

Presenting Riddles:
The Artifact Text in Contemporary Fiction

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Abstract

This dissertation defines “artifact texts” as works of fiction utilizing a narrative device in which the book held by a reader is purportedly a physical object from the story-world. I argue that this structure shifts the traditional narratological distinction between story and discourse, making discourse itself a part of story and, through that, the narrative form evokes a greater sense of presence for the reader. The first chapter establishes the terms of this argument, identifying the main requirements for the narrative structure and introducing Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht’s notion of presence, which he opposes to meaning and interpretation.

The second chapter considers Vladimir Nabokov’s *Pale Fire*, showing both the characteristics of this narrative structure as well as its stakes in relation to common postmodern and post-postmodern literary tropes. The presence gained by the artifact structure allows such texts to engage in postmodern play and language games without sacrificing immersion and emotional investment in plot and character. In *Pale Fire*, the totalizing nature of unreliability threatens to unravel any investment in the text, but the artifact offers stability and assurance against that unreliability.

The third and fourth chapters consider two other artifact texts in detail, to show some of the variety of effects increased presence can have. In Chapter 3, I argue that Mark Z. Danielewski’s *House of Leaves* sets up a tension between the text and a controlling authorial figure, which leads to the reader’s greater investment in the text itself, even as the author denies answers or even mocks the search. In Chapter 4, I argue that Doug Dorst and J. J. Abrams’s *S.* creates an experience of the relation between the everyday and history that closely resembles

reality through the mixed temporalities of its fictional narrative and ongoing marginal commentary.

The final chapter considers Luigi Serafini's *Codex Seraphinianus*, an encyclopedia-like text of a fantastical world featuring an untranslatable language and strange, unexplained images. This book reverses the previous trend, bordering on pure presence instead of meaning. I argue that the artifact preserves meaning, by suggesting a language to the reader from its genre and graphical devices.

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Chapter One

The Presence of the Artifact

In the 1990s, the television show *Mystery Science Theater 3000* relied on a flimsy, minimalistic premise: its protagonist had been trapped on a space station and forced by mad scientists to watch old, low-quality science fiction films. The bulk of the show then consisted of this protagonist, along with two robotic sidekicks, “riffing” on the films while they aired, adding jokes and sharp critique. While the show is most memorable for its low-budget charm and humor, this combination of a reappropriated film with new jokes and commentary created an interesting phenomenon. The real-world audience numbers for most of these nearly unwatchable films would have been almost nil. Yet the show’s contribution of the “riffing” was essentially parasitic, unable to exist without this primary material. When the film and its riffing were combined, however, the show created a new product out of stale, clichéd cultural artifacts, even resuscitating archived movies for new audiences. This effect is captured in the most culturally iconic image of the show: a shot from the back of a darkened movie theater playing the film, behind the silhouettes of the human and his two robots, watching the film in such a way that the tv audience views both the silhouettes and the film simultaneously. A new form had been created out of an exhausted one.

While a few science fiction films disappearing into the archives of time might be a small loss, more important for literary scholars is the fact that entire genres and modes of representation can become similarly stale or worn out, suffering a diminished ability to affect audiences. The artistic imperative to think of new forms of expression, new content, new styles,

or new narrative structures is a never-ending struggle captured in the constant upheaval of the avant-garde and radically experimental arts. One such approach is to take what already exists and find a way, essentially, to “riff” on it and create something new. Often, in fiction, this takes the form of parody, pastiche, and remediation through new technologies. This dissertation will investigate one such variation, a narrative structure I refer to as an “artifact text,” wherein the real-world book doubles as an artifact from the fictive story-world. At the core of this structure is a document inscribed within the story-world, much as in cases of “found manuscript” novels. However, while the found manuscript trope has been used frequently throughout the history of the novel, from minor instances of a character discovering a note to lengthier letters or diaries reproduced within the larger narrative, the artifact text takes this further by expanding the found document from a localized trope into the total structure of the novel. That is, the book itself—the object held by the real-world reader—is coterminous with the artifact that exists and is discussed in the story-world, and what the reader sees on the page is the same as what a character from the story would see.

The majority of this dissertation will formalize the “artifact text” sub-genre’s features and effects by studying three prominent examples: Vladimir Nabokov’s *Pale Fire*, Mark Z. Danielewski’s *House of Leaves*, and J. J. Abrams and Doug Dorst’s *S.*, with the final chapter approaching Luigi Serafini’s *Codex Seraphinianus* from an opposing direction. In each case, the foundation of the book is a complete, independent document: an autobiographical poem in *Pale Fire*, a critical film analysis in *House of Leaves*, and a novel in *S.* Similarly, in the first three texts, there is an editorial frame surrounding that document, in which another fictional character

explains or investigates the origins or context of the work (*Codex Seraphinianus* troubles this, part of the reason the final chapter approaches it differently). This frequently involves mysteries or supernatural occurrences, and the novels often leave the reader with many questions unanswered or with competing, undecidable explanations. Moreover, in each case, the editorial commentary expands to the point of becoming a full, coherent narrative in its own right, rivaling the ostensibly “primary” document.

Each of these novels includes unconventional narrative devices—such as nonlinear reading paths, pictures, experimental typography—or actual physical objects, the book itself being one such physical object. None of these novels is the first to include such devices, nor are they the first historical instances of this structure, as artifact texts appear occasionally in works prior to the twentieth century. Thus, this dissertation will not attempt to claim that this is an “experimental” or radically unique device. Laurence Sterne’s *Tristram Shandy* engaged in similar typographical experiments in 1759, and describing narratives as an existing found text has been an oft-used authentication device, such as in Miguel de Cervantes’s *Don Quixote* (1615). Nevertheless, its increase in the past fifty years both is representative of postmodernism’s fragmentation and play, and offers an essential counterbalance to postmodernism’s extreme irony and challenge to authenticity.

In fact, I will show in this dissertation how the narrative structure of these works counters postmodern play and artifice with a heightened sense of *presence*, based on Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht’s notion of the word. In *The Production of Presence*, Gumbrecht locates presence in the “things of the world,” emphasizing spatiality, tangibility, the ability to impact bodies, and

ways of evoking a sense of those traits (xv). He has since added the clarification that “by ‘presence’ I have meant—and still mean—that things inevitably stand at a distance from or in proximity to our bodies; whether they ‘touch’ us directly or not, they have substance” (*Our Broad Present* ix). He traces a history of Western thought’s deepening allegiance to the concepts of meaning, interpretation, and the mind, arguing that this emphasis on meaning has coincided with a movement away from, or even the loss of, an emphasis on being, substance, and the body (53). He argues that “what . . . we miss in a world so saturated with meaning, and what therefore turns into a primary object of (not fully conscious) desire in our culture are . . . phenomena and impressions of presence” (105). To be clear from the outset, he does not claim interpretation, meaning, depth, or any associated concepts are “bad,” but rather promotes a tension between the two. Indeed, in *Our Broad Present*, he adds that while he might assign a “priority” to presence, “this is not the case because presence is ‘more important’ than the operations of consciousness and intention, but rather because, perhaps, it is ‘more elementary’” (ix-x). While never able to escape mediation or rationality altogether, the artifact text puts narrative’s inherent meaning-predominance in tension with a sense of realness that helps counter the potentially alienating effects of highly mental processes such as abstraction, artificiality, metafiction, or parody.

The competing frames of reference that come into being around this story-world artifact create both the radical indeterminacy associated with postmodernism and the stability that supports the readers’ search for resolution. The two (or more) frames of reference interact with each other. They compete for attention. They fill in holes left by their counterpart. They also create new holes and cast doubt where there was none before. The dialogic relation between the

novels' multiple frames of reference asks readers to invest in the narrative form: to take sides, to read closely, and to allow the text to affect them in ways that they might otherwise resist. The artifact creates a space that, rather than increasing the distance between reader and text, allows the reader to enter, engage with content, and find significance. Through this interaction, the artifact text revitalizes inherited forms and uses them to create something new.

Showing the Discourse: Some Concepts from Narrative Theory

Narrative theory is less a single school of thought than it is several schools linked by their focus on, and interest in, narrative. Because of this, some of narrative theory's central concepts have numerous interpretations, and the artifact text further troubles some of these concepts. One of the essential narrative principles in this theory has been the distinction between the content of a story and the way in which the content is presented. Russian Formalists, for example, split narratives into *fabula* and *syuzhet*. Boris Tomashevsky identified story/fabula as "the aggregate of mutually related events reported in the work," whereas, "Plot (*syuzhet*) is distinct from story. Both include the same events, but in the plot the events *are arranged* and connected according to the orderly sequence in which they were presented" (164-165). Paul Ricoeur, on the other hand, describes how "every narrative combines two dimensions in various proportions . . . The first may be called the episodic dimension, which characterizes the story as made out of events. The second is the configurational dimension, according to which the plot construes significant wholes out of scattered events" ("Narrative Time" 43). Seymour Chatman, meanwhile, talks about story and discourse: "in simple terms, the story is the *what* in a narrative that is depicted, discourse the

how” (*Story and Discourse* 19). While there are fine distinctions between these conceptualizations, and an adherent of Tomashevsky might focus on different areas of a text than might an adherent of Chatman, on the whole, they are all founded on a structuralist distinction between what *happens* in the world of a story, and how the presentation might order, expand or contract, emphasize, or frame those events.¹ And even those who might fairly dispute the frequently totalizing nature of discussions of this binary would recognize that the conceptual distinction is foundational to narrative theory.²

The artifact texts in this study complicate this distinction. In each, the reader encounters ostensibly an object from that story world: that is, the physical book or manuscript that has been written or typed by fictional characters. In this sense, the book or artifact is part of the story, an “existent,” to use Chatman’s term. Yet that existent also *contains* all the sequencing, perspective, and other discursive qualities. Rather than encountering story through discourse, the reader seems to encounter discourse through story. Moreover, that artifact has its own contextual story concerning its composition and publication that is important to the larger story world. Yet, since the artifact is also the most exterior frame of narration, it seems to create a case where there are important parts of the story existing outside the discourse and not conveyed by it. Compare this

¹ For conceptual consistency, I primarily use Chatman’s “story” and “discourse,” in the same sense of “what’s depicted” and “how it’s depicted” that he describes.

² Richard Walsh, while acknowledging a commonsensicality to the distinction, argues that it lacks conceptual rigor. He argues that fictional events cannot be innocent of artifice, and once that innocence is no longer presumed, “the distinction between fabula and sujet starts to collapse” (*Rhetoric of Fictionality* 54). However, even his critique of the binary doesn’t throw out the terms, but rather re-situates fabula as the “reader’s working version [of events], a function of the process of interpretation, and a means rather than an end in itself” (68). Monika Fludernik also critiques the distinction as part of her development of “natural narratology.”

to even the most immediate of stream-of-conscious narration, first-person narration, or free indirect discourse: in any of those cases, while the reader has close access to a character's mind, the reader is aware that an author has transcribed those thoughts into written words, and arranged them in a larger sequence of plot. In the artifact text, it is the character who has purportedly done the transcribing and arranging, subsuming discourse into the act of a character who is part of the story. For instance, Edgar Allan Poe's 1831 story "MS. Found in a Bottle" is the short account of an unnamed character's disastrous sea voyage. Poe writes the story literally as a message in a bottle, with no exterior narrative framing. The note is written in the sailor's voice, is limited in length to what could reasonably be contained within the space of a bottle, and ends just before the ship sinks, the sailor's syntax growing more urgent and clipped to account for the limited final moments. The note conveys the discourse, but it is itself part of the story-world. As such, there are details of the story-world—that the man indeed drowned, or that the message was recovered—that are never "told," but are rather shown by the very document's existence. While the artifact qualities of Poe's story are rather minimal, in the texts studied here, how a reader treats the non-narrated details plays a critical role in the reader's overall response to the text.

Gérard Genette offers a way out of the potentially reductive distinction between story and discourse by adding a third term. He proposes "to use the word *story* for the signified or narrative content . . . , to use the word *narrative* for the signifier, statement, discourse or narrative text itself, and to use the word *narrating* for the producing narrative action and, by extension, the whole of the real or fictional situation in which that action takes place" (27). However, while

narrating would be useful for the artifact text, Genette focuses on the second term, *narrative*, in his analysis, not simply out of current interest or preference, but because

the level of narrative discourse is the only one directly available to textual analysis, which is itself the only instrument of examination at our disposal in the field of literary narrative, and particularly fictional narrative. If we wanted to study on their own account, let us say, the events recounted by Michelet in his *Histoire de France*, we could have recourse to all sorts of documents external to that work and concerned with the history of France; or, if we wanted to study on its own account the writing of that work, we could use other documents, just as external to Michelet's text, concerned with his life and his work during the years that he devoted to that text. *Such a resource is not available to someone interested in either the events recounted by the narrative that the Recherche du temps perdu constitutes or the narrating act from which it arises* [emphasis mine]. (27-28)

For Genette, anything the narrative discourse does not give the reader is unavailable for analysis. An event or object needs to put in context, and without that context, the responsible scholar shouldn't consider it. Certainly his position is influenced by the structuralist orientation of his theory, but most literary scholars are reluctant to make claims about story content without direct support from the discourse, and it's rare to see serious scholarly work that focuses "merely" on discerning what "actually" happens in a text. And yet this is what texts like *Pale Fire* or *House of Leaves* tempt, even require, the reader to do and to ask.

By making discourse part of the story-world itself, a part of artifact texts—namely, their structural elements, their paratexts, and story elements suggested by their physical features—truly isn't "narrated." In *Story and Discourse*, Chatman offers a distinction between recounting and enacting: "the difference between narration proper, the recounting of an event . . . and enactment, its unmediated presentation . . . corresponds to the classical distinction between *diegesis* and *mimesis* . . . or, in modern terms, between *telling* and *showing*" (32). Authors and scholars in the early 20th century promoted showing over telling. While the debate has taken many forms, the version advanced by Percy Lubbock (and popularized by authors such as Henry James) was influential; Lubbock insisted, "The art of fiction does not begin until the novelist thinks of his story as a matter to be *shown*, to be so exhibited that it will tell itself" (62). Typically, "showing" is a metaphor for narrative that slows to elaborate on detailed description, action, and dialogue in a way such that the significance is clear without the clarification of the narrator ("telling"). While still a practical guideline for beginning writers, "show, don't tell" is not widely held as a critical standard.³ However, in the case of the artifact text, it is literalized in the interplay between an object artifact and the discourse contained within. At its most extradiegetic, the physical features of the novel, including layout, typography, images, and basic physical existence, communicate by showing rather than being contained within, and relying

³ Booth offers a thorough critique of the debate in *Rhetoric of Fiction*, in which he shows the necessity of "telling," along with cases where it is preferable to "showing," in several stories from the *Decameron* (8-16).

exclusively on, a “telling” narrative. The reader encounters a rare fusion of story and discourse in the physical object of the book.

A word also needs to be said also about the concept of the implied author, a sense of artistic control separate from both character and real-world author that the reader discerns in a text. Wayne C. Booth formulated this concept in *Rhetoric of Fiction* to help account for irony and other instances where the narrator’s tone is different from what the reader perceives. He writes that the author

creates . . . an implied version of “himself” that is different from the implied authors we meet in other men’s works. . . . It is clear that the picture the reader gets of this presence is one of the author’s most important effects. However impersonal he may try to be, his reader will inevitably construct a picture of the official scribe who writes in this

manner—and of course that official scribe will never be neutral toward all values. (70-71)

In Booth’s formulation, the concept is a useful way of talking about values without necessarily making claims about the real-world author, about whom any claims might be wrong or who might have disguised his or her actual values. However, in narrative theory more generally, this is a fraught concept with little consensus over its necessity. For instance, Richard Walsh argues that the term does no necessary work, since “the narrator is always either a character who narrates or the author. There is no intermediate position” (“Narrator” 505). A 2006 monograph from Tom Kindt and Hans-Harald Müller (*The Implied Author: Concept and Controversy*) and 2011 special issue of *Style* both focus entirely on the basic question of its analytical value, with debate continuing, particularly over whether the actual and implied authors need to be separated

at all. The artifact text does not mandate a choice between using the “implied author” or not, though it does require reference to an authorial figure or textual whole of some sort underlying the different discourses. That is, with the artifact text, the reader encounters two or more character-authors, multiple discursive texts, and frequent holes or ambiguities in the story. One could ascribe intentionality to any of the individual characters, but there is always also a feeling of the potential for a “grand theory” that will tie the separate texts together and solve the riddles. In Chapter 3 (concerning *House of Leaves*), the concept of an implied author is necessary to my argument that the book posits a tension between that implied author figure and the text itself. In the rest of the dissertation, I simply refer to the author directly as the sense of unity and purpose behind the disparate pieces of text.

Making an Artifact

Most readers will have encountered at least one instance of an artifact text. However, while there are plenty of texts that utilize some of this structure, for the purposes of this discussion, there are three parts of a text that work in combination to create an artifact text:

1. A document inscribed within the story world.
2. A contextual frame of reference that concerns the document’s authorship, composition, publication, or physical state.
3. A *lack* of any narrative discourse outside the inscribed document(s). The reader only has access to what is inscribed or physically provided from the story world.

Considering Poe's "MS. Found in a Bottle," we (1) readily see that the document has been inscribed by the sailor, (2) draw conclusions based on our understanding of the context of a message in a bottle and the sailor's rhetorical situation, and (3) never receive any authorial or extradiegetic narration that adds to our understanding—only an intradiegetic narration. But, again, the texts considered in this dissertation, which develop this artifact structure in more elaborate ways, complicate these basic requirements. Regarding the second, for instance, while in the majority of cases, the contextual frame will consist of overt commentary from other characters (or, in the case of Poe's "MS.," as a clearly identified rhetorical situation), it can also exist implicitly, as will be seen in Chapter 5, concerning Luigi Serafini's *Codex Seraphinianus*. Here, there is never an editor or commenter writing a separate document, but the *Codex's* form as an encyclopedia structures the artifact and is necessary for the reader being able to draw meaning and significance from the text.

The third characteristic also allows confusion, since editorial characters can complicate the distinction between extra- or intradiegetic. The texts still have narrators, due to their character-authors and editorial figures who compile the documents of the artifact. The key distinction is that they are always characters within the story, and their narrations are always inscribed in the story world. For instance, *House of Leaves* includes a set of unnamed editors who sometimes clarify details from its more prominent authors. In *Pale Fire*, an editor referring to himself as Charles Kinbote creates the artifact as he prepares and comments on the narrative poem of John Shade, and many of Kinbote's anecdotes are first-person narrations similar to those by a homodiegetic narrator in a realist novel. However, the editorial comments in *House of*

Leaves and Kinbote's anecdotes are still *inscribed* by characters within the story-world, and there is no narrative voice exterior to the ostensibly physical documents (artifacts) themselves.

Expanding on the distinction between “recounting” and “enacting,” Chatman refers to such texts as “nonnarrated” or “minimally narrated” (147). He claims, “The negative pole of narrator-presence—the pole of ‘pure’ mimesis—is represented by narratives purporting to be untouched transcripts of characters’ behavior” (166), adding that “theoretically, a copied text is the minimal case. The discourse pretends merely to transmit already written materials, like letters or a character’s diary” (167). Since these nonnarrated texts are “untouched,” any connective tissue between the parts must come from the commentary or activity of an editor. As a character, an editor figure is as prone to unreliability as the primary document’s author. As the primary document and editorial frame get tied together into the same text, paratextual features (such as titles, order, layout, etc.) can be considered *actions* of one of those editor characters, but those actions are shown, through the very arrangement and presentation of the artifact, rather than being narrated. Again, the most fundamental consideration is that everything within the artifact text has been inscribed within the story-world itself, which is necessary for the reader to encounter the text as both discourse *and* as an object. And it is this combination of discourse and object that brings about the heightened presence the reader experiences.

The artifact text has a number of direct antecedents, and, as suggested by Chatman’s quote above, has close relatives in mimetic forms of literature, such as epistolary and diary

novels.⁴ By “mimetic,” I am here referring to these forms’ imitative quality, in that they each replicate an existing form and medium of discourse.⁵ Trevor Field writes that “the diary novel is somewhat awkwardly caught between two worlds, the real and the literary, for its mimetic references to physical writing materials and implied dates will always distinguish it from novels which stand as autonomous literary artefacts” (22). Such textual references to the composition of the diaries or letters, which serve to establish that the novels’ contents were at some point inscribed within the story-world, help concretize the narrative situation. Diaries and letters are not framed by a disembodied, authorial narrator who is separate from the world of the letter, or a first-person retrospective narration from some uncertain time and place after the letter was written. Rather, diaries and letters have a specific, individualized, autodiegetic narrator, in a specific time and place during which the writing occurred. Critics of the diary novel and the epistolary novel argue that, historically, the concretization of the rhetorical situation allowed for new considerations of consciousness and identity in such novels, as it formalized the character-author’s interiority. For instance, in *The Epistolary Novel*, Joe Bray argues that epistolary novels

⁴ Indeed, these genres show the artifact text can often be a matter of degree rather than a hard boundary. Either of the two forms could meet characteristics (1) and (3) above, being the inscribed documents of a character, and either could be said to (2) raise the rhetorical situation implicitly as does the *Codex*. I find that epistolary and diary novels do not inherently focus on the contextual frame, and thus I discuss them as separate forms. As Chatman adds, “Of all the forms of literary narrative those that pretend to be constituted by found letters and diaries least presuppose a narrator. If we insist on an agent beyond the implied author, he can only be a mere collector or collator” (169). In artifact texts, the “agent” is never a “mere collector,” and indeed the structuring of the presentation is essential, so I believe it important to keep these forms separate.

⁵ Not to be confused with Auerbach’s sense of the word in *Mimesis*, in which he historicizes the shifting between high and low styles in the representation of everyday life. Similarly, the imitative or true-to-life quality of the depictions in such works isn’t of concern in this context.

have historically been seen as simple, but really “are able to probe the recesses of their characters’ minds in complicated depth, exploring with subtlety some of the critical tensions within, in Bakhtin’s words, ‘the internal life of the individual person’” (20). Rather than a simple, unfiltered flow of thought, the epistolary novel creates a rift between a past, experiencing self, and the “present” narrating self, an important step, Bray argues, toward the emergence of more complicated third-person literature (16).

Mimicking existing forms of correspondence or recording gave these narratives an immediacy and believability not readily available to retrospective narration. There is always a risk that fiction may be met with resistance by its readers, but as Field writes, “It is certainly true . . . that quite apart from facilitating a suspension of disbelief the journal form is particularly well suited to creating positive belief on the part of even the least willing reader” (54). As he also notes, this facilitation can go a long way, even allowing the reader to ignore when the diary premise doesn’t hold up to scrutiny: “Many successful diary novels manage to draw the reader into believing in the possibility of the writing process before launching off into a literally unlikely text which nonetheless remains credible as long as the reader is inspired by literary good faith” (21). Thus, the overwhelming volume written by some of these fictive diarists, or the occasional unlikely or impossible writing situation, will often be overlooked as long as the initial premise rings true for the reader.

H. Porter Abbott’s work on diary fiction gives a reasonable explanation for why this form should appear as more genuine to readers:

In purporting to give the truth of a real, not an invented, consciousness, the diary strategy favors a conception of the real as the artless, and thus in a familiar paradox it has become a formal attribute of the absence of form. . . . It is important to stress, however, that the sense of reality that the diary can foster is of two kinds. The artless spontaneity of the internal, nonretrospective record is one. The other is the document itself, which, as a *document*, claims to be real. In other words, this is the sort of document that people who are not professional writers actually write. As such, it is a kind of realistic absolute or terminal point. (18-19)

Abbott indicates that, as a document that anyone could write, a diary (or letter) subdues artifice, at least temporarily. The diary has the appearance of being an “artless” document produced by a fictional character. In this light, the figure of an implied author is similarly diminished, at least seemingly.⁶ Appearing as an everyday form of writing and often including everyday details, these mimetic forms seem at first to bear less of an imprint of design. Importantly, though, Field notes that this is still an illusion, and even a seemingly inconclusive end “is a reflection of deliberate artistic choice rather than the arbitrariness of day-to-day reality” (20). Close readers will detect in the artless recording of events the same narrative goals as in overtly constructed third-person narratives.

The mimetic quality of diaries and letters also results in a distinct temporality compared to the more common, third-person realist novel. With the exception of cases where the entire

⁶ This offers another distinction from the artifact text, wherein the reader encounters both the seemingly authentic document as well as the sense of an authorial design simultaneously.

novel is a single letter or diary entry, epistolary and diary novels are neither wholly retrospective, nor wholly in the present tense. Instead, each letter or entry brings the reader up to the point of composition, only to skip ahead again with the next installment. As Abbott writes, “The interrupted composition of the diary brings us continually back to a new beginning in the present. Each entry, as it begins, returns us to the moment of composition and in so doing returns us to that point of temporary withdrawal, outside the action, necessary for the putting down of the words on paper” (24-25). This creates a constant reminder of the narrative situation, and also complicates the distinction between narrating and experiencing selves. The character experiences an event at one point in time, but might not write about it until hours later. At that point, the “narrating self” could be substantially different than the “experiencing self,” as the excitement of love or the anger of a fight may have faded or been complicated by intervening events. The next entry might not be for weeks or months, and, as expected in a fictional narrative, there have likely been dramatic events that have induced changes in the personality or viewpoint of the writer. For a retrospective narrator, all these events will already be in the past, so whatever changes the events have induced have likely already occurred. For a present-tense narration, the changes in character occur gradually as the character experiences the events. For the entry-based diaries and letters, these changes happen in stutter step, meaning the reader must always be catching up to an already-changed and still-changing narrator.

While diaries and letters appear in some of the artifact texts I will study, the bulk of each novel consists of other types of documents, such as a narrative poem, monograph, novel, and encyclopedia. This might seem strange, as a novel or poem would seem to lack the artless quality

of a diary or letter. The artifact accomplishes this seeming artlessness, though, by foregrounding the narrative situation as in the mimetic forms. That is, a novel typically seems artful because of the sense of an implied (or real) author behind the scenes. However, the artfulness of *Ship of Theseus* (the novel within S.) is first attributable to a character within the story-world: the fictive author V. M. Straka. The character-author is part of the diegesis, and so the novel becomes an object within the larger story of S., its writing becomes an event within that story's history, and its author becomes a character whose identity is of primary concern. Of course, readers still know there is a real-world Doug Dorst arranging the novel at the highest level, but part of that arrangement is to make the novel *Ship of Theseus* into an object that characterizes Straka. As with diaries or letters, the novel becomes *both* a way into the character of its fictional author, and a piece of the final product of an extradiegetic, authorial consciousness.

This displacement of an extradiegetic implied authorship into several authorial characters is central to the artifact text. As in the examples of the diary and epistolary novel, displacements of authorship are common throughout literary history, both for aesthetic reasons and pragmatic, real-world concerns. In a postscript to *The Name of the Rose*, Umberto Eco writes of his choice to attribute the text to another persona:

I was a novice narrator, and in the past I had looked at narrators from the opposite side of the barricade. I was embarrassed at telling a story. . . . My story, then, could only begin with the discovered manuscript, and even this would be (naturally) a quotation. So I wrote the introduction immediately, setting my narrative on a fourth level of

encasement, inside three other narratives: I am saying what Vallet said that Mabillon said that Adso said. . . .

I was now free of every fear. (511-512)

Besides having fears of being an impostor or of being inadequate as a writing talent, an author may have a political need for pseudonyms or fictional textual transmission—as in cases of political critique, or when female and/or non-white authors publish in a white, male-controlled industry. In “Who was ‘A. Moore’?” Andrew Bricker identifies other problems in eighteenth-century publishing that might lead to misattributions of an author’s identity: “authorial pseudonyms, made-up printers and booksellers, so-called ‘trade publishers’ who had nothing to do with the actual printing or distribution of a given work, even the names of real authors, printers, and publishers who have been added without their approval and despite them having had no hand in the publication” (181).

More pertinent to the present study, though, would be the case of historical forgeries and impersonations, such as the eighteenth-century poet Thomas Chatterton’s fabrication of a fifteenth-century poet Thomas Rowley. Relying on his audience’s limited exposure to authentic medieval writing, Chatterton was able to convince people that poems he had written were actually the historical manuscripts of Rowley, a persona Chatterton had invented. The Rowley poems enjoyed some limited success, but upon discovery, his work was discredited.⁷ While he did not directly steal work, the fraudulent use of a false identity for economic gain certainly is

⁷ This historical incident became the matter for Peter Ackroyd’s found manuscript novel *Chatterton*.

unethical. In contrast, while Nabokov may write a poem mimicking the style of Robert Frost, or Abrams and Dorst may forge an early 20th-century surrealist adventure novel, they do not pass off their works as authentic historical documents. Nevertheless, while the ethics may not be in question, some may consider it a “cheap” tactic to mimic another style or author.⁸ However, in the case of these novels, the authors do not merely mimic, but rather bring the mimicked material into conversation with postmodern and contemporary tropes and concerns. Just as with *Mystery Science Theater*’s whimsical use of science fiction castoffs, artifact texts use the imitation of older, sometimes archaic, forms to create something new.

In fact, pseudo-authors and editors appear frequently in literature, especially with diary novels, which often require some explanation from an outside source. Yet, as Field notes,

The ambiguity surrounding the role of the editor figure in diary fiction is considerable.

While the prominence of such a guarantor of truth in editions of real diaries means that an unmediated diary immediately reads like fiction, the writers of fictional journals attributed to real people include editors precisely in order to prevent the reader from taking the work as real and to increase his enjoyment of the make-believe journal. In the case of total fiction, meanwhile, a whole range of exploitation is possible. (63)

The examples that Field gives of diary fictions with editors would certainly fit them within the present study. Each artifact text, through its editor figure, creates an intermediary between the

⁸ Indeed, one question often raised concerning *Pale Fire* is whether John Shade’s “Pale Fire” poem is “good poetry,” or if Nabokov was parodying Frost’s style. A similar question could conceivably be raised concerning S.’s surrealist *Ship of Theseus*, once S. has had a little more time to develop a critical conversation.

mimetic document and the reader, and in each case, the intermediary maintains the mimetic quality of the novel on the whole. For instance, Nabokov and Danielewski each create an explicit editor, who has acquired a manuscript and prepared some form of introduction or commentary about their respective documents. In doing so, the editors each reproduce common written forms available today, such as the “critical introduction” to an author’s work. In *S.*, the frame takes the form of two students’ marginal comments in a library book, along with various supplementary objects, such as photos, postcards or other documents. As mentioned above, in the case of Serafini’s *Codex Seraphinianus*, the frame is a more implicit rhetorical situation created by the encyclopedic genre, which will be shown to structure and frame content in similar ways without overt commentary. In each case, a frame of some sort is established, but not one that disrupts the mimetic quality of the artifact text. And yet, in all of these texts, the real author takes a further step back from the work. Not only is the fictional document written by a fictional someone else, but also the commenter is a separate identity from the real author. The real author stepping back from the work creates a sense of more unmediated contact between the reader and text.

It’s this unmediated contact that evokes a sense of presence for the reader, which then works to counter some of the potentially alienating trends of postmodernism. Attempts to define postmodernism often focus on compiling list of features, particularly in opposition to modernism.⁹ In *Postmodernist Fiction*, Brian McHale argues that, while such lists can prove a

⁹ For instance, Fredric Jameson identified “constitutive features,” such as “depthlessness . . . weakening of historicity . . . a whole new type of emotional ground tone,” and the relation of each of those features to new technologies (*Postmodernism* 6). Ihab Hassan lists over 30 binary pairs, including concepts such as “play,” “indeterminacy,” “immanence” “schizophrenia,” and “against interpretation” (280-281).

useful starting point, “they also beg important questions, such as the question of why *these* particular features should cluster in *this* particular way—in other words, the question of what *system* might underlie the catalogue” (7). In place of such lists, McHale locates the shift from modernism to postmodernism in a shift in *dominant*, from epistemology to ontology. That is, underlying the different catalogues of features, there is a tendency to shift from questions of how one interprets and knows the world and other people to questions such as “Which world is this? . . . What is a world? . . . What happens when different kinds of world are placed in confrontation, or when boundaries between worlds are violated?; What is the mode of existence of a text, and what is the mode of existence of the world (or worlds) it projects?” (10). By shifting the focus to the questions asked, McHale shows many of the entries on the “catalogues” to be simply the different ways in which artists and critics attempt to address those questions. Gumbrecht’s proposed restoration of sensations of presence in culture and aesthetic production parallels McHale’s shift in dominants; just as culture shifted from an epistemological modernism to an ontological postmodernism, Gumbrecht argues for a shift from meaning and interpretation to presence. The artifact text’s emphasis on the material reality of the artifact itself reflects this ontological dominant. While *S.* and (arguably) *House of Leaves* postdate postmodernism, all of the texts considered here can be seen to engage in ontological questions concerning the nature of the worlds represented, the identity of the texts’ authorial figures, and, not surprisingly, the nature and stability of the text itself. These artifact texts continually re-assert the truth that they are simultaneously the sole access point to the story-world, while also being vulnerable to manipulation or destruction.

