lives, we have no choice but to simplify them into points, and once we have done so, we must hierarchize them by paying them different levels of attention based on their perceived importance. If you did not do this, you could not prioritize the words being spoken to you by a friend over those of a passerby, or the book in your hands over the patch of air beside it; indeed, you could not even distinguish your friend’s words from the constant hum of noise generated by the world, nor the book from surrounding atmospheric particles. Lines without points, after all, are not a multiplicity, but simply a mass of sameness. In the best
scenario, you would end up like Funes the Memorious and merely incapable of thought; in the worst, you would lose all capacity for conscious thought. If Jesse Prinz is correct to claim that we are only conscious of that to which we have modulated our attention (89), in fact, in a very basic way, consciousness is hierarchy: it is our knowledge of the stimuli that we have decided are worth paying attention to as opposed to our ignorance of stimuli we have decided are not. Our choice is not between constructing hierarchical versus non-hierarchical structures: it is between hierarchizing well and hierarchizing poorly, and as with all things, those who refuse to admit the nature of the choice are likely to end up in the second group.

Yet if the poststructuralist conception of mind is not adequate to cognizing the information age, what model is? Hayles, examining this problem with respect to *Infinite Jest*, writes that “nothing less than a reconceptualization of subjectivity can offer a solution” (693), because the novel’s events show that “the idea of an autonomous liberal subject can be a recipe for disaster in a world densely interconnected with interlocking complex systems” (696), suggesting we must shape our minds more along the lines established by communal institutions like AA or the Enfield Tennis Academy (693-695). As demonstrated in Chapter 2, however, these models evacuate subjectivity of its critical faculties, rendering it extremely vulnerable to exploitation. What is more interesting about Hayles’s argument, though, is its relationship to her more recent concerns about students’ limited attention spans and tendency toward ADHD. As I mentioned in the Introduction, ADHD is not primarily defined as an inherent incapacity for attention, but an inability to “self-regulate” attention—and “self-regulation,” of course, has long been a term frequently associated by critics of Hayles’s persuasion with the “autonomous liberal subject” whom she critiques.
One always must be careful of transferring terminology across disciplines, but is it entirely off-base to say that the poststructuralist subject has ADHD? There is some research, after all, linking ADHD symptoms with the types of creativity poststructuralists prize, theorizing that an “inability to filter out information [...] makes these individuals constantly open to much more information, increasing the chances of them coming up with an original recombination of information” (Healey and Rucklidge 422). Despite the obvious possible benefits of such a cognitive framework, however, I trust that anyone who has long dealt with ADHD-diagnosed persons understands the serious cognitive drawbacks that accompany this perpetual openness, primarily its susceptibility to distraction and incapacity for inhibition.

Is there any other hypothetical construct for subjectivity better able to critically manage, filter, and modulate through information overload? And if not, can it be that after decades of theoretical assault within the academy, it turns out we actually need the autonomous liberal subject after all? It seems to me that this may be the case, because so far as I can tell, no other model of subjectivity is capable of the attentional modulations required to make of the mind something more than a mere repository and replicator of memes, powerless over their transit and absolutely at their mercy. If it will mollify objections, let us say that this status is not a given, that it must be built gradually over time, and furthermore that it can never really be fully achieved, only approached. It cannot, however, be curtly dismissed, least of all in the context of the mega-novel: while Borges might have once thought that only someone with Funes’s capacities for memory could read a book like *Ulysses* (qted. in Quian Quiroga 12-14),² for the reasons I have articulated, the task is probably best undertaken by a mind not totally open to stimuli but one with maximum capacity for controlled shifts in modes of processing.
To rigorously argue this point would obviously require far more analysis than could be contained in my remaining space. I will end instead by illustrating this speculation with two quick stories that happened to bookend the composition of this work. In 2011, around the time I began, the IBM computer program Watson appeared on an episode of the quiz show *Jeopardy!* handily defeating two of the series’s most successful champions. I imagine this came as no shock to those conversant with recent developments in A.I., but I (like, I suspect, many humanists) was somewhat surprised, as I had not realized that computers could now not only process encyclopedic text with incredible speed but also, for many practical intents and purposes, demonstrate comprehension of it equal to that of any human. While subsequently wondering whether there would long be any function for the human mind in a world where computers seemed progressively capable of superseding its abilities, I consoled myself with one thought, perhaps prompted by a glance at Richard Powers’s *Galatea 2.2*: Watson, for all his prodigious memory and even more astonishingly precise ability to search and filter it, would probably be totally baffled by *Finnegans Wake*. That said, if this observation is to help us conceptualize the continuing importance of human mind, we need to make sure it does not apply equally to most humans, too.

Two and a half years later, during in the summer of 2013, when I began writing this conclusion, former NSA contractor Edward J. Snowden leaked documents to several news outlets detailing some of the agency’s elaborate surveillance programs, prominently including large-scale collections of metadata from some of the country’s largest information companies, whose scale potentially extended into the yottabytes. Though I do not have the technical expertise to speak with any confidence about what exactly this portends, the resulting hubbub in the mainstream press about potential threats to privacy seems to me misplaced—at least, if
“privacy” is conceived traditionally, as individuals’ control over specific information they believe to be only accessible to them. So far as I can tell, there is no individual piece of information that such programs make available that had not been accessible through one method or another previously. Besides, more importantly, when one has the run of a database of such enormous size, one does not generally use it to look up for specific bits of data: the very quantity of information within it, after all, makes any individual datum nearly meaningless. Rather, what one does is find novel ways to manipulate the data, representing it at three or four levels of compression, then reordering it so that it provides answers to questions that otherwise could not even be asked. One uses it, in other words, to eliminate or subordinate the vast majority of its raw data while simultaneously synthesizing new information that even the individuals with whom it is associated are not likely to know.

What kinds of filtering, recoding, and sorting, then, will be done with the unthinkable amount of data our society will produce in the near future? What beneficial and pernicious effects might result? And what kinds of minds will we have to produce to adequately handle it?

Briarwood, Queens, 2011-2013
Introduction

1. Karl calls them “Mega-Novels” rather than “mega-novels.” I decapitalize the term so as to broaden it beyond his specific emphasis on postwar American fiction.

2. Of course, we might as easily ask it of some of James’s later work, especially *The Golden Bowl*.

3. The list of humanists expressing these sorts of concerns is far too extensive to survey here. For a recent discussion of these issues, see Baron.

4. The most famous attempt to give all elements of a text this kind of attention is, of course, Barthes’s *S/Z*, which attempts to closely analyze every phrase of Balzac’s “Sarrasine.” David Richter’s summary of *S/Z*’s reception should demonstrate Rabinowitz’s point: “*S/Z* was simultaneously the masterpiece and the reductio ad absurdum of Barthes’s holistic approach to fiction, because it made clear that any genuinely complete analysis of a fictional text would be so long and complex as to be nearly unreadable. It was widely admired but never imitated, even by Barthes himself” (832).

5. This is also why it has been suggested both within philosophy (see Svendsen) and psychology (Fahlman et al.) that boredom is abetted by the desire for but absence of meaning in one’s life.

6. It does not help that most texts Ngai mentions, other than Gertrude Stein’s *The Making of Americans*, are conceptual poetry, such as Judith Goldman’s poem listing every word in *Moby-Dick* that begins *un*- Many of these are arguably stupid, as Chapters 1 and 3 will suggest.

7. We should not over-emphasize this point, given the specific parameters of the study cited within consumer research, but Yoon, Sarial-Abi, & Gürhan-Canli actually suggest that *low* information loads tend to push people more effectively toward alternate perspectives.

8. This argument is suggested, for example, by Jeppsen’s claim that “when the novel begins to ignore the noise of culture—and, to be precise, the badness of the prose that fills our daily communicative life […]—then the novel will drown in the depths of irrelevancy” (143). Similarly, though not approvingly, James Wood claims that DeLillo, Pynchon, and Wallace share with Flaubert the notion that “the novelist’s job is to become, to impersonate what he describes, even when the subject itself is debased, vulgar, boring” (*Fiction* 33).

9. In fact, there may be no better fictional treatment of the asymmetrical relation between the world’s vast information and our limited minds than Borges’s early short fictions, which is why I will refer to them throughout the book.

10. How to place one’s attention, of course, is a major subject of Wallace’s famous 2005 Kenyon College commencement address, as well as several of his later stories, most notably “The Soul is Not a Smithy.”

11. This is probably why genre has been such an important critical tool for writers as diverse as Northrop Frye and Fredric Jameson.

12. Incidentally, Robert Scholes’s *The Fabulators*, one of the first monographs to attempt to conceptualize (what eventually came to be called) postmodern narrative, uses a chapter organization remarkably similar to my own, even though I developed it independently well before I was aware of Scholes’s book. This corroborates, I think, Sinding’s general point.

13. The next time you criticize a mediocre commercial film or novel, for example, observe the extent to which your criticism relies upon your perception of its failure to fulfill...
certain expectations. Steven Moore, for instance, after spending much of his introduction to *The Novel* excoriating the aesthetic limitations of conventional realist fiction and its tendency to pander to readerly pleasure, proceeds to establish the quality of Joyce’s dialogue over John Grisham’s on the grounds that the latter is “unrealistic” and “unsatisfying” (15).