However, I argue that artifact texts complicate the epistemology-to-ontology shift by seeking to address *both* dominants. McHale acknowledges that there isn't a clean boundary between the two: "Intractable epistemological uncertainty becomes at a certain point ontological plurality or instability: push epistemological questions far enough and they 'tip over' into ontological questions. By the same token, push ontological questions far enough and they tip over into epistemological questions" (11). However, while he allows that the same question, pushed to an extreme, might shift between dominants, the nature of a "dominant" would presumably preclude multiple dominants from being active at once. Nevertheless, artifact texts seek to engage with both. They foreground an ontological issue regarding the nature of texts, but contained *within* those ontologically troubled artifacts are concerns deeply epistemological in nature. When McHale considers the nature of text and the physical book, discussing what he calls "concrete prose" and "schizoid texts," he still maintains a distinction between the physical object and the discourse it contains. He writes, "The material book . . . although in a sense it does not belong to the text's ontological structure, nevertheless constitutes a kind of ontological subbasement or foundation, without which the structure could not stand. A major ontological 'cut' divides the book as real, material object from the text as intentional object" (180). He grants the physical book an ontology relevant to the text, but still holds it apart as something distinct. Artifact texts collapse the distinction, making the physical book a part of the story-world's ontological concerns.

The end of postmodernism (at least in its most extreme versions) has led to a reassessment of many of the catalogued characteristics, particularly the value of postmodern

irony, relativism, and detachment. Wolfgang Funk notes the problematic relation between postmodern fiction and the world in his development of “authentic narrative,” which is the closest concept to the artifact texts described in this dissertation. He argues that if postmodern fiction “can lay claim to any sort of truth, it is certainly not the faithfulness of realistic description or evocation, but rather a truthfulness of/in representation, or more precisely the process of representation” (46). His solution similarly looks to a synthesis of story and discourse, but that synthesis takes a rather different form than what I argue. Considering Jennifer Egan’s *A Visit from the Goon Squad*, he argues that “authentic narrative” foregrounds the artifice of its narrative structure, “collapsing the conventional narrative levels and introducing a meta-level, on which *histoire*, *narration*, and *récit* converge” (49). While his argument and my own approach a similar point of converging story and discourse, for him it is specifically by *heightening* discourse and putting the reader in the position of working through it that merges story and discourse. The present discussion, by contrast, argues that discourse is subsumed into story, as a way of giving even disruptive metafiction “presence” for the reader. The novels studied here span the postmodern debate, and can be seen to engage in many of its common practices, such as metafiction, nostalgia, and ontological indeterminacy. However, the “presence” created by the artifact is in tension with those postmodern tactics, and the tension between claims for artifice and claims for the real maintains (or reconstructs) significance for readers. This study will show that the cleverness and riddles allow rich engagements with identity, death, lived experience, and memory, while still displaying hallmarks of postmodern play and abstraction.

While found manuscripts, diary novels, epistolary novels, pastiche, and forgery might all share some characteristics with the novels I've identified as artifact texts, the *combination* of all three elements described above makes the artifact text a distinct narrative form. As in a found manuscript novel, the context of the document is essential, but as in a diary novel, the artifact maintains its mimetic reproduction of the story-world element. This dissertation will focus on the effects that result from this structure, which primarily cluster around the greater presence and immersion the structure allows to the reader. By bringing the reader into an encounter with a story-world object, that story becomes more "real." As a result, story-level, ontological questions become central to analysis. The first novel, Nabokov's *Pale Fire*, is the most restrained in its use of this structure, yet its layout and the fact that the poem and commentary are inscribed within its story lead to the same effects, so its simpler approach will serve as a useful study before I address the eclectic, more complex forms. Chapter 2 builds on Hans Gumbrecht's notion of presence to show how *Pale Fire*'s structure constructs an elaborate artifice as a way to evoke emotional attachment, rather than serving as a barrier to it. The chapter illustrates how this presence maps onto a number of related textual operations, such as spatiality, immersion, and scene, all of which will carry forward to the other chapters.

Chapter three of this dissertation will cover Danielewski's *House of Leaves*. The primary text, a critical analysis by a man named Zampanò of a documentary film titled *The Navidson Record*, parodies the academic monograph genre with extensive footnotes and abstruse digressions. Its editor, Johnny Truant, recounts his personal experience with the manuscript, and unnamed editors provide further documentation about both Johnny and Zampanò, including a

series of letters to Johnny from his mother, Pelafina. These competing voices result in frequent contradictions but also surprising correspondences, seeming to create metaleptic violations of the different story levels. Moreover, all the voices are shot through by a heavy-handed persona of Danielewski, who includes coded references to his own name and occasionally mocks the reader. I argue that using the artifact structure allows Danielewski to pit a controlling, authorial presence against the object of the text, furthering a goal of creating “better” readers. By performing a persona of himself (both within and outside of the text) as a domineering force who has outsmarted readers and denied meaning or significance, he pushes the reader to side against the persona and with the text itself, leading to more determined focus and investment in the text. The more he intrudes, the more the reader allies with and invests in the story. While frequently reminding readers of a core absence or indeterminacy, the novel nevertheless rewards its readers’ investment in the presented artifact.

Chapter four covers *S.*, a novel conceived by J. J. Abrams and written by Doug Dorst. It provides the most elaborate and full example of a true textual “artifact,” with both the book and its physical contents (such as postcards, napkin sketches, and supporting documents) produced to look genuine and real. The book has been published to look like a weathered library copy of a novel; it contains marginal comments by two “readers,” who are conducting a literary investigation concerning the book’s authorship and history. The story revealed by the commenters is not particularly unique in itself, telling a love story and the discovery of a historical conspiracy. However, I argue that the structure creates a truly distinct literary *experience* of the temporality of human experience and history. By including an old narrative

alongside distinct temporal layers of dialogic commentary, commentary which is ostensibly ongoing, the book becomes a living history, where the ongoing present is seen simultaneously with its historical evolution. Such simultaneous experience of different narratives is rare, and *S.* may in fact be unique in also blending two distinct narrative temporalities as it does. Indeed, its closest comparisons seem to come from outside fictional literature, such as the Talmud, the Jewish book of religious law, structured around persistent debate and evolution of thought in relation to its base text, the Mishnah. I argue that this story's timelessness replicates human experience of both interpersonal relations and history more authentically than do more traditional narratives.

These first chapters show the artifact as a structure that restores presence to an art form that typically privileges meaning, creating, at times, a balance, and, at other times, a tension between the two. However, in the final chapter, I investigate Luigi Serafini's *Codex Seraphinianus*, an artist's book that reverses this trend, being an object of almost pure presence that requires restoration of its meaning dimension. *Codex Seraphinianus* appears to be an encyclopedia, detailing a surreal, hallucinatory, or alien world's inhabitants and cultures. It is also written in a fabricated script that appears to be untranslatable. Combining its lack of language with its bizarre images that prevent sequential understanding risks reducing the reader's response to the work to mere curiosity. In chapter five, I show how the artifact, primarily its genre, structures our understanding enough to allow meaning, even without language or coherent sequences. Moreover, by preventing the reader from accessing content, Serafini exposes the way that the generic features of encyclopedias shape, even control, our understanding, and how such

features can work to reinforce existing power structures in the world. Thus, the dissertation will move from a highly meaning-based, metafictional text to one based almost entirely on presence. However, along the way, this dissertation will show how incorporating the artifact into narrative structure allows an author to develop both meaning and presence, without losing sight of either.

Chapter Two

“For we are most artistically caged”: *Pale Fire*

It is one thing to conceive the main play of a composition and another to construct it. The strain on the mind is formidable; the element of time drops out of one's consciousness altogether: the building hand gropes for a pawn in the box, holds it, while the mind still ponders the need for a foil or a stopgap, and when the fist opens, a whole hour, perhaps, has gone by, has burned to ashes in the incandescent cerebation of the scheme.

—Vladimir Nabokov, *Speak, Memory*, 227.

Vladimir Nabokov's frequent reference to the composition of chess problems has led many critics to see chess as a metaphoric key to decipher some of his work, particularly his 1962 novel *Pale Fire*, which abounds in chess references.¹⁰ However, while he describes the composition of chess problems as having a “poetico-mathematical” inspiration, and the composer's relation to a chess problem does seem analogous to that between an author and the world (*Speak* 226-228), the comparison also downplays key differences between chess problems and novels such as *Pale Fire*. Most significantly, in a chess riddle, the composer and solver both have an equal knowledge of the rules of the game, the capabilities of the pieces, and the boundaries of play, whereas the “game” of *Pale Fire* leaves its readers with unstable knowledge about how the pieces move or where the boundaries of its game board lie. Indeed, while chess is

¹⁰ See, for instance, Bader (1972), Boyd (1990), Lange (1996), and Ramey (2012).

a game with clearly defined rules, many of the chess references in the novel specifically strain against those rules, such as “promoting pawns / To ivory unicorns and ebon fauns,” or the comparison of the assassin Gradus to a knight that “feels” the additional moves off-board that it could potentially make (276). And while a chess problem can be objectively described as having or not having a solution, *Pale Fire* allows no such claim, because the scope of its problem remains indeterminate. As John Shade says, he and the other characters “are most artistically caged” (37), but the size and shape of that cage are unclear.

Rather than attempting to offer a new unifying interpretation of the text, the goal of this chapter is to elucidate the boundaries of that artistic cage Shade identifies. One of Nabokov’s deepest intellectual influences, Iulii Aikhenvald, wrote specifically against the reader’s imposition of whim. He argues, “Whoever intentionally obscures his author with himself, whoever for some need of his own, and for his own sake distorts the author’s original, is not acting in the spirit of free impressionism: on the contrary, he is forcibly promoting his own impressions” (4).¹¹ Notably, this is exactly what happens in Kinbote’s reading of Shade’s poetry in *Pale Fire*—at least by one interpretation. Moreover, much of the critical dispute has likewise centered on differences in fundamental premises about what should be included in the discussion. Does Kinbote kill himself, and is it worth investigating, or should the analysis stop with the final page? Should we consider Nabokov’s paratextual commentary as relevant, given the heightened craftwork apparent in the novel’s design, or exclude it as authorial intrusion?

¹¹ Aikhenvald quotes drawn from Stephen Blackwell’s forthcoming translation of “The Writer and the Reader,” from *In Praise of Idleness* (1922).

Which “clues” are intentional and which are projections of a critic’s own idiosyncratic concerns? When is textual evidence required for a reading, and when is aesthetic satisfaction sufficient on its own? Because of the novel’s structure and indeterminacy, many of the critical responses to this novel go against the grain of typical academic scholarship, regularly integrating Nabokov’s commentary or speculating outside the normal boundaries of story.

The fundamental split in critical discussions of the novel’s story centers on an ambivalence between emotional investment and metafictional play, two dimensions that often work against each other. Part of the difficulty for an author seeking to make a character or situation real enough to elicit an emotional response in a reader is that the reader always encounters story content as textual discourse; and as language, a story lends itself more immediately to interpretation and meaning than it does to immersion and emotional reaction (Gumbrecht 109). *Pale Fire* seemingly compounds the problem with its complicated structures and riddles that call for cognitive, rather than emotional, investment. However, as an artifact text, the novel anchors its discursive functions and cognitive demands within an artifact: the physical, story-world object of the manuscript included in the novel. By evoking the physicality of an existent of the story-world, *Pale Fire* offers an assurance of at least one part of that story-world, and further evokes the history and context surrounding the object, creating an opening into the broader story-world. This structural device allows the novel to blend immersion with seemingly anti-immersive, self-reflexive metafiction, establishing a realism that encourages genuine engagement with its mysteries despite its radical indeterminacies and rather than trivializing these indeterminacies as “mere” puzzles.

In this chapter, I use *Pale Fire* to establish the primary characteristics of the artifact text, and then use that designation to elucidate the critical debate about the novel. I first analyze the existing critical discourse about the novel's indeterminacy and show how it vacillates between investment in the characters and story and detachment from its artifice. I then argue that the presence created by its artifact structure allows it to do both, showing some of the key aspects of the structure in the process. In particular, I show how the artifact highlights its physicality in the story world, emphasizes spatial exploration of the text, and develops a static, affective present, traits which will then carry over into the discussion in subsequent chapters. As a result of its structure, the reader experiences *Pale Fire* as both narrative and object, allowing the novel to shift between playful artifice and immersion, creating a realist investment in character that is not undermined by its metafiction.

The Black Box of *Pale Fire*

Nabokov's *Pale Fire* consists of four related documents. At the center is "Pale Fire," a 999-line autobiographical narrative poem by the fictional John Shade of the also-fictional New Wye. After Shade is shot and killed upon completion of the poem, his acquaintance and neighbor Charles Kinbote acquires the copy of the manuscript and assumes an editorial role, taking it upon himself to compose a "Foreword," "Commentary," and "Index" under the pretense that his friendship with the poet has made him the most suited to glossing its contents and background, going so far as to claim, "Without my notes Shade's text simply has no human reality at all" (29). While the "Foreword" does explain the composition and physical details of the manuscript,

it also quickly makes clear Kinbote's inadequacy for his task, as he reveals his easily distracted, jealous, and narcissistic mind. In the extensive "Commentary" that follows the poem, Kinbote claims to gloss the poem but instead focuses on his relation with the Shades, his own personal life, and the history of his country Zembla and its ruler Charles II, which he claims was originally intended to be the poem's central subject. The "Commentary" includes numerous heavy-handed hints that Kinbote believes himself to be Charles II, and by its end, Kinbote has revealed it outright. Moreover, he explains that Shade's killer was actually an assassin named Gradus intending to kill Kinbote. However, by this time the reader has also long since come to the conclusion that Kinbote is most likely delusional and has fabricated, at minimum, the existence of Zembla, and potentially far more. Most of his judgments, both social and literary, are in doubt, and his interpretation of the poem is fraught with unreliability. Finally, the "Index" continues both trends of Kinbote's narcissism and warped genre expectations. He gives himself the most extensive entries while excluding numerous characters relevant to the poem, giving only a dismissive "*passim*" to the poet's wife, Sybil (313).¹²

The critical history surrounding the novel has been heated, largely as a result of two primary instabilities related to this overall structure. The first instability is that the narrator with the greatest filtering control—that is, Kinbote, who is both (ostensibly) the author of his own documents as well as the handler of the only manuscript of Shade's poem—is, at minimum, an incompetent editor. He is easily distracted, complaining of an amusement park outside his cabin

¹² Indicating "here and there," despite Sybil's central, defining presence in John's life, and significance within the poem itself.

(13), then correcting himself that it's actually a group of campers (235), yet leaving both comments in the manuscript he's supposedly readying for publication. Beyond this, he makes frequent mistakes in his commentary, such as missing the origin of the title in Shakespeare's *Timon of Athens*, despite having (and quoting from) a mistranslated copy (80). Most important, though, are his ethical breaches as an editor, shifting the focus of the Commentary to himself and the story of Charles XII's flight from Zembla, even after discovering that the poem didn't deal with the tale. These failures as an editor are foregrounded, and it did not take long after the publication of the novel for one of the first major theories about the novel to emerge. In "A Bolt from the Blue," Mary McCarthy asserts that Kinbote is truly an alias of the insane Russian professor Botkin, mentioned seldomly in the novel yet still given an entry in Kinbote's Index (McCarthy 85). Given Kinbote's total control over the manuscript and the realization that he is not only incompetent but possibly deliberately deceitful, insane, or both, McCarthy opened a door that has been hard to close, as it exposes every detail of the text to challenge.

The second instability is that the documents, despite supposedly originating from two separate authors, display a number of connections. While Kinbote doesn't recognize the source of "pale fire" as a title, its origin nevertheless happens to be the one text Kinbote has with him in hiding (Shakespeare's *Timon of Athens*). Kinbote even makes the ironic comment, "It certainly contains nothing that could be regarded as an equivalent of 'pale fire' (if it had, my luck would have been a statistical monster" (285). Kinbote echoes Shade's daughter Hazel in the appreciation for "mirror words" (193). These, and other resonances, led to the emergence of "single-author" theories, arguments that all four documents in the novel originate from a single

creative entity, both intuitively in the real world (as Nabokov is of course the sole author) but also within the story-world, with Kinbote or Shade either fabricating the other party entirely, or falsely attributing texts to him. The first of these interpretations was Page Stegner's, who claimed that Kinbote's wild creativity is behind all the documents. But a more thoroughly elucidated claim from Andrew Field arose in opposition:

The most cogent argument for the essential unity of poem with commentary are the rejected draft portions of Shade's poems, which Kinbote cites and which, if they are in fact Shade's, would prove . . . that the old poet was indeed originally on the verge of writing a poem about the country of Zembla. . . . There must be more than just a suspicion that one of the two voices belongs, in ventriloquial fashion, to the other. . . .

The primary author—even without Nabokov's acknowledgment that Kinbote really does not know what is going on in Shade's poem—must be John Shade. (335)

From these starting points, a number of other single-author theories developed.¹³ However, while many are quite convincing, even from the start, Field's draws on a very problematic "if" when he refers to the rejected drafts. No matter how convincing any interpretive theory about the novel might be—single-author or otherwise—it will run into the first instability of the unequal hierarchy of documents: that is, Kinbote's overarching control of both his commentary and the physical poem. As Vladimir Alexandrov argues, "The reason why many of the ambiguities in

¹³ These were more thoroughly developed and pushed on the Shadean side, especially Bader (31) and, for a time, Boyd, who also outlines for several pages a preponderance of the resonances between poem and paratext (111-113); along with Stegner, Pekka Tammi gives the most formal defense of a Kinbote-authored text in *Problems of Nabokov's Poetics* (1985).

Kinbote's texts cannot be resolved is of course that the reader has no criteria outside the novel by which he can gauge the referential accuracy of what Kinbote says. We do not even know for certain if the variants he cites for Shade's poems are really derived from it or not" (191).

Because of the combination of these two basic aspects of the structure, attempts to "solve" the puzzle of *Pale Fire* often run into the problem of critical projection onto the novel. Maurice Couturier refers to the novel as a "black box," and critiques the single-author theories, arguing, "The exegetes on both sides remain prisoners of the black box: they do not, properly speaking, interpret the text; they analyse it more or less scrupulously according to their own metaphysical or aesthetic preconceptions, according also to what they know or think they know about the author's expectations and values" ("Which Is to Be Master" 2).¹⁴ Others have acknowledged the fundamental indeterminacy of the textual evidence. Brian McHale, for instance, refers to the novel as a "text of absolute epistemological uncertainty" (18). In a study of the different audiences brought out by the novel, Peter Rabinowitz agrees but laments this, arguing that the novel's ambiguity "makes us more aware of the gap between authorial and narrative audience, and hence of the novel as art, as construct. It is thus difficult to get involved in *Pale Fire* as narrative audience, and for many readers, including myself, the book is generally unmoving, witty and brilliant as it may be" ("Truth in Fiction" 139).¹⁵

¹⁴ Proponents on both sides of the single-author theories often critique this in their opposition as well, with Field explaining how one fellow critic reached his conclusions: "He knew what he was looking for and got his ball to the right place by putting it in his pocket" (346). See also chapter six in Alladaye, or Couturier's expansion of the quoted passage above in "The Near-Tyranny of the Author."

¹⁵ Still others have derided the efforts. In a short survey of Nabokov's work, Neil Cornwell claims, "Arguments over whether a primary author for the entire text (other than at the level of Nabokov himself, of course) can be discerned . . . by now seem largely beside the point," going on to describe the

One last coordinate of this discussion that should be mentioned are those who argue that single-authorship interpretations actually undermine the aesthetic value of the novel and its characterization. Ellen Pifer makes the point that not only are Kinbote and Shade separate and linked only by the force of the poem itself, but “by straining to make out some intimate link or hidden bond between the identities of Shade and Kinbote, or of Shade and his author, we only perpetrate the law of averages, obscuring the nature of each character’s unique reality” (117). Thus, the puzzle-solving efforts can be critically detrimental, leading readers astray from the true depth of characterization.

Nevertheless, despite these criticisms of the purpose or value in seeking to answer the text’s riddles, new work continues to focus entirely on the characters’ ontological status¹⁶ or return to the original questions as conversational touchstones.¹⁷ This rather complicated, sometimes outlandish, debate reveals a few important concerns. First, the array of theories seems to reflect two competing concerns that critics are bringing with them to the text: metafictional play and emotional investment. While the novel indeed resembles a puzzle, begging to be solved, the opposite is also true but often forgotten: the puzzle is still a novel. For Rabinowitz or Pifer,

ontological status of Zembla to the novel as a “rather pointless argument” (76, 78), while Brian Stonehill calls the authorship question a “ludicrous critical battle” (81).

¹⁶ Such as René Alladaie’s 2013 *The Darker Shades of Pale Fire*, which builds off of Boyd but comes to its own, new conclusion.

¹⁷ Such as Laurence Piercy’s “Kinbote’s Heroism” (2016), Maurice Charney’s “Adopting Selves, Inserting Selves: Nabokov’s *Pale Fire*” (2014), Geoffrey Green’s “A Rich and Fertile Allusive World of Style: Cracking the Barrier of Nabokov’s ‘Indeterminacy’” (2015), or Pyeaaam Abbasi and Omid Amani’s “Nabokov’s Postmodernism: The Matter of Discourse and Survival in *Pale Fire*” (2013). Even Couturier, despite his reasonable criticism of “black box” readings, still refers back to the debate in his recent book *Nabokov’s Eros and the Poetics of Desire* (2014), despite being outside the book’s primary focus.

excessive zeal for the puzzle diminishes novelistic aspects such as character or thematic significance. Brian Boyd, after progressing from a Shadean theory, even critiques his former camp, saying, “And if [Shade] *had* invented his own death . . . how much would the novel lose!” (125). Solving the puzzle, while potentially convincing, could arguably result in a less satisfying novel. Second, Kinbote’s editorial control means that criticism must either rest in indeterminacy or make cautious leaps in interpretation. In the most extensive treatment of the novel, Boyd describes his evolution from a Shadean reading to one where Kinbote is a real-but-delusional person who is influenced by the spirits of Hazel and John Shade (who was himself influenced by Hazel in his writing of the poem). He comes to this conclusion via a series of re-readings, establishing a dense web of thematic connections and motifs that resonate across the fragments, and his final conclusion is compelling but, importantly, based on interpretive leaps off-page to arrive at deeper characterization and aesthetic significance. Perhaps most significant among these is the notion that Kinbote, after completing the final pages of his paratext, commits suicide, a notion forwarded by Nabokov, but implied within the text as well.¹⁸ Even if the novel is Maurice Couturier’s black box, into which critics pour their own concerns, it hasn’t slowed or stymied critical response.

¹⁸ A stance that has been challenged by many, such as Beatrix Hesse, who argues, “In an interview with Alfred Appel, Nabokov stated that even Kinbote himself committed suicide after (or even shortly before) completing the index. This comment, however, should be taken with a grain of salt: like all literary characters, Kinbote must cease to exist once the novel is finished” (118). See also Isaacs (2002) or Alladay (2013). However, “suicide” in this case could refer metaphorically to the novel’s completion, as Hesse says, since Kinbote realizes that his existence comes to an end with the completion of the text. Similarly, this could refer to Kinbote being a persona created by a delusional Botkin, a persona whose purpose runs its course and ceases to exist with the conclusion of commentary. Still, any of these requires at least *some* projection forward beyond the literal end of the book, an objectionable choice to some.

Presence and the Artifact Text

Pale Fire's heightened presence offers one explanation for the sustained critical attention the novel has received, even in the face of total indeterminacy. As stated in Chapter 1, Hans Gumbrecht promotes the restoration of "presence" to a productive tension with "meaning" in culture, something he shows to have diminished over the past centuries. He draws especially on Jean-Luc Nancy's comment that "a moment arrives when one can no longer feel anything but anger, an absolute anger, against so many discourses, so many texts that have no other care than to make a little more sense, to redo or perfect delicate works of signification" (5). In contrast to Nancy's biting tone, Gumbrecht does not propose one or the other being dominant, but rather a sense of aesthetic experience as "moments of intensity" that include meaning and presence: "presence and meaning always appear together . . . and are always in tension. There is no way of making them compatible or of bringing them together in one 'well-balanced' phenomenal structure" (105).

The competing concerns of metafictional play and emotional investment in *Pale Fire* map on to the binary of meaning and presence, respectively. Meaning effects are apparent in any novel, due to the form's basis in language, narrative, temporality, and interpretation, and Gumbrecht even states that "the meaning-dimension will always be dominant when we are reading a text" (109). This prioritized meaning-dimension is particularly the case for what Brian Stonehill calls "self-conscious" novels, such as *Pale Fire*. Defining self-conscious novels as any "extended prose narrative that draws attention to its status as fiction" (3), Stonehill explains that such illusion-breaking techniques "tend to alienate us from the fiction—they prevent us from

believing in the fictional illusion, by reminding us that it has been invented by the author for his or her readers” (6). Yet this would suggest that the elements of *Pale Fire* that seem to emphasize meaning the most would also drive a reader further from any sense of presence. Merja Polvinen argues similarly:

If we think of the story having been *made*, it becomes less rational to think of its events as real. Thus it is easy to assume that drawing attention to the artifice of fictional narratives is a technique primarily intended to discourage belief in the fictional world and consequently to increase the emotional distance between the readers and the events depicted. . . . As a consequence, self-reflective literary techniques are often understood to involve readers in stepping out of the fictional world and their emotional engagement with that world’s characters, and into a state where both the characters and the emotions are no longer experienced at first hand, but instead at a rational—often ironic—distance. Thus emotional immersion in a fictional world and a rational awareness of that world’s fictionality are set up as counterforces. (166)

“Stepping out of the fictional world” would seem to contrast directly with engaging with the “things” of the world, the basis of Gumbrecht’s presence. However, as Stonehill goes on to argue, “the astounding and intriguing thing about the best self-conscious fiction . . . is that even as it exposes its own artifice, and professes itself to be an invention, it is still able to fire our imaginations and move our emotions as do events in real life” (14). Few readers would likely dispute the claim about imagination. After all, the riddling quality of *Pale Fire* (and novels like it) specifically engages with the intellect. On the other hand, Stonehill’s claim about emotional

engagement would likely meet with stiffer resistance. After all, how can a narrative evoke this greater sense of presence at all, given that it is always a textual discourse? In *Postmodern Narrative Theory*, Mark Currie, working through the claims of Derrida, argues, “Writing is . . . a fall from presence since, like the sign, it is exterior to what it means, capable of signifying in the absence of the writer, demanding a kind of nostalgia for its origin, the moment when the mind that produced it was present, when it was full with signifying intention, or when it was speech” (88). Its disembodiment from the speaking body means that writing should inherently be distanced from presence.

Marie-Laure Ryan confronts a similar conflict to that between artifice and investment or meaning and presence in *Narrative as Virtual Reality* (2003), developing the tension between *immersion* and *interactivity*. She argues that the control given to readers in interactive fictions is a godlike authority that actually alienates the reader from the text, leading them to “associate with a godlike author who creates the fictional world from an external perspective” (283).¹⁹ That is, a reader who is given too much control over the narrative, whether that’s sequence or content, is aware that the control is not like reality and thus withdraws from that world. Thus, even though we might think of “interactivity” as something that increases engagement with the text (in the sense of fun, interest, curiosity), our experience of the story-world and its characters and

¹⁹ This is another area where Wolfgang Funk’s argument, described in Chapter 1, differs from mine. He emphasizes the reader’s role in reconstructing plot as a key element in what synthesizes story and discourse, to the point where the author “forfeits her implicit authority to structure the representation of the story” (42). I don’t dispute that argument as it applies to *A Visit from the Goon Squad*, but otherwise agree with Ryan that a character given the authority typically reserved for the author can lead to further detachment from the story content.

events suffers the opposite fate of detachment. While her focus in the study is primarily digital and electronic media such as hypertext and virtual reality, she associates metafiction with these interactive digital forms, claiming, “The cost of the metafictional stance is an ontological alienation of the reader from the fictional world. . . . Literary texts can thus be either self-reflexive or immersive, or they can alternate . . . but they cannot offer both experiences at the same time” (284). While her recent update of the book (2015) fine-tunes much of the argument, she nevertheless maintains, “For interactivity to be reconciled with immersion, it must be stripped of any self-reflexive dimension” (207), and finds that, so far, the two have not been reconciled.

Thus, artifice, interactivity, and meaning all seem to coordinate as threats to investment, immersion, and presence, and reconciliation between the two poles seems unlikely or impossible. Yet what both Gumbrecht and Ryan advocate isn’t reconciliation, but “alternation” or “oscillation.” Gumbrecht promotes “a relation to the things of the world that could oscillate between presence effects and meaning effects” (xv), and he adds that “literary texts have ways of also bringing the presence-dimension of the typography, of the rhythm of language, and even of the smell of paper into play” (109). Presence in narrative requires some restoration or emphasis on the physical properties of the text or its language. I believe that *Pale Fire* draws on its distinct structure to accomplish this oscillation.²⁰ Presented as both a static object of the story-world and

²⁰ Indeed, it’s worth noting that Ryan specifically identifies Nabokov as one author for whom the text is a game (*Virtual Reality* 2 118), and Stonehill includes a chapter on Nabokov as an author of self-conscious novels.

as the vessel that conveys narrative, Nabokov turns the very self-reflexivity that should *threaten* immersion into the quality that *creates* it, by enhancing the virtual presence of the story. Rather than narrating in a mental, or otherwise un-inscribed, first or third person as in most realist novels, Nabokov has Kinbote compile a physical manuscript that contains both the poem and his own narrative. Because we are reading the manuscript instead of being told the story by Kinbote, the narrative is essentially anchored. It is no longer *just* the output of a flawed, human narrator but also an object that contains that flawed narration. By narrating through the physical object instead of through first- or third-person narration, Nabokov also alters the temporal dimension of the narrative. Beginning, middle, and end lose their narrative force since the reader encounters an object that contains all three in a static present: every word of the poem and paratext is contained within the artifact that the reader encounters and investigates rather than unfolding over time through the telling of a narrativized tale, and it's this spatialized presence that evokes presence effects in the reader. It allows the reader to invest emotionally in the story, care about the ontological status of its characters without seeming ludicrous, and accept a potential supernatural explanation of events without feeling cheated.

The Artifact of *Pale Fire*

While critics have, of course, drawn attention to Kinbote as an unreliable narrator, he needs to be distinguished from traditional first- or third-person narrators in order to get to the specific rhetorical situation created in the novel. While rhetorical narrative theory posits a relationship between the narrator and a narrative audience, one which is sometimes invoked in

text, in other cases that space is often strangely unnatural but unquestioned as literary convention. A character can be telling a retrospective narrative only to die at the end of it. Another might narrate in the present tense. Others stretch belief regarding memory. As discussed with diary and epistolary novels, however, the artifact text avoids this by anchoring its rhetorical situation to a specific story-world object. In the case of *Pale Fire*, this would be the document that Kinbote (or whoever masquerades as him) has produced. As with any novel, there is a narrative, but unlike narrative in many realist novels, this narrative is conveyed by the physical document, rather than by a narrative voice. This change might seem inconsequential, and in some discussions, it can be overlooked. However, when the narrator is unreliable, especially to the extent attributed to Kinbote, this tethering serves an important function. Extreme unreliability allows the total unraveling of the text, often reductively. This contributes to the loss of immersion mentioned with self-reflexive texts above. It becomes difficult to care what happens when the narrator has undermined the basis of the entire story. An artifact text, though, maintains a precarious hold on the reality of the story-world. Everything Kinbote writes can be questioned, but we still have the document about which it is written.

Pale Fire begins with a distinct emphasis on the physical, as Kinbote's "Foreword" quickly begins describing the state of John Shade's "Pale Fire" manuscript: "the manuscript . . . consists of eighty medium-sized index cards, on each of which Shade reserved the pink upper line for headings (canto number, date) and used the fourteen light-blue lines for writing out with a fine nib in a minute, tidy, remarkably clear hand, the text of his poem, skipping a line to indicate a double space, and always using a fresh card to begin a new canto" (13). This excess of

minute detail, to which Kinbote adds mention of other cards bearing first drafts and even the rubber band holding them all together, marks an immediate emphasis on the physical manuscript of the poem, and alongside this develops a similar emphasis on Kinbote's "Foreword," "Commentary," and "Index" as physical documents.