14. For instance, when I presented on a panel about contemporary encyclopedic narratives during the writing of this book, our esteemed moderator’s introductory comments treated as a given that the greatest value of mega-novels was their ability to subvert totalizing metanarratives. See Chapter 5 for more on this point.

15. So far as I can tell, there is no universally agreed-upon definition of attention span nor any universal value for its typical length. However, an experiment conducted at Catholic University regarding an activity similarly challenging to reading a mega-novel—listening to a chemistry lecture—demonstrated cycles of attention lapses every four minutes or so among student subjects (Bunce, Flens, and Neiles).

16. That the narrator of long novels no longer performs this function was famously observed by an eminent scholar in a classic work of narrative theory, but for the life of me I cannot recall who or where.

17. As Horace wrote, even Homer nods.

18. Even Charles Dickens, who does write with the oral narrative rather than reference work in mind, often addressed and satirized the encyclopedic impulse (see Buzard 119).

19. Catherine Emmott has examined the manipulation of attention in the whodunit at some length (Sanford and Emmott 92-93).

20. *Contra* Kenner’s claim that Joyce cross-references everything “at least twice, in order to demonstrated that nothing is a flyspeck on the design, but an intended part” (63), Mesias is not mentioned again.

21. The tendency of this tactic to lead to self-reinforcing feedback loops was famously critiqued by Alec McHoul and David Wills in their study of Pynchon (108).

*Chapter 1*

1. There have been some partial exceptions, such as Milorad Pavić’s wonderful *Dictionary of the Khazars* or Flaubert’s *Dictionary of Received Ideas*, but those tend to fit more in the category of encyclopedia, at least as I am defining the terms, which is discussed in Chapter 2.

2. In fact, the *Wake* has recently inspired Bill Cliett to compose a “lextionary” comprising definitions of 800 of Joyce’s coinages, designed, like the first English dictionaries, to “jazz up your voca(l)bulary.”

3. Certainly, there are currently no elucidations of these words on Raphael Slepdon’s *Finnegas Wake Extensible Elucidation Treasury*, the most comprehensive database of *Wake* glosses.

4. These distinctions are often made somewhat differently by followers of Barthes, often to assert that “experimental” novels are writerly, while “realist” novels are readerly. However, Barthes in *S/Z* does not associate “writerly” text with difficult or experimental work, but in fact states that “the writerly text is not a thing, we would have a hard time finding it in a bookstore”; we may only find it in “ourselves writing” (5). In other words, the readerly and writerly appear more distinguished by the reader’s cognitive modes than the text itself. Similarly, *The Pleasure of the Text* claims that his terms “pleasure” and “bliss” should not be made “the source of
absolute classifications” since “there is always a vacillation” between them (4). Of course, this studied vagueness, characteristic of Barthes’ later period, has not stopped anyone from co-opting the terms for more rigid polemical purposes.

5. Some interpretations of information, following Wiener, prefer to consider information the negative of entropy. The difference, so far as I understand it, mostly derives from whether one considers information a property of the message or the receiver’s knowledge, but for our purposes, the distinction is unimportant, because in both cases their absolute value increases in exact proportion, even though one has a negative sign in front of it.

6. The otherwise astute Steven Weisenburger provides a case study. Discussing Gaddis’s first novel, he claims that “Even in The Recognitions, though, Gaddis is well aware that cybernetic theorists had recently discovered a telling homology between the mathematical equation for computing entropy and the equation for calculating the information per message, that is, the message’s susceptibility to semiotic entropy or ‘noise’” (Fables 212). This is entirely wrong. As may be seen from my description, Shannon’s definition says nothing about a tendency toward noise: in fact, because it evaluates text separate from its channel, it is exempt from Newton’s Second Law of Thermodynamics, which Weisenburger seems to have conflated with entropy proper. (Only when the message is transmitted in a channel does the Second Law apply.) Furthermore, Shannon’s definition is explicitly non-semiotic, because it separates information (i.e., the actual characters) from meaning (i.e., what they semiotically represent) (“Mathematical” 1).

7. How a focus on meaning can confuse literary treatments of information may be seen in Thomas Pynchon’s early story “Entropy.” In his introduction to the retrospective collection of his early short stories, Slow Learner, Pynchon warns that, though his early work had given readers the impression that he possessed a deep knowledge of entropy, they should “not underestimate the shallowness of [his] understanding” (12-13). In “Entropy,” in fact, Pynchon has his character Saul refer to five dramatically distinct information theory terms—noise, redundancy, ambiguity, irrelevance, and leakage—as essentially synonymous (90-91). All five impede meaning, of course, but how their effect on information causes them to do so is dramatically different. As a result, Saul’s application of information theory to relationships becomes incoherent—which might be an appropriate, if unintended, result for the story.

8. This paradox may not apply in quite the same way to literature as biology: after all, biological mutation is unguided and genetic, while literary mutations are shaped by critical intelligence and may be taken from anywhere. Yet this is likely why, despite The Gold-Bug Variations’ interest in genetic mutation, there are so few errors (and so much conventionality, not only in language but plot and character) over its 600 pages, excepting the one “diseasterously” in the passage from which I quote (and, of course, in the book’s title).

9. We should take a moment, incidentally, to reject the commonplace view that modern art is characterized by an original defiance of convention, while postmodern art is based upon repeating conventions and undoing totalized orders. After all, contrary to Eco, it is the arch postmodern novel J R that Steiner criticized as too unconventional to be read, while it is the modernist masterpiece The Making of Americans that Wilson found too repetitive to finish. This distinction looks particularly inadequate given the equally common, and diametrically opposed, identification of modernist literature as affirming totalized order and postmodern literature as subverting metanarratives. Not only does that distinction work no better on its own—for instance, Leo Bersani, in The Culture of Redemption, complains about supposed totalized aesthetic order in modernist work such as Joyce’s Ulysses but ignores how the contemporary
critics characterized the book as a nihilistic cacophony, while oddly discounting the almost identically broad reliance of postmodern work like Thomas Pynchon’s *Gravity’s Rainbow* on the grand textual structures of Weber, Rilke, Kabbalah, physical equations, and so on (155-199)—it directly contradicts Eco’s formulation by associating order with the modern and disorder with the postmodern. Surely, there are some general distinctions that might be made between modernism and postmodernism, but this rhetoric about order and originality is not among them.

10. Gibbs himself uses the word “entropy” twice in reference to the clutter of messages that overwhelm the Upper East Side apartment (i.e., those on its radio, telephone, incoming mail, and ambient disorganized papers) serving as a retreat for several failed artists who have become entangled in J R’s schemes (287, 403) and once more while substitute teaching (21). Consequently, entropy was one of the first subjects addressed in criticism on the novel (see Thielemans, “Gaddis”; Malmgren) and continues to be invoked by more recent Gaddis criticism (see Leise).

11. See Chénetier, though, for an analysis of how the narrator’s absence in *J R* is generally overstated by such critics.

12. As established in Chapter 1, note 5, there is a school of thought that sees entropy as information’s opposite. If entropy can be thought of as the opposite of information, however, it can only be as its additive inverse or negative (e.g., as 1 is to -1). While Wiener articulated this position in some of his work, it is not consistent with this formulation: he wants them to be polar opposites (e.g., as 1 is to 0), with entropy creating an absence of information. For the reasons articulated, that will simply not work.

13 Critics’ inability to articulate this dilemma leads to frequent contradiction. For instance, Connes’ thesis is that Gaddis’ work is based in indeterminacy, but he ends up speaking of the novel in determinate structures like musical tonics and overtones (110); similarly, Johnston is unable to distinguish Gaddis’s own “deterritorialized” aesthetic (156) from the pernicious way that “capitalism produces an information multiplicity whose terms always exceed the telos of the system’s functioning” (*Information* 161).

14. Critics sometimes recognize this without satisfactorily expressing how it is achieved. For instance, O’Donnell’s essay on the dissolution of the independent narrative voice ends by mystically invoking “the presence of ‘Gaddis,’ who has orchestrated the novel’s many voices, languages, and discourses” to hold things together (O’Donnell, “Master’s”), while Tabbi similarly has recourse to an ineffable process whereby “the reader, author and text converge in the collaborative give-and-take that for Gaddis constitutes the acts of reading and writing” (Tabbi, “Technology”).

15. In fact, Gaddis may include a quick jab at Orwell’s insistence on shorter, Anglo-Saxon words in *The Recognitions*, as in one party scene his narrator recounts how, “Beyond, someone was engaged in writing a criticism of a work which contained forty-nine one-syllable words to seven of two syllables, thirty-one words of Anglo-Saxon origin to five of Latin and one-eighth of Greek. It was honest, this person said” (619).

16. See James Miller for an account of the debate over Orwell in academic writing at the end of the twentieth century.

17. Stein explicitly rejected the tactic of altering or inventing words, in fact (*Lectures* 237-238).

18. Actually, as Stephen Ramsay observes, the variety of vocabulary used in the novels of “hard” writers like William Faulkner and Henry James is often dramatically less than that of “easy” storytellers like Rudyard Kipling and Jack London (71-72).
19. She writes of Stein’s 1934 abridgement, which cut out hundreds of thousands of words, “I do not think it sacrifices much” (163).