Besides the obvious parody of the common critical introduction and commentary genres, a number of instances (1) mark the moment of their composition, and (2) highlight the physical publication status of Kinbote's manuscript. Among the marked moments of composition, there is the first signal that Kinbote might be a questionable authority. While describing Shade's composition method, Kinbote loses track of his thought and says, "I mean, he preserved the date of actual creation rather than that of second or third thoughts. There is a very loud amusement park right in front of my present lodgings" (13). By its inappropriateness for the genre, this comment signals that Kinbote should be watched closely. Alongside this are other comments that clash with the supposed rhetorical situation of a critical introduction: "As mentioned, I think, in my last note to the poem"; or that the publisher "has asked me to mention in my Preface—and this I willingly do—that I alone am responsible for any mistakes in my commentary. Insert before a professional. A professional proofreader . . ." (17, 18, ellipses Nabokov's). Besides the hint at Kinbote's unreliability, these errors and asides are all strange because of the simple fact that they could presumably be edited out of the text he is writing. Given that Kinbote is the author of the notes and has access to them, there should be no need to hedge by saying, "I think," and the "Insert before a professional" seems to be the deliberate residue of a publication

comment left in Kinbote's manuscript. Instead of being corrected, though, the comments have been allowed to remain.

A reading based on the total indeterminacy created by Kinbote's unreliability might say that Kinbote even has made up the publication comments, a statement about the text's unreliability that remains an ever-present possibility about the story. Just as we can with many other unreliable narrators, it is possible for us to dismiss anything Kinbote says. However, that is not actually a problem for this discussion. Even if his publication comments are lies or delusions, he has written or typed them in the world of this story, and the reader is left with a document that may contain untruths, but still seems to be an object from the story world. As mentioned, Currie argues for language as a fall from presence, but alongside that, Gumbrecht identifies typography and the physical properties of the text as ways of restoring that presence. In these early pages of *Pale Fire*, Nabokov makes the abstract words of Kinbote something physical, drawing attention to the words' physical inscription into the text. As such, one could argue that Kinbote's words shift from being purely narratorial discourse to *also* being the physical features of an object. "Insert before a professional" doesn't tell us something directly, but it can be seen to *show* us something, however minor it is at this point. It shows that perhaps the publisher was a poor one, inattentive to detail, or perhaps that the manuscript was rushed, incomplete, or never brought to final publication. Whatever it may be, it shows the manuscript *to be* a manuscript. It is an aspect of the story-world that is conveyed outside the traditional line of narrative.

Early comments from Kinbote also seek to overdetermine the authenticity of the manuscript. Besides mentioning a number of outside figures involved in the production—from

multiple publishers to the efforts of Sybil Shade to get “Prof. H. (!) and Prof. C. (!!)” enlisted as co-editors (17-18), Kinbote tells the reader that he had the manuscript professionally photographed (17), that “a professional proofreader has carefully rechecked the printed text of the poem against the phototype of the manuscript” (18),²¹ and that the new publisher Frank has sent galley proofs which Kinbote has returned (18). None of this confirms that a man named John Shade wrote those notecards, or that the person commenting on them is a separate entity from the person who wrote them. In fact, we could still argue that these are the scribbles of a madman and Frank, the photographs, and the editorial pressure from Sybil are all fabricated. But Kinbote’s emphasis on this context surrounding publication amounts to a first point of defense against the unraveling that radical indeterminacy can cause. If this story were conveyed through first-person narration, everything would be doubtable, since it could all be characterized as the product of an unreliable mind. That unreliable mind is present here, but we also have an object that stabilizes and anchors the discourse. To be clear, the typical reader isn’t going to reject outright the entire narrative situation when a narrator is unreliable; however, it becomes easier to disregard the stakes of the discussion because “it’s all unreliable anyway.” Instead, anchoring the unreliability to an object means there is at least one part of the story that “really exists” within that story’s world.

The inclusion of this introductory commentary isn’t unique to Nabokov’s work. As a point of comparison, we can see that Nabokov begins similarly in *Lolita*, where John Ray, Jr.

²¹ That is, the physical reproduction of a photograph into print.

introduces the memoir of Humbert Humbert that describes his obsession, abduction, and rape of Dolores Haze. He gives background details about the status of particular characters (3-4), and gives his own commentary on how Humbert Humbert's style is at odds with his perversion. He writes, "He is abnormal. He is not a gentleman. But how magically his singing violin can conjure up a tendresse, a compassion for Lolita that makes us entranced with the book while abhorring its author" (5). He also indicates some minor editorial changes he made to the text. Thus, like Kinbote, Ray performs a stabilizing role, vouching for basic facts of the case. However, despite minimizing his own involvement, his very presence suggests that his role has been more significant than he claims, raising the possibility of his having manipulated the text for his own reasons, leading some critics to draw direct comparisons to Kinbote (Ferber 137 and McDonald 356). While the presumptive unreliability of John Ray, Jr. bears similarities to Kinbote's, already there are distinctions that can be drawn between the two novels, primarily based on the emphasis on the manuscript's physicality in *Pale Fire*. In *Lolita*, there are only the briefest mentions of the manuscript itself, with none of its physical properties highlighted to the degree that Kinbote highlights the physical presence of the notecards of *Pale Fire*. Moreover, John Ray, Jr. doesn't overdetermine a physical manuscript's existence in the same way as does Kinbote. The lower stakes in the physical document are created largely because *Lolita* doesn't raise the same level of doubt over its ontological status. While a reader is led to question Ray's degree of influence over the text, the novel does not return to and foreground that manipulation throughout, and there's

never the risk of outright rejection.²² In *Pale Fire*, the risk of abstract self-reflexivity is countered by a naturalizing narrative structure that gives the novel a stable ontological status.

Spatializing the Artifact

The initial distinction between *Pale Fire* and *Lolita* is simply a matter of degree, concerning how much doubt the frame creates in the rest of the story. However, the difference in degree becomes a difference in substance, based on the way *Pale Fire* spatializes its fragmented documents. While literature is typically a temporal medium, its spatial aspects received increasing attention over the twentieth century, especially after their promotion in Joseph Frank's three-part "Spatial Form in Modern Literature." He makes the argument that "modern literature, exemplified by such writers as T. S. Eliot, Ezra Pound, Marcel Proust and James Joyce, is moving in the direction of spatial form. This means that the reader is intended to apprehend their work spatially, in a moment of time, rather than as a sequence" ("Part I" 225). In his analysis of modern literature, this was mostly a matter of pausing at particular moments and expanding the scene spatially. However, Jerome Klinkowitz develops the concept in relation to contemporary literature, where the structure of the novel itself is spatialized.²³ He argues that spatial fiction "should not have to represent some other, secondhand reality at all, but rather be its own reality,

²² Notably, Rabinowitz, for whom the ontological uncertainty of *Pale Fire* prevents a moving aesthetic experience, argues that *Lolita*'s frame is purely factual, to give context to the otherwise total narrative control of Humbert Humbert.

²³ He even calls these novels "artifacts," though he uses the word in a more general way than how I use it here.

where the pleasure of the reader is not to recognize the artful depiction of a familiar world, but to appreciate its elements of composition, which just as in a painting would be a spatial affair. The work as self-conscious artifact becomes fully self-reflexive” (39).

While Klinkowitz links spatiality to self-consciousness (and thus the typically anti-immersive qualities discussed earlier), Gumbrecht links space to presence. Drawing a series of distinctions between “presence cultures” and “meaning cultures,” he says:

In a presence culture . . . space, that is, the dimension that constitutes itself around bodies, must be the primordial dimension in which the relationship between humans and the things of the world are being negotiated. Time, in contrast, is the primordial dimension for any meaning culture, because there seems to be an unavoidable association between consciousness and temporality. (83)

If both Klinkowitz’s and Gumbrecht’s claims are valid, it becomes clear how the artifact structure of *Pale Fire* can be essential to its being both immersive and self-conscious. Its fragmentation into separate documents makes the novel self-aware, with a heightened sense of constructedness, but it also makes the novel seem to occupy a more concrete space in the world, increasing its presence for the reader.

But how exactly does this spatial form develop in *Pale Fire*? Again, a comparison to *Lolita* is useful here. *Lolita* has a frame narrative, but the overall progression of the novel is linear. We read from beginning to end with no reason to shift between the two, and the novel retains its overall linear temporality. One can read *Pale Fire* linearly as well, but the novel allows for and encourages different paths. At minimum, a reader has three common-sense

options: read front to back, follow Kinbote's suggestion of reading his material first, or read the poem while flipping back and forth for the commentary. Complicating this, though, is Kinbote's redirecting suggestions for the reader. The first of these occurs quickly, when in the "Introduction," Kinbote encourages the reader to see the note to line 991, one of the last lines of the poem (15). As Boyd shows, following Kinbote's redirections exactly leads to early discoveries: "Kinbote has a secret he has not divulged even to his friend and neighbor Shade, yet after reading only two and a half pages into the Foreword we already know that secret: Kinbote is the disguised king of Zembla" (21). Boyd links this to authorial intentionality, emphasizing the need to "trust Nabokov" and do as he wants us to do (22). Yet doing so certainly disrupts traditional narrative dynamics, as the supposed secret of the novel is revealed almost immediately. Similarly, the "Foreword" tells the reader right away that Shade will die at the poem's completion. And humorously, Kinbote encourages multiple readings of his contribution, privileging it over the poem, writing, "Although those notes, in conformity with custom, come after the poem, the reader is advised to consult them first and then study the poem with their help, rereading them of course as he goes through its text, and perhaps, after having done with the poem, consulting them a third time" (28). Of course, a reader can choose to skip around in any novel, but this is typically a violation of convention. As an *object*, though, the artifact spatializes its form, allowing movement between the different documents at will, just as a person encountering an ancient book might freely explore its surfaces and contents, rather than adhering to the textual sequence within. Skipping forward or backward in a linear narrative is also a temporal movement forward or backward, but when moving between "Pale Fire,"

“Commentary,” and “Index,” it is not skipping at all but rather investigating the different parts of a static, physical artifact that happens to contain written discourse.

But the object does still contain narrative, and through that the novel presents a number of different stories. Most prominently, there are Shade’s biography and near-death experience, Charles XII’s escape from Zembla and new life as Kinbote, and Gradus’s journey to assassinate Charles XII. While these theoretically can be integrated with each other fairly easily, they are, for the most part, kept separate, contained either by their discourse or spatiotemporally. They also follow distinct patterns of development, with Shade’s life mostly developed through the poem, the escape and resettlement developed sporadically by loose links to poetic details and indexical hints, while the Gradus narrative is developed by Kinbote who layers its connection to the poem’s composition.

Perhaps the most interesting influence of spatialization and the interaction between documents can be seen in the presentation of the Gradus narrative. This narrative arc is interesting in itself for the way that Kinbote freely fabricates more detail than his one (or possibly two) supposed interviews with the man could have reasonably obtained. In the context of this discussion, however, we see how the structure of the novel allows Kinbote to tether a supposedly autonomous narrative to the artificial construct of the poem, purely for aesthetic reasons. He says early in the “Commentary” that “we shall accompany Gradus in constant thought . . . through the entire length of the poem, following the road of its rhythm” (78). Later, he explains, “I have staggered the notes referring to him in such a fashion that the first (see note to line 17 where some of his other activities are adumbrated) is the vaguest while those that

follow become gradually clearer as gradual Gradus approaches in space and time” (152). Still later, Gradus’s movements are transposed onto the poem itself, as “he has sped through this verse and is gone—presently to darken our pages again” (163-164). This narrative choice is blatantly artificial (on a diegetic level), given Kinbote’s admission to plotting out the movement, supporting the notion that it is fabricated to fit into the Zembla narrative. At the same time, it is also a way of enhancing the powerful sense of fate that permeates that narrative. The reader knows the poem is partially incomplete and that Shade has been killed, and the reader knows that these two facts are relevant to one another, and that reading brings the event of Shade’s death closer. Because the novel establishes its assertion that these narratives have already been inscribed into the separate documents, they evoke a sense both that the event has already happened, but also that it is currently happening still, with no way to prevent it.

The Temporality of Artifact Texts

The fatalism of “having already happened,” combined with the readerly experience of “happening currently,” brings to attention the unique temporality that the artifact text constructs. By containing discourse within a story-world object and spatializing the narrative, the artifact text disrupts the expected narrative temporality of past-present-future. In its place, the artifact develops something closer to what Fredric Jameson, in *Antinomies of Realism*, describes as an “affective present.” Jameson attempts to give a historical framework for the emergence and dissolution for realism as a literary mode by exploring a number of incompatible dualities that nevertheless occur simultaneously within the realist text. While the historical dimension of

Jameson's book is outside the scope of the present discussion, his stylistic analysis of realism is relevant. One of the most significant of the antinomies he describes is between two temporal modes of narration. On the one hand is a "narrative impulse," linked to storytelling or *récit* in the familiar temporality of past-present-future (10, 18). On the other hand are "impulses of scenic elaboration, description and above all affective investment, which allow it to develop towards a scenic present" (11). He claims that "realism" emerges out of a "symbiosis" between these two temporalities (11). In *Pale Fire*, this antinomy is translated into and embedded in narrative structure. While the reader, again, never believes that the story is "real," interaction with the book itself, for all purposes, replicates the interaction a character would have with that same physical book within the story-world. Because the reader interacts with this as an object, the novel gains the quality of both a narrative temporality and a static presence. It's this static presence that becomes an extreme version of the scenic quality Jameson describes.

Jameson's phrase "impulses of scenic elaboration" echoes Joseph Frank's description of spatialization, which he argued in 1945 to be characteristic of modernist literature. Analyzing a spatialized moment in Flaubert, Frank says, "For the duration of the scene, at least, the time-flow of the narrative is halted: attention is fixed on the interplay of relationships within the limited time-area. These relationships are juxtaposed independently of the progress of the narrative; and the full significance of the scene is given only by the reflexive relations among the units of meaning" ("Part I" 231). Elsewhere, describing Proust, he writes, "To experience the passage of time, Proust learned, it was necessary to rise above it, and to grasp both past and present

simultaneously in a moment of what he called ‘pure time.’ But ‘pure time,’ obviously, is not time at all—it is perception in a moment of time, that is to say, space” (239).

Jameson later describes this contrast between storytelling and scene differently, as “You tell, you *recite*, the events; you show them happening in the present of the novelistic scene” (21). As mentioned before, Gumbrecht describes the oscillation between presence and meaning in similar terms, putting them in tension with each other and arguing that the two can never be brought into easy balance (105). Thus, while a number of different tensions are being established in Jameson, Frank, Gumbrecht, and Ryan, it can be seen that they all similarly fall into a binary structure, with insistence from the author that the two poles cannot be readily reconciled. While such binaries are often reductive, their persistent presence is telling. Thus, everything from meaning, linearity, telling, narrative, temporality, and self-reflexivity—all those aspects conveyed through the novel’s discourse—interrelate on one side, while presence, spatiality, showing, scene, and immersion—those aspects linked to the physical manuscript projected by the novel—fall into place on the other. The two fundamental parts of the artifact text can be seen in this way to directly enact Jameson’s argument about the antinomy of realism. If this is the case, it could be argued that a novel like *Pale Fire*, despite its artificiality, operates as does a realist novel, and in this way, we start to arrive at one form of the paradox that Stonehill presents in his discussion of self-conscious novels. By its very contrived structure, the novel becomes something seemingly authentic or immersive.

The spatialization and affective presence of the artifact change the way the reader confronts the novel. While it conveys narrative, the artifact is different from a personified

narrator's telling of a story. That is, a voiced narrative, whether it is a character within the story or a stand-in for the author, tells the story in a linear way, which the reader is expected to follow from beginning to end. The artifact comes to be seen more like a painting or other visual art depicting multiple scenes within the same frame. While the scenes cannot all be taken at once, each is accessible simultaneously, and as a result, there isn't a "right" way to travel through the narrative. When Brian Boyd, for instance, bases his extensive analysis around three re-readings, he is not truly re-reading at all but simply continuing in an existing exploration. The resonances that bring him to read the beginning again do not re-start the temporal narrative, but instead build on the existing accumulation of significance by revisiting one aspect of the structure. This spatialization of the novel also requires us to consider where precisely the borders of the narrative lie, an especially important question given how often critics of *Pale Fire* challenge other readings for including details that "aren't in the novel." This is most relevant for *Pale Fire* when questioning Kinbote's suicide. As Boyd notes, there is significant implication that the Kinbote persona is on the verge of killing himself once the commentary concludes; Boyd writes, "It seems so far from the case that Kinbote has rid himself of any desire to follow her [Hazel's] example, as he hopes at the end of the Commentary, that we can surely read his suicide as imminent" (105). He adds that Nabokov gave support to this interpretation, and notes the controversial status of such an authorial disclosure, that some consider it an intrusion (106). However, as he argues, "Even if Kinbote had said within the novel that he would commit suicide on such and such a day in such and such a way, there would be room for doubt . . . The only way

Nabokov could have made Kinbote's suicide as unequivocal as Wood requires would be to provide a declaration within *Pale Fire* external to Kinbote's text" (106).

While for Boyd this means allowing Nabokov's authorial intrusion, Nabokov's insistence might not be necessary after all. As Boyd's analysis shows, the implication of Kinbote's self-destruction is there, established more through the echoes and hauntings between parts than by direct statement, but certainly present. And while there is room for doubt, that doubt is a result of the structure and the way that the novel unites writing and death. Pyeaaam Abbasi and Omid Omani argue that Kinbote's rambling commentary and fabrications are a way to stave off the death that is expected upon completion of the poem: "By concocting the tale of Zembla, Kinbote extends the narration and provides the reader with more than 100 pages of commentary. However, an end must be put to the commentary, therefore, in his mind, Kinbote is always awaiting the arrival of a second Gradus who will 'presently . . . ring at my door' to equate end of his narration with his nonexistence" (372). Since the commentary is guaranteed eventually to end, the confirmation Boyd seeks can be seen in the thematic resonance that equates the end of narrative with death. By ending, Kinbote as a persona dies, whether he's killed by some Gradus figure or by his own hand. However, because the documents persist in an affective present, it could be argued that this death is both guaranteed and also infinitely deferred. The only way to avoid narrative closure is to sidestep narrative temporality altogether, something the particular structure of the novel allows.

The characters of *Pale Fire* remain "artistically caged," but the shape of that cage is altered dramatically by the artifact narrative structure. By enhancing the sense of presence in the

novel, Nabokov pushes beyond the normal boundaries of a narrative and makes the novel into something more real and compelling. In doing so, he raises the interpretive and ontological stakes. The novel remains fundamentally indeterminate, but unlike a puzzle with no answer that eventually bores the person investigating it, the novel's presence allows it still to convince readers to look for answers, even after it becomes clear the answers are not in the text.

Chapter Three

“The matter of some other voice”: Authorial Dualism in *House of Leaves*

Why did god create a dual universe?

So he might say,

“Be not like me. I am alone.”

And it might be heard.

—Unknown (*House of Leaves* 45)

In an early chapter of Mark Z. Danielewski’s *House of Leaves* (2000), Danielewski’s fictive film critic Zampanò cites an “impressive” essay on riddles by Edith Skourja, a woman for whom no real-world analog exists. Noting the shared etymology between “riddle” and “read,” she claims, “Riddles: they either delight or torment. Their delight lies in solutions. Answers provide bright moments of comprehension perfectly suited for children who still inhabit a world where solutions are readily available. Implicit in the riddle’s form is a promise that the rest of the world resolves just as easily” (33). She contrasts this with the “adult world [which] produces riddles of a different variety. They do not have answers and are often called enigmas or paradoxes. Still the old hint of the riddle’s form corrupts these questions by re-echoing the most fundamental lesson: there must be an answer. From there comes torment” (33). A similarly fictive critic, Walter Joseph Adeltine, calls Skourja’s analysis “elegant crap” (34).

This brief parody of academic debate, occurring at a seemingly minor moment within the larger novel, nevertheless captures one of the stickiest problems of Danielewski’s *House of Leaves*. Is it a riddle that allows for “bright moments of comprehension,” or an enigma that

torments? Any reader would agree that it presents itself as a textual puzzle that is meant to be solved. It is a novel with three main narratives and numerous supplements and paratexts, each of which is fragmentary and unreliable. It has between two and four protagonists, any of whom may be a fictional construct of one of the others. The novel runs to 736 pages, with some interpretations relying on the specific page number on which a passage appears. However, while it encourages puzzle-solving, it also foils its readers with false leads, breaks in immersion, and irresolution at the level of plot. The novel invites us to solve it, then mocks us when we try.

While Skourja's dichotomy sounds reasonable at first, it neglects a key consideration. An interpretation elucidates a paradox or enigma, noting its existence according to the laws or logic of the world, whereas a riddle is intentionally crafted by a person for the specific purpose of riddling. That is, a paradox is ontologically preexisting and inherently lacks answers, while, if a riddle lacks answers, it is designed that way, a deliberate, sometimes even malicious, act done with the aim of frustrating another person. If *House of Leaves* is a riddle without an answer, especially one where the reader's trust is violated, Danielewski risks alienating his readers, prompting significant time investment and effort only to refuse providing a payoff for that effort. Yet, nearly two decades after its publication, the novel continues to generate discussion in online and academic communities, discussions that often assume and depend on a trust between the reader and author that there is *something* to be found, even when that trust is unrealistic.²⁴

²⁴ As an illustration of this, a Facebook "*House of Leaves* Book Club" was created in February 2018 and grew to over 4,000 participants, who debated the novel's questions, and among the many comments, one noted an errant ink spot. Despite other copies not sharing this error, multiple commenters suggested the possibility of varying ink splashes between texts being an intentional code on the part of the author.

I believe that Danielewski indeed breaks this trust, and deliberately so, but in a productive way that promotes the development of what he considers an “idealized reader”: a reader who “tak[es] in every single note, notic[es] every twist of phrase” (McCaffery and Gregory 124). In this chapter, I claim that *House of Leaves*’s artifact narrative structure enables Danielewski to present a nihilistic deconstruction of truth that destabilizes any understanding of the novel’s events or characters, while simultaneously promoting genuine emotional concern and attachment to even its most ontologically threatened characters. I argue that Danielewski accomplishes this by performing an authorial persona—one that blends textual signals and real-world behavior—who asserts a dominance over the reader that echoes and expands the godlike authority he holds over the story. However, because of the narrative structure, rather than the reader simply turning *away*, the reader has something to turn *to*: the object of the text. The disruptive, volatile author figure is opposed by the presence of a stable object, and the reader responds to the author’s barbs by digging deeper and searching harder. Readers may never find a final answer, but in the process, Danielewski makes them into “better” readers.

Manuscripts, Letters, and Photos: The Artifacts of *House of Leaves*

In the most general sense, *House of Leaves* has a structure similar to *Pale Fire*, discussed in the previous chapter: both consist of one man’s manuscript, acquired and compiled by another man who adds his own commentary, along with an index. However, while *Pale Fire* thrives on Nabokov’s tight control, *House of Leaves* sprawls, including a wide array of other documents—visual, textual, and (arguably) auditory—that both support and complicate its content.

The primary document of the artifact is *The Navidson Record*, an (at times) analytical and (at other times) descriptive work of criticism written by a man identifying himself as Zampanò. It describes a film, also titled *The Navidson Record*,²⁵ created by prize-winning photographer Will Navidson, who intends to document his move into a new home with his partner, Karen, and two children. The experience quickly turns to the supernatural, as they discover a new room in their home that presents the physical impossibility of being larger on the inside than on the outside. This room begins spawning other rooms, growing to ridiculous, somehow-even-more-impossible dimensions: at one point, the house has a depth greater than the diameter of the Earth. After several explorations including professionally trained, well-equipped explorers, which lead to the deaths of three men, including Will's brother Tom, Will makes one final solo expedition, nearly resulting in his death until Karen saves him. Zampanò supports the analysis with research, some of it real (such as literary and cultural references, or the theoretical works of Heidegger, Derrida, or Barthes), some of it fake texts or comments by real people (ranging from Derrida to Jay Leno), and some of it fake texts by fake authors. However, within the discourse of *The Navidson Record*, all comments are presented as having truly come from their speakers or writers.

The novel is sparked when Johnny Truant, an active drug user and partier, comes across the manuscript when his friend Lude tells him about Zampanò, who has died old and alone in his neighboring apartment. Despite his apparent wash-out lifestyle, Johnny shows himself to be an at-times competent editor, tracking down sources, translations, and help from the many young

²⁵ To avoid the confusion of this shared titling, if the sentence does not clarify, I will refer to Zampanò's analysis (the artifact) as *The Navidson Record*, and the documentary as "the documentary" or "the film."

women who helped Zampanò write the work. Their support was essential because, as Johnny learns, Zampanò was blind. Even more, the film, whose analysis would already be a daunting challenge for a blind person, doesn't seem to exist, as Johnny can find no trace of it or its contents. His work is tracked in footnotes that explicate the analysis and also describe at length his own activities, including several graphically rendered sexual and violent encounters. His work becomes an obsession, as the claustrophobia and paranoia inherent to the film infect his life, along with the looming threat of an unseen monster that potentially haunts the house's depths. Johnny's health and sanity deteriorate until he goes on a quest to find the home, bottoms out, and finally recovers enough to complete his work.

A third discourse is a series of letters to Johnny from his mother, Pelafina, a schizophrenic who was institutionalized after an alleged attempt on Johnny's life when he was a boy. These letters, which precede the supposed events of the film and Zampanò's and Johnny's respective works, show her guilt and her own decline, but also raise uneasy correspondences with the other documents, even bearing a coded reference to Zampanò, of whom she shouldn't, based on the surface chronology the reader reconstructs, have any knowledge.

Beyond this, numerous supplementary paratexts are necessary to the novel. A group of unnamed editors has published all three discourses and added their own clarifying footnotes. As this is described as the second edition (one of Johnny's restorative experiences at the finale of his account is encountering a band whose members have even read the first edition), some of these editorial footnotes include follow-up on previous ambiguities. An index is included, though it is not clarified whether it's the work of Johnny or the editors. Appendices provide poetry by both

Johnny and Zampanò, some of Zampanò's transcribed notes and outlines, and corroborating documents such as a notification of Pelafina's death and a letter written by Zampanò decades before the events of the novel. They also include several artworks depicting parts of the documentary, notably dated prior to Johnny's work with the document. Thus, following the characteristics of an artifact text set out in Chapter 1, the reader has a story-world document consisting of multiple different texts and varying media, and multiple competing frames of reference, and the artifact itself fits Chatman's sense of "nonnarration."

The novel adds one further feature to this, making several of its material characteristics part of the story. Chatman claims that story and discourse "must further be distinguished from the mere physical disposition of narratives—[such as] the actual print in books" (*Story* 26), citing Roman Ingarden to argue that, "The material book . . . is not 'a literary work, but only a means to "fix" the work'" (27). However, in *House of Leaves*, the physical disposition is inseparable from story.²⁶ The typography distinguishes authorial voices, chosen significantly for each author, such as "bookman" for the editors and "courier" for Johnny. The word "house" appears in blue, struck passages that Johnny restored are in red, and missing fragments are indicated typographically. Each of the features of the narrative's "physical disposition" are either traced to a particular character's choice or prompt questions specifically about whose decision it was. Probably the most well-known of these features is its layout. In Chapter IX, the mostly orderly footnotes

²⁶ And even more so with *S.* and *Codex Seraphinianus*, the subjects of the next chapters. Thus, while *Pale Fire* requires a small suspension of disbelief for the reader to pretend the text and story-world object are the same, *House of Leaves*, *S.*, and *Codex Seraphinianus* go to great lengths to present all facets of the book as faithful to the story-world document.

become a labyrinth that direct the reader forward and backward through the text, encumber the reader, and make it possible to lose track of the place in text or the path through it. N. Katherine Hayles calls this a thematic layout, as the labyrinth echoes the content of the chapter, which describes the shifting halls of the house and which resonates with both Zampanò's and Johnny's psychologies (see figure 1). She contrasts this with several other chapters that have what she calls "mimetic" layouts (796). In these, dealing with the exploration of the house, the spacing and placement of the words resembles the exploration itself (for instance, growing cramped as Navidson is forced to crawl through a narrow passageway), thus, she says, mimetically reproducing the content (see figure 2).

Arriving soon after the novel's publication and establishing some of the primary themes, as well as secrets, contained within *House of Leaves*, Hayles's work has been the basis for one of the main strands of criticism, focusing on the technical innovation and medial specificity of the text. For instance, Mark Hansen argues that the book's relation to the digital should be understood as "a media-technical, and not simply a stylistic or formal, shift in the function of the novel" (598). He writes that "the house must . . . be viewed as a figure for the otherness of the digital" (607), and that "even as it reconfigures the novel from storytelling vehicle to interface onto a virtually limitless universe of information, the thematization of mediation serves first and foremost to foreground the paradoxical privilege enjoyed by print in today's new media ecology" (611). Jessica Pressman similarly focuses on media specificity, calling it a "networked novel"; in particular, she argues that *House of Leaves* has to be considered as a node in a network alongside several extratextual works, such as the novel's online discussion board, the album *Haunted* by

168 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 Sanlúcar 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, replete with enough terror 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 Luiz de Molino planned and executed a mutiny, resulting in the death of at least one officer and the wounding of many more.¹⁶⁹ 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 underestimation 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 *Santo Antonio* 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 maritime law and his own ire on the one man 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. Magellán had a better idea. Molino, Quesada's trusty servant, was granted clemency if he agreed to execute his master. Molino accepted the duty and

whether clear, reflective, insulated, heat-resistant, switchable, tinted, bad-guy, antique; or even tin-plated steel, factory-painted steel, brass; or even a single nail or screw, whether sheet-metal, particleboard, drywall, concrete, drive, aluminum, silicon bronze, solid brass, mechanically galvanized, yellow-zinc plated, stainless steel, epoxy coated, black finish, Durocoat; to say nothing of the sheer absence of anything that might suggest a roof, whether pitched, gable, hip, lean-to, flat, sawtooth, monitor, ogee, bell, dome, helm, sloped, hip-and-valley, conical, pavilion, rotunda,

impossible to consider any sort of construction, whether of homes, factories, shops, stores, department stores, market halls, conservatories, exhibition buildings, railway stations, warehouses, and office buildings, exchanges, and banks, hotels, prisons, hospitals, museums, libraries, theatres, churches, bridges, airports, town halls, law courts, ministries, and public offices. Houses of parliament, monuments, parks, even towns, and cities, public works etc., etc., without paying heed to such names as Thomas Hall Beeby, Ricardo Bofill, John Simpson, Steven Holl, Léon Krier, Richard Neutra, Andres Duan, and Elizabeth Plater-Zyberk, Ramon Forner, Daniel Libeskind, Quintlan Jane B. Allan Greenberg, Frank Drew, Robin Seifert, Frank Gehry, Jean Willerval, Arata Isozaki, Kisho Kurokawa, Gisue and Mojgan Hartiri, John Outram, Zaha Hadid, Peter Eisenmann, Richard Meier, John Hejduk, Aldo Rossi, Herman Herzberger, Louis E. Fry Sr., Louis E. Fry Jr., Louis E. Fry III, Santiago Calatrava, I. M. Pei, Riccardo Scottio, Harry G. Robinson, Bernard Tschumi, Charles F. McAfee, Eva Vecesli, the Coop Himmelblau, Cheryl L. McAfee, Charles Eames, Simon Rodia, Ray Eames, Ricardo Bofill, Donald L. Stull, M. David Lee, Michael Graves, Elizabeth Diller, Charles Moore, Bruno Taut, Robert Traynham Coles, Mies van

Figure 1: Thematic Layout in House of Leaves (135).