20. Interestingly, Goldsmith also invokes Pierre Menard, and characteristically (contra Barth), he seems a bit disappointed that Borges didn’t just retype Don Quixote instead of writing his own story. I suspect Barth, for his part, might mind that Goldsmith seems to have applied his non-reading practices to the Borges story Barth so admires, given that Goldsmith appears confused on some pretty basic plot points (109-110). Incidentally, Goldsmith does partly resist the notion that his work need not be actually written, claiming of a book like Day that the “conception of what it would feel like to read it, to hold it, to examine it” is an important aesthetic experience. Furthermore, even for a book as mechanical as Day, Goldsmith points out that he had to make some original decisions regarding font, formatting, etc. However, these “literary properties that we’re not able to see during our daily reading” of the newspaper (118-119) do not seem to produce particularly profound results.

21. This process might be seen at the macro level in the convoluted structure to the whole book’s periodic repetitions of longer passages revealed by Clement’s corpus study.

22. Furthermore, as Marjorie Perloff notes, we should not assume that Stein’s terminology itself is particularly consistent or rigorous (64-66). Stein’s essays are a poet’s, not a critic’s.

23. Here is that second paragraph:

Some love themselves enough to not want to lose themselves, immortality can to them mean nothing but this thing. Some love themselves negatively, then impersonal future life is for them alright, a good enough thing. Some love themselves and others so hard that they are sure that they will exist even when they won’t, they do to themselves exist even when they don’t, these have a future life feeling an individual thing, some love themselves and they are it and that is all there is of it in them and they do not have future life in them to be an important thing. Men and women have being in them all of them when they are living. Many men and women have in them a feeling of future life in them, very many of them, some for this life, some for another life, some for both lives, this and another one, some have a stronger, some have a weaker feeling of themselves inside them, some have more, some have less loving in them for themselves than other ones have in them, some have more some have less loving in them for other ones than others have in them, some have more some have less for some thing than other ones have in them and all these things in each one are part in them of the virtuous feeling, of the religious feeling they have in them each one, each man and woman, each one having man or woman being in them, each man or woman has some being in her or in him. (444, 480)

24. Despite everything, the Wake’s text is still primarily classical, rather than quantum, information. Quantum information does exist: to create it, one entangles photons to form qubits that may achieve values anywhere on the continuum from 0 to 1, and thus would not be limited to the alphabet’s discrete set of characters. However, since quantum information decays into classical information as soon as it is measured, it is not clear that any literary work could be expressed in this form (Loepp and Wootters 56-102). All of the Wake, however, is easily expressible in classical, linear text, with only the minor exceptions of the musical staffs in “The Ballad of Persse O’Reilly” (which still relies on a finite musical vocabulary) and the footnotes in the “Night Lessons” chapter (which still could be expressed classically, so long as one
manipulates the spacing to separate out the marginalia). Put another way, not only is *Finnegans Wake* in the Library of Babel, it would be one of most coherent of the library’s books. *Finnegans Wake* may break language down to the individual character (Attridge 207; Rasula, “*Finnegans*” 524), but rarely does it go further.

25. To my knowledge, only critic has explicitly attempted to bridge these camps using information theory, James Connor. However, he gets mixed up in his analysis of order and disorder. Connor claims that the *Wake* “belongs at the top of Shannon’s bell curve, halfway between pure order and pure chaos, constructed, yet constructed in such a way that it packs a certain measure of improbability into every line” (826), but that is a misreading of Shannon’s graph. The midpoint of which he speaks is not between order and disorder, but between total probability that a binary digit reads “1” and total probability that it reads “0”—that is, the point at which either choice is equally likely, and thus where the text is maximally entropic.

26. Interestingly, Shannon named Joyce’s work as an example of text that got closer to the minimum redundancy, but this may be somewhat misleading. Shannon and his colleagues refer to the frequency studies of G. K. Zipf, who famously tested his theory regarding the relation of a corpus’s words’ frequencies to their ranks on *Ulysses*. Zipf chose Joyce’s novel because its size, vast vocabulary, and abnormal prose style pushed his theory to its limit, yet it still held. Accordingly, the Macy conferees cite Joyce because they believed, following Zipf, that the size of his vocabulary would make any given character less predictable/redundant, much as a newspaper article’s use of many disparate proper nouns and minimum filler make it less redundant (“Redundancy” 254-255). However, from my (very limited) understanding of Zipf’s work, though, it appears he did not consider syntax, which at least adds some unpredictability in the late Joyce. Quantitative linguistic analysis beyond this, sadly, is outside my ken.

27. Coincidentally, Bennett also invokes Borges’ Pierre Menard, in his case to demonstrate the tremendous difference in time between how long it would take to independently generate such a structured work as *Quixote* (Menard, remember, only finishes a few chapters) and how long it would take to simply copy it.

28. Despite arguments that the *Wake* destroys the Babelian borders between the world’s languages (see Derrida, “Joyce”; Milesi 148), the *Wake* is much more a work of English than any other language, in particular by maintaining its syntactic structure (Epstein 15-16). Many foreign loan words are incorporated, of course, which expands the dictionary we need to use for correction.

29. While the typeset of the *Wake* is standardized, its aural form is obviously not: the *Wake*’s words can be pronounced with any number of accents, which would inevitably vary the value of $d_p$, though the general critical tendency is to hear it in the West Irish dialect Joyce used in his “Anna Livia Plurabelle” recording. I use my best judgment in treating the phonetics of the *Wake*’s words, but these values will obviously only be approximate.

30. That the sounds are similar seems important, too. Not all Hamming distances seem to be the same in this respect: while I don’t think anyone would favor “lacy” over “easy” as a correction for “eacy” on the grounds that $l$ is only seven letters from $e$ while $s$ is sixteen away from $c$, something about phonetic structure makes the close relation of the voiced and unvoiced alveolar fricatives represented by $c$ and $s$ seem to present a smaller Hamming distance than if they were not so closely related. It even seems to trump motifs—no one has suggested “eacy” should be read as “eary,” despite ears being one of the book’s major motifs.

31. As Sebastian Knowles further pointed out to me, the rhythms of more complex phrases are also detectable beneath the *Wake*’s sentences, though their Hamming distances on a
word-by-word basis are quite large. Why some phrases with high Hamming distances seem appropriate corrections and others with lower ones don’t is part of the mystery of the language. For instance, Epstein hears “The Star-Spangled Banner” in “Saw fore shalt thou sea. Betoun ye and be” (36); I don’t, but I cannot think of any way to adjudicate this dispute.

32. \( d_l = 4 \) here, but \( d_p \) is much lower; it cannot be calculated exactly, but every sound in each word is closely related to its correlate (see Chapter 1, note 30).

Chapter 2

1. I focus on the use of specialized information as the essential feature of the subgenre so as to keep the “encyclopedic novel” from too much overlap or conflation with “epic novel,” which I treat in Chapter 5. Critical treatments frequently merge the two. For instance, Frye identifies the epic as the subset of the encyclopedic that is associated with the “romantic” and “high mimetic” range of his modal theory (315-326), since a culture’s epic constitutes a “mythical or scriptural revelation” that combines knowledge and cultural meaning (54-56). Though Mendelson makes a greater effort to separate the encyclopedia and epic chronologically and by breadth of knowledge expressed, he still claims “Encyclopedic narrative evolves out of epic, and often uses epic structure as its organizing skeleton” (162). That Mendelson blurs the two is perhaps seen in how Franco Moretti in Modern Epic, though acknowledging that he and Mendelson are discussing a similar canon, thinks these books are better referred to by his title phrase (4). The convergence of encyclopedic and epic for these three is rooted in a purportedly inextricable connection between knowledge and cultural ideology, especially via education (Frye 54-55; Mendelson 162, Moretti, Modern 37). The two are related, of course, but there is something to be gained by examining them separately.

2. Burn only explicitly refers here to the work of William Gaddis, but implicitly extends his view toward the encyclopedic novel generally.

3. Not only must it be accurate, it must accurately transmit discoveries made elsewhere, making it doubly referential—Wikipedia’s “no original research” policy represents the typical encyclopedic attitude well (Reagle 11-13). One exception, incidentally, is the Enlightenment Encyclopédie.

4. That even sophisticated readers tended to overrate their capacity for making such distinctions was demonstrated when Dan Brown’s The Da Vinci Code managed not only to convince a large number of readers of the historical accuracy of its long-debunked theories about the Holy Grail based solely on a meager introductory page of “Facts” (see Burstein), but even got academics more caught up in debating its factual accuracy than its novelistic merits (see Ehrman).