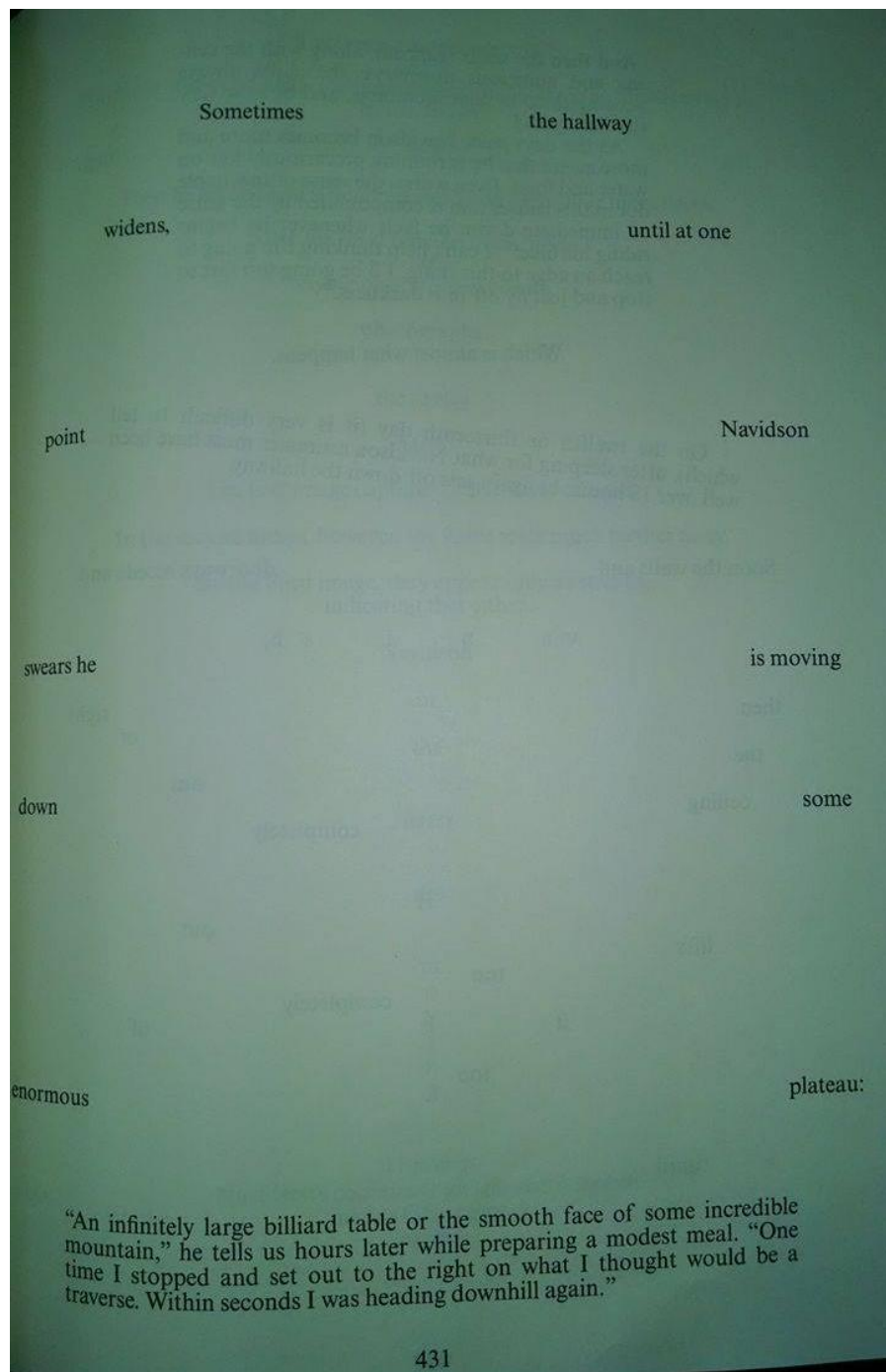


Figure 2: Mimetic Layout in *House of Leaves* (431).

Danielewski's sister under the performing name Poe, and the novel's companion piece, *The Whalestoe Letters* (which adds several letters to Pelafina's correspondence, along with a biographical intro about her). Again Pressman emphasizes the novel's place in the digital age, as she writes, "the novel uses its assemblaged narrative to teach the reader to engage with a contemporary print novel that is distributed across the digital network" (107-108).

These media-specific studies all emphasize the physical aspect of the book, essential in considering it as an artifact. Hayles writes that

as if learning about omnivorous appetite from the computer, *House of Leaves*, in a frenzy of remediation, attempts to eat all the other media. This binging, however, leaves traces on the text's body, resulting in a transformed physical and narrative corpus. In a sense, *House of Leaves* recuperates the traditions of the print book—particularly the novel as a literary form—but the price it pays is a metamorphosis so profound that it becomes a new kind of form and artifact. (781)

Pressman also claims, "The novel procures from its reader a sense of identification with the characters not through emotional empathy but by producing a convergence of house and book that puts the novel's reader in the position of a reader within the text" (111). As seen with *Pale Fire*, these are qualities to be expected when the text read by the reader doubles as an object from the story world: the book will show the physical effects of its presence, and the reader similarly "crosses over," becoming a participant in the story world. However, these passages both show the risk of taking this analysis too far. While Hayles says early on, "None of the dynamics displayed in *House of Leaves* is entirely original, yet the bits and pieces add up to

something specific, if not unique” (781), the “profound metamorphosis” she later claims would seem to contradict this. Discussions of such new forms often seem to result in an emphasis on description of form at the expense of the substance of the story, borne out by Pressman’s suggestion that the novel doesn’t develop emotional empathy with the characters. Such analyses resonate with Johnny’s introductory note about the manuscript: “Zampanò knew from the get go that what’s real or isn’t real doesn’t matter here. The consequences are the same” (xx), a stance that often stops short of considering what those consequences are or why they should matter.

The other strand of criticism on this novel consists of analyses that focus on the nihilism or deconstruction at the heart of the text. While the previous authors support Johnny’s comment about consequences, nihilist readings would instead emphasize Johnny’s point about the non-existence of the film. Will Slocombe’s ““This is not for you’: Nihilism and the House that Jacques Built” (2005) was perhaps the earliest influential reading in this regard. He argues that “nihilism is implicit in most postmodern or poststructuralist fiction, but *House of Leaves* suggests a much more radical approach in which nihilism is something that can never come into Being. More properly, this means that rather than nihilism having a construction, it is that which exists before construction or is that upon which a construction is built” (88). Key to this critical strand is that the more the reader pushes at the novel, the more it reveals the fundamental absence or impossibility at its center. As Slocombe says, “Our desire to enter the House is the same as Navidson’s, because it is a process of interpretation by which we seek to bring this

House into Being. The House continually resists such readings, however, through the appearance of deconstructive elements within the text itself, stopping our reading before it starts” (96-97).²⁷

Both these critical impulses produce valuable insight, but must sacrifice a lot on the level of content to get there. That is, they might show whether the Navidson family is remediated or ontologically threatened, but in the process, they don’t spend much time on the family itself. Several more recent studies have had more reconstructionist projects, attempting to reclaim *House of Leaves* for a post-postmodernist literary world. Irmtraud Huber writes in “Leaving the Postmodernist Labyrinth” (2014) that the supernatural in *House of Leaves* “incrementally shifts its focus from epistemological and ontological considerations towards pragmatic ones,” and that “it eventually leaves the solipsism of its postmodernist house to reconstruct a past, a family and a home” (79). The pragmatism of the reading isn’t to deny the novel’s games with language and knowledge; rather, “life in the house might be impossible but the question the novel repeatedly asks is how to live with and in spite of it” (84). Mary K. Holland’s “Recuperating the Postmodern Family” (2013) returns to Hayles’s remediation, but spends more time on what is actually saved: the family. While these reconstructive readings go a long way toward

²⁷ See also Mark C. Little’s *Rewiring the Real* (2013) or Rune Graulaund’s “Text and Paratext in Mark Z. Danielewski’s *House of Leaves*” (2006) for other readings of the novel as self-deconstructive. Little pointedly leaves open the possibility that the novel is an “elaborate confidence game,” and says, “Any effort to summarize the book, any attempt to say what the book is about, is bound to fail. The most that can be said is that the book is about the impossibility of saying what the book is about” (n.p.), while Graulaund says, “Danielewski is therefore heavily reliant on the deconstructionist conviction that it is a waste of time to engage in a ‘transcendentalist reading, in that search for the signified.’ We see this first and foremost in Zampano’s and Truant’s persistent attacks on the concept of authenticity, and second because direct and repeated references are made to actual poststructuralist publications. Finally, the fact that Danielewski’s house is so blatantly a construct” (385).

recuperating the content of *House of Leaves*, they end up leaving out or downplaying some of the ways Danielewski disrupts that, such as the novel's heavy metalepsis. Thus, it seems that analyses have tended to cluster toward one of these areas—mediation, nihilism, or reconstruction—at the expense of one or both of the others. The analysis that follows will seek to show how the deconstructive core of the novel works to encourage reconstructive, deeper readings, in particular through an accentuated authorial presence within the text itself.

The Implied Author

The accentuated authorial presence requires a reconsideration of the role of the implied author. As mentioned in the “Introduction,” the implied author is most commonly traced to Wayne C. Booth's *Rhetoric of Fiction*, where Booth argued for it as the source of the text's meanings, intentions, and ethics. He writes, “Our sense of the implied author includes not only the extractable meanings but also the moral and emotional content of each bit of action and suffering of all of the characters. It includes, in short, the intuitive apprehension of a completed artistic whole; the chief value to which *this* implied author is committed, regardless of what party his creator belongs to in real life, is that which is expressed by the total form” (73-74). Many have noted since that this amounts to a way to talk about “intention,” when the prohibition against the intentional fallacy was in full force. Chatman's use of the implied author was similar, though in his case he emphasized it less as a source of morality than for its structural role in the communication from author to reader (*Story* 148). He later clarified in *Coming to Terms* that the implied author “is the source—on each reading—of the work's invention. It is also the locus of

the work's *intent*" (74). He clarified that it does not need to be an anthropomorphized entity but can be considered the "text implication" (86).

However, as theoretical concerns have shifted and intention has become something more acceptable to consider, the implied author, at least these early formulations, has grown less useful. Richard Walsh dispenses with the prohibition against ascribing authorial intentionality altogether. He argues that "the narrator is always either a character who narrates, or the author. There is no intermediate position. The author of a fiction can adopt one of two strategies: to narrate a representation, or to represent a narration" (*Rhetoric of Fictionality* 78). Because of this, he argues, the implied author doesn't perform any necessary theoretical role and can be dispensed with. The initial formulation can also be noted as tautological, as the implied author is said to be in service of the total form, but that total form can only be understood. Ansgar Nünning notes this and an overall theoretical fuzziness in attempted definitions: "He is 'implied,' i.e. he is a construction or reconstruction by the reader, and he is not the narrator, but rather the man who invented the narrator (if there is one), in short, the man who stacked the cards in a particular way' . . . On the one hand it is emphasized that the implied author is an abstract construct, but, on the other hand, he is taken to be [a] personalizable inventor of the narrator" (97). Nünning favors instead a *non-anthropomorphic* concept of the "structural whole" (112).

A 2011 special issue of *Style* focused explicitly on the controversial term, featuring narrative theoreticians on both sides of the issue. As Brian Richardson explains in the introduction, one complication is that the loose terms originating from Booth and Chatman have resulted in two conflated issues, the I.A.'s role in the communication model, and as the "text

itself”: “It is important to keep these logically distinct issues separate, since critiques of one position have no necessary implications for the others. Thus, one may readily grant that the implied author has no place in the communication model of the work and still have a solid argument for the figure as an author-image constructed by the text” (1). The issue remains unresolved, but the concept’s detractors certainly have a point in the term’s fundamental fuzziness and conflation of issues. Peter Rabinowitz, though, argues for a pragmatic approach that acknowledges the implied author’s imperfect definition but uses it when it is productive to do so. Of particular relevance here is his explanation that “the implied author is more than a circumlocution that allows us to bring talk of intention into polite society. The implied author is also (and this became more important to Booth as time passed) a way of thinking about how authors choose to present themselves” (“The Absence of Her Voice” 102). As he notes, such recourse isn’t always necessary in order to talk about intention, but it can enable some conversations that would be difficult otherwise.

The artifact text in general would be one such conversation. As they feature separate, fragmented narratives without a unifying narrator, the artifact text implies some form of higher creative force that has stitched it all together. However, in that sense, it would be fine to use Nünning’s “structural whole,” or do as Marie-Laure Ryan suggests and simply attribute all coherent rationale to an actual, living author (39). With *House of Leaves* in particular, though, Mark Danielewski posits a version of *himself*, both outside and inside the text, as this creative force. This is a force somewhere between author and character, and yet distinct from both, that has outsmarted the reader at every turn, knows all interpretations, and is waiting for the most

microscopic combing of the text. He makes this version of himself into a god presence above the text, an intentional persona I believe to be far different from the living author. However, doing so encourages the reader's deeper investment in the text itself, a process that enables reconstructive readings.

Unreliability, By What Measure?

Despite its terminological openness—or perhaps because of it—the implied author has also been used as an important determinant of unreliable narration.²⁸ For Booth, the implied author is a necessary component of identifying reliability: “I have called a narrator *reliable* when he speaks for or acts in accordance with the norms of the work (which is to say, the implied author's norms), *unreliable* when he does not” (158-159). James Phelan, who utilizes the implied author in his research, clarifies the definition to account for more possibilities: “a character narrator is ‘unreliable’ when he or she offers an account of some event, person, thought, thing, or other object in the narrative world that deviates from the account the implied author would offer” (*Living to Tell* 49). Phelan claims this occurs along three “axes”: (1) characters, facts, and events; (2) knowledge and perception; and (3) ethics and evaluation (49-50). One further point he makes regards the reader's reaction to detected unreliability. He says, “Audiences perform two

²⁸ Not surprisingly, being based on a terminologically fraught concept has made implied authorship contested as well. Walsh, for instance, after rejecting the idea of narrators who are neither the author nor a character, understandably asserts that only character authors can be unreliable in his framework (*Rhetoric* 79). Such an assertion might be challenged in another context, but with the artifact text, all narrators are characters, and the artifact itself isn't “narrated.”

qualitatively different actions once they determine that a narrator's words can't be taken at face value: (1) they reject those words and, if possible, reconstruct a more satisfactory account; or (2) . . . accept what the narrator says but then supplement the account" (50-51).

Given this possibility of rejection, Danielewski takes a significant risk early in *House of Leaves*. While Johnny Truant's narration takes up the entirety of the "Introduction," the reader has not yet become familiar with his tendency to include lengthy narratives in his footnotes to Zampanò's work. However, at mention of a water heater being out in *The Navidson Record*, Johnny interjects with a recent story inspired by his own water heater breaking (12). The episode, which spans several pages and details Johnny's ability to improvise lies to impress people, particularly women at bars, ends with him raising a question:

I'm sure you're wondering something. Is it just coincidence that this cold water predicament of mine also appears in this chapter?

Not at all. Zampanò only wrote "heater." The word "water" back there—I added that.

Now there's an admission, eh?

Hey, not fair, you cry.

Hey, hey, fuck you, I say. (16)

At this point, it's only fair for the reader to ask if there is any reason to continue reading Johnny's narrative at all. The one character through whom the entirety of this supernatural tale is filtered has just openly admitted to falsifying the document in question. This isn't even the only instance, as he will later graphically describe his own death getting hit by a truck (108),

committing rape and murder (497), and his recovery from addiction and the debilitating psychological effects of editing the manuscript (509), only to admit each is a lie and to mock the reader for believing or taking offense. This creates tension for the reader, as *The Navidson Record* has begun to build intrigue, but Johnny is simultaneously the reader's only access to that, as well as the current obstacle to it. An instance or two might be humorous, but further provocation can lead the reader to irritation, frustration, anger, or even dismissal of the narrative.

Phelan's typology allows us to describe Johnny's comments as clear cases of "misreporting" on the "axis of characters, facts, and events," but more relevant here is Phelan's later elaboration on the consequences of unreliability, distinguishing between "estranging" and "bonding" unreliability. He writes, "In estranging unreliability, the authorial audience recognizes that adopting the narrator's perspective would mean moving far away from the implied author's, and in that sense, the adoption would be a net loss for the author-audience relationship," while "in bonding unreliability, the discrepancies . . . have the paradoxical result of reducing the . . . distance between the narrator and authorial audience" ("Estranging Unreliability" 11). In other words, he allows for unreliability to be relative and comparable, varying by the situation and effect, and while unreliability often distances readers from character narrators, it can also bring them closer. While these lies of Johnny's are clearly estranging, almost irreversibly so, they are not the only experience of him by the reader.

Elsewhere, the reader is led to bond with Johnny by identifying or sympathizing with his unreliability. For example, after Zampanò describes a breakfast scene in detail, Johnny notes:

Easily that whole bit . . . could have been cut. You wouldn't of²⁹ noticed the absence. I probably wouldn't of either. But that doesn't change the fact that I can't do it. Get rid of it, I mean. What's gained in economy doesn't really seem to make up for what you lose of Zampanò, the old man himself, coming a little more into focus, especially where digressions like these are concerned. . . . Zampanò himself probably would of insisted on corrections and edits, he was his own harshest critic, but I've come to believe errors, especially written errors, are often the only markers left by a solitary life: to sacrifice them is to lose the angles of personality, the riddle of a soul. In this case a very old soul. A very old riddle. (31)

There are also moments where he acknowledges confusion that is likely shared by the reader (42, 57). Johnny's neglect as an editor would qualify as mis- or under-interpreting, but they reveal humanity that endears the reader to him, especially in contrast to Johnny's more repulsive behavior. The reader sees Johnny's sympathy for an old, lonely man and his frustration at his own incapacity for the task he's undertaken, and the reader's connection to him is likely to be stronger because of it, at least for a time.

The other two author-narrators of *House of Leaves* have their own unreliabilities. For instance, Zampanò, despite insisting on the film's reality, undercuts this claim with gaps and mistakes in the text that would be inexplicable with a real film. A scene that describes two famous friends of the Navidsons visiting and seeing the mysterious hallway simply leaves blanks

²⁹ Johnny's writing is often marked by common grammatical errors such as using "of" instead of "have" here.

for the friends' names. As Johnny notes, "Zampanò provided the blanks but never filled them in" (63). Much later, Zampanò transcribes a letter that Will Navidson writes to Karen, just before he goes off on what seems to be a suicidal, final trip into the house's depths. He names several characters, saying, "I miss Daisy. I miss Chad. I miss Wax and Jed. I even miss Holloway," but then follows this with characters the reader doesn't know: "And I miss Hansen and Latigo and PFC Miserette, Benton and Carl and Regio and 1st lieutenant Nacklebend and of course Zips" (391). These names are in red text and struck through, a practice Johnny has already identified for places where Zampanò deleted something that Johnny was able to recover. As these have so far been passages that seem deeply personal to Zampanò, the reader is led to believe that these names in Navidson's letter aren't actually part of film, but rather Zampanò's own regrets, slipping into the text. Such suspicions aren't explicitly confirmed, but even if the film is real, Zampanò's analysis seems deeply flawed, even more so than simply being the product of a blind man writing about an especially visual medium. Meanwhile, Pelafina's letters shift between lucidity and delusions of the director of the institution creating a surgically altered impostor pretending to be her (617). Even as they might shift between estranging or bonding unreliability, these narratives tend to prevent the reader from fully investing in one over the others, at least not without strong doubts as to its veracity of any account. While Phelan's distinction is sensible, the problem for *House of Leaves* is that bonding unreliability would seem to require some level of emotional commitment to the character and story. The reader has to care enough about the "truth" of a fictional world to differentiate between these moments, and that caring requires some level of immersion. This immersive investment alternates throughout the text with a constant

threat of undoing, as most of what the reader believes or tries to understand is undermined by the text.

Beyond narrative unreliability, issues of timing, placement, and arrangement serve as frequent reminders of a core nothingness within the text and keep readers at a distance. Moments that seem about to offer the most important details consistently disappoint. After several chapters describing the chaos of the failed explorations, including the fourth that leaves three people dead, Chapter XVI of *The Navidson Record* begins with an attempt at objective distance. Having collected wall samples before fleeing the house, Navidson has their composition analyzed and dated. As soon as data begins being reported, the reader encounters, “2 Pages Missing.” Not only is the timing of the deletion deliberately frustrating, but also the Xs that follow indicating the lost words, complete with occasional surviving fragment, emphasize the text’s refusal to offer the comfort of an explanation. As if to add a final insult, the deletion is followed by a note from Johnny that it wasn’t Zampanò’s doing but rather his own mistake of leaving an ink bottle on the manuscript that leaked through the pages (376). Similarly, important supporting documents are also excluded. Several footnotes direct the reader to an interview with Billy Reston, Navidson’s friend and one of those closest to the events—only for reader to find the appendix missing. Another mentions a “Song of Quesada and Molino,” suggesting its thematic relevance, but the song is never included anywhere in the book.

One of the most frustrating of these deletions is the Minotaur passage of Chapter IX, which seems at first to offer a key to understanding the novel. The first extended passage of red, struck-through text, this passage describes the Greek legend of the Minotaur. In particular, it

mentions a play, supposedly inspired in some way by Zampanò, about the Minotaur in which, rather than a dangerous monster, it is a deformed son of Minos, which he places in the labyrinth to protect from judgmental outsiders (110-111). In this version, Theseus is a “drunken, virtually retarded, frat boy,” rather than a hero, and the final slaying is a tragedy (111). As Johnny notes, there are several strange discrepancies in the notes, such as Zampanò citing a flyer titled “Sonny Won’t Wait” from 1968, only for it to change to “Sonny Will Wait” from 1969 in the notes. Hayles draws attention to the change, as well as Johnny’s discovery of a “coincidence,” which “we can guess . . . is the discovery that within the phrase ‘The Minotaur’ is the anagram ‘O Im he Truant’ (798).³⁰ All of this seems to point to an answer, perhaps that Johnny is literally a son of Zampanò, or that he is metaphorically filling the role. However, the visual layout of the page tempers this (see figure 3). The passage takes the shape of a key, but the strike-through distances the reader from the conclusion that this *is* the key. Moreover, even if not struck-through, the “key” doesn’t quite fit on the page, suggesting a mismatch. Instead, it serves as a reminder that whatever key there might be to the text has been taken away.

Danielewski, God-Author

These gaps and deletions are difficult to attribute to a single narrator, and their conspicuous timing seems to demand that the reader look on the larger scale of narrative

³⁰ The online community has noted this as well, though refined it, by pointing out Johnny’s description: “that’s what you get for wanting to turn The Minotaur into a homie . . . no homie at all” (337); taking out H O M I E from “The Minotaur” avoids Hayles’s need to add the rather cumbersome, “O Im he.”

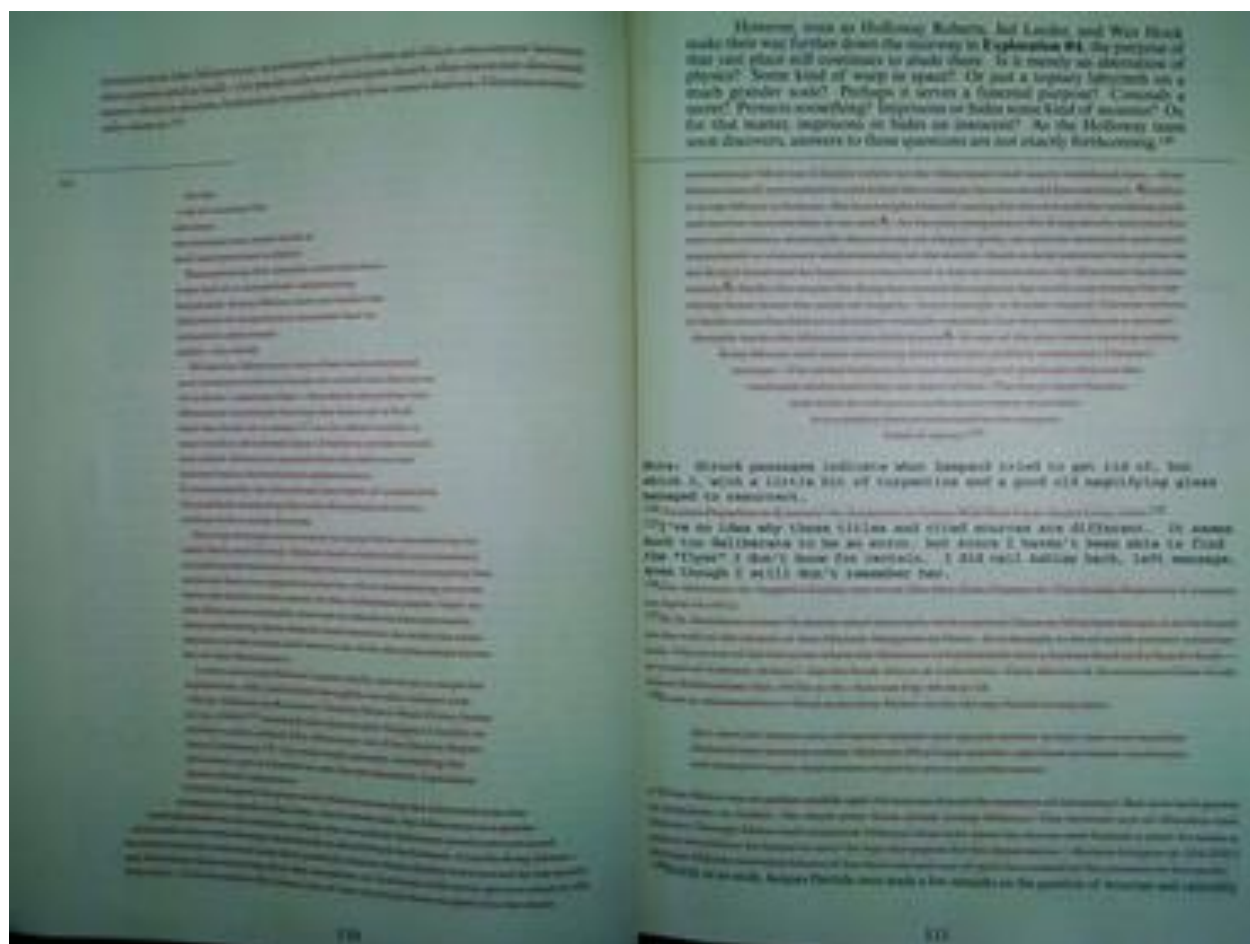


Figure 3: "Key" Passage in House of Leaves (110-111)

cohesion, which brings this discussion back to the implied author. In doing so, it becomes apparent that Danielewski takes on, at minimum, the persona of a trickster or, at worse, an authoritarian role in relation to this novel. While an author's role over the characters and story is, of course, always "authoritative," I would argue that Danielewski attempts to expand this role beyond the confines of the book. That is, by making the novel an artifact (and thus "making it present" for the reader), he seeks to make the reader's experience part of the story, and by doing so, make the readers themselves into characters subject to his authority. However, from the outset, I would emphasize that this is performance,³¹ and that Danielewski is utilizing the "implied" author in a very direct way; taking a further step back, the real-world Danielewski performs this role to push the reader to the text itself.

In an interview with Larry McCaffery and Sinda Gregory in *Critique* (2003), Danielewski mixes seemingly forthright opinions with more startling assertions. Asked about his influences and their presence in the text, he responds,

As a fiction writer, being as self-conscious as I can possibly be would seem to be a very positive thing. By that I mean a writer who's aware of what she or he is doing, who

³¹ The performance is similar to authors who make themselves into explicit textual characters. For instance, Chaucer inserts a version of himself as the teller of the Sir Thopas and Melibee tales in the *Canterbury Tales* as a presumably humorous self-mockery. Nabokov includes thinly veiled or open references to himself in texts such as *Pnin*, and *Look at the Harlequins* takes on a particularly interesting relationship to Nabokov as an "autobiography" of Vadim Vadimovich N., whose name and experiences mirror many of Nabokov's own. Postmodern and contemporary novelists such as Alasdair Gray sometimes even confront characters with their very fictionality, though such a trope quickly wore out its novelty. *House of Leaves* differs from these, as will be seen, in that the textual references are quite cryptic, making the authorial figure not *quite* a character, and in the real-world performance that is part of the effect.

knows enough about what's being done to borrow what's needed while avoiding merely repeating what's already been borrowed and done before—and who can somehow display this awareness in a manner that avoids destroying the narrative or seems too much like, “Hey kids, look what I can do!” I don't mind admitting that I was extremely self-conscious about everything that went into *House of Leaves*. In fact—and I know this will sound like a very bold remark, but I will say it anyway since it remains the truth—I have yet to hear an interpretation of *House of Leaves* that I had not anticipated. (106)

The question of destroying the narrative is still at stake in this discussion, but the author's claim about predicting all interpretations—while possibly true—certainly strikes one as far bolder than is typically expected. Later in the interview, he claims not to have read *Pale Fire* or David Foster Wallace's works, which is, again, certainly possible, but given the similarities to what we've seen in the previous chapter and Danielewski being clearly well-read based on the references within *House of Leaves* itself, this claim strains credulity (114). He adds that there are “no errors in the book” and that the entirety was written in pencil (perhaps the most plausible of these claims, since many of the more labyrinthine passages would likely be easier to draft in pencil than with 1990s word processors) (117). These moments don't create a particularly endearing image of the author for the reader, as he seems not only to be cleverer than his reader but to know it and remind the reader of that fact.

This sense of an omnipotent author figure who has outsmarted the reader at every turn is inscribed into the text as well. Beginning with footnote 27 in Chapter III (22), if the reader takes the first letter of every footnote, he or she will find “MARK Z DANIELEWSKI,” followed by

another “DANIELEWSKI” starting with footnote 46. In footnote 75, a tediously long list of photographers, one can find several more acrostic notes: “A long list [o]f visi[o]naries” (the bracketed o’s are missing), “She said memories mean all but they are all dead who you,” and “I wait now for only the wind” (64-66). The acrostics in footnote 75 could be traced to Zampanò, since it’s his list of “visionaries,” but the notes spelling Danielewski’s name span footnotes by Zampanò, Johnny, and the editors, indicating a presence cutting across all three. The claim could be made here that these are harmless insertions that don’t affect the larger picture. The picture is complicated, though, by the specific instruction in one of Pelafina’s letters to look for acrostic codes (619). The first suggestion from the editors to read Pelafina’s letters occurs just after these acrostics (72). A reader having just passed a long, undifferentiated list, and then being primed to be on the lookout for acrostic messages, could very reasonably think to look back. Given this guidance, these acrostics seem as though they’re meant to be found and should be included in “the text,” rather than dismissed as irrelevant. And once they are included, they seem far less innocuous. Danielewski’s showing himself to be the man behind the curtain is a sure disruption to immersion. Moreover, these discoveries encourage the reader to dig still deeper, only to turn up empty-handed. As it is, besides the author’s name, the three acrostics in footnote 75 don’t provide any answers. “A long list of visionaries” is a play on the fact that it’s a list of photographers, and the other two seem significant but just raise questions instead of serving as some sort of key. In this light, as compelling are the pragmatic and reconstructive readings of Huber or Holland, Danielewski himself violates them. It becomes difficult to care about the fates of the Navidson family, or even the more immediate narrators, when Danielewski intrudes to

remind readers of their artificiality and his authority over them—and over the readers themselves.

Danielewski's presence in the novel constitutes one of the many metalepses that seem to occur. Metalepsis, as defined by Gérard Genette, refers to any transgression between narrative levels, logically impossible or otherwise (234). "Narrative levels" here could refer to a narrator exterior to a story (extradiegetic), such as Zampanò; the story he or she narrates (diegetic) such as that in *The Navidson Record*; or any narratives interior to the diegetic (alternately called metadiegetic or hypodiegetic). Genette includes metalepses that are technically "possible," by which he means rhetorical narrative devices. However, as Jan Alber and Alice Bell note, "only ontological metalepses involve disorienting transgressions that are physically or logically impossible, and hence properly unnatural" (167), and typically, these are the instances that attract notice. Thus, metalepsis more often refers specifically to the violation of distinct storyworlds. When Danielewski enters (or descends into) the text, it is a violation of one boundary (what Alber and Bell call a "descending" metalepsis). In a text such as *House of Leaves*, however, further instances are complicated by the uncertainty the reader has about the text. While Zampanò and the Navidsons occupy distinct narrative levels, the ontological separation between them is far less certain. Does Zampanò actually invent the film, or is Johnny mistaken in his claim that it doesn't exist? More complicated still are the chronological violations that cast doubt on the ontological status of any character. As mentioned above, acrostics are first indicated by Pelafina, who tells Johnny to look for one in the following letter. However, if one goes back several letters, there is an acrostic that asks, "My dear Zampanò, who did you lose?" (615).

Pelafina's death precedes the events of *The Navidson Record* and Johnny learning of Zampanò, so there is no indication that she should know the blind critic, and, indeed, if she *does*, Johnny stumbling across the manuscript in the manner described would be a drastic coincidence.

Johnny's discovery of his name in an anagram for The Minotaur would also seem to violate chronology, as would numerous misspellings, particular phrases, or details that echo across the three separate discourses.