5. In fact, the very unexpectedness of the most interesting truths encyclopedic novels relate renders them poor transmitters of those truths. This might be best exemplified by Gravity’s Rainbow. As Terry Reilly has noted, much in Pynchon’s World War II narrative that has been viewed as fantastic invention is based on actual secret information he picked up from his days at Boeing (“Hans Kammler” and “Hard Science”). However, such information, instead of making the book a revealing secret history of the war, renders its encyclopedism ineffective. To add an example, one scene sees British intelligence send invisible, coded messages whose recipients can only decode using their own semen (72-74). I can only imagine this scene is usually taken by readers as pure fabrication, yet it was recently revealed that MI6 did once use semen as an active agent in invisible ink (“MI6…”). However, the precise mechanism Pynchon
describes does not really resemble that which MI6 actually used, so since the novel describes a process that sounds totally fictional, yet has a factual basis, yet is not actually described correctly, it would be best not to try to learn about World War II from its text.

6. Nor is this attitude purely a relic of the mid-century academy; see Sisk for a more recent academic attempt to verify Melville’s cetology.

7. Given how confusing Ishmael’s assertion is for first-time readers (Wolff 123-124), for whom the whale’s status as a mammal is one of the few cetological facts they are likely to know, it is interesting that there have not been many good critical analyses of this claim. Vincent throws off a response, claiming Melville, though knowing that the whale was not considered a fish by biologists, “let his definition be shaped by the common characteristics and by familiar experience, not by laboratory information” (140)—an odd conclusion, given that Ishmael seems so determined to correct popular misconception elsewhere. While Donald Wolff grants a level of “irony” to this claim, he still believes the text supports the value of “common sense” against “academic learning” (124). Otherwise, critics addressing this passage are few and far between: the only one I have found presenting a plausible explanation is Jamey Hecht, who claims that Ishmael does so to deny his relative kinship to the species his profession hunts (113-117).

8. Charles Olson attempts to extricate Ishmael on that point by noting the distinction between baleen whales and toothed whales before asserting “Melville was satisfied with the biggest of the toothed whales, the sperm” (22-23). This exemplifies, I think, the slipperiness with which critics arguing the classical encyclopedic position make their case.

9. Though the cetological chapters were once argued as necessary to inform readers about key-terms central to the plot later (Vincent 122-125), these plotless expository chapters are clearly written by choice rather than dramatic necessity. For instance, in Chapter 72, “The Monkey-Rope,” Ishmael has no difficulty introducing and defining his central whaling term during the action without pontificating abstractly upon it at great length (319-322).

10. Granted, this view still surfaced occasionally: as late as the nineteenth century, a German encyclopedia sought to encyclopedize all known information. It was abandoned as unfinishable only after 167 volumes had been written and no end was yet in sight (Yeo 4).

11. As several studies have shown, accuracy per se is not that much of problem for Wikipedia: despite the lack of central editorial verification, because it can be updated instantaneously, it tends not to fare that poorly when compared to centrally-edited encyclopedias (Reagle 138-168). Even so, the fact that Wikipedia is editable by almost anyone leads to the site’s own admission that readers should confirm its material elsewhere, an astonishing admission for an encyclopedia (Reagle 163-164). Regardless, though, accuracy alone is merely necessary, not sufficient, for a good encyclopedia. Two representative examples should make this point well. Regarding adequate organization of data, Wikipedia’s article on the 2008 conflicts on the Georgia-Russia border quickly devolves from a disciplined overview of a key world event into an accurate but sprawling and nearly paratactic day-by-day account of assorted occurrences, hindering comprehension of the subject for a casual reader. Somewhat more whimsically, the popular Internet game of “wikigroaning” highlights how a given subject’s importance is rarely reflected by the depth of information Wikipedia carries on it, as with how the article on humanitarian Dr. Albert Schweitzer has a lower word count than the article listing unproduced episodes of the British TV series Dr. Who.

12. The shared surname is acknowledged in the text, as is the fact that both Eliot and Eco’s characters take it from Isaac Casaubon (62).
13. The actual value of Casaubon’s hypothetical project to his time is a separate question, which depends upon how much we credit Casaubon’s intelligence.

14. Casaubon’s serendipitous comments about how “secret services” use this strategy resonate well with the CIA archivist Nicholas Branch in Don DeLillo’s *Libra*, published the same year as *Foucault’s Pendulum*, who is charged with filing and sorting every record of related to the Kennedy assassination, no matter how trivial, for his eventual secret history of that event (14-16). Like Eco’s Casaubon, his project is hypothetically finishable, inasmuch as its end product is not totality but a critical condensation, yet the rate at which he accumulates data seems to outstrip his ability to process and order it (440-445, and see Codebó 137-157).

15. Perhaps this is why, in Richard Powers’ *The Goldbug Variations*, fictional biologist Stuart Ressler’s pioneering genetic research is so much less compelling than the mundane scenes in which research librarian Jan O’Deigh pores through her homemade filing system to find an interesting Daily Fact for her library’s community board.

16. See also H. Clark (“Encyclopedic” 107). Donato (895) and Burn (“Collapse” 48) also tackle this point, but identify the impossible totalizing encyclopedic dream of being able to write (in Burn’s terms) a “book about everything” as descriptive of Flaubert’s efforts more than Bouvard and Pécuchet’s.

17. Burn is specifically talking about David Foster Wallace’s *Infinite Jest* here, but he makes similar remarks about Flaubert’s characters elsewhere in “The Collapse of Everything.” The phrase “take data pretty much as it comes,” incidentally, is Wallace’s, not Burn’s.

18. I freely admit to not realizing that Bouvard and Pécuchet were mishandling their gardening until their crops failed, which says nothing about gardening as a body of knowledge and everything about a city-dwelling literary scholar’s ignorance of it.

19. Some critics have suggested that Flaubert’s inability to finish the book before his death speaks to the indefinite and consequently nonsensical nature of all knowledge (Donato, Gothat-Mersch), but this misses the point—the first volume is essentially finished, and the second is designed to be so that Flaubert could’ve completed it swiftly, though we will never know what this catalog would’ve looked like beyond what exists of the *Dictionary of Accepted Ideas*.

20. Of course, many encyclopedias and encyclopedia-like volumes like textbooks do not have scholarly notes. However, given that such omissions have provoked criticism about their failure to effectively address the way in which knowledge is discovered/ordered/retrieved (see Loewen 302), it should be clear how vital they really are to this process. (Certainly, whenever we consult Wikipedia, we ought first to look at how rigorously endnoted is the article in question.)

21. Vollmann does admit that *Europe Central* is less “rigorously grounded in historical fact” than his *Seven Dreams* series of historical novels about the North American continent (753). I do think that the points I make, however, hold for those books too, especially for the notes, as Vollmann even writes in his prefatory statement to each volume that “The reader is encouraged to use the Chronology and Glossary only as needed […] As for the Source Notes, they may be ignored or skimmed […]” (*Argall*, n. pag). See Caserio for an approach to these books that, though different than the one I’ve laid out here, demonstrates the limitations of the historicity of even such rigorously historical fiction.

22. In another endnote, Orin Incandenza describes these as practical jokes of hyper-naturalism in which Incandenza and his crew would simply throw a dart at a phone book page
and declare whatever happened to the name it hit in the next hour and a half the “found drama,”
unmediated by audience, director, or cameras (1026-1028).

23. To be fair, Aubry acknowledges the limits of the 12-Step philosophy and does not
quite idealize it. However, in his view, the ideal blend of sincerity and irony is exemplified by
an AA guest speaker (217-218). Interestingly, such criticism seems to entirely oppose the early
critical response to The Pale King, which claims Wallace encourages total mental fixation on a
chaotic, disparate mass of trivial minutiae as a path to personal salvation, as I noted in the
Introduction.

24. See Woulters for a discussion of this issue as it appears in Wallace’s final novel, The
Pale King.


Chapter 3

1. Too many mega-novels have been associated with the Menippean tradition to list them
all. For a capacious application of the term to mega-novels generally, see Weisenburger (Fables
199-256). Regarding the specific works discussed in this chapter, Elaine Safer does not quite use
the term “Menippean satire” in her subchapter on The Sot-Weed Factor, but her description of
the work as a “comic epic” and invocation of Plato’s dialogues and Rabelais’ Gargantua and
Pantagruel bring her treatment so close to Bakhtin’s that we may attribute her failure to mention
him to Bakhtin’s slow assimilation into the Western literary establishment as she was writing
(50-68). For The Public Burning, see Jackson Cope’s extended description of the novel’s
relation to Bakhtin and the carnivalesque (71-85), and for The Recognitions, see Johnston’s
Carnival of Repetition, which discusses the term without quite resolving it into his challenging
discussion of the book’s treatment of authenticity (Carnival 42, 66, 152). Incidentally, Barth’s
second mega-novel, Giles Goat-Boy, has more frequently been dubbed a Menippean satire than
The Sot-Weed Factor (see Walkiewicz 73, Walter, Gresham). I don’t treat it here, however,
because it seems not to involve the use of cruft in humor that I am emphasizing, though it would
fit quite nicely in Chapter 5’s discussion of self-negating allegory. See also Khapertian for a
discussion of Thomas Pynchon’s books in this context.

2. Esther is an important supporting character, and the chapter does devote a few pages to
her activities; Ellery, her lover, is more minor, but his arc is developed a little as well; and the
second speaker above (“the tall woman”) and her husband appear briefly in a few other scenes.
However, this still leaves as many as half a dozen nameless, unimportant voices in this excerpt
alone.

3. Bergson’s worldview, of course, profoundly influenced Gertrude Stein’s: my
subchapter on The Making of Americans in Chapter 1 might be read with Bergson in mind.

4. There have been several criticisms that this formulation is too limiting (see Griffin 29-
30), but I see no way for the genre to be articulated at all without it. As Rosenheim notes, both
the fiction and historic particulars are vital: if one attacks historical particulars without writing a
manifest fiction, one has composed not satire but polemic (17-18), and if one writes a manifest
fiction without attacking historical particulars, one has merely written fantasy (29-30).

5. For how this can be done, see Wayne Booth on how “stable irony” can separate satirist
and satirized (see 1-31 and 105-120).

6. Actually, very little in the novel can be said to argue for the Rosenbergs’ innocence.
As many have noted, the Rosenbergs’ voices are surprisingly muted in the book, and while
toward the book’s end Nixon reaches the conclusion that the Rosenbergs weren’t guilty (370)—which is Coover’s own position (LeClair and McCaffery 78)—his logic is so confused by a series of weird fantasies about the pair as to have little rhetorical force. Just about the only point introduced in the book that might even serve in the Rosenbergs’ favor is the (historically accurate) citation of Albert Einstein and Harold Urey’s claim that there was no “secret” of the atomic bomb for the Rosenbergs to steal.

7. Gaddis, too, seems to have believed he was engaged in some sort of muckraking endeavor, claiming of The Recognitions, “I thought that I was the first one to discover that the world was filled with false values and I was going to tell them. […] It was a sense of mission” (qtd. Safer 111). However, even the largely grotesque stories culled from the New York Daily News that Gaddis did incorporate “verbatim” into the text (Johnston, Carnival 157) cannot “expose” anything much, since cherry-picked several years’ worth of news demonstrates little. In using such material to fend off anticipated attacks against the book’s realism, Gaddis most resembles the creative writing workshop student who angrily defends an unconvincing story by insisting “it all really happened that way!”

8. As Christopher Knight notes, “Weisenburger’s critique does not escape its own fall into binarism, hierarchization, and totalization, thereby undercutting the vaunted ‘radicalness’ […] of the project” (253). Alastair Fowler further points out, with some justice, this approach to postmodern satire actually “proves the rule: it is addressed to true believers who already share the satirist’s views” (66-67).

9. It should not be hard to see why many critics have believed a limited length preferable for maintaining clarity in satiric balance—recall Hippolyte Taine’s complaint that reading Flaubert’s Bouvard et Pécuchet was like watching two snails try to climb Mont Blanc, since “the first time they fall is amusing; the tenth is unbearable” (qtd. in Flaubert xiii).

10. Weisenburger, in fact, cites Bakhtin directly (Fables 27-29).

11. For instance, though Pantagruel’s lineage is forty names long, Rabelais creates frequent incongruity in the list by invoking both Biblical and classical giants, wildly contradicting the standard lineages from both those traditions and inventing ridiculous new giants besides (e.g., “Offot, who developed an awesomely fine nose from drinking straight from the wine-cask” (18-20). Similarly, the list of surfaces with which Gargantua experiments wiping his ass has dozens of entries but is frequently broken by commentary (e.g., a cat’s fur does well, but the cat will claw you) and is divided into several briefer sublists (herbs, fowl, etc.), each of whose use as an ass-wipe is ridiculous in its own way (245-250). Perhaps the most appropriate scene to juxtapose against the one from Barth we will examine in a moment is the insult contest between Panurge and Thaumaste, which in Rabelais eschews what might’ve been a tiresome catalog of dirty words for a convoluted exchange of obscene hand gestures (103-108).

12. Much less does he undermine history entirely, as many critics have suggested the book aims to do (see McCaffery 87-89). These arguments are fond of invoking Uncle Sam’s insistence that “Hell, all courtroom testimony about the past is ipso facto and teetotaciously a baldface lie” (86) and Time’s claim that “objectivity is an impossible illusion […] only through the frankly biased and distorting lens of art is any real grasp of the facts—not to mention Ultimate Truth—even remotely possible” (320), but while these views appear similar to Coover’s, simply saying them in fiction does not make them true, and furthermore, both of these pronouncements are uttered by characters seeking to pervert truth to destructive ends. As Frank Cioffi notes, “Many critics have noted that the novel is about how the factual is essentially a
fictional construct. […] But I wonder to what extent this novel is also about how some fictions are better orderings of an AW [actual world] than others” (“(Im)Possible” 37).

13. The novel’s treatment of myth is well-covered ground; in addition to Ramage, see LeClair (106-130) and Dainotto.

14. I take these definitions from Tzvetan Todorov’s The Fantastic (41-57). In short, the uncanny is that which may appear supernatural but is simply an improbable or coincidental natural happening, while the marvelous is the legitimately supernatural. The fantastic is that which one cannot yet tell is uncanny or marvelous.

15. For all the commentary on the grotesqueness of Sam raping Nixon, the scene is little worse than Boabdil’s rape of Joan Toast: Nixon may tell us, “it felt like he was trying to shove the whole goddamn Washington Monument up my ass!” (532), but Ebenezer describes Joan Toast as having been “split like an oyster” (334).

16. To name a few examples, these would include the mistakenly-lobotomized Mr. Pivner; the nameless man stuck on the outside of an airplane throughout a Caribbean flight; and the Reverend Gwyon, whose ashes are accidentally baked into a bread eaten by his son Wyatt. As my numbers suggest, incidentally, the exact totals are a bit arbitrary, as so many extremely minor characters’ horrific outcomes are mentioned only in passing, while some more important characters’ activities are merely implied (e.g., Otto’s likely death of his mysterious disease under Dr. Fell’s treatment, the likely statutory rape of Giono by Big Anna, etc.). Several I double- or triple-count, for that matter (e.g. Esme attempts suicide, is institutionalized, then dies of an arcane illness).

17. Given that Christopher Knight’s book on Gaddis avoids postmodernism’s slippery vocabulary by conceiving The Recognitions as a more traditional satire on a specific historical milieu, it is worth commenting upon to an extent here. As I argue in this chapter, I think The Recognitions frequently fails on this front. To take one example, Knight focuses heavily on Gaddis’s satiric depiction of abstract painters, but the scene in which Gaddis most directly does so—the party celebrating Max’s L’Âme d’un Chantier, a work shirt framed as a painting—is totally ambiguous as to whether the painting has any aesthetic value as a found object, which renders its nature as satire close to nil. On the one hand, the commentary about it is a self-contradictory and stupid collection of faux-aestheticist commonplaces: for instance, Hannah tells Otto that “I think it’s the saddest thing Max has ever done. It’s an epitaph. […] The emptiness it shows, it hurts to look at it. It’s so real, so real” (182), then later turns around and tells Stanley “The composition’s good. Max is good with compositions, he’s successful with it, but he still works like painting was having an orgasm, he has to learn that it isn’t just having the experience that counts, it’s knowing how to handle the experience” (184). On the other hand, when the narrator makes a rare intrusion into the noisy party, he says “Above them all the Worker’s Soul hung silent, refusing comment; though the red lead recalled bridges built by horny hands, sexually unlike any that fluttered glasses beneath it now, the spots of rust a heavy male back straining between girders, generally different from any weaving here. For all its spatters of brightness, that canvas looked very tired, hanging foreign and forlorn over the sad garden” (185).

18. Just about the only critic who rejects that The Recognitions is satire is Birger Vanweesenbeeck. However, he seems primarily to mean that the novel does not satirize the
value of art, instead championing the artist’s small but devoted community in the postmodern era. This view does not address sections like the party scene that treat at length characters that Vanweesenbeeck would surely not characterize as part of that genuine artistic community.

19. Weisenburger, for instance, while attacking authenticity and cultural tradition as mere romantic-modernist rhetorical tricks, due to their imposition of hierarchized values onto an unstable world (Fables 216), still lambastes how the “myriad of counterfeitors, plagiarists, and usurers are not eccentrics at all but central figures of their society, itself the debased coinage of a modernist cultural orthodoxy,” apparently relying upon such stable, universal values like authenticity (Fables 210).

20. Of course, one can write perfectly good satires without the free indirect discourse, but it is particularly useful in the novelistic mode, which is why a list of the device’s great innovators, such as Austen and Flaubert, will overlap substantially with a list of great prose satirists. Incidentally, Gaddis’s tendency away from this tradition, especially toward greater use of direct dialogue, is taken even further in J R (see Ch. 1).