Two moments in particular emphasize this metaleptic disruption. Throughout the novel, Johnny's paranoia about the reality of *The Navidson Record* continues to grow, but added to this is paranoia about his relation to the text. Besides terror at the spaces of his home and the feeling of monsters in the shadows, he comes to realize a dependence on the manuscript. He says:

A moment comes where suddenly everything seems impossibly far and confused, my sense of self derealized & depersonalized, the disorientation so severe I actually believe—and let me tell you it is an intensely strange instance of belief—that this terrible sense of relatedness to Zampanò's work implies something that just can't be, namely that this thing has created me; not me unto it, but now it unto me, where I am nothing more than the matter of some other voice, intruding through the folds of what even now lies there agape, possessing me with histories I should never recognize as my own; inventing me, defining me, directing me until finally every association I can claim as my own . . . is relegated to nothing; forcing me to face the most terrible suspicion of all, that all of this

has just been made up and what's worse, not made up by me or even for that matter Zampanò.

Though by whom I have no idea. (326)

There are several possibilities here. The most obvious is that this is another reference to the authorial figure behind this all. It could also be a reference to Pelafina, for one interpretation for the many correspondences is that she is behind all the texts in the novel. Or it could simply be Johnny's paranoia taking over. But one final instance of metalepsis is impossible to ignore. During his final exploration of the house in *The Navidson Record*, Navidson reaches a final expanse of nothingness. Left with nothing but what seems like an endless fall, he begins to read a book titled *House of Leaves*, by match light, then lighting the pages to continue, despite the inevitability of failing: "as the fire rapidly devours the paper, Navidson's eyes frantically sweep down over the text, keeping just ahead of the necessary immolation, until as he reaches the last few words, flames lick around his hands, ash peels off into the surrounding emptiness, and then the fire retreats, dimming, its light suddenly spent, the book is gone leaving nothing behind but invisible traces" (467). Even if the house is real and if *The Navidson Record* happened, it would of course be impossible for Navidson to have read the book that hasn't been written.

This image of the impossible book being consumed by the very attempt to read it certainly lends itself to the deconstructive readings of the novel. Indeed, metalepsis in general is most commonly a disruptive force, though the extent to which it disrupts narrative is disputed. Even simple narrative framing adds a level of constructedness to the text. Brian McHale writes of how nesting and embedding complicate "the ontological 'horizon' of the fiction" (112), and

he quotes David Lodge as claiming, “It would seem to be a general rule . . . that where one kind of aesthetic presentation is embedded in another, the ‘reality’ of the embedded form is weaker than that of the framing form” (117). Dorrit Cohn calls metalepsis a “vertigo that isn’t present in other highly metafictional or speculative techniques” (“Metalepsis” 110-111), and as already mentioned, Alber and Bell refer to it as disorienting. Alber and Bell also describe several of the purposes of metalepsis, one being an “exercise of control” (176). Yet it is Mark Currie who notes a comparison particularly relevant for the trope of an omniscient narrator entering the text:

A narrator who knows everything about a character, about their past and their future, and is capable of entering into that character’s thoughts, is an impossible person, a convention that we accept in fiction that has no correlative in life, unless by comparison with God. A novel that allows interaction between an omniscient authorial narrator and a character about whom the narrator holds this kind of knowledge necessarily draws attention to the inherent artificiality of that convention. (166)

This would certainly seem to be the position that the figure of Danielewski takes within the text. The controlling force that Johnny senses over him and repeated associations of characters with mythical figures (Jacob and Esau, Minos and the Minotaur) all emphasize a lack of agency on the part of the characters, controlled by the boundary-breaking author-god. With this in mind, it is hard to put much stock in a reconstructive reading that locates value in the story-level content. The frequent metalepses, particularly Danielewski’s presence, seem designed to prevent immersion in the text at every step, or to disrupt existing immersion upon the reader’s closer inspection of textual mysteries. And without immersion, it is hard to expect a reader to commit to

character concerns. When Karen Navidson interviews several fictionalized versions of intellectuals and celebrities, such as Harold Bloom, Douglas Hofstadter, and Jacques Derrida, she ends by asking each one how they would describe the house. David Copperfield, the stage magician, responds, “A riddle” (364). But this is the riddle without answers, the deliberate trick from its writer, where the house changes, and a monster or shadow sweeps in to destroy all evidence. Of course it takes one who calls staged illusions “magic” to notice.

Thus, I would argue that Danielewski creates an aura of the author as a controlling god-figure of the text, while also expanding the text to include its readers’ experiences. Outside the text, his interview with McCaffery and Gregory casts himself as infallible, predicting every interpretation and imbuing every possible detail with intentionality. Just as Pressman argues that we must include Poe’s companion album in interpretation, I believe the “aesthetic object” includes this interview and others like it. And when readers focus on some of the text’s most microscopic details, they see only the sign of the creator, Danielewski’s name, encoded into a story from which he is supposed to remain separate. This aura enacts some of postmodernism’s metafictional extremes, while also serving as a representation of the anthropomorphized version of the implied author. And by constantly reasserting his presence, this authorial figure pushes the reader to see every word as a potentially intended message, even when that may not have been the case.

However, while some can take this authorial presence as a pure deconstruction of meaning and significance, that is, as a constant reminder that there is nothing in the house, that all the characters are fictional, and any interpretation has been foreseen (and potentially

thwarted) by the author, for others, it reinforces the investigative push. Like Will Slocombe, Alison Gibbons uses the novel's epigraph, "This is not for you," for a chapter title. But while Slocombe emphasizes the epigraph as pure denial, Gibbons presents it as a challenge by imagining the dialogue it develops for a reader. She writes that "'Not' almost appears to reverse the oriented movement suggested by the preposition . . . Indeed, it is somewhat reminiscent of the forbidding words of a parent to their child as they move a potentially exciting object away from the child and out of reach" (23). The prohibition makes the book into something "tantalizing" (24), and the more Danielewski insists the reader cannot partake in it, the more the reader will insist on doing so. Irmtraud Huber similarly notes this reverse psychology, commenting multiple times on the book as a direct challenge to readers. She claims, "Life in the house might be impossible but the question the novel repeatedly asks is how to live with and in spite of it, how to accept the insights of poststructuralism that have so deeply influenced postmodernism without being driven into isolated silence, madness, or suicide" (84), later adding, "The blank page, as much as it represents silence, also evokes the challenge and the temptation to be filled" (107).

If the novel were a purely voiced narration—that is, *not* an artifact but rather the purely mental or spoken account of a narrator or narrators—I would argue such an interpretation would be impossible. The reader who attempts to answer the omnipotent author's challenge would be met only with mockery. However, as an artifact, the novel gives the reader something to turn *toward* when turning away from the controlling author. Returning to the epigraph that opened this chapter:

Why did god create a dual universe?

So he might say,

“Be not like me. I am alone.”

And it might be heard. (45)

These lines from a poem, whose origin stumps both Johnny and the editors and has so far stumped real-world readers as well, posit a dualistic universe. While the poem could refer to god and humanity, the “dualism” suggests to me a power equal to the god it presents. And in the case of *House of Leaves*, this could be seen to suggest the real-world Danielewski gives us the object of the book itself, the artifact, as a rival force to the manipulative, figural-Danielewski. Just as the god-like author figure serves as a stand-in for control and authority and the “anthropomorphized” implied author, the book represents a de-personified “structural whole,” an entity that can be seen to have meaning, but whose significance may differ from or exceed the meaning intended by any author, real or implied. By giving us the book as a simulated physical object instead of merely as the narrated discourse of a more traditional novel, Danielewski explicitly gives the counter to his authoritative stance, as the reader can use the artifact to prove him wrong. And while metalepsis, metafiction, and authorial intrusion attempt to weaken reality and thereby weaken the emotional, empathic connection with characters, presence reasserts both.

For instance, many of Danielewski’s claims in the interview are dubious, based on evidence in the actual text. His insistence that there are no errors seems mainly a reference to idiosyncrasies such as Johnny’s habits of saying “alot” or “should of,” or revelatory typos, such as Zampanò switching from third person to first when talking about Tom—“He might have spent

all night drinking had exhaustion not caught up with me” (320)—which might indicate the story’s closeness to his own life. However, other mistakes seem to be purely typographical errors, such as one note citing a source published in “fall 1195” (316), or a line in Will Navidson’s letter to Karen that reads, “I’d like to it, I’ve tried to do it” (390). Such mistakes are to be expected in any text, and surely the “real” Danielewski knows this, but his insistence that there are no errors makes these trivial moments into evidence that aspects of this artifact exceed the control of the god-figure of the author. Danielewski also claims not to have read *Pale Fire* before writing the novel, but Johnny’s specific description of one batch of Zampanò’s notes as a set of “green index cards held together by a yellow rubber band” seems a deliberate reference to Kinbote’s description of the poem’s state when it came to him (376).

Moreover, while the author-god allows the story-level’s metalepsis and play to threaten perceptions of the reality of its characters, the book seems intent on reminding its readers, particularly through the work of the editors, that these are distinct, individual identities. While they remain nameless and never engage in any extended narrative, these editors provide several important details to suggest each character’s reality. For instance, some readers can argue that Johnny doesn’t exist, that Pelafina’s encoded comment to Zampanò or Zampanò’s desire to create a “son” “in the margins” indicate that Johnny is some type of narrative construct.³² However, though the editors acknowledge they’ve only corresponded with (rather than directly met) Johnny, they include correspondence with several of the women Johnny claims he or his

³² This would be similar to the single-author theories of *Pale Fire*. Zampanò’s comment particularly echoes the couplet, “*Man’s life as commentary to abstruse / Unfinished poem. Note for further use*” (67).

friend Lude met or with whom they had sexual encounters. Johnny tells of a woman named Hailey³³ whom he scared with his nightmares and paranoia, and with the publication of the second edition, Hailey has emailed the editors to let them know Johnny wasn't as bad as he made himself out to be (151). Thus, evidence for Johnny exists.

A different reading might posit that perhaps Johnny or Pelafina created Zampanò, except that the editors provide a letter from a blind man with the same name to a gun store, written when Johnny would have been only a child (554). Moreover, Johnny describes meeting with Zampanò's assistant transcribers throughout the novel. For Pelafina, the editors give the letter from the institution to Johnny, informing him of her death, along with a receipt showing that Johnny reclaimed a necklace of hers that he mentions in his narrative (643-644).

Even the film of *The Navidson Record*, which Johnny seems so sure doesn't exist, seems in fact to be real, based on textual evidence. The editors include several artistic depictions of moments from the film, most dated in the 1990s, before Johnny has acquired the manuscript or the first edition has been published. These depictions include a comic book page by Tyler Martin from 1993, showing one of the action scenes of the film (659).³⁴ Even a moment as seemingly disruptive as the appearance of *House of Leaves* on the diegetic level of *The Navidson Record* is troubled by the supplementary materials. The editors include photographs of several of Zampanò's fragmentary notes, one of which is a first draft of the passage where Navidson reads

³³ Possibly a foreshadowing of a character from Danielewski's *Only Revolutions*.

³⁴ If one takes intertextual details from Danielewski's other works into account, the evidence for the reality of story-world elements grows. For instance, a short companion piece to Danielewski's *The Familiar*, titled "Clip 4," refers to a film being "Super Navidson Recordy" (172).

House of Leaves (551). The passage in the first draft reads only, “the only book he possessed: _____” (see figure 4). The absence of the title indicates that the supposed metalepsis might not necessarily violate ontological boundaries at all, but could be a deliberate rhetorical choice by Johnny to fill in the blanks and manipulate the text, something he has done before.

In contrast to the disruptive, annihilating tendencies of the authorial figure, the novel develops a theme of constant return and focus on the house and text. As much as the author’s presence is emphasized by what he can manipulate and take away from the reader—information, text, immersion—the sheer presence of the physical artifacts of the house and text create a centripetal force on the characters who “can only [live] in the margins of that place” (388). When Will Navidson decides to return to the house and what he assumes will be his death, he writes a letter to Karen explaining his decision: “Why am I doing this? Because it’s there and I’m not. I know that’s a pretty shitty answer. I should burn the place down, forget about it. But going after something like this is who I am. You know that” (389). He explains that he’s realized that “God’s a house. Which is not to say that our house is God’s house or even a house of God. What I mean to say is that our house is God” (390), giving it a rival power to Danielewski’s godly authorial presence. Johnny sees the manuscript the same way in its unavoidable pull, and his conviction, quoted above, that it’s not he who supports and maintains its existence but rather the text that has created him. And one of the many collected quotes from Zampanò similarly insists that “Prometheus, thief of light, giver of light, bound by the gods, must have been a book” (546). Thus, Zampanò suggests the “book” not only to have power equal to the gods, but also to be a force working against their will for the sake of humanity.

As Davidson indicates on the recorder, he is slowly
 becoming more and more ^{confused?} disoriented. He suffers from
 surges of nausea. ^{like a bad case of the spins?} Questions plague him. Is he
 floating? falling? or rising? ^{flips up?} Is he right side up?
 Upside-down? Or on his side? Eventually, however,
 the ^(ROTATE THEME?) spins stop and Davidson accepts that the
 questions are sadly irrelevant.
 Taking a tiny sip of water and digging ^{himself} deeper
 into his sleeping bag, he turns his attention
 to the last possible activity. ^{NAIDON?} the only book he
 possesses: _____
 SPACE? >
 (For whatever reason the tape
 cuts off here.)

Figure 4: Zampanò's Notes (551)

Presence constantly borders on addiction for these characters, as their obsession with it threatens sanity and health, while simultaneously sustaining them. The physical book reinforces this addictive quality for the reader as well, in part through the self-referentiality of its footnotes and circular loops, but also through one of the most frequently mentioned details: the constant printing of “house” in blue text. Most critics who focus on the novel’s relation to digital media, such as Hayles, Pressman, or Hansen, have noted the blue text’s suggestion of a hyperlink and hypertext fiction. However, while the blue certainly evokes html hyperlinks, that connection is subverted by the fact that *only* “house” appears in blue. While the internet moves outward, including the entire world in its focus, and hypertext allows for nonlinearity and unpredictability in reading, *House of Leaves* does neither, allowing only a single path, always back into the house and into the novel. The reader who “follows the links” of the text won’t find himself or herself getting lost but rather constantly referred back to the same page: the novel itself.

Moreover, the blue text and the rival force to the author that the house and text represent complicate the nature of the threat that the house and text purportedly pose to Navidson and Johnny. Another of Zampanò’s collected excerpts is an untitled poem, which reads as follows:

Little solace comes
 to those who grieve
 when thoughts keep drifting
 as walls keep shifting
 and this great blue world of ours

seems a house of leaves

moments before the wind. (563)

These lines seem to suggest the blue text is instead a connection between the house, text, and world. The blue world is compared to a house, so that every use of “house” in the text reasserts the link, but the poem also suggests the presence evoked by these concepts is *fragile*, constantly threatened. More than the house or artifact that threaten, it is the shifting of thought and focus that *act* on the house and artifact. That is, the “shifting” suggests the author itself, a theme echoed by the red struck-through passages that counter-balance the blue house. These red passages, representing authorial manipulation—deletions by Zampanò and re-insertions by Johnny—all deal with the Minotaur, the figure of absence and threat of annihilation. They thus seem to reassert the rivalry between the controlling author and independent text.

Johnny’s and Will Navidson’s fates both seem to challenge the idea that the text and house represent threat as well. While their obsessions bring them to their lowest individual points, these obsessions also prove to be a generative force. For Will, the obsession with the house estranges him from Karen. His choice to return is an acceptance of death, but also brings to light truths he had been avoiding. He confesses to her the identity of “Delial,” a name that Karen has frequently heard and assumed to be a former lover (17). In reality, Delial is the subject of a photo that won Will a Pulitzer Prize, a starving girl he could have helped but instead chose to photograph (391-392).³⁵ Only in his final return to the house can he confess the guilt he feels

³⁵ It should be noted that the photograph is based off a real-world photo taken by Kevin Carter, who committed suicide shortly after winning the Pulitzer Prize for his work.

over his claim to fame. The separation caused by his obsession is also what leads Karen to assemble his footage and understand him more as a person, finally leading her to return as well and rescue Will. The presence of the house brings him to his lowest point, but the very significance of their emotional story grows out of that confrontation.

The same is true for Johnny, whose work on the manuscript brings him to face the traumatic experiences that he has denied his entire life. As his health and sanity deteriorate, he is evicted from his apartment and decides to travel to Virginia in an attempt to find the house and prove its existence (410). Entire stretches of memory disappear, his only friend Lude dies, hallucinations of horrific violence take over, but eventually, he instead finds himself returning to his own childhood home. It is only on this voyage that he finally allows himself to remember the institutionalization of his mother in response to a purported attempt to strangle him as a child and the absence and loss she represents in his life. He insists that the strangling attempt never happened, and it's only the force of the manuscript that brings him to allow himself to remember (517). In his (chronologically) final journal entry, he encounters others who have read the first edition of the book, and who seem genuinely concerned for his well-being. Looking through their copy of the text, he reflects, "There's no question I cherished the substance of those pages, however imperfect, however incomplete. Though in that respect they were absolutely complete, every error and unfinished gesture and all that inaudible discourse, preserved and intact. Here now, resting in the palms of my hands, an echo from across the years" (514). The end of his story remains ambiguous, as he recognizes "a strange and oddly familiar sorrow," but he insists "I don't need to leave yet. Not yet. There's time now. Plenty of time. And somehow I know it's

going to be okay. It's going to be alright. It's going to be alright" (515). He has, of course, given enough justification over the novel for one to doubt his words, but it seems to be a genuine resolution to traumatic memories, one which the presence of the text and its shared existence in other people's lives brings about in him.

The generative potential is in many ways simply a poststructuralist sense of meaning, suggested from the very earliest pages of the novel when Zampanò describes an innocent moment where Will tosses a clump of Karen's hair in a wastebasket. Karen says, "Just you watch, one day I'll go bald, then won't you be sorry you threw that away," to which Will replies, "No," which Zampanò notes (through a fictional critic) "could refer to either 'watch,' 'bald,' or 'sorry' or all three" (11), creating four meanings out of a single word.³⁶ Similarly, Zampanò's footnotes and Karen's scholarly interviewees all posit different meanings for the single house, many of which, despite the prevalent academic parody, still present symbolically reasonable claims. The text could even be seen as embodying the split Roland Barthes describes between a "readerly" and "writerly" text. He proposes the writerly text as "the goal of literary work . . . to make the reader no longer a consumer, but a producer of the text," as opposed to the readerly text, where the reader "is left with no more than the poor freedom either to accept or reject the text: reading is nothing more than a *referendum*" (4). The authorial presence in *House of Leaves* is the force of control, making the reader passive, while the presence of the text itself allows different possibilities of meaning to emerge that transcend the author's control. However, it's not

³⁶ And even more significance is evoked from Karen's cancer in the final chapter of the book, treatment of which has caused significant hair loss (526-527).

as simple as an opposition between the two. For Barthes, the goal is a “plural text”: “the interpretation demanded by a specific text, in its plurality, is in no way liberal: it is not a question of conceding some meanings, of magnanimously acknowledging that each one has its share of truth; it is a question, against all in-difference, of asserting the very existence of plurality . . . there is never a *whole* of the text” (6). In *House of Leaves*, Danielewski uses the opposition between these tendencies explicitly to create a whole out of them. The authorial, top-down control represented by red text is a threat. It is an antagonist, both figurative and represented in-text, but it is also a necessary force against which the text itself and the world it represents are able to generate meaning and significance. As Johnny finally allows himself to remember, he watches a sunset, “reds finally marrying blues” (516).

Presence, created by the physical artifact of the text and its contents, isn’t evoked for its own sake but rather to work through the existential threat created by postmodern practices like metalepsis. Of course, the metaleptic moments throughout the novel are still there, and the text doesn’t allow for a unifying interpretation with any degree of certainty. However, presence allows for the meaningfulness of the investigation, a sense of purpose that softens the disruptive edge of metalepsis. In “‘Unnatural’ Metalepsis and Immersion: Necessarily Incompatible?” Werner Wolf begins from the standpoint that metalepsis is always disruptive, only to investigate the exceptions to that claim, particularly in the form of “naturalization.” As he uses it, “naturalization . . . is more than merely making sense of seemingly strange phenomena of the story level; rather it means rendering such phenomena plausible by means apparently originating in the represented storyworld so that they become compatible with immersion” (119-120). By

foregrounding the act of writing and production of the text, Danielewski allows the reader great leeway in naturalizing its strangeness.

Wolf also notes that “emotional involvement in the storyworld” is one feature that will encourage naturalization of techniques like metalepsis (125). Allowing *House of Leaves* too much freedom in performing its tricks can easily overwrite this emotional involvement. For instance, with the acrostic codes, several critics point out the “My dear Zampanò” reference, but few if any discuss the letter Pelafina directs Johnny to decode, a letter which describes the brutal, sexualized torture she receives at the institution. *House of Leaves* allows the play and theorycrafting, but the reader who takes it too far can get lost in it all, while losing sight of the purpose of theorizing altogether. In Danielewski’s interview in *Critique*, he concludes by describing his ideal reader:

One of the rules I made for myself early on was not to underestimate the intelligence of the reader. I would write for the reader who gets it all, who can suspend it all, until the last possible moment before it must necessarily resolve with that final chord. During the ten years that went into making *House of Leaves*, I never flinched from that; and gradually this idealized reader I addressed came to life in my imagination, taking in every single note, noticing every twist of phrase . . . And with that kind of an audience, the rest was easy. (124)

While the interview seems at least partially performance, this comment seems true. *House of Leaves* pushes the reader to explore, and its mix of immersion-breaking challenges and restorative stability maintains a tension that pushes that exploration in different directions while

always reasserting a single path that returns to the house and the text. But the reader who follows that path and who becomes Danielewski's ideal reader nevertheless reaches a point where the single path allows for multiple paths of either rejection or reconstruction.

Chapter Four

Hybrid Temporality in Doug Dorst and J. J. Abrams's *S*.

I will not be long here, Charles!--& gone, you will not mind my having spoiled a book in order to leave a Relic.

—Samuel Taylor Coleridge, marginal note to
Charles Lamb (qtd. in Jackson 3)

Just as with *House of Leaves* and *Pale Fire*, consideration of Doug Dorst and J. J. Abrams's artifact text *S*. requires starting with a riddle. The ancient Greek "Ship of Theseus" puzzle asks a basic question: does the identity of an object persist beyond the replacement of its component parts? If a ship, over the course of its voyages, has its oars, planks, and rigging replaced, to the point where nothing remains of the original, is it the same ship? Thomas Hobbes later pushed this question further: if the original parts are saved, only to be reassembled elsewhere, "which ship—the continuous or the reconstructed—is numerically identical to the original ship?" (Brown 1). On the one hand, these questions concern physical matter, the part in relation to the whole. But on the other hand is a temporal issue: answering any version of this puzzle requires one to consider both the present moment, as well as a more continuous historical trajectory, and moreover, to be able to consider these two temporalities simultaneously.

A ship is just an object, and the stability of an object's identity might be of only little relevance to the everyday reality of the average person. Dorst and Abrams's *S*., however, addresses this same question in relation to objects, to humans, and to the experience of reading and time itself. The primary object of the book-in-a-box project is the novel *Ship of Theseus* by

fictional author V. M. Straka, artificially produced as an aging library book. As the title suggests, it deals with the puzzle directly, featuring a ship that has gone through numerous transformations while retaining its identity. It also refers to the puzzle thematically, as its protagonist, a man named S., questions the stability of his own identity in relation to a forgotten past (he has amnesia) and numerous fragmentary, disjointed adventures. In the margins of the book are the handwritten comments of two character interlocutors, Jen and Eric, who each investigate the book's (*Ship of Theseus's*) history. In the process of their investigations, they come to know each other, fall in love, and change, leading them too to question the stability of their identities as they grow distant from their former selves. The story level of the text raises this question over the stability of identity as a temporal issue—characters changing over time. However, the book's artifact structure spatializes the same question. It provides an assortment of physical objects, from a book to a napkin to a decoder wheel, and asks the reader to determine a stable textual identity that underlies the entire collection of artifacts. Both the temporal and the spatial insist that the reader be able to hold both the fragmented textual present and the underlying textual identity simultaneously in mind.

In a way, this is what a reader does with every text: consider the part alongside the whole as they interpret it. But the second part of this chapter will show how, with its artifact narrative structure, *S.* is able to make this hermeneutic tension not just a matter of interpretation but also shows it to the reader directly, by bringing multiple, distinct narrative strands to the surface and presenting them simultaneously. While *Pale Fire* and *House of Leaves* use their artifact structure as a counter-balance to the potential hazards of their metafictional play, *S.* uses its structure to

dramatically alter the temporal experience of reading by creating an effect of narrative simultaneity, a rare and under-theorized form of narration. At an individual moment of the reader's progression through the text, the reader is able to perceive a multiplicity of voices vying for attention, but only able to focus on one at a time. This conflict between what the text is sending and what the reader is physically capable of processing creates a narrative tension that drives the text forward, through the reader's need to keep the different narratives together.

S. is not the only novel to attempt to portray multiple narratives simultaneously.³⁷ However, *S.* uses the simultaneity to force the reader to maintain not just multiple, simultaneous narratives, but two simultaneous, different temporalities: one fictional and created at a specific point in time, and the other ongoing and (ostensibly) non-fictional. The final part of this chapter will show how this temporal hybridity inculcates a distinct experience of historical and fictional time. On the one hand, the novel constructs what Eelco Runia refers to as a metonymy of history, a way of “storing” the presence of the past to experience both the continuity and discontinuity of time. Moreover, it engages in Paul Ricoeur's conceptualization of temporality's relation to narrative, giving the text both a sense of “within-timeness” as well as deeper historicity. The simultaneity brought about by the artifact blends the ongoing experience of the present with a

³⁷ Any artifact text with footnotes, commentary, or any other overt editorial frame inherently creates a similar tension, though *Pale Fire* and *House of Leaves* don't develop this as much as *S.* does. J. M. Coetzee's *Diary of a Bad Year* is a non-artifact text that manipulates the page layout to portray multiple narratives occurring simultaneously. Even sequential narrative can at least approximate simultaneity, though without spatial manipulation of the text I would argue it remains always an approximation.

sense of the past as both desirable and irrecoverable, creating a rich portrayal of how lived experience relates to the past.

A Book in (and Beyond) a Box

S. contains, at minimum, three story arcs: the novel *Ship of Theseus*, the historic life of *Ship*'s deceased author V. M. Straka, and the literary investigation and love story of the marginal commenters Jen and Eric. *Ship of Theseus* is a full, autonomous novel in itself (published to mimic in appearance an old library book) and tells the story of an amnesic man by the name S., who becomes part of a dissident political movement as he searches for a woman named Sola, who seems to be connected to his lost past. *Ship of Theseus* is fragmentary and its narrative is frequently strange or dream-like, with the flow of time often hazily uncertain or outright impossible, and locational references deliberately ambiguous, often seeming to refer to real-world places but only indirectly. The story opens with S. soaking wet, in the middle of a city, with no memory of his own identity and only "a vague but terrifying sense-memory of falling from a great height" (6). He is press-ganged onto a ship whose crew members, with one exception, sew their own mouths shut and refuse to communicate with him. He escapes and falls in with a group protesting a military corporation named Vévoda, only for Vévoda to strike and kill the group one by one. S. finds himself back on the ship, is incorporated into the crew and becomes an assassin targeting Vévoda agents. He is waylaid in a place known as the Winter City where he cannot interact with other people, but eventually finds and escapes with Sola. The two proceed with a plan to kill the head of Vévoda, but after cornering him, S. relents, thinking, "He

doesn't care about Vévoda anymore. As long as the man lives, S. and others will resist what he brings to the world. When Vévoda dies, someone else will take his place. When S. dies, someone else will take his place. Another S. Another story" (451). The erosion of clear causal links between events in the story, the ship that has undergone centuries of transformations while remaining the same, the story's opening with S. in the middle of a city and with no memory, and the impression that all of it has happened before: all these story details combine to create the impression of an endless historical cycle—somehow both deeply concerned with time but also outside of its normal passage—entwined with the more personal, human experiences of S., Sola, and the other revolutionaries.

The second story arc concerns the historic context surrounding the publication of *Ship of Theseus*, portrayed as the posthumous 1949 work of V. M. Straka. There are eighteen other novels attributed to him, but as his translator, F. X. Caldeira, tells the reader, the real identity of Straka remains uncertain. He may have been "Vaclav Straka," an existing person with no connections to the literary world who was believed to have committed suicide before the novel's publication, or he could be a pseudonym used by one or more of a number of other authors who exist within the world of S., such as Torsten Ekstrom or Amarante Durand (vii-ix). Whatever may be the case, Caldeira tells the readers of *Ship of Theseus* that Straka was killed in 1946, and that Caldeira finished assembling *Ship of Theseus* from the notes left behind. The reader will eventually learn that Straka's 1946 death is also uncertain, that Caldeira actually believes Straka to have escaped for a time, and that many of Caldeira's footnotes that appear in *Ship of Theseus* are coded messages to Straka. Moreover, Caldeira is revealed to be a woman, Filomela, who was

in love with Straka despite having never met him directly. “Straka,” along with many of the authors attributed to his identity, was a member of a politically active group called the S., which had fractures and betrayals within its ranks, leaving Straka as one of the last members, turmoil obliquely referred to in the events of *Ship of Theseus*. His final concern in life seems to have been the care for Signe Rabe, the daughter of Ekstrom and Durand, who had both been killed. Caldeira, meanwhile, who never knew who Signe Rabe was, suffered for it, believing Straka to have loved another.

While Caldeira’s footnotes tell some of this account, sending coded messages to Straka while simultaneously protecting his identity leads Caldeira frequently to lie or omit information. Instead, the majority of Straka’s story is revealed through a third story level, the contemporary interactions between the college students Eric Husch and Jen Heyward, whose journey of discovery is told primarily through notes in the margins of *Ship of Theseus*. Eric is a graduate student whose research focuses on Straka, but whose future is in doubt due to his advisor’s attempt to steal his work. Jen is an undergraduate student reading Straka’s work for the first time and facing academic burnout as she attempts to graduate. Together, they uncover much of the historical context of the book, even tracking down Caldeira, with Eric meeting her shortly before she dies peacefully. They learn that the historical conspiracy to eliminate the S. group likely was a continuation of previous incarnations of the same political struggle and likely continues into the present. Eric and Jen eventually meet in person and fall in love, and by the end of S. have fled the country to try and find answers to some of the final mysteries of the text.