21. This is most apparent in the passages dealing with Mr. Pivner’s devotion to his evening radio and Dale Carnegie’s How to Win Friends and Influence People (285-292, 498-501). Compared to his sympathetic treatment of Wyatt and the Rev. Gwyon’s attachments to religious doctrines, Gaddis invokes no recognizable attraction that Pivner might find to either the radio or to Carnegie’s book, because he depicts them as being transparently stupid. The narrator invites readers to join him in feeling confident in their intellectual superiority to Pivner rather than challenging them, which—despite claims by those like Weisenburger of the book’s radicalness—is the most conservative form of satire. This highbrow complacency, as Peter Wolfe has noted, sometimes expresses an uncomfortably high disdain for anyone without Gaddis’s prep-school-through-Harvard classical education and encyclopedic knowledge about and taste for art (55-57), which substantially weakens many parts of the book. For instance, when Otto, hearing Handel’s oratorio Judas Maccabeus on the radio, off-handedly and mistakenly suggests that the work’s text has been translated into English from the original German—an understandable mistake, given that Judas Maccabeus is far from Handel’s best-known piece and that the composer was raised in Germany before spending his most prolific working days in London—Wyatt angrily yells to himself “–The original! Good God, how can anyone clinging to such foolishness keep any hope in his head?” (136). I can’t help but think that, while Gaddis’s sympathies are likely with Wyatt on this point, the latter is much more worthy of being mocked here than Otto.

22. We will give Steven Moore credit here, as his book on Gaddis sensibly reasons that since Wyatt only appears in twelve of the twenty-two chapters, one of these two chapters on the book ought to be focused on Wyatt’s narrative arc and the other on the book’s other threads. That said, this half-and-half division still overstates Wyatt’s involvement in the book, as Wyatt is only involved as a main character in the majority of scenes in five chapters (Part I, Chs. 2, 3, and 7, Part II, Ch. 3, and Part III, Ch. 3). In another four he is a focal character in about half the scenes (Part I, Ch. 1, Part II, Ch. 2, 6, and Part III, Ch. 5), and in three more he only appears quite briefly as part of a much broader canvas of characters, wherein he is rarely the focal point (Part II, Ch.1, 7, 8). It is true that the ten chapters without him at all tend to be among the book’s shorter ones, but even so, I estimate that Wyatt is only involved in about 40% of the book’s total scenes.

23. Gaddis may begin the chapter by quoting Darwin on “the struggle for existence” (568), but the characters do not really compete with or even engage with each other much at all:
everyone rambles on about themselves without listening to or caring about what anyone else says.

Chapter 4

1. Of course, these four possibilities are reminiscent of those facing Oedip Maas in The Crying of Lot 49 (i.e., that there is a secret Tristero conspiracy of postal carriers; that there is no Tristero conspiracy and she is merely hallucinating; that there is no Tristero conspiracy, but there is a conspiracy set up by her late lover Pierce Inverarity to make her believe there is one; or that she is hallucinating an Inverarity conspiracy to make her think there is a Tristero conspiracy) (140-141). In my view—one shared by Pynchon, if the introduction to Slow Learner is any guide (22)—the way those choices suggest the equal validity of all shadow stories and thus mutually self-negate is a failing of that shorter book. How Mason & Dixon avoids this problem by making Zhang’s plots a local instance of cruft, rather than the crux of the book, should be clear later in the chapter.

2. Of such plots, Peter Brooks writes, “The reader never is vouchsafed anything we would want to call a plot, in the traditional sense, but he is himself forced to engage in plotting, if not toward the creation of meaning, at least in exploration of the conditions of narrative meaning” (316).

3. Abbott’s work has recently addressed narrative compression, the notion that any event can be theoretically broken down into a sequence of smaller events almost indefinitely, all the way down to the molecular level. Obviously, we are only cognitively capable of understanding such events at all at a relatively high level of compression, at which point they become more narratable and can establish a narrative point. Abbott represents these principles with the following diagram:

[Diagram: Complexity graph with processes of infinite complexity leading to threshold of tellability, which leads to threshold of narratability and causal disconnection.

Shadow stories, as he notes, function as a third dimension to this chart, allowing another field of potentially indefinite decompression (“Shadow” 3).

4. This possibility is raised explicitly when the pair are impersonated by their underlings Darby and Cope (470-473).

5. While the genre’s appeal to its contemporary Spanish audience came from the way it realistically depicted rural poverty, when exported, the picaresque read primarily as an exotic
sequence of comic adventures. Consequently, while the picaresque’s influence on England includes a few works that might pass for picaresques with Spanish critics (e.g., *Moll Flanders*), it is more characterized by novels from the likes of Henry Fielding, which emphasize comic adventuring more than social marginality (see Monteser 41-71; Winton; Beasley). This perspective took hold so thoroughly that today even Anglophone academics—to the great horror of most Hispanists—often refer to *Don Quixote*, a work featuring a wandering journey but most decidedly not about rural poverty or a *pícaro*’s “criminal biography,” as a picaresque (Wicks 14). While some do continue to maintain a restrictive definition based in the classic works (see Ardila), the word has been used so variously over the past several centuries that most now follow Claudio Guillén and Alexander Blackburn in acknowledging a broad picaresque “myth” comprising numerous family resemblances rather than a firm genre. For instance, Robert Scholes’ *The Fabulators*, for instance, in tracing the generic roots of early postmodern fiction, cited the influence of the “loose and episodic picaresque form, with its simple, chronological string of events in the life of a roguish individual” (67). More recently, other critics have linked not only the postwar American “road novel,” to the picaresque (see Sherrill), but has stretched it to cover works as diverse as Ralph Ellison’s *Invisible Man*, Raymond Chandler’s Philip Marlowe novels, Michael Moore’s documentaries, and the BBC comedy series *Blackadder* (Ehland and Fajen).

6. The *OED* currently defines the word as “a rogue, a scoundrel,” but there is no universally agreed-upon derivation allowing us to chart its accrued connotations. Frederick Monteser notes five possibilities, which invoke roots as varied as the (then-ill-regarded) French province of Picardy, smallpox sores, and a sharp or pinching sensation (13-14).

7. For this chapter’s purposes, I use this restricted definition of the genre. There is, after all, even less consensus on the frame-tale’s definition than the picaresque’s, partly due to its limited theorization within the Western academy (see Barth, *Friday* 224-225), which is likely caused by how the frame-tale’s origins lie in Eastern languages not widely spoken in this half of the world (e.g., medieval Arabic and classical Sanskrit) (Gittes 2). This has caused it to merge with the much more general, not to mention critically popular, concept of “framing,” which may be applied to a wide variety of works outside the cornice-novella structure. For instance, the common trope of *mise-en-abyme* been invoked to suggest that framed storytelling is the characteristic element of both modernist and postmodernist fiction (see Caws; Pearce, “Enter”) and the trope of transmission of narratives among characters has been argued to be central to the development of the novel (see Duyfhuizen, *Transmission*). Furthermore, as Eric L. Berlatsky points out, “framing” may also be used to refer to the relationship between a main text and extra- or para-textual elements that “frame” our readings of a work (“Lost” 166), while William Nelles observes that even ordinary dialogue cannot be rigorously distinguished structurally from framed narrative (123-125). The category, as will be obvious, has a tendency to expand beyond one’s ability to say anything meaningful about it. Incidentally, as Richard Walsh suggests in *The Rhetoric of Fictionality*, we should be careful of overusing the frame image to describe the relation between readers and a work of fiction, because it implies a certain kind of barrier and separation between the two rather than any direct engagement.

8. The *Thousand and One Nights* is a useful example because of its high degrees of both vertical and horizontal framing. If we grant, as John Barth notes, that the opening of the collection itself claims to narrate the story of another mythic volume called the *Thousand and One Nights* (*Friday* 223), then the book reaches seven vertically-embedded speakers with extensive horizontal framing: for instance, the book’s general narrator tells us about a legendary
book of tales, whose narrator tells us about the storyteller Shahrazad, who tells us (in “The Hunchback’s Tale”) about a tailor, who tells us about his encounter with a barber, who tells him about how as a younger barber he extracted himself from execution by narrating the fraught situations of his six brothers, each of whom speaks briefly in his own story (Richard Burton 355-406). Even this complexity is nothing compared to the Sanskrit tale collection The Ocean of Story, whose combination of horizontal and vertical framing, as Barth notes, is even more mind-boggling (Friday 84-90).

9. This holds true for those frame-tales both based in horizontal framing, where one or more storytellers on the same diegetic plane tell unconnected stories, and vertical framing, where a storyteller narrates a story in which one of her characters further narrates another story to someone else, and so on (see Nelles 132).

10. Partly, this is because both genres rely upon the conventions of pre-Gutenberg narrative traditions: as Walter Ong notes, their structures were devised at least as much to help storytellers steeped in oral traditions to project the artificial audience written narrative requires than to innovate literature for its own sake (69-70).

11. Charles Clerc and Brian McHale have both implied that the novel draws on both the frame-tale and picaresque traditions (Clerc 89-91; McHale, “Zone” 49-50). Neither quite realizes that he is doing so, however. Clerc places Mason & Dixon explicitly in the picaresque tradition, but subsequently brings up the Learned English Dog’s reference to himself as a “tail-wagging Scheherazade”; McHale, conversely, explicitly places it in the frame-tale tradition, but only after invoking the American “road novel” tradition, which, as Rowland Sherrill notes, is rooted in the picaresque.

12. Kolbuszewska discusses this primarily in terms of the Gothic, which she identifies at the center of the novel’s chronotope. My discussion of chronotope is not meant to contest her argument, merely to supplement it.