While complicated and fragmentary, much of the story side of *S.* could be a fairly typical conspiracy thriller. However, the way the story is *told* is distinct, as the narrative distributes the story through a variety of different channels. First, *Ship of Theseus* is narrated in third-person, present tense, and its dreamlike and fragmentary content are disorienting in themselves. Next, Caldeira's footnotes partly contextualize the story for readers as footnotes should, but also (we learn) contain lies meant to mislead or divert any conspirators still seeking Straka, and also include seemingly nonsensical references that are actually encoded messages to Straka. Finally, Jen and Eric's story primarily develops in their marginal commentary, where they converse with each other while analyzing the text (see figure 5). They also include physical documents such as photographs, postcards, a map drawn on a napkin, or extended confessional letters to each other—included as inserts in the text, twenty-two in total (see figure 6). Each is left inside the pages, typically close to where it is mentioned or relevant along the timeline. The presence and placement of these documents require the actual reader of *S.* to be attentive to the physical nature of the artifacts, since they can be lost, or fall out of place; indeed, some of the thicker documents almost seem intended to slip from the pages. This evokes a physical reaction to the text, where the reader recognizes the possible effect of his or her body and actions on the artifact. Finally, Jen and Eric's story continues beyond the book's close with *Twitter* accounts created for each

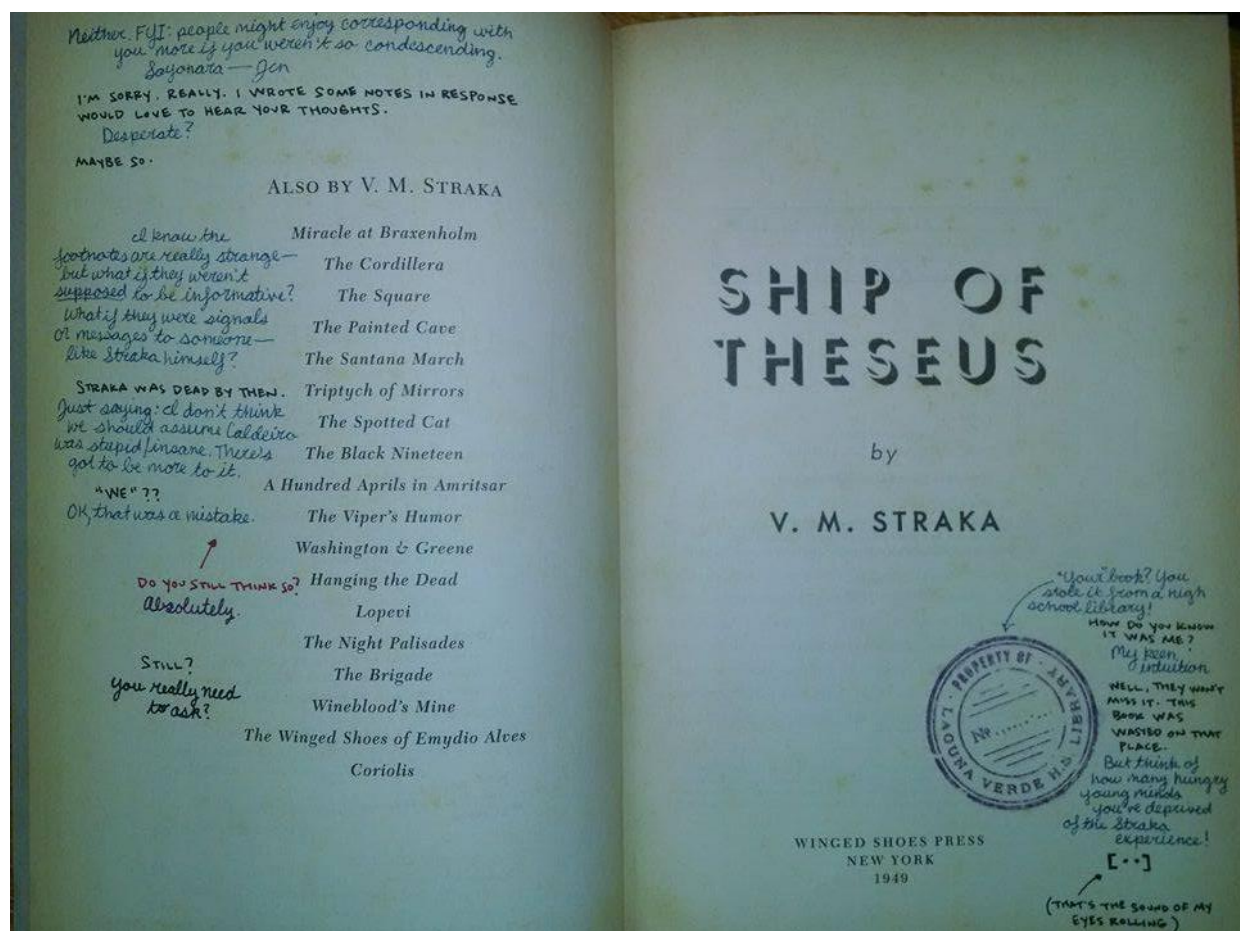


Figure 5: Jen and Eric's Marginal Commentary

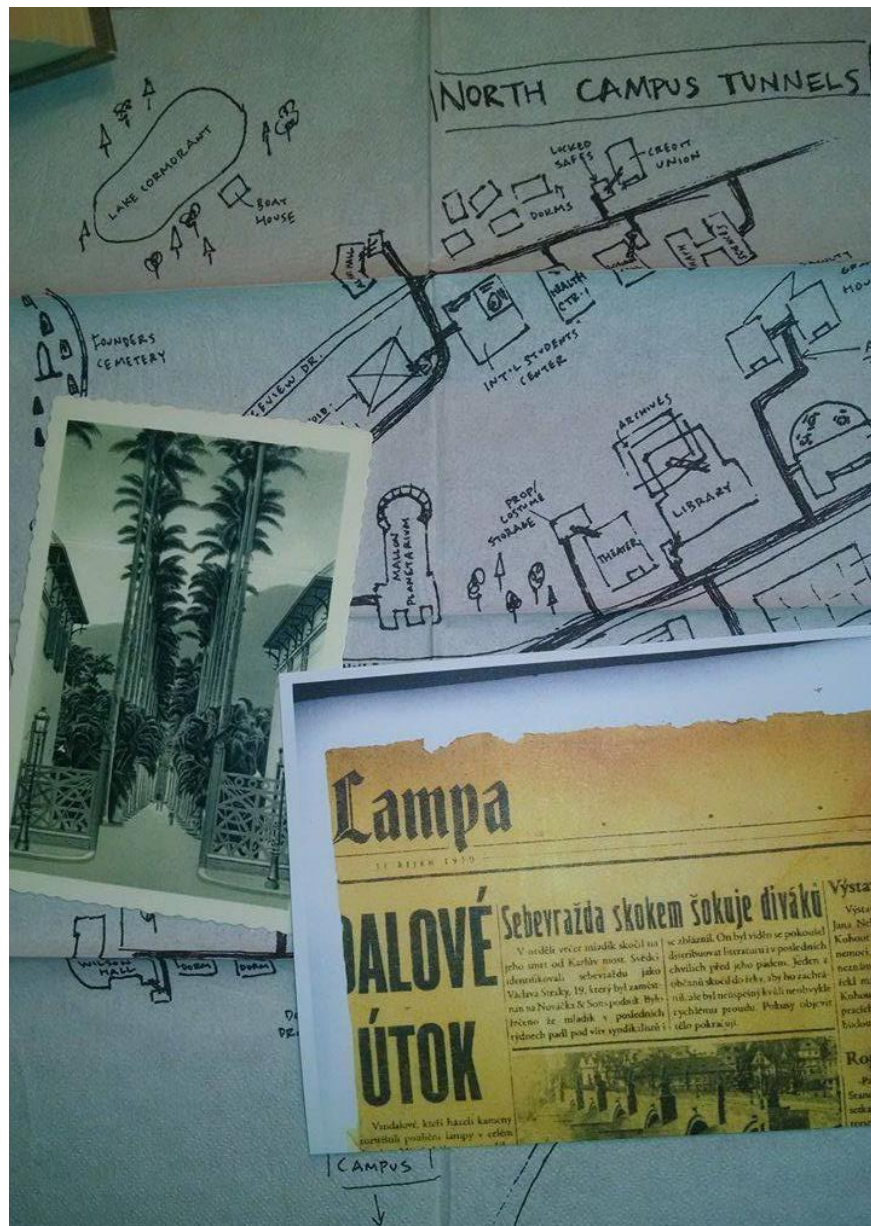


Figure 6: A Sampling of Physical Documents

character. While containing mostly supplemental content, the interactions between the accounts do inform the reader of the continuing investigation and fill in a few areas left ambiguous in the book's pages.

Because of these physical and spatial features, the copy of *Ship of Theseus* that the reader holds is itself a part of the story-world. As with the previous texts, the artifact blurs the traditional narratological line between story and discourse. *S.* gives an even more elaborate example of this, as *Ship of Theseus* is reproduced as an old library copy, complete with Dewey Decimal sticker, library stamps, and yellowed pages (see figure 7). Rather than a discourse that merely asserts the book as a shared object with the story-world, Abrams and Dorst convincingly recreate the shared object, creating an elaborate case of *showing*, rather than *telling* or narrating, the story-world. This crossover, where discourse is made a part of the story, can be seen in the physical book in several ways. First, its physical features provide some information directly: the Dewey Decimal sticker shows 813.54, confirming the book's placement in 20th century American fiction within the story-world; the weathered cover and yellowed pages indicate its age; the copyright page gives story-world information (publication in 1949 by Winged Shoes Press), rather than the real-world *S.*'s copyright information; and its library stickers and stamps reveal that Eric stole the copy.

Second, making Jen and Eric's comments handwritten marginalia in an already-published book, rather than footnotes, creates a physical constraint on their discourse. Unlike Johnny Truant or Charles Kinbote (or here, Filomela Caldeira), who each prepare their manuscripts for publication and have the freedom to expand their commentaries, Jen and Eric have only the

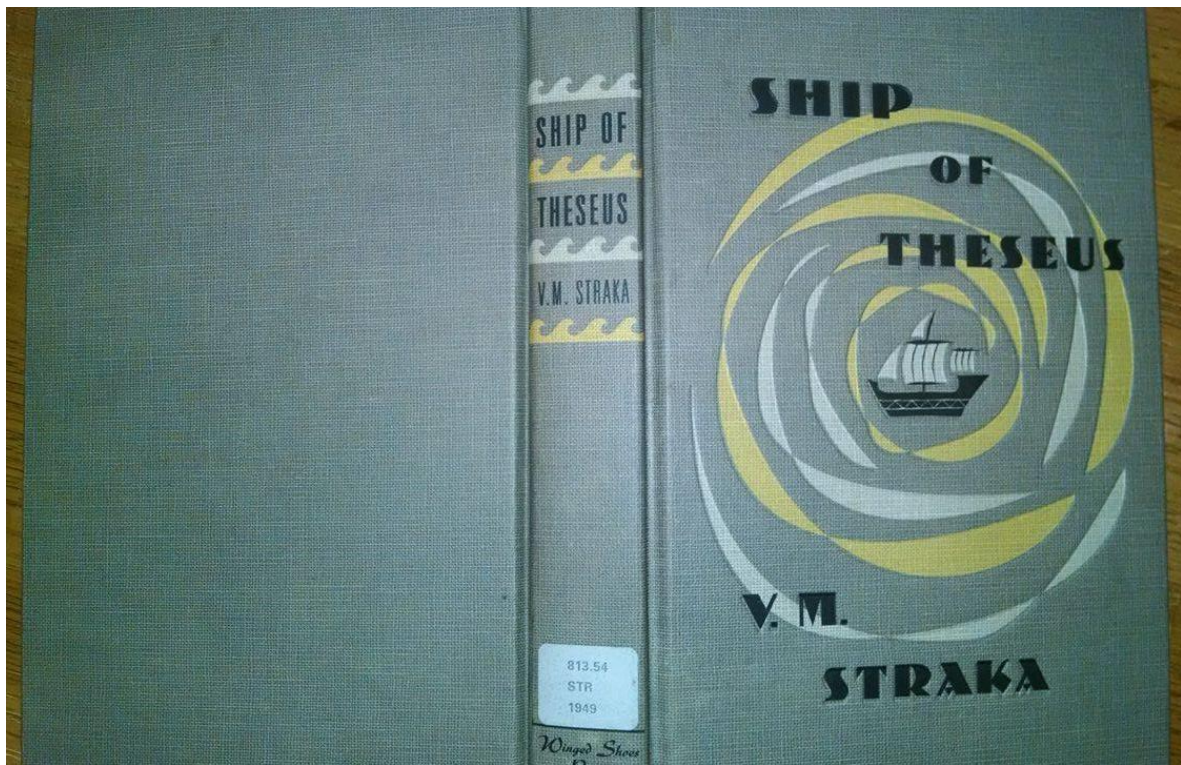


Figure 7: Ship of Theseus as Library Copy

space of the existing pages to utilize, along with the occasional extra document (and, after publication, the in-character *Twitter* accounts). Often, they include arrows when they run out of space or a page grows complicated, and longer comments create the need to go off page entirely. For example, when a line from *Ship of Theseus* reminds Eric to ask Jen about an instance she's mentioned of disappearing when she was a child, Jen responds, "There's no way I can tell that story in this space. Here," and inserted are two sheets of note paper in which Jen describes her childhood disappearance in detail (100). Later Eric has a similar confession about his inadvertent involvement in his uncle's death at sea (203), and still later, Jen describes the childhood disappearance more fully, including details she left out or lied about initially (376). In each of these moments, by forcing them off page, *S.* reminds and promotes the sense that the book-as-object has a stable independence from Jen and Eric, and that they are arriving on the scene later.

Third, beyond the direct information it provides and by creating story-world constraints on Jen and Eric, the physical book "shows" story precisely by the insistence that it is a story-world object, meant to authenticate the story by its very presence. This has been the unifying premise for the artifact text as a genre, but *S.* takes it a step further than *Pale Fire* or *House of Leaves*. In those books, the discourses of Charles Kinbote and Johnny Truant insist on the physical book's reality directly to a reader, but with *S.* the dated production shows the "reality" without the need to directly address an audience; instead, the reader essentially stumbles onto the novel and "overhears" the marginal commenters. However, this production and presentation of an artificially "authentic" object creates a risk for the real-world reception of the project, that it becomes seen as a nostalgic gimmick, a concern reflected in criticism of the novel. In Sara

Tanderup's "A scrapbook of you + me," she argues that the novel is paradoxically nostalgic for the physical book, "imagining the old-fashioned book as a privileged space for authenticity and intimacy," while also being "deeply grounded in the contemporary media culture at the level of both culture and context" (149-150). She notes that the handwriting, library marks, and yellowed pages are all artificial reproductions, claiming,

Essentially, *S.* is a delicious new book. It projects the idea of old books into a published new work, thus ironically reproducing, even mass-producing, the sense of intimacy, singularity, and authenticity that is commonly associated with such books. In this way, it draws on the cultural nostalgia that in particular surrounds rare books, artists' books, and scrapbooks, and which begins to be associated with the printed book in general—while in fact . . . *S.* is deeply grounded in the culture of the digital media. . . . Its participation in contemporary media culture clearly contradicts the intended celebration of the analogue that is reflected in its form and content. (160-161)

In Courtney Jacobs's "Rekindling Metaphysical Insight," nostalgia isn't the primary focus but is still part of the discussion:

The drive to "collect" and display literature is waning—these drives replaced with an appetite for instantaneous and compact possession and consumption. Our current dissatisfaction is now aimed at intellectual processes that require intensive effort, or abstract philosophical consideration. Is *S.* (and postmodern metafiction in general) then a swansong for the past? Or rather, is it a prescription for what Teresa Brennan has termed "the age of paranoia," marked by a fear of efforts physical, sensual, and intellectual? (54)

S. certainly draws on the sensuous appreciation for the physical book, especially old books, and the immediacy evoked by handwriting.

However, Tanderup's assertion that its interaction with contemporary media "contradicts" this celebration suggests a common critique of nostalgia as having a problematic relationship with postmodernism and contemporary fiction. Fredric Jameson describes the "incompatibility of a postmodernist 'nostalgia' art language with genuine historicity" (*Postmodernism* 19), considering it alongside the "blank parody" of pastiche and other forms of weakened historicity; he later claims, "This approach to the present by way of the art language of the simulacrum, or of the pastiche of the stereotypical past, endows present reality and the openness of present history with the spell and distance of a glossy mirage" (21). Though less overtly critical, Gary Saul Morson also problematizes nostalgia when he describes "epilogue time," which "presumes that all important incidents have already happened and that further changes are mere extensions of what has gone before." When "real people" embody this epilogue time, he writes, "no present actions could make any real difference. Such lives are often suffused with a delicious nostalgia, a poetic sense of constant distance from a beautiful and irrecoverable past" (192).

In both Jameson's and Morson's descriptions, there is a sense of looking back, which S. certainly embraces, but from the *outside*, which I would argue S. firmly rejects. That is, in Jameson's and Morson's critiques, nostalgia remains a matter of surface imitation of a shallow sense of the past, and one which remains inaccessible, whereas in S., the need to be aware of and account for the passage of time becomes an integral element to plot and theme. Runia similarly

calls the past “irremediably gone” (6), but sees in nostalgia, as well as monuments, mementos, and similar concepts, a desire for the presence of the past. He argues that nostalgia emerges out of our need to account for both continuity and discontinuity with the past, an endeavor that “meaning” cannot accomplish. While Jameson’s critique of a superficial nostalgia is fair, there is a tendency to apply the term to all post-1945 artistic considerations of the past. *S.*, rather than simply putting on a costume of the past, expresses the deep longing Runia describes, and simultaneously raises questions *about* the longing by creating an object that allows the past of its story world to be simultaneously present and absent.

Tanderup tempers the assertion of nostalgia in her conclusion, saying that *S.* could instead be considered an object of kitsch, citing Celeste Olaquiaga’s definition of kitsch as “the attempt to repossess the experience of intensity and immediacy through an object” (171). Yet, while Tanderup says kitsch shouldn’t be considered in its negative connotation, she then returns to its mass-produced imitation and says, “Rather than as a literary work, *S.* is presented as a successful imitation, a product meant for consumption and entertainment, selling an experience of intensity and intimacy” (172). While the critical response to kitsch varies among scholars and has evolved since the early rejections of kitsch by Clement Greenberg or Hermann Broch, Tanderup’s description of the experience of “intensity,” which Jameson calls an “emotional ground tone” and characteristic of “the waning of the great high modernist thematics of time and temporality,” seems to bring Tanderup back to the same position of *S.* as an ahistorical surface (6, 16).

I would argue that rather than an empty nostalgic aura, *S.* recreates an experience of being “in history.” Jameson praises E. L. Doctorow’s *Book of Daniel* as one of the instances of “real history” because it “establish[es] an explicit narrative link between the reader’s and the writer’s present and the older historical reality that is the subject of the work” (21). This “real history” resembles Runia’s concept of historical metonymy, which he characterizes as a “transfer of presence” (14). For Runia, metonymy is a trope of “presence in absence” (6), where an object (such as a monument) *presents* the past, while fundamentally reminding of the past’s absence. Runia notes art as well-suited for this, particularly art that can emphasize its “out-of-place-ness” (16). *S.* does something similar through its artifact structure. By forcing the reader to maintain the simultaneous narrations of the present-day alongside an object that looks, feels, and reads as if it’s from the past, *S.*’s narrative structure creates just such a link between the reader’s, Jen’s, and Eric’s present moment and the historical reality of the story-world.

Narrative Simultaneity

If there is a single assumption that most narrative theorists share, it is that temporality plays a constitutive role in narrative. In an oft-cited passage, E. M. Forster explained: “We have defined a story as a narrative of events arranged in their time-sequence. A plot is also a narrative of events, the emphasis falling on causality. ‘The king died, and then the queen died’ is a story. ‘The king died, and then the queen died of grief’ is a plot” (71). Both story and discourse in this formulation require the passage of time, something preserved in more rigorous narrative theory today. Hilary Dannenberg, for instance, reiterates Forster’s argument, claiming, “The reader

devours a narrative with the desire of being able to trace a causal-linear sequence of events through fictional time; she wants more than story, she wants *plot* in the sense of Forster's definition" (45). James Phelan develops a similar idea of narrative *progression*:

narrative form . . . is experienced through the temporal process of reading and responding to narrative. Consequently, to account for that experience of form we need to focus on narrative progression, that is, the synthesis of both the textual dynamics that govern the movement of narrative from beginning through middle to end and the readerly dynamics—what I have so far been calling our engagement—that both follow from and influence those textual dynamics. (*Experiencing Fiction* 3)

Marie-Laure Ryan takes this a step further in an essay about spatialized texts and those that allow reordering of the narrative, such as Marc Saporta's *Composition No. 1*. For Ryan,

time is one-dimensional; it is traditionally represented by images such as the river or the flight of an arrow, which suggests a unidirectional movement along a line. If we represent a story through a diagram, there will be only one trajectory that goes from the world of time 1 to the world of time 2; changing the order of the events will result in the best cases in a different story; and in the worst case in no story at all. When a narrative sequence involves causality, it cannot be inverted, because an inversion would mean that the effect precedes the cause. ("Sequence, Linearity, Spatiality" 180)

For both Phelan and Ryan, either causality or change over time are integral elements to finding significance or meaning in the text.³⁸ *S.* does not allow the chaotic reordering to which Ryan objects, and the text carefully guides the reader to stay on track. However, the intermingling of the novel's text and its marginal comments creates an effect of narrative simultaneity, which frequently establishes significance through association and proximity rather than causality. For instance, the first page of *Ship of Theseus* has two different, equally natural, places to start (3) (see figure 8). The novel begins by describing the Old Quarter where *S.* will first awaken from his amnesic state. The page also shows a marginal comment in blue ink from Jen, in which she summarizes some of what she's researched about the novel's authorship (3). The respective *inscriptions* of "Dusk. The Old Quarter of a city where river meets sea" and "So: I've been reading up on what your scholarly homeboys have said" occur sixty years apart, but for the reader, the presence of these statements is *perceived* simultaneously. The reader who privileges reading top to bottom might start with Jen's comment, while a reader who privileges chronology or formally printed material might start with the *Ship of Theseus*. Moreover, while the novel and Jen's comment are the two most natural places to start, Eric's penciled comment noting that this is the only Straka work where he titles chapters, Jen's other blue ink comment at the bottom of

³⁸ It should be noted that some writers and critics argue against this, that narrative can be perceived without such causal or chronological requirements. In "Good Readers and Good Writers," Nabokov, for instance, claims that "one cannot read a book: one can only reread it," and upon that rereading, we "behave towards a book as we do a painting" (3)—that is, as an experience separate from time. However, he still describes this as an appreciation of the "inner weave" or the "pattern," elements of fiction which would be where causation and chronology structure the narrative (4).

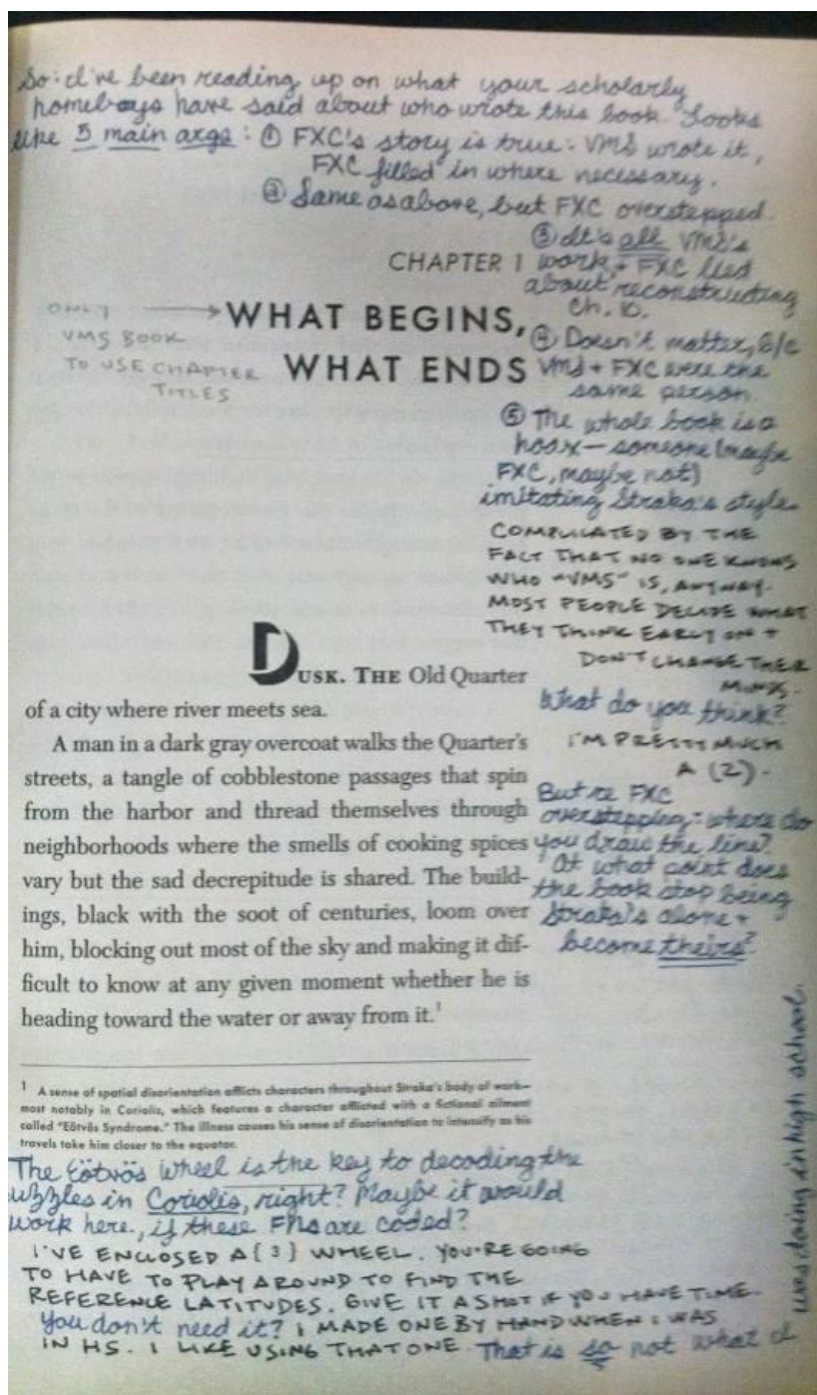


Figure 8: Narrative Simultaneity

the page, and Caldeira's footnote all pull the reader's focus to different parts of the page. Since the reader encounters the page after it has received all these layers of discourse, all layers are now present simultaneously. And since a reader cannot, of course, read both levels of discourse simultaneously, the text creates a rupture between text and reader, serving as a reminder that the different discourses in *S.* each have their own narratees, and the reader is something of an eavesdropper. Thus the reader is aware of the simultaneity of narrative acts occurring, but physically unable to process both at the same time.

Narrative simultaneity³⁹ is a rare textual strategy, but it does occur elsewhere. Brian Richardson describes a number of different examples within his concept of "unnatural narrative." For instance, he describes J. M. Coetzee's *Diary of a Bad Year*, in which the pages are typically divided into three segments, with nonnarrative essays, "diary-like" narrative, and a character's narrative; he explains, "For much of the work, the two narratives diverge as one moves ahead of the other in its disclosure of different periods in the same overall *fabula*. The reader typically starts processing the text left to right and top to bottom, but soon is tempted, seemingly irresistibly, to continue on with one or both of the narratives" ("Unusual" 167). This temptation seems similar to the reader who doesn't necessarily know where to start with a given page of *S.* Richardson cites Jukka Tyrkkö, who has argued that even classic novels by Cervantes and Sterne

³⁹ This textual practice should be confused with neither story events occurring simultaneously, nor what is sometimes called "simultaneous narration." For the first, a narrator can certainly tell the reader that *x* happens at the same time as *y*, but since, in most texts, the reader will encounter this as a sequential, linear prose text, the narration of those two events always unfolds over time. "Simultaneous narration," on the other hand, is a term used by Gérard Genette and Dorrit Cohn to refer to a narration that occurs wholly in the first-person present tense (Genette 215-223; Cohn 96-108).

have suggested sequence breaking, such as when they “engaged readers by means of metanarratives giving instructions to skip certain ‘irrelevant’ chapters or to reread some previous ones” (qtd. in Richardson 167). Attempted simultaneity occurs more frequently in non-textual mediums, such as film that utilizes split screens for separate stories. Mary Slowik covers Paul Driessen’s *The Boy Who Saw the Iceberg*, the Pliex Collective’s *Itsu*, and Caroline Leaf’s *The Street*, explaining that

techniques of layering and compositing images make it possible for the layers themselves to become separate self-contained stories in their own right. As such, transparency refers to the viewer’s experience of several distinct and discrete narrative threads organized as a polyphonic spatial whole. My point is that there is a spatial organization that gives a constancy to the action so that its multiple levels are revealed and the viewer experiences both progression and stasis. (48)

Slowik notes how the simultaneity is something like a trick played on the mind, that the mind assembles the sequences of images or words into an optical illusion of simultaneity. This resembles S.’s approach, in that each page presents a view of multiple discourses at once, which the reader is aware of but cannot physically process simultaneously. However, the reader’s attempt to maintain each of these discourses evokes an urgency in the reader to constantly catch up with different narrative strands.

The juxtaposition of Jen and Eric’s dialogue with Straka’s novel produces a complex reading experience, but S. complicates this further with several additional layers of discourse. Before Jen finds Eric’s copy, Eric has read through the novel and made marginal annotations in

pencil. Jen and Eric's investigation then spans a semester, during which time they make several passes through the novel, which are represented by their handwriting changing colors as they change pens along the way. Caldeira's footnotes and the physical documents are an additional level. This adds up to at least nine discourses, separated in the story-world by some combination of time, audience, and rhetorical type; in chronological order:

1. Straka writes the fictional text *Ship of Theseus* for an authorial audience.
2. Caldeira adds the contextual footnotes and introduction for the same authorial audience, along with coded messages for Straka.
3. Eric glosses the text in pencil to himself.
4. Jen and Eric analyze the text and talk to each other in blue and black ink.
5. Jen and Eric continue in orange and green ink.
6. Jen and Eric continue in purple and red ink.
7. Jen and Eric continue in matching black ink.
8. Throughout 4-7, Jen and Eric insert documents into the book.
9. Jen and Eric communicate over *Twitter* accounts.

This leads to pages such as in figure 9. Here, the reader encounters the novel's prose, a footnote, pencil, blue/black, orange/green, purple/red, and a loose slip of paper where Eric describes different crimes and political agitations Straka was accused of in his lifetime (10). While the reader can reassemble the chronological order easily, each different layer of discourse tries to tell part of the story at the same time, so the narrative does not occur in a sequence but rather simultaneously.

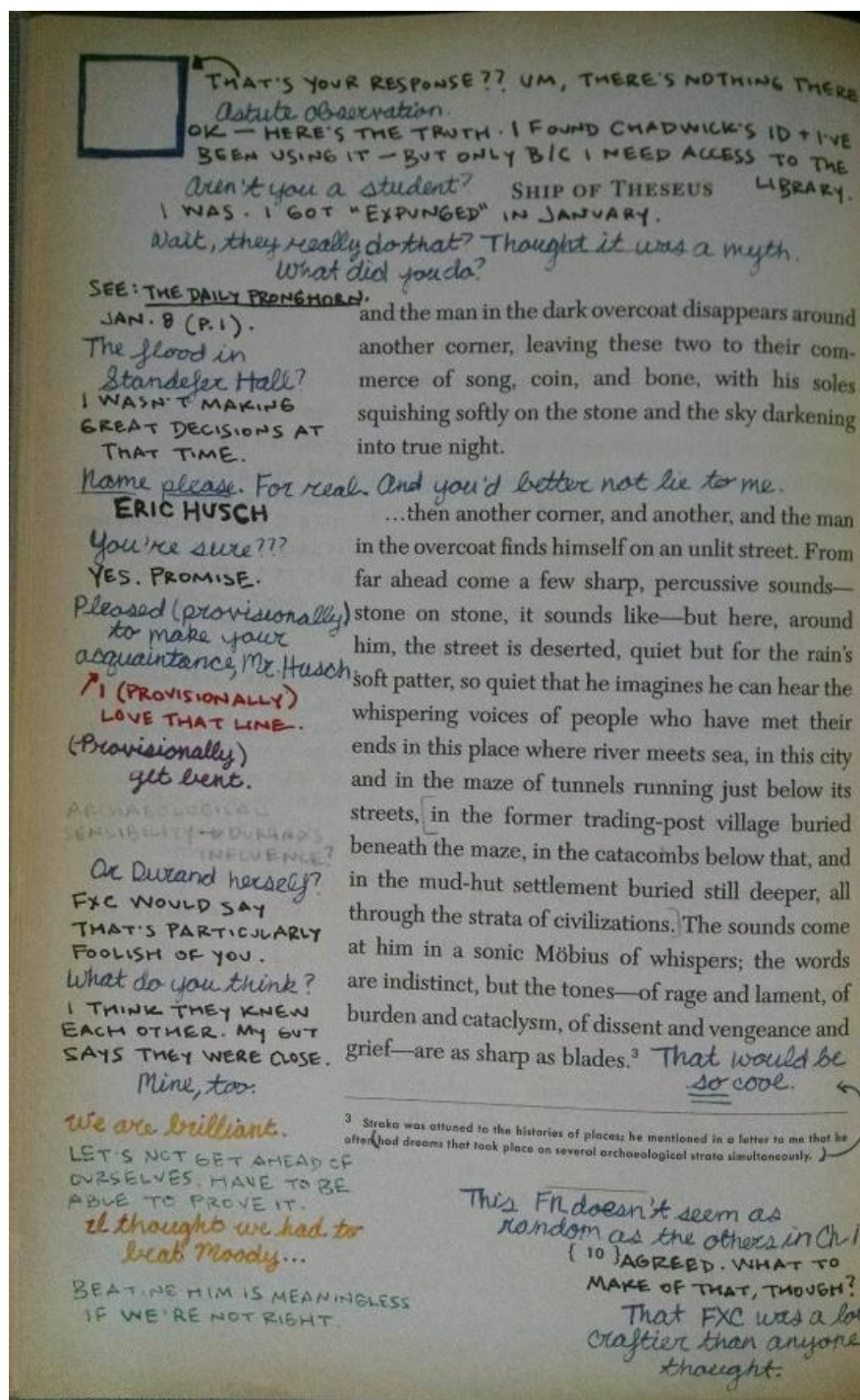


Figure 9: Layers of Discourse in S.

Like figure 8, the most familiar place to start when reading is at the top left, either with Jen and Eric's blue/black dialogue, or with the novel. However, the different layers now require the reader to hold in place not only different discourses, but also multiple chronological phases. The novel is still in its opening pages, and the reader might not yet have a grasp on its story. Pencil Eric only glosses a comment in the text, asking if an archaeological comment suggests the influence of novelist and archaeologist Amarante Durand. Blue/black Jen/Eric are just beginning their investigation, so early that Eric is just now offering his name, yet they are also beginning to speculate on the text, that perhaps Durand herself was the author, or she and Straka were close friends or lovers. By the orange/green layer, they have gathered evidence that this was indeed the case, and their comments refer not to the novel, but rather back to the blue/black comments that first suggested the link. Jen notes, "We are brilliant," and Eric cautions, "Let's not get ahead of ourselves. Have to be able to prove it." Lastly, by the purple/red layer, the two have become romantically involved, and Eric refers all the way back to their initial interactions, teasing Jen about the way she responded to his introduction, and Jen's response, "Get bent," shows the level of familiarity they've reached. Each interaction is, individually, quite simple, and yet the interweaving of the different phases of the timeline is more complex than prolepsis or analepsis⁴⁰ might accomplish in a non-spatially manipulated text. And because the reader encounters this as a page of an object, rather than a narrative within a discourse, these layers are encountered all at once.

⁴⁰ Terms that Genette uses for narrative that looks forward or backward in time, including, but not limited to, "flash forwards" and "flashbacks."

This simultaneous encounter raises a question as to how the reader should approach Jen and Eric's story as plotted discourse. While the events of their story can be mapped onto a single timeline, and can be seen to follow a basic sense of exposition, complications, and resolution, the larger narrative and thematic project at work in *S.* suggests that it makes more sense to separate the different ink phases into distinct narratives (or, to consider the ink phases as *both* part of a larger timeline and distinct individual narratives at the same time). In *Experiencing Fiction*, Phelan attempts to give a more rigorous understanding of "beginnings," "middles," and "ends," by ascribing each with a number of functions (15). Beginnings perform the role of exposition, launch, initiation, and entrance. The first two of these are about content, setting up the initial conditions of the story and the first impetus toward change (17-18), while the latter two are the rhetorical ways the narrative acclimates the reader and brings the reader into the narrative act (18-19). In *S.*, when green Eric cautions orange Jen not to get ahead of herself in the passage quoted above, a reader might first take this as a prolepsis-like reveal that the blue/black phase will discover something that supports their current speculation (10), making it part of the "middle" of Jen and Eric's timeline. However, using Phelan's breakdown as a way to interpret this, this exchange could instead be seen as the beginning of a new narrative. It establishes exposition (that they've made some conclusions about *Ship of Theseus* but lack confirmation),⁴¹ and serves as the launch, with "Have to be able to prove it" setting out the new trajectory. As the orange/green phase shows, Eric receives funding from a mysterious group called Serin, and that

⁴¹ Phelan includes an expository function in middles and ends as well, but the emphasis for beginnings is on the establishing conditions for the narrative.

funding enables him to travel around the world, gathering the evidence that helps them start to prove some of their theories, thus following the trajectory established with the launch. Similarly, red/purple comments in the early pages of the book mostly establish their greater familiarity and the newfound danger of their search, which are the expositional starting concerns of that phase.

Thus one could call these different ink phases separate narratives, or stories, or episodes, or chapters, and in any case have reason to do so, but with any of those terms, the reader encounters subsequent chapters or episodes in *sequence*, while here, the key is that the blue/black, orange/green, and purple/red phases⁴² each seem to have a full narrative progression, and their individual narrative progressions overlap with each other for the reader. They do not need to re-establish the “initiation” and “entrance” functions that Phelan identifies; instead, the artifact of the book itself performs this for each of the sub-narratives, suggesting that S. has one large “beginning” (the physical book), made of at least four smaller beginnings (the individual narratives), and that these beginnings (as well as, later, the middles and ends) are all being narrated at the same time.

S. suggests three basic features of narrative simultaneity in print texts. First, narration can occur simultaneously, but it cannot be received simultaneously. Since a reader can’t read two thoughts at once,⁴³ the simultaneity is always approximated, an effect produced for the reader

⁴² The pencil Eric is being excluded as mostly annotative, and the final black/black phase might be seen as closer to an epilogue.

⁴³ Nabokov’s “Good Readers and Good Writers” again comes to mind here. The primary reason he argues that one can only “reread” is that “when we read a book for the first time the very process of laboriously moving our eyes from left to right, line after line, page after page, this complicated physical work upon the book, the very process of learning in terms of space and time what the book is about, this stands between us and artistic appreciation” (3). This stands in contrast to much narrative theory, in particular,

rather than an actual process of reading.⁴⁴ Second, to account for the reader's inability to read two sentences at once, narrative simultaneity requires visual cues, in particular the physical spatialization of the page layout; this is one reason the artifact text, which already tends toward spatialization, readily allows for narrative simultaneity. While Coetzee separates his text into blocks, in *S.* the margins and use of color alert the reader to simultaneity, even if that reader cannot process it as such. Upon turning to the page previously discussed in figure 5, the reader immediately sees the different colors of the marginal comments and learns quickly the rough chronological scope of the narrative layers.

Third, simultaneous narratives need to be on roughly equal ground hierarchically. One text cannot be subordinate to the other. Initially, one might compare the narrative structure in *S.* to prolepsis and analepsis or a stream of conscious narrative that skips across time. In those cases, the reader still encounters the forward and backward shifts as part of a sequence, whereas in *S.* the simultaneous presence of different narratives resists the linear sequence of words as an ordering principle. An alternate comparison might look to footnoted and annotated texts, but a footnote is subordinate to the main text and would not seem to create the same effect of simultaneity. A footnote establishes a hierarchy, where the reader is aware of a path that flows from primary text, to footnote, and back. A reader may choose to skip the footnote, read it later,

rhetorical narrative theory that includes the reader as a fundamental part of narrative (such as Phelan's argument in this chapter).

⁴⁴ This raises one distinction from simultaneity in film. While comparable, film simultaneity is distinct due to viewers' peripheral vision, which makes some degree of simultaneous *progression* a little more conceivable. That is, a viewer can potentially perceive enough to maintain multiple narrations without shifting focus. Simultaneous progression in verbal narrative, though, is impossible, due to the need to process language.

or read it before reaching the footnote in the primary text, but any of those choices breaks with an indicated order. In the case of novels such as *Pale Fire* or *House of Leaves*, the commentary grows in significance, threatening to overtake the main narrative, and this approaches a similar effect to simultaneity, in that the reader might find both texts equally demanding. However, as seen in the previous chapters, the discourses in those texts compete for the reader's attention, and in fact, rather than simultaneity, the reader is tempted into abandoning one or the other narrative entirely for long stretches of time. A reader can follow either Kinbote's commentary or Shade's poem separately through their entirety, and a reader can choose to ignore Zampanò or Johnny for the sake of following the narrative of the other. The layered comments in *S.*, on the other hand, are cooperative. A reader cannot exclusively follow Jen and Eric's commentary without *Ship of Theseus*, because their comments, even when they stray off-topic, always stay close to the novel. A reader could potentially read the novel on its own, but would miss entirely the connections to the broader world of *S.*, connections which require Jen and Eric to expose.

Importantly, the fictional and ongoing narratives never settle into a kind of synthesis, just as how presence and meaning are meant to remain in tension. In *Our Broad Present*, Gumbrecht again promotes the oscillation between meaning and presence, but specifically draws attention to how a "reader/listener of poetry can never pay full attention to both sides" (5). The tension in maintaining each narrative throughout the text performs a vital role in sustaining narrative interest, through the drive that results from putting the reader in the constant role of needing to "catch up" with each of the individual narratives. As stated above, Phelan's argument for the experience of narrative form depends on "progression," which consists of textual dynamics and

readerly dynamics or engagement. Progression and the judgments we form as readers “are responsible for the various components of that experience, especially the significant interrelation of form, ethics, and aesthetics” (3). Richardson too focuses on the idea of dynamics: “The term ‘narrative dynamics’ is used here to refer to the movement of a narrative from its opening to its end. This includes the beginnings of both the story and the text, the temporality of the telling, the movement and shaping of the plot, and the functions of the ending” (*Narrative Dynamics* 1-2). In both analyses, the emphasis is on movement and the narrative’s trajectory from beginning to end. While simultaneity might at first seem a sort of pause in movement, the tension to maintain simultaneity turns into its own narrative drive. Reading Jen/Eric continually makes readers feel the need to read more of *Ship of Theseus* to satisfy their curiosity, and reading *Ship of Theseus* continually requires readers to return to Jen/Eric for understanding. The tension resulting from the two narratives’ mutual need becomes similar to curiosity, suspense, desire, interest: any of the emotions that draws the reader further into the narrative. These emotional pulls typically align with what Phelan calls the “mimetic component” of the text, that is, “an audience’s interest in the characters as possible people and in the narrative world as like our own” (*Experiencing* 5). Using an aesthetic device like the formal tension described in *S.* is closer to the “synthetic component,” where the attention is based on the character and world being “artificial constructs” (6). Yet, by making the novel into an artifact text, Dorst and Abrams turn the synthetic component into a mimetic one, as the narrative structure becomes part of the realistic depiction of the book object, rather than (just) the design imposed on the story from outside by an implied

author. Thus, like *Pale Fire* and *House of Leaves*, *S.* uses its narrative structure to make even its most artificial signposts of implied authorship into part of the story itself.

Hybrid Temporality

By making *S.* an artifact text of both fictional novel and non-fictional commentary, Dorst and Abrams create a hybrid temporality that distinguishes *S.* from even the other instances of narrative simultaneity, such as Richardson's example of Coetzee's *Diary of a Bad Year*. In *Diary*, the different narrative voices are each on the same diegetic plane and refer to that level of reality. While the different phases of Jen and Eric's interactions all come from the same diegetic plane, the narrative of *Ship of Theseus* is, even within the story world of *S.*, decisively fictional. It is a complete novel, and as such, its events occur on an entirely separate existential and temporal plane from Jen and Eric (whose interactions are likewise on a separate temporality from that of actual readers). The distinction between fictional and lived temporalities is explored in Morson's *Narrative and Freedom*, where he describes fictional narrative's existence on a timeline of always being already complete. He explains, "Even when foreshadowing is not explicitly used, it is implicitly present by virtue of a narrative's reliance on structure and closure. In a well-constructed story, everything points (or will turn out to point) to the ending and to the pattern that will eventually be revealed" (7). He later contrasts the openness of a moment and its uncertainty with the excitement of adventure stories, where "we know that the outcome has in a sense already happened because the author has already written it down. Their suspense is ultimately—not immediately but ultimately—illusory. We know that it is the product of an

author's prior deliberation rather than of real contingency in our own present" (174). He argues for ways that fiction can create a sense of openness from within, to resist the sense of determinism or fate that can overshadow its characters and render their choices less consequential. While *Ship of Theseus*'s content is decidedly ambiguous, as a novel it still conveys this sense of already-writtenness, simply by virtue of being a novel.

Moreover, through its artifact form, the novel performs this already-writtenness by offering the physical artifact of *Ship of Theseus*, which links its own fictional narrative to the ongoing, lived, nonfiction (within this story-world) experiences of its marginal commenters. In doing so, it provides a fictionalized version of what Paul Ricoeur calls historical time. In *Time and Narrative*, Ricoeur claims humanity has gone through an aporetic of temporality, splitting the experience of time into a phenomenological/lived side and a cosmic/universal side. This is in contrast to an originary mythic time, which "takes us back before this split, to a point in the problematic of time where it still embraces the totality of what designate as, on the one hand, the world and, on the other hand, human existence" (105). He identifies history and fiction as two ways of approximating this earlier great time, describing "the modalities of re-mythicizing time . . . which fiction alone has the power to evoke, in the strong sense of this word" (132). I would argue that *S.* stages an experience of these two temporalities by juxtaposing the "monumental" (Ricoeur 130), eternal time of a fictional narrative to the phenomenological, lived time of two readers. The physical artifact of the book requires the reader to experience these two temporalities at once, and in their combination, an approximation of historical time emerges. The

history experienced by the reader is a fictitious one, of course, but the inculcation of that experience is what separates the novel from a more superficial nostalgia.

Historical parallels to this hybridity of a static text inflected by lived experience exist, and *S.* prompts one possible historical comparison itself with the idea of palimpsests. When *S.* is trapped in the Winter City, he writes in the margins of the newspapers that arrive from mysterious origins: “He has filled thousands of pages, writing in the thin white spaces between lines of type, superimposing his words over the printed ones when he runs out of margin. Palimpsests atop palimpsests” (379). Eric marks “palimpsests,” asking if it’s Jen’s new favorite word, drawing attention to it. Tanderup also draws attention to this in her critique of the novel, saying it “applies well to the concept as well as the visual design and narrative structure,” and claiming that because of the palimpsest’s association with intertextuality, *S.* celebrates an “invented, fictional version of the literary tradition” (152-153).

However, while the layering of *S.* might at first suggest a palimpsest, it should be remembered that ancient and Medieval palimpsests exist because people attempted to erase a document and use it for a new purpose. A trace remains, but the goal is to efface the original, and the original and new texts don’t necessarily have anything to do with each other. This seems like a false lead for how *S.* operates, where the comments are a very deliberate interaction with the novel, and the two coexist, rather than the comments relying on effacing the novel.⁴⁵

⁴⁵ Indeed, this might be seen as closer to what distinguishes *S.*’s “simultaneity” from *House of Leaves* or *Pale Fire*, as argued above, where in those texts, the commentary often seems to require overwhelming the base text.

Instead, closer comparisons that illuminate S.'s particular hybrid temporality can be seen in the historical examples of marginal commentary and the Hebrew Talmud. Marginalia holds an interesting place in literary history, with the capability of both stabilizing and destabilizing a text. While we commonly associate marginal commentary with interpretation or contextualization that should aim to stabilize meaning, Lawrence Lipking calls marginalia "the art of digression," and says it "engages in the spontaneous generation of afterthoughts, signifying with its arbitrary departures that no two thoughts are the same, no explanations are final" (649). Marginalia are an example of the poststructuralist potential within an individual word or thought to exceed authorial control, and while marginalia can be disruptive, as Lipking claims, that disruption is not a negative force on the text but a generative one. In particular, historical marginalia can reveal the everyday, lived reality of readers *through* the static materials they were reading at a particular moment, bringing human experience back to the text whose contents exist on an entirely different temporality. Stephen Orgel, for instance, describes a schoolbook that would have been shared amongst sixteenth-century German students. The book includes several moments of homoeroticism from Virgil that would have been considered immoral at the time. However, based on the marginal comments from the students, Orgel concludes that their actual lessons included comments from the teacher "sanitizing" Virgil, so that the classic could be utilized for its lessons in Latin, without corrupting its readers. Orgel claims, "Virgil presumably had to be sanitized through interpretation rather than expurgation because the text had become an essential classic, the gateway to the imperial epic the *Aeneid*" (34). Other examples of glossing can show how a word's usage at a point in historical time might differ from its meaning in the

static text, or reveal everyday details about the reader's life at the time of reading. Considering the stable manuscript alongside the reader's commentary can thus give new significance to both, preserving the everyday reality, contextualizing the printed discourse, and allowing for meaningful connection between the two different temporalities.

The connection of two temporalities can also be seen in the Jewish book of religious law, the Talmud. This work is in some ways the ultimate instance of marginalia and commentary, as it is the product of centuries of debate, with the physical text bearing the trace of that debate (see figure 10). The central text depicted is that of the Mishnah, or the first collection of oral Hebrew law. Around it are debates about the meaning and language of the Mishnah, carried out by centuries of rabbis. Even in cases where decisions are reached, the trace of such debates remains behind. This is deliberate, as Judah Goldin describes:

The Talmud is not a code or catechism, laying down in summary, categorical form what man's obligations are. It is on the contrary the record of a process, the actual process by means of which the law is made clear. Hence the tensions it preserves—views in conflict, argument advancing and withdrawing, contradictions harmonized only with acutest dialectic, diverse subjects made to reveal underlying unifying principles, the movement of the mind from theme to theme and the succession of generations of scholars seeking for the new developments and insights sanctioned by the old. (15-16)

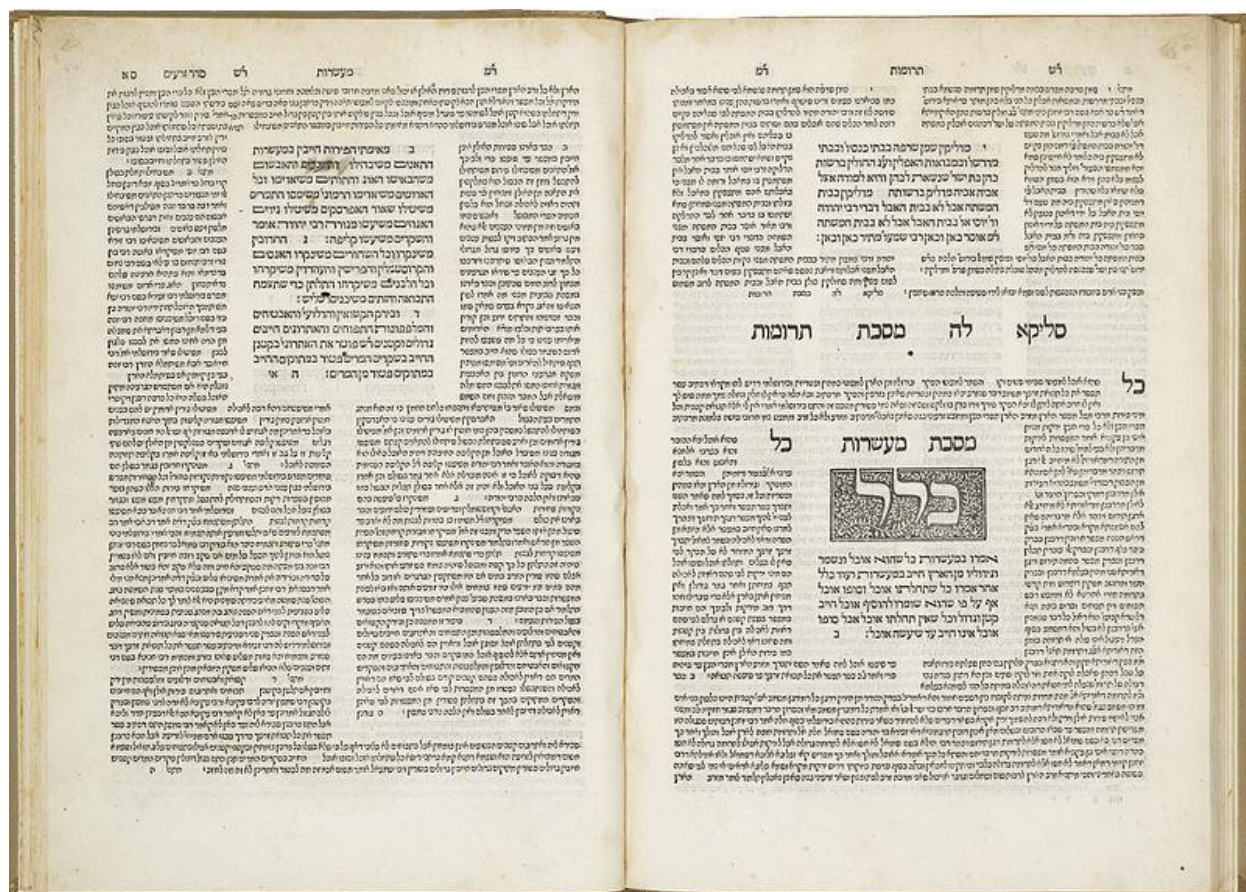


Figure 10: Talmud Textual Layout

The Talmud captures the movement and process of past minds and ideas in a stable print form and brings those minds into the present of lived reality. Adin Steinsaltz explains, “For these scholars time is not an ever-flowing stream in which the present always obliterates the past; it is understood organically as a living and developing essence, present and future being founded on the living past. Within this wide-ranging process, certain elements take on more stable form, while others, pertaining to the present, are flexible and much more changeable” (8).

Just as a historical document can preserve the everyday reality of a person or group of people, the fictional *Ship of Theseus* enables the everyday reality of Jen and Eric by serving as the motivation and mediating space for their interactions, while also preserving the trace of those interactions. By juxtaposing the stable object and ongoing experience, *S.* represents a historical temporality close to Ricoeur’s historical time. In “Narrative Time,” Ricoeur offers a direct comparison between narrative and historical temporalities by showing narrative to engage in the same temporal levels outlined by Heidegger, which Ricoeur summarizes as “within-time-ness,” “historicality,” and “temporality as such” (36-37). He argues that “within-time-ness” parallels the pure sequence of narrative. Being within time, as he explains, “is already something quite different from measuring intervals between limiting instants: it is first of all *to reckon with* time and so to calculate. It is because we do reckon with time and make calculations that we have the need to measure, not the other way around” (38). In *S.* this is literalized in the interactions of Jen and Eric, whose interactions are filled with such reckoning with time. Their interactions constantly refer to the backdrop of Jen’s graduation, the attempt of Eric’s dissertation advisor to steal Eric’s work, the old age of Philomela, and the time necessary for their very reading and

correspondence. As that correspondence grows and their relationship deepens, Jen and Eric note the physical book's importance to their lived experience. Once they've begun meeting regularly and entered into a romantic relationship, Jen asks if they should consider stopping their marginal notes. Eric replies, "But I still love that we're doing it. I love hearing you in the margins. SoT my favorite book, it was the central text for my dissertation, and now it's also the scrapbook of us" (292-293).

And, just as with the examples of the Talmud and marginal commentary, their interactions inflect lived experience into the static document of the book, which comes to represent the backdrop of broader history. Ricoeur argues that the "configural" dimension of narrative correlates to Heidegger's notion of historicity. By configural, he means the assemblage of different sequential moments into meaningful groups, or, in other words, plot. He claims, "narrative does more than just establish humanity, along with human actions and passions, 'in' time; it also brings us back from within-time-ness to historicity, from 'reckoning with' time to 'recollecting' it. As such, the narrative function provides a transition from within-time-ness to historicity" (44). While he argues that narrative generally does this, the distinction of *S.* is that it *shows* this process. Ricoeur claims that storytelling takes these temporalities for granted (40), but *S.* exposes their operation by literally framing the within-time experiences of Jen and Eric within a historical object. That historical object serves as the "transition from within-time-ness to historicity" that Ricoeur claims by converting Jen and Eric's interactions from mere sequence into a shaped plot. This is both metaphorical, as the historical questions raised by the novel serve as the motivation for their own narratives, and literal, as the physical

confines of the book give a beginning and end to their narratives, as described in the previous section. *Ship of Theseus* thus comes to bear the trace of their transient reckoning with time, and the combination of that open-ended reckoning with the stable, defined object produces “historicality,” as described by Ricoeur. Moreover, the printed word or “finalized” text is made present, in Gumbrecht’s sense of the word, by its recontextualization according to lived experience at the time of the marginal comment.

Though both *Ship of Theseus* and Jen and Eric’s commentary are fictional, S. creates a historical experience through their combination. A page such as figure 11 shows this in the way Jen and Eric repeatedly bring the “final” text of *Ship of Theseus* back into their experience of transient reality. At this point in *Ship of Theseus*, S. has become a regular passenger on the ship as he undertakes assassinations of Vévoda agents. Whenever he is on the ship, he attempts to etch his story into the wood floor and walls of his cabin, but finds that what he writes never matches his intentions. In this particular instance, he forsakes intentionality, and the result is the etched question, “Who is Signe Rabe?” (329). Signe Rabe is the child of Durand and Ekstrom that Straka, in the world extradiegetic to *Ship of Theseus*, cared for after her parents’ deaths. She thus has no place in the fictional world of *Ship of Theseus*, and the question is neither answered nor explained. Moreover, her identity remains a secret to the scholarly world of S. criticism. The margins feature comments from the pencil, blue/black, orange/green, and purple/red phases, each representative of the late stage of their distinct narrative progressions. Pencil Eric glosses the

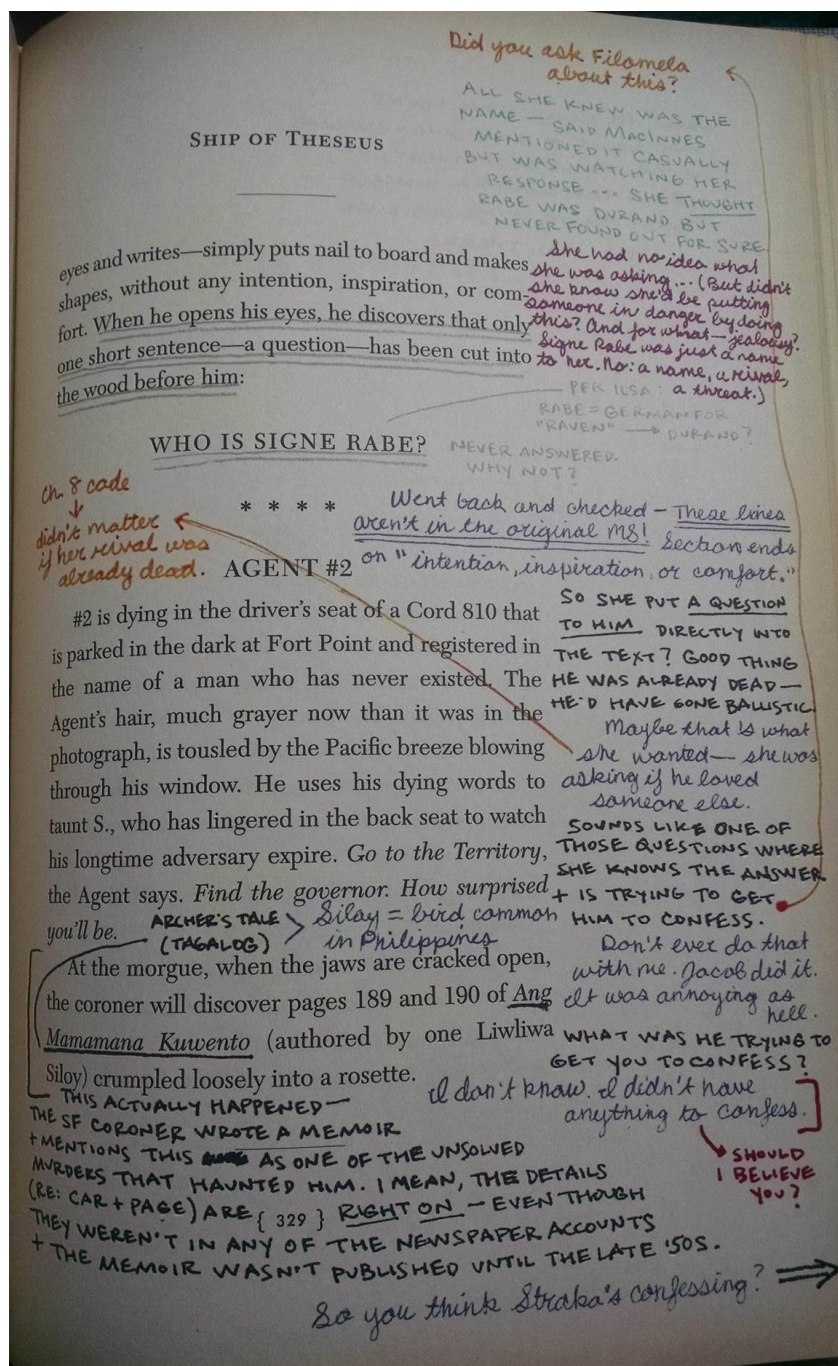


Figure 11: Hybrid Temporality in S.

unexplained detail from the text. Blue/black Jen and Eric discover that the lines are not in the manuscript, which ends instead with S.'s choice to inscribe shapes without intentionality. Thus they know it to be an addition of Caldeira's; their work takes a static text and re-inserts it into the historical moment of its publication. Orange/green Jen and Eric have found Caldeira and Eric has met her personally, and they know it to be a question to which she never found an answer; their work revitalizes the text again by historically contextualizing and connecting it to the living world. Purple/red Jen and Eric have learned more about Signe Rabe being a real person whom Straka sought to protect, but their comments also focus more on the emotional significance of their discoveries, and Jen simply reflects on Caldeira's thoughts and the pain it must have caused her: "She had no idea what she was asking . . . (But didn't she know she'd be putting someone in danger by doing this? And for what—jealousy? Signe Rabe was just a name to her. No: a name, a rival, a threat" (329).

Each round of comments strengthens the connection between the strange, abstract novel and the history to which it was bound. And since each round of comments has its own narrative trajectory and is finished before the next begins, Jen and Eric similarly revitalize their own comments with each new phase, re-contextualizing earlier thoughts with the new experiences they've had and the information they've shared with each other. The spatial and colorized distance on the pages of *Ship of Theseus* stand for temporal difference as well, and Jen and Eric show a similar discomfort with their prior selves. Eric often unnecessarily tries to explain or justify his younger, penciled comments, reflective of personality changes but also the change in audience. Later versions of Jen often apologize for flippant earlier comments that show a lack of

sensitivity or naivete, such as a comment making fun of one of Eric's pencil comments reflective of his childhood depression, or another about how she can abuse her dad's credit card because he doesn't check the account (172, 348). Such changes are to be expected in any narrative that features character development, but through its structure, the reader encounters each simultaneously. Their comments draw attention to this. After Eric forgets why his younger self underlined a passage, Jen replies:

Jen (blue): Is it interesting to look back + see everything that you've responded to? Like this is a scrapbook of all your younger selves. (Funny how distant you can get from them.)

Eric (black): I don't think I'm distant from them. They're all me. I just don't remember every little thing about them.

Jen (blue): I'll take distance. The further I get from the little girl who did what everyone told her, the better. (76)

Their differing reactions to change recalls the original "Ship of Theseus" puzzle that opened this chapter. For Eric, changes in personality don't change an underlying, consistent identity, whereas Jen seems to want to recreate herself as a new Jen, a desire reflected in her frequent references to past experiences and concerns by different names. She refers to the "Jenny-in-Danger" self that emerged out of her childhood disappearance, expresses anxiety about her friends' insistence on still calling her "Jenny," and tries to distance herself from the version her parents project and the person she was with a previous boyfriend.

Despite the early Jen's desire to distance herself from her past (a desire that diminishes in the later rounds of comments), the novel thematically resists her desire to toss away her past. Her early desire aligns closely with the philosophy of Guthrie MacInnes, a background villain of the book. The limited explanation the reader receives about MacInnes's "multitudinalism" philosophy suggests that he argued there "is nothing durable in identity," and that there are distinct gulfs between a present self and its past (205). It is opposed to another philosopher, Orpheus Clementson Wayne, whose concept of the "Identity Parallax" suggests a person only seems mutable from another viewpoint, but remains consistent within (98). Neither of these philosophies is elaborated on in great detail, but there is a clear relation to the novel's approach to characterization. If narrated separately, the phases of each character might seem quite different, even to the point of being distinct identities. That is, "purple" Jen is very different from "blue" Jen, to the point that, if they were able to be viewed out of context and without narrative trajectory, they might not seem quite the same character. Just as with the ancient ship of Theseus puzzles that asked about the stability of identity, Jen's development asks us to consider how time, both everyday time and the weight of history, acts on our identity. For Eelco Runia, "The need for presence may be said to be . . . a manifestation of the will to account for the fact that we are completely unchanged yet completely different from the person we used to be" (5-6), leading to the desire that manifests itself in metonymy that captures both continuity and discontinuity.

In fact, the truth is somewhere in between Jen's and Eric's insistence: their older comments both are and are not them. However, the stability of the physical book serves as the metonymy that binds these different Jens and Erics. Just as their investigation brings *Ship of*

Theseus back into their living world, the book offers a stability and continuity to their selves.

And in this way, the artifact of *S.* performs two roles. It shows the experience of time in a distinct way than other narratives, by putting everyday and historical time side by side on the page. But it also serves as the physical memory of identity, allowing its characters to grow without completely discarding their earlier selves.

Chapter Five

Narrative Structure and Meaning in *Codex Seraphinianus*

Each of the previous chapters has considered a riddle, as *Pale Fire*, *House of Leaves*, and *S.* each pose questions to their readers about the identity of the characters, the authorship of their respective documents, and the veracity of the events depicted within those documents. Moreover, they are each potentially riddles without answers, undermining investigation with gaps in information, disruptive metalepsis, and metafictional play. The goal of this dissertation has primarily been to show that the critical role of the artifact narrative's structure is to promote a presence necessary to motivate a reader to continue reading against such indeterminacy. From a narratological perspective, each artifact text blurs the line between story and discourse by making an element typically outside of the discourse—the book itself—part of the story-world. From a phenomenological perspective, that blurring enhances the “presence” qualities of an art form—fictional narrative—that is typically linked more closely to “meaning.” These books may be riddles without solutions, but each novel's artifact structure, when successful, aims to provide substance and exigency to the stakes of that riddle, encouraging readerly persistence despite indeterminacy and frustration.

This chapter, then, approaches what could be considered the opposite issue, as it investigates a solution for which the question remains unknown. Luigi Serafini's *Codex Seraphinianus* (1981) is an art book that presents a wide array of fanciful images representing an alien world and culture. While many of its inhabitants seem to be based on real-world humans and other life forms, the plants, animals, and customs depicted in fact depart significantly from

that real-world context. Alongside these strange images is an ample textual apparatus that gives the entire book the appearance of a textbook or encyclopedia. However, the reader lacks knowledge of or access to any supposed source material to which the *Codex* is a companion, and moreover, the text itself is in an alien script, which so far has resisted efforts to be transcribed into an existing alphabet and/or translated into a known language. Evidence, ranging from computational analysis to Serafini's own insistence, suggests that the script is either indecipherable or outright nonsensical. What the reader is left with, then, is what appears to be discursive, explanatory text that cannot be read, and a series of rich, seemingly purposive illustrations that nevertheless prevent the reader from accessing that purpose.

In fact, as the reader lacks language to elucidate the relation between different parts of the text or sequences of images that could be pieced into a coherent story, one is tempted to say that the *Codex* isn't narrative at all; rather, one could argue that its aim consists solely of the attempt to elicit an affective response to individual images from a collection. If so, the book creates a problem for itself, since its publication in codex form, the very length of the text (over 350 pages), the use of the alien script for pagination, and the thorough textual apparatus, including many pages without any images at all, all indicate that the book should be considered as an object of sustained focus and overall cohesion. And yet, the occasional scholarly attempt to decode the language doesn't seem any more fruitful a path, and without a language, whether textual or visual, it is difficult to see where a "meaning" can emerge out of consideration of the book in its entirety, rather than as a collection of individual images.

However, the very effort to see the book in its entirety and treat it as an artifact of a story world reveals another language at work in the text's generic and structural elements. *Codex Seraphinianus* communicates with its reader through the ordering of information into an encyclopedic format. Even when the content is mysterious, the structural elements ordering that content are familiar, and the reader's familiarity with those elements enables him or her to establish relationships between the various images, eventually revealing deeper underlying meanings. Moreover, by accepting the book as an artifact of this story-world, the reader accepts the suggestion of a fictive scribal figure, who inscribes the notes and draws the illustrations for a specific rhetorical purpose: to order and present the body of knowledge held by this culture. By stripping us of sensible textual and visual language, Serafini lays bare the generic structures that shape, even control, our comprehension of the world. In this chapter, I first explain why a purely affective, presence-based approach is problematic for this particular book. I then show how the encyclopedic structural elements assemble collections of disparate images into sequences that impart meaning, applying this to one of the book's particularly cryptic sections. Finally, I argue that, even though a single "narrative" of the *Codex's* story world doesn't emerge, the text shifts the narrative dimension onto the reader's processing of the book-as-artifact, integrating the reader's experience into the narrative itself.

A Dream of a Hallucination of an Alien World: *Codex Seraphinianus*

At least part of the *Codex's* intrigue for readers surely comes from the aura surrounding its creation, of which Serafini has offered an account. Before its first publication in 1981,

Serafini planned, wrote, and illustrated the *Codex* over a period of almost three years in the late 1970s (Babkina). He explains:

I worked for nearly three years. I lived like a monk, like a hermit, I didn't go anywhere, didn't talk to anyone, didn't make any money. It was a very ascetic life. I would just sit and draw and accompany the drawings with non-existent, mechanical writings. Some kind of mysticism was revealed to me as I was doing this. . . . The *Codex* was not a project in the conventional meaning of the word. To me it was a necessity—I just had to do it. You may call it inspiration but I would rather compare it to a state of a trance.

When you are in a trance it doesn't matter how much time you spend doing a job—you feel involved and can't stop until you finish it. You are obsessed with it, something lives inside you. A poet may spend two hours writing a poem, and I in a similar feverish state spent two and a half years writing the *Codex*. (Babkina)

Likely some of the interview is dramatization of the process, but the book certainly bears out the general sense of this intense process. It consists of between 350 and 400 pages (depending on edition), each written and illustrated by hand. The script exhibits precision and control, with no obvious corrections or changes along the way, and with recurring letters suggesting at least a consistent alphabet of some sort, even if it defies translation.

While the contents are often quite strange, the organizational structure displays a large degree of consistency, and feels familiar to readers of printed reference works. The book opens

with an image of one of its bird-like creatures,⁴⁶ along with a brief passage below it, giving the appearance of an epigraph. After that, the book has eleven sections and a few final end-matter pages. Each of the eleven sections opens with a title page that has an illustration and what appears to be a single word, presumably the theme of that section. Within each section, there will be a unique opening page consisting solely of text, similar to an introduction, then a table of contents page that indicates several sub-sections. Much (though not all) of the text then follows a pattern of seemingly explanatory information on left-facing pages, with illustrations and captions on right-facing pages. Finally, each of the eleven sections seems to have a definite subject area, though a few are somewhat ambiguous. While there isn't a definitive key, most sources, from critical analysis to popular reference materials such as *Wikipedia* or *TV Tropes*, offer a variation of the following:

1. Plants
2. Animals
3. Bipedal Creatures
4. Scientific Processes
5. Machines
6. Anthropology
7. History
8. Writing

⁴⁶ All references are to the First American Edition (1981) of the text. Some editions have additional or fewer pages, or change which images appear on the cover or the title page referred to here.

9. Culture

10. Sports and Games

11. Architecture

The more ambiguous themes cluster in the middle, with 3, 4, and 6 being arguably the most cryptic in terms of an identifiable theme. The shift into the bipedal creatures of the third section is perhaps the most jarring of the text. In the first two sections, while many of the plant and animal depictions are quite fantastical, such as a bandaged pear, a bleeding orange with a safety pin piercing it, and animals hybridized with human objects, the themes themselves are readily identifiable, and flora and fauna would be an unsurprising way to open what appears to be an encyclopedia of an alternate world. The third section, however, consists mainly of a series of human-like legs terminating in decidedly inhuman upper halves. The third section creates a spike in the confusion, not just regarding the content itself, but also with the sudden upheaval of what seemed like a familiar, and therefore comforting, organizational scheme, as the sensible movement from plant to animal now has to account for the strange leap to inexplicable, bipedal creatures.

While such a discomfiting book is likely an uncommon experience for many readers, the book's fantastical content and exotic text have both historical and artistic antecedents. Peter Schwenger claims the "leading influence" on the *Codex's* contents to be the 15th century paintings of Hieronymus Bosch, such as *Garden of Earthly Delights*, filled with outlandish, dream-like, and alien figures. Kane Faucher suggests this is overstated, arguing, "One cannot disregard other, possibly more significant influences on Serafini's texts and illustrations,

including but not limited to Leonardo da Vinci, Charles Darwin, and the tradition of medieval bestiaries and herbals.” Faucher claims that the Bosch comparison risks distorting the nature of both Bosch’s paintings and Serafini’s text. Tomi Melka and Jeffrey Stanley argue instead for the relevance of the *Rohonczi codex*, a Hungarian text first emerging in the 19th century “in which arrays of angular and curved unknown symbols—or pictograms—and some 87 pictures of religious, military, and secular appearance, occur” (142). Any or all of these may have had a degree of influence on Serafini,⁴⁷ but perhaps the closest historical parallel (and acknowledged by most critics) is the so-called *Voynich Manuscript*, a vellum document of unknown authorship and uncertain time of creation, though carbon dating of its vellum suggests that it was composed in the 15th century. It contains an untranslated text and illustrations of plants, animals, constellations, and other things, many having no real-world referent. While this bears an obvious similarity to the *Codex*, the *Voynich Manuscript*’s historical mystery is more often treated as a curiosity, rather than a serious object of study. For instance, discussion of the *Voynich* typically concerns translation, dating, and the ownership of the manuscript, and its uncertain purpose means that asking aesthetic- or narrative-oriented questions are possibly, even likely, entirely off-track.

In contrast, the *Codex* is explicitly an art object with a known context and authorship. Rather than seeking historical inspirations, it might make more sense to see it as part of the trend

⁴⁷ Melka and Stanley identify numerous other comparisons, large and small, which gives an indication that seeking a single inspirational text is unlikely to succeed (142-143).

toward artists' books over the course of the twentieth century. The artist's book⁴⁸ is a wide-ranging category, but according to Johanna Drucker, whose definition I follow here, "It is a book which integrates the formal means of its realization and production with its thematic or aesthetic issues" (*Century* 2); furthermore, "artists' books are almost always self-conscious about the structure and meaning of the book as a form" (4). In a separate study, she phrases it slightly differently, as "an independently produced artistic vision in book form that *makes use of the book as a form* not just *incidentally*, but *significantly*" ("Artists' Books" 15, *emph. hers*). Neither definition gives the concept particularly firm boundaries, partly by design. The key feature is self-reflexivity about the book as form, and beyond that, the artist's book can include almost anything. The artists' books described by Drucker and others are typically a dedicated project of an independently working artist and are frequently experimental in form and content. Both characteristics apply to the *Codex*.⁴⁹ Moreover, Drucker describes an "auratic quality, an often inexplicable air of power, attraction, or uniqueness" (*Century* 93), which would seem to fit the *Codex*'s mysterious draw.

However, the loose conceptual boundaries of "artists' books" create difficulties in allowing concrete analysis. Drucker typically focuses on a general statement that artists' books play on the identity and cultural legacy of the book as a form, and she surveys the field in broad

⁴⁸ Regarding punctuation: the general tendency is to use "artist's book" for singular, and "artists' books" for plural, which I follow here.

⁴⁹ While not independently produced, *House of Leaves* and *S.* could both be argued to fit the definition of artists' books based on self-reflexivity and visual/formal experimentation. Moreover, the independent production isn't always included on Drucker's or others' required features. Nevertheless, while an argument could be made to extend the term to artifact texts in general, the term doesn't do quite enough theoretical work to be necessary in previous chapters of this dissertation.

strokes. Historically and culturally, the art book form is often linked to resistance to commercialism and mass production. Brian Wallis places the artist's book within the aesthetics of postmodernism, as a participant in political protest. In particular, he links US experiments to protests against the Vietnam War, but also against institutions, such as museums, that supported the dominant culture. The problem is that "artist's book" seems to be a descriptive label, rather than contributing to concrete analysis. Matthew Brown writes of this theoretical shortcoming, saying:

A weak claim is to say, "right, the book arts are intermedia and their virtue is their slippery, ungraspable anti-essentialism." For me, this position vitiates the field, reducing discussion to a kind of bland relativism, akin to saying "Book arts do it all! Hooray for everything!" A strong claim is to say "not quite: the book arts bring with them potentialities specific to the book format, and their virtue is their distinction from other media." Again, for me, this distinction is in the book's bequeathing to us a literally graspable form and in its bequeathing to us a form anchored in semantic and syntactic meaning. The tactile and the verbal coordinate with the visual, the sculptural, and the temporal to make the book expressive as a medium. (8)

Brown's suggestion of the artist's book's combination of its narrative, linguistic content with its tactile and spatial features seems like the right place to locate the "strong claim" he identifies, though it runs into the obstacle of the category's sheer diversity of potential forms. Indeed, while the artifact text certainly strives toward the same goal of making "the book expressive as a

medium,” it does so in a significantly different way than many other works that would be considered “artists’ books.”

Umberto Eco likewise provides a telling account of the underlying problem of interpreting art books in his description of his encounter with Max Saporta’s *Composition No. 1*, a narrative made of loose pages that can be shuffled and read in any order:

A brief look at the book was enough to tell me what its mechanism was, and what vision of life (and, obviously, what vision of literature) it proposed, after which I did not feel the slightest desire to read even one of its loose pages, despite its promise to yield a different story every time it was shuffled. To me, the book had exhausted all its possible readings in the very enunciation of its constructive idea. Some of its pages might have been intensely “beautiful,” but, given the purpose of the book, that would have been a mere accident. Its only validity as an artistic event lay in its construction. (170)

One might debate whether *Composition No. 1* is an artist’s book, but regardless, the problem Eco describes is the same as that facing the artist’s book, including Serafini’s *Codex*. Essentially, if an artist only disrupts his or her form or medium, there is little else to say after identifying that objective. After flipping through a few pages of *Codex Seraphinianus* and admiring the creativity of some of its contents, it nevertheless becomes readily apparent that the book won’t yield answers, and even if it is decipherable, the skill necessary to do so is beyond most readers. So why continue?

Perhaps because so many readers despair and give up on interpretation, full discussions of the book are in fact quite rare, and tend to focus on translation efforts. *Codex Seraphinianus*

tends to excite curiosity and invite commentary, but that commentary is then highly limited. First, there are scholars who mention the book or include it in lists of artistically inspirational works, but because of the nature of the text, cannot say much else. Douglas Hofstadter, in one oft-cited mention, calls the book “inspired nonsense” (in a positive sense) and a “highly idiosyncratic *magnum opus* by an Italian architect indulging his sense of fancy to the hilt” (228-229). Perhaps most famously, he says, “There is very little to fasten onto; everything shifts, shimmers, slips. Yet the book has a kind of unearthly beauty and logic to it, qualities pleasing to a different class of people: people who are more at ease with free-wheeling fantasy” (229). Jim Dwyer includes the book in his work on ecofiction, *Where the Wild Books Are* (2010), claiming “*Codex Seraphinianus* (1981, trans. 1983) by Luigi Serafini, a highly surrealistic pastiche of illustrations and prose, is both an ‘encyclopedia’ about an alien world that is a thinly veiled version of our own and an early critique of the information age” (91). While this might be a provocative claim, in this case it is literally the extent of the commentary. John Coulthart, emphasizing the link to Borges’s “Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius” (1940), places the *Codex* within a “trend of fantasy writing that delights in invention purely for its own sake,” and defends it by arguing as follows:

It may be a folly but, like all the best follies, it achieves its own aesthetic apotheosis through accumulation of detail, sheer inventiveness and the ultimate conviction of its own worth; like all the best follies it is also unique. It might even be argued that the *Codex Seraphinianus* is one of the purest works of fantasy, one that affects no compromise with supporting narrative or histrionic drama but aims straight for the gold.

I include each of these in particular because they all admire the project, but, due to the book's very nature, cannot seem to subject the book to a thorough, detailed analysis.⁵⁰

Longer scholarly work that takes on an aesthetic focus is limited to a few examples. Peter Schwenger calls the book “fundamentally hallucinatory” and an example of “glyptolalia,” a modification of Michel de Certeau’s glossolalia which “simultaneously invites and withstands attempts at interpretation” (np). He ultimately argues that the book “brings into focus naming and classifications themselves, and implicitly reveals their systems of order to be hallucinatory. If an hallucination is a visual manifestation of unreal entities, the *Codex Seraphinianus* is such a manifestation, designed precisely to reveal the unreality of the encyclopedic project.” Kane X. Faucher makes a similar point in “Text, Image, Asemic,” focusing on its destabilizing aspects. He notes, “We cannot situate it in a stable frame, within a locus that appeals to a recognized order. Any attempt to unify the *Codex* under a classificatory or categorial regime risks the ‘unreading’ of what the *Codex* is, and instead becomes a reflective instance of self-reading in the frame of a historical discourse” (np). He uses the notion of “asemic writing” to argue for the book as “an attempt to transcend the barriers of being situated within a particular language or languages, to produce a writing that can be understood universally without words where its extreme individualized and relativized nature makes every interpretation technically correct.” While Faucher provides perhaps the only example of a critique that considers the text in its

⁵⁰ See also Bök (2000), Braune (2013), Schmeh (2015), Calvino (1984), and Manguel (1996).

entirety, I believe this final position to be similar to that lamented above by Brown or Eco: as an artist's book, we've seen *Codex Seraphinianus*'s intention, and that's all there is to say.

The lack of anything to say could be the result of having gone so far in the direction of Gumbrecht's presence that *meaning* has now been lost. The previous chapters covered works typically seen as metafictional, cerebral, and meaning-driven, and thus "more presence" was generally a good thing, enabled by the artifact structure. However, pushing presence too far risks losing the concepts we associate with meaning, such as interpretation or depth. Gumbrecht argues against an oversaturation of meaning in Western intellectual and aesthetic traditions, because "if we form an idea of what this thing may be in relation to us, we seem to attenuate, inevitably, the impact that this thing can have on our bodies and our senses" (xiv), but while he favors a return to presence, he always emphasizes that art shouldn't allow *either* presence or meaning to dominate. He claims, "I think that the 'beyond' in metaphysics can only mean doing something in addition to interpretation—without, of course, abandoning interpretation as an elementary and probably inevitable intellectual practice" (52), and that "the saturation of such a desire, however, cannot happen through a simple replacement of meaning with presence" (xv). There should always be a "tension" or "oscillation" between presence and meaning, affect and analysis. The total loss of depth-based interpretation and meaning could consequently lead to literature that can only be spoken of in the most general of terms, as a sort of pre-rational affective response. However, while *Codex Seraphinianus* trends in that direction, the artifact, by providing a structural language, re-inserts meaning into the text. Just as *Pale Fire*, *House of*

Leaves, and *S.* evoked presence to create a driving tension with meaning, *Codex Seraphinianus* instills a presence-dominant with *structure* to (re)enable interpretation.

Exposed Encyclopedias

If, as Gumbrecht says, narrative is typically a medium where meaning is dominant, then re-asserting the narrative dimension of the *Codex* can be a way to see both its surface and depth. As much as its indecipherability resists meaning, it nevertheless seems to encourage the reader to approach it as a narrative. Melka and Stanley say, for instance, that “despite the fact that readers are faced with illegible writings, the general perception is that narrative is in progression” (143). The basic requirements of narrative are quite simple. Chatman identifies only two: “Stories only exist where both events and existents occur. There cannot be events without existents. And though it is true that a text can have existents without events (a portrait, a descriptive essay), no one would think of calling it a narrative” (*Story* 113). The *Codex* seems to have both of these, with either the inhabitants of the fanciful world or the one imagining them being existents, and the many scenes depicted, and the implicit act of depicting them, being events. Nevertheless, without language or images that can be reassembled into a meaningful sequence, the temporal, plot dimension of narrative seems thin. However, this narrative thinness isn’t the result of just its language; rather, the *Codex* combines three elements—lack of language, encyclopedic order, and unfamiliar content—to create this problem, each of which would be manageable on its own, as comparisons to several other texts shows.

First, and most obviously, the lack of an accessible language creates difficulties for a reader, but even without a textual language, a visual one would still be possible. Graphic novels and artists' books regularly work without text. Shaun Tan's *The Arrival* (2006) tells a story of the experience of immigration entirely with images, and Xu Bing's *Book from the Ground* (2013) constructs a coherent narrative simply from emojis (simple images used typically in digital communication). Thus, inaccessible language alone doesn't bar *Codex* from narrative.

Secondly, while not explicitly an encyclopedia, the book clearly shows a referential organization, disrupting any sense of a plot trajectory. As Melka and Stanley say elsewhere in the study, "Technically speaking, the pages appear to be indexed entries intended to be consumed at the leisure of the interested" (141). The idea of jumping to any entry at will is in significant contrast with the idea of a temporally ordered and authorially-structured plot. This might at first seem to raise again Marie-Laure Ryan's argument cited in the previous chapter against texts that allow re-ordering, that "if we represent a story through a diagram, there will be only one trajectory that goes from the world of time 1 to the world of time 2; changing the order of the events will result in the best cases in a different story; and in the worst case in no story at all" ("Sequence" 180). Of course, the distinction remains that changing the order in which the reader encounters the plot does not necessarily change story. Novels such as Roberto Bolaño's *Nazi Literature in the Americas* (1996) or Milorad Pavić's *Dictionary of the Khazars: A Lexicon Novel* (1984) organize themselves as encyclopedic works, in a way that invites the reader into a reconstructive process, where the logical organization gives way to one more temporally, and

narratively, inflected. The underlying story remains consistent, despite the reordering. Thus, the *Codex* can engage in this form without becoming nonnarrative.

However, thirdly, the *Codex*'s wholly alien content distinguishes it from other texts organized as encyclopedias by preventing that reconstruction. Bolaño's and Pavić's novels both keep their stories in a primarily familiar frame and convey the stories through known languages, but the *Codex* focuses on alienating its reader from familiar signposts. Again, comparisons can be drawn, such as to Jorge Luis Borges's "Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius" (1940). This short story describes its narrator's encounter with an encyclopedia entry, then an encyclopedia volume, about a land named Uqbar and its legends about the exotic world Tlön. Like that of the *Codex*, the described world is unfamiliar, and the story describes the different philosophies of this other world, along with some fantastical elements. While many of the *Codex*'s critics will point out its similarity to Borges's work, the difference is critical. The encyclopedia in Borges's story has been translated, increasing its accessibility, and the narrator figure filters the encyclopedic into a narrated discourse. Neither of these is the case with the *Codex*. Thus, these texts, while showing some similarity to the *Codex*, create dissonance through only one channel, while the *Codex* does so by combining all three. Doing so establishes two competing drives in the text. On the one hand, it organizes its story-world as a referential text, which can function as a temporally progressive narrative as long as the reader mentally reconstructs the chronology and a version of the story itself. On the other hand, it wants to present a wholly alien world, which blocks the reader from reconstruction at every step.

In combination, these three forms of dissonance eliminate the possibility of reading the referential content of the *Codex* as narrative, particularly one which is based in a discernible plot. One could argue that there is no need to continue, that the book accomplishes its purposes—whether that’s deconstructing meaning or creating a surreal imaginative world—sufficiently for a reader who skims in and out of the material and allows it to affect him or her, even that Serafini intends for it to be experienced that way. I would argue, though, that evidence suggests the book is not meant as a coffee table book of curiosities but rather is meant to be read as a coherent whole. First, if the book was only meant to radically alienate its readers, that could have been done in a fraction of the length, especially considering Serafini’s description of the laborious effort the book required. Particularly wasted in that sense would be the time spent on pages that are nothing but text. The pagination and overall structure instead indicate a wholeness to the work. Second, Serafini’s interview comments speak against a pure surface. When asked why he created a language, and why “wouldn’t the pictures have sufficed,” Serafini replies,

A language means a meaning, it stimulates the desire to solve the mystery, to understand the meaning. That’s why descriptions, schemes and chapters of text were essential in the *Codex*—that’s the principle of an encyclopedia. Many people tried to decipher the text creating decoders and computer software, but to me it is all too superficial. To decipher does not always mean to understand. (Babkina)

Serafini has claimed the text to be indecipherable and here wholly dismisses “deciphering,” but still he emphasizes language’s *meaning*. He later says, “I wanted to be heard and understood, but I wanted an understanding without the text, a more profound and personal understanding.

Nowadays you can do such a trick to yourself by going onto a Chinese webpage, for example. But back then I needed to create the *Codex* in order to make people understand something this way.”

This “understanding without the text” is central to the *Codex*’s meaning. Lacking text that can establish causality, the reader utilizes other frames to return a wholeness to the book.

Chatman argues against E. M. Forster’s common definition of narrative that requires a causal link between events. According to Chatman, “the interesting thing is that our minds inveterately seek structure, and they will provide it if necessary. Unless otherwise instructed, readers will tend to assume that even ‘The king died and the queen died’ presents a causal link” (45-46). This serves as a helpful reminder of intentionality’s role in logical processing (whether that intentionality is traced to an implied or real author), in that the reader who knows they confront art has the basis to seek meaning, even when it isn’t foregrounded. Unlike some of its forebears, such as the *Voynich Manuscript*, the *Codex* is certainly intended as art, and thus readers can begin to “provide” structure based on their familiar reference points.

The narrativity of comic books is one such reference frame, as many of the pages of the *Codex* have a panel-like structure and seem to depict the same object over a span of time. Seeing the *Codex* as comics could certainly restore an aspect of plot, at least to these particular pages. Paul Fisher Davies analyzes this narrative structure in detail, arguing that the *Codex* “is not mere nonsense, mere abstraction, nor mere art object, but . . . it affords us a reading experience by adopting the textual forms of graphic narrative; we really can *read* it” (127). One of the sequences he looks at is a well-known page where, over a series of panels, an image of a couple

having sex in bed gradually merges and transforms into a crocodile, which then crawls away (see figure 12).⁵¹ Davies describes how a reader will “map” or compress these images onto each other, giving the series a temporal sequence:

Shown in this sequence, then, is *change*; but that relies on *identity* (of the bed, of the transforming couple); of time (which is read as moving forward) and *space* (which is understood, once the bed itself is read as unchanging and identical, as being a constant from image to image). Finally there is abstract *analogy* suggested: that lovemaking is “beastly,” that two lovers can become lost in each other, that they become one subhuman creature, that love grows dangerous. (124)

Many readers, of course, will reach this interpretation automatically, and that is part of Davies’s point, that the *Codex* draws on readers’ familiarity with story elements and progression to tell a story. More importantly, his reading outlines how the text offers a sense of temporality, and with that, we see the return of meaning, in the symbolic representation Davies gives to the images.

However, while this is a useful starting point, it would seem to be an instance of what Brian McHale terms “weak narrativity”: “weak narrativity involves, precisely, 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 and undermining confidence in it” (165). While comic book narratives ready readers to encounter such pages and

⁵¹ Since different editions of the *Codex* have some differing pages, all of which are numbered in the *Codex* script, citations will refer to the chapter number and page within that sequence (with the chapter title page being 1), according to the First American Edition (1983).

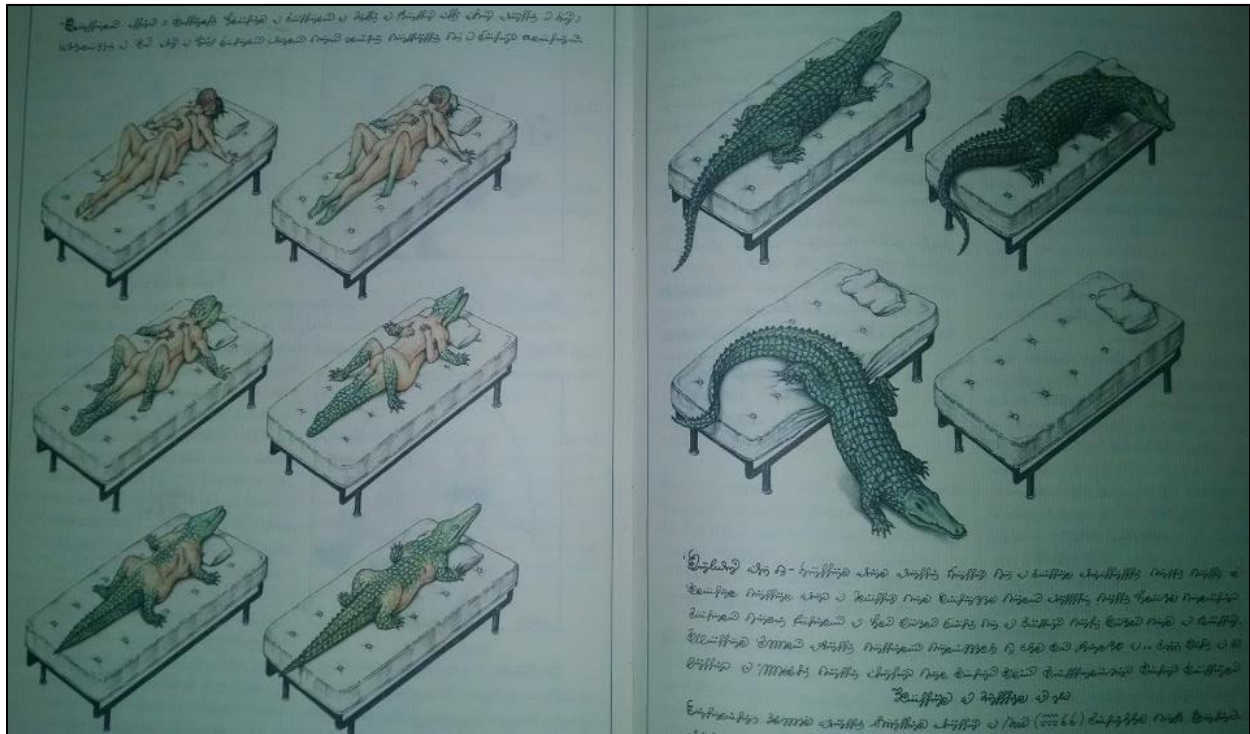
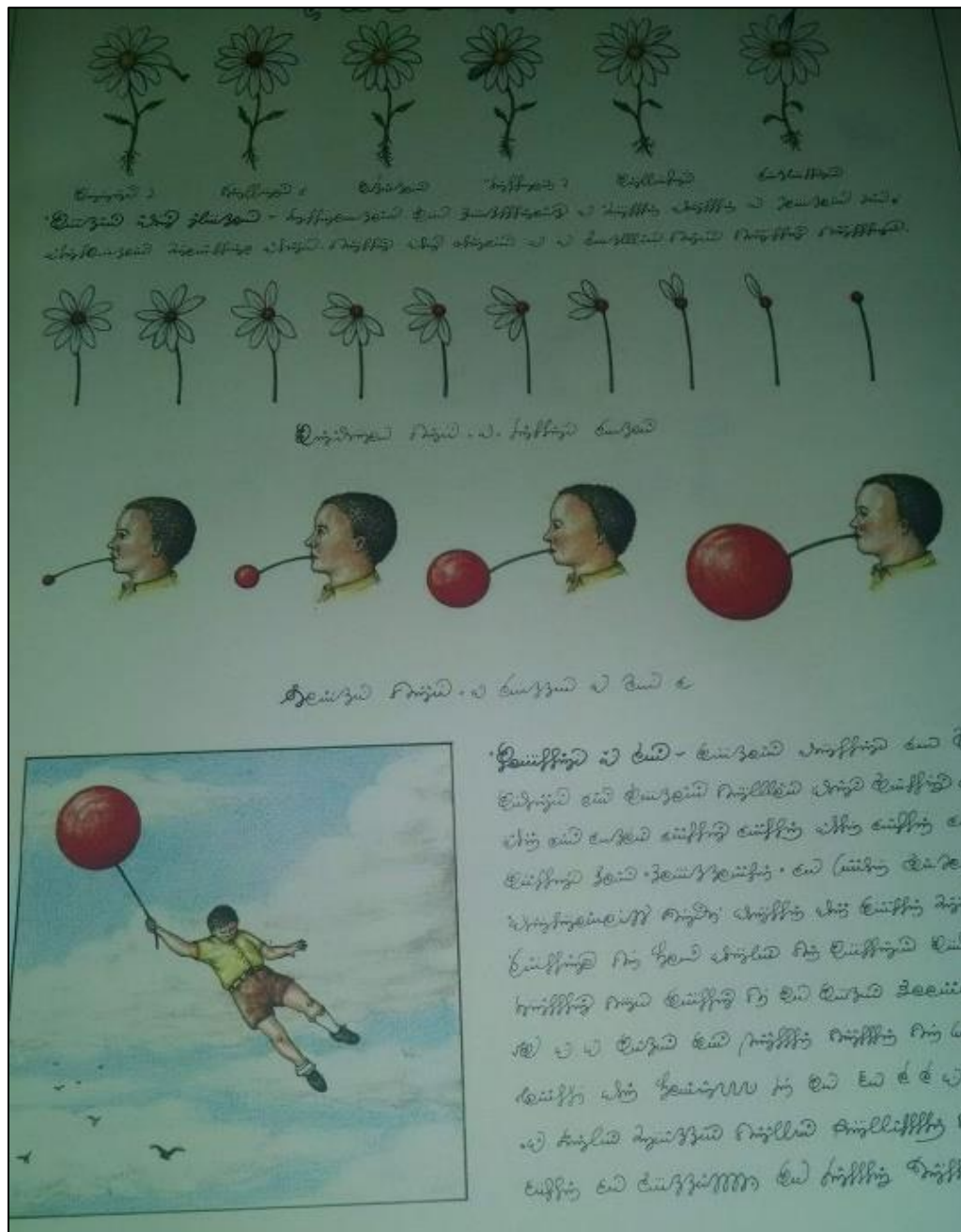


Figure 12: Sexuality and Crocodiles in C.S. (6.14-6.15)

“evoke narrative coherence,” the *Codex* has few such coherent pages, and the interpretive return from it remains limited. The *Codex*’s crocodile page is probably the most coherent “narrative arc” in the book, and its meaning is exhausted fairly quickly. Indeed, while Davies effectively shows similarities between a few other sequences (and single “splash” images) and comics, many seeming sequences don’t lead to any interpretive statement. We can see this in another page not described by Davies (see figure 13). This final image of the first section appears to show a related sequence. A flower loses its petals, until its stem and center are all that remain, at which point a boy