13. More famously, this happens to Gravity’s Rainbow’s Tyrone Slothrop, who is scattered by his inability to manage the many plots surrounding him. Regine Rosenthal has suggested that Slothrop is really a Spanish-style pícaro, but while she is correct to note the spatial wildness that unites Gravity’s Rainbow’s Zone and the picaresque landscape, I believe the frequent temporal incongruities that mark the book move the narrative closer to a circumfabulation. (We will examine Gravity’s Rainbow in more depth as a mega-novel epic in Ch. 5).

14. Sascha Pöhlmann probably has discussed the tension between these tendencies best, though without quite resolving it. Though he criticizes the Mason-Dixon Line regarding “The obvious violence of such acts of demarcation” (231), he also notes, “The nation of Americans which Mason sees in the process of being created is actually built, not because those who share an essential group identity finally get to rule themselves, but because an imagined community is produced through discourse as a weapon to fight oppression and injustice” (232). The latter, however, is not possible without the former: one cannot either achieve or sustain its multiplicity without establishing linearity.

15. See the episode of Tom Hynes and Catherine Wheat to observe first the potential abuses caused by establishing clear legal borders, but then how establishing legal jurisdiction helps build community (575-584).

16. In other words, plotting here relates to Todorov’s notion of the fantastic, where characters do not know whether to plot an event as uncanny or marvelous. See Chapter 3, note 14 for more discussion; see also de Bourcier for a discussion of the compatibility of pre- and
post-Enlightenment concepts (185-186), and Kolbuszewska for how these terms may be addressed via the Gothic (183-204).

17. Even a self-consciously overplotted modern circumfabulation, John Barth’s *The Tidewater Tales*—which throws into its narrative about the fortnight sailboat trip of literary couple, one of whom is a Barth-like fiction writer who has been stricken with a constricting minimalism (see *Further* 64-88), everything from a conventional domestic drama to an embedded play set in the Fallopian tubes called *Sex Education* to several encounters with frame-jumping circumfabulation heroes like Odysseus and Don Quixote—generally manages to avoid pure cruft due to the power of the central narrative voice. The closest thing to a pointless story its elaborate subplot involving a possible world-jeopardizing scheme by rogue CIA agents (“Doomsday Factors”), which has so little impact on the rest of the book that it is tied up only as an afterthought in the denouement (644-646) (*contra* Fogel and Sleuthag 190-212). Still, however, it gives the novels’ narrators so much amusement in the recounting that it maintains something of a point.

18. *Life A User’s Manual* is, obviously, a horizontally-based frame-tale. I do not know whether there exist any great vertically-framed mega-novels. Such a book would doubtless be categorized among postmodern metafiction, but the best examples of in this subgenre tend to be shorter works like “Menelaiad” from John Barth’s *Lost in the Funhouse*, a retelling of part of the *Odyssey* in which Menelaus’s eight vertically-embedded layers of narration respond to and resonate with each other in cascading ways, or his even briefer “Frame-Tale,” a Moebius Strip that loops the phrase “Once upon a time there was a story that began.” The closest example of which I can think is Gilbert Sorrentino’s *Mulligan Stew*, which shares some of the properties I describe here but does not do much with them. Barth’s *The Last Voyage of Somebody the Sailor* is of mega-novel length, and it does reach five vertical layers, but the outer two are never invoked outside the book’s opening and closing, and the remaining three’s interaction match neither the nutty heights of Barth’s shorter metafiction nor the fascinating cruft of the other mega-novels in this chapter (see Brown and Barth, *Further* 311-348). This lack, incidentally, is perhaps emblematic of how metafiction exhausted itself rather more quickly than many critics expected. Despite common claims in the 1980s and 1990s that metafiction “highlights […] the extent to which we have become aware that neither historical experiences nor literary fictions are unmediated or unprocessed” (Waugh 30) because “the profusion of narrators […] makes any assumption of textual authority yet another fiction” (Duyfhuizen, *Transmission* 44), or that, in the clash of ontological boundaries, “postmodernist fiction achieves its aesthetic effects and sustains interest, in the process modeling the complex ontological landscape of our experience” (McHale, *Postmodernist* 39), adding vertical layers to a text as often undercuts its meaning as increases it. The problem is not that such self-conscious approaches are inherently “fake” or “empty,” as John Gardner claimed (94-96), but that any fictional world’s separation from the real allows vertical levels to be added so arbitrarily as to make their use inconsequential philosophically. For instance, if it is revealed several chapters into a novel that its story has been written by a prison inmate, then further revealed later on that the inmate’s narrative is constructed by his creative writing teacher (as occurs in Jennifer Egan’s *The Keep*), the novel has shown less about the mediation of reality than about an overuse of one localizable trick. Consequently, metafiction is usually better deployed with a sense of fun rather than metaphysical seriousness, as with, for instance, Don Quixote’s comments in the second half of his narrative about the popular reception greeting the first.
19. If one counts the preamble and epilogue, there are one hundred and one, a number as symmetrical as Shahrazad’s (Burgelin 174). For a more extensive look at the connections between the Thousand and One Nights and Life A User’s Manual, see Joly (304-313, 1102-1111).

20. As Barthes notes, even the most straightforward narrative inevitably “still seems to be keeping in reserve some ultimate meaning, one it does not express” (S/Z 216).

21. Bartlebooth’s name has three sources, and while the first two are intrepid questers—the grail-seeking knight Parsifal and modernist Valery Larbaud’s gentleman traveler A. O. Barnabooth—the third is one of the exemplary useless men of literature, Herman Melville’s Bartleby the Scrivener (Burgelin 188).

22. Acknowledging this, Josipovici uses the standard critical fallback as his defense: anything that contradicts his theory is intended ironically (191). For reasons that should be clear, I reject this argument.

23. Bolaño himself claimed the book was largely a response to Huckleberry Finn (Between 353), one of the few American books Hispanists will admit possesses some authentically picaresque features. Similarly, the book has been linked to the “road movie” (see Kaegi) whose heritage prominently includes the picaresque (see, again, Sherrill).

24. Madero and Lupe, for their parts, vanish entirely; no one, not even the self-proclaimed “definitive authority” on the visceral realists, hears of Madero afterward (584-585).

25. Three of the thirteen, furthermore, include features that put the official conclusion into question. For two cases (the cases of Mónica Posadas (460-462) and Aurora Ibáñez Medel (573-574)), there are inconsistencies in the confessions provided by the arrested killers. For the third, the case of Esther Perea Peña (625-626), questions are raised within the police department about the plausibility of the official reconstruction.

26. While an critic especially devoted to laying guilt at the feet of globalization could doubtless argue why his individual psychological disease should be ignored in favor of macro-level economic forces beyond his control, I am unaware of any culture in human history that has managed to eradicate this kind of domestic killing.

27. See Franco Moretti’s Graphs, Maps, and Trees for this distinction between “close” and “distant” reading (1-2).

28. See Abbott’s diagram, reproduced in Chapter 4, note 3, for an illustration of this principle, and Chapter 5 for a more detailed discussion of it.

Chapter 5

1. Critics as divergent in attitudes as Northrop Frye (89) and Fredric Jameson (Political 34) have asserted that all literary interpretation is allegorical, in fact, suggesting how thoroughly the genre may be detached from any specific literary form.

2. Indeed, size may be the primary connotation that “epic” holds today, as Alison Johns-Putra observes when noting how the term is popularly deployed in describing gargantuan productions like “Hollywood blockbusters and rock songs, as well as ‘real-life’ events: sporting contests, corporate takeovers, political elections, court cases” (1).

3. Along similar lines, Fletcher recently articulated the postmodern phenomenon of an “allegory without ideas,” a nominalism-inspired subgenre that uses traditional “symbols of power” without locating them in a total allegorical concept and which thus “gains strength by abjuring eternal ideas” (“Ideas” 32)
4. See Ch. 2, note 1, for more discussion of this overlap.

5. Patrick O’Donnell claims that paranoia does not actually form grand narratives, but is “a form of accommodation for the loss of those grand narratives” (*Latent* 16), probably believing, as Peter Knight does, that paranoia does not assert truth but is “an ironic stance toward knowledge and the possibility of truth” (2). This is perhaps true of paranoia conceived as prophylactic, reflexive cynicism deployed as necessary to insulate the subject from the public sphere, but there are certainly many paranoid theories intended quite seriously as forms of knowledge.

6. Ricoeur himself, in fact, claims to be an adherent not of the hermeneutic of suspicion but of “recollection of meaning,” in which one places faith in consciousness’s ability to both intend and receive meaning truly (28-30).

7. As Petra Rau notes, postmodern writers on the political Left are happy to debunk most official historical narratives regarding World War II as a matter of subversive political principle—except the Holocaust, which cannot be questioned (215).

8. As Peter Knight notes, few call their own ideas “paranoid” or “conspiracy theories,” no matter how elaborate the hypothesized schemes they contain, but reserve those terms as pejoratives for others’ misguided theories (10-11).

9. For instance, Samuel Hynes, summing up critical attitudes on the relationship of World War I to its era writes, “No one after the war—no thinker or planner, no politician or labour leader, no writer or painter—could ignore its historical importance or frame his thought as though the war had not occurred, or had been simply another war” claiming that the conflict generated a “gap in history” (ix-x). In response to this gap, Hynes continues, there emerges a “fragmented, elliptical, difficult form” of perception and expression in the arts that comes to be known as modernism: “*Modernism* means many things, but it is most fundamentally the forms that the post-war artists found for their sense of modern history: history seen as discontinuous, the past remote and unavailable, or available only as the ruins of itself, and the present a formless space emptied of values” (433).

10. I have heard it suggested numerous times recently that the literary academy’s definition of the period covering the second half of the twentieth century has changed from “postmodern” to “post-WWII.” There is much that might be said about this shift, but that the fact that these two definitions are viewed as alternatives shows the relative weakness of their association: no one quibbles about making a period distinction between “high modernist” and “inter-war” literature.

11. Writing with the willingness to make broad generalizations resisted by future generations of scholars, Harry Guest observed in 1984 that the lions of Japanese literature’s minimal reference to the war was because, “The Japanese have an amazing—and possibly enviable—capacity for forgetting, ignoring or bypassing what is unpleasant or inconvenient. Furthermore, Japanese art is traditionally oblique” (216).

12. Several critics have suggested that these books’ paranoia, especially those written some years after the war, have more to do with the anxieties of Vietnam than World War II (see Dickstein 40, Jarvis). While I don’t think it is wrong to link these novels to Vietnam, for the reasons I have argued, their modes of figuration seems to me at least as appropriate to World War II.

13. See *Irr* for another treatment of this issue with respect to Jameson’s theory, though I believe this essay takes too much for granted the stability of national identity, even in its attempt
to address internationalism in the work of twenty-first-century fiction about immigration and return.

14. Doing so would actually be an example of the classical catachresis, which Quintilian defined as a term that “adapts, to whatever has no proper term, the term which is nearest” (8.34).

15. This might be demonstrated best via the infamous Ern Malley hoax, in which two Australian poets, frustrated by the obscurity of modernist poetry, submitted to wunderkind editor Max Harris (and subsequently published) a batch of poems that haphazardly strung together gnomic imagery and arcane vocabulary under a fake persona (Lehman). A typical one is “Night Piece”:

The swung torch scatters seeds
In the umbelliferous dark
And a frog makes guttural comment
On the naked and trespassing
Nymph of the lake.

The symbols were evident,
Though on park-gates
The iron birds looked disapproval
With rusty invidious beaks.

Among the water-lilies
A splash — white foam in the dark!
And you lay sobbing then
Upon my trembling intuitive arm.

“The symbols were evident” is an obvious joke, because they are of course not evident at all: the relationships between the various images and whatever they might conceivably figure are so arbitrarily catachrestic that no real insight is derivable from them. Granted, as Lehman notes, that a number of contemporary avant-garde poets (e.g., John Ashbery) think the poems rather good in spite of their intent to satirize, but while there is admittedly a very fine line between the better of the Malley poems and, say, the minor poems of Wallace Stevens’s *Harmonium*, I tend to think the similarity tends less to speak well of Malley than poorly of avant-garde poems.

16. Charles Harris seems to trust Henry VII (180-181), and though I generally would not dispute his Barth expertise, I don’t believe there is any reason to think so.

17. This is a contrast to the moments in *The Sot-Weed Factor* where the true geopolitical schemes and even existence of characters like Charles Calvert or John Coode are seriously questioned before they are eventually resolved (see Ch. 3).

18. In other words, they cannot create Hutcheon’s “historiographic metafiction”: as Schulz notes, the “historical contradiction […] structurally neutralizes the novel’s negative metahistorical intentions” (*Muses* 120, 129).

19. This was, incidentally, a major movement in the arc of Murakami’s career, as he had been criticized in Japan throughout the 1980s for being apparently apolitical (see Suter 52).

20. To be precise, the box is a Cutty Sark box, and Toru does find a bottle of Cutty Sark in the hotel room he revisits in the dream world. However, like the *Thieving Magpie* overture, it appears to be a meaningless connection.
21. Kane does not explicitly cite Jameson, but she does claim that “Midnight’s Children belongs to a group of postcolonial novels […] that allegorize national history through the metaphor of the body politic” (95).

22. Rushdie has cited The Tin Drum as a model for Midnight’s Children (Imaginary 277); see also Merivale.

23. Oskar’s evasion of metaphor is perhaps most unsettling when describing the enthusiastic participation of trumpet-player Meyn in the Kristallnacht—participation that does not, incidentally, impress the SS enough to dismiss a brownshirt’s complaint about his brutality toward his cats—which is narrated by Oskar in the quintessentially metonymic nursery-rhyme style of “The House That Jack Built” (e.g., “Once there was a musician, he slew four cats, buried them in a garbage can, left the house, and went out to visit friends. There was once a watchmaker who sat pensively by his window, looking on as Meyn the musician stuffed a half-filled sack in the garbage can and quickly left the court,” etc.) (150-158). Though this style enables Oskar to express sadness over the death of his favorite toymaker and Meyn’s fate, it largely blunts his ability to understand the larger situation in which the characters are part.

24. Even though Saleem tells us “Nothing was real; nothing certain” (389), he does not actually blur the distinction between history and ideological fiction, the way Hutcheon claims he does, by refusing “the known facts” or a “final point of reference” (94, 162). Saleem’s retrospective commentary depends upon being entirely confident about the actual size of each country’s military. It is only at that moment, given the condition of his figural system, that he is totally befuddled. See Ten Kortenaar for a further refutation of Hutcheon-style arguments (232-234).

25. One prominent counter-example is M. Keith Booker, who argued that “a close look at Rushdie’s book […] reveals the difficulty of demonstrating that Midnight’s Children, on the basis of form alone, contains a powerful critique of either imperialism or global capitalism” and that “a look at the actual content of the book also tends to suggest that the book serves as a prop for the ideological structures deployed by Western capital” (286). Yet I think this contributes to my point, because while Booker does well to criticize the reflexive poststructuralist praise of complexity and undecidability as goods unto themselves, his alternative is an equally reflexive Marxist approach to figuring historical relations (and a near-Zhdanovite Marxism, at that), which entails, among other things, a somewhat disturbing defense of historical totalitarian Marxist regimes.

26. Indeed, they often do so while mocking Pynchon’s earlier paranoid hero, V’s Herbert Stencil, for adopting the very same conspiracy-theory mindset (Cooper 161).

27. Molly Hite, for instance, has argued against the critical view of Them as an all-powerful conspiracy, modeling her analyses roughly on Russell’s Paradox and Gödel’s Incompleteness Theorem (Ideas 123-124) and finally claims “that there is no real They in the final analysis” (Ideas 144). However, she does not foreground this in her larger treatment of the book, and as consequently, it hasn’t seemed to have had much impact.

28. As Moore notes, “The Firm” was an actual WWII-era term for the Special Operations Executive, the bureau that appears to encompass The White Visitation in Gravity’s Rainbow (92).

29. Other groups, like Enzian’s Hereros, create similar systems. Notably, Enzian’s rival Josef Ombindi does not create such a system, choosing suicide for his followers instead.
30. Peter Knight’s work on conspiracy theory in American culture similarly notes that conspiracy theories “traditionally functioned […] to bolster a sense of an ‘us’ threatened by a sinister ‘them’” (3).

31. Exemplarily, T. S. Eliot, who famously uses Tarot as a key element in the symbolism of “The Waste Land,” admits that “I am not familiar with the exact constitution of the Tarot pack of cards, from which I have obviously departed to suit my own convenience.” His association of the Three of Staves with the Fisher King, for example, is made “quite arbitrarily” (51).

32. Were we to select Lizzy Bennet, for instance, we would interpret the Tower as Wickham’s seduction of Lydia, the Queen of Swords as the obstinate Mrs. Bennet, the King of Cups Lizzy’s desired marriage to Mr. Darcy, and so on.

33. He receives the Three of Pentacles, a card classically indicating “mediocrity, in work and otherwise,” the apprentice craftsman failing to achieve mastery (Waite 276). Since he apparently lacks the creativity to spin that card positively, perhaps, in this case, Tarot has chanced into an accurate description.

34. This is true whenever the narrator pulls similar sleights-of-hand through the novel: Gödel’s Theorem, for example, does not actually prove Murphy’s Law (279; see also Hume 190).

35. As Wood suggests, this is probably the best response to The Crying of Lot 49, so determinately about indeterminacy as to defeat its apparent purpose. Regarding the question of whether to believe in the hidden Tristero conspiracy, a plot to fake such a conspiracy, or that Oedipa is hallucinating the whole thing, he notes “since we cannot verify that such a choice need exist […] all we can say is that this ordeal is Pynchon’s problem, not America’s” (Broken 212).

Conclusion

1. This is why Deleuze and Guattari’s work, of course, always foregrounds a small number of key phrases, like “lines of flight” and “body without organs,” so that others may focus on and export them while not getting bogged down in their belle lettres essayistic indulgences.

2. Borges wrote this prior to composing the story bearing Funes’s name. Given how it eventually developed, I suspect he would have retracted that speculation.
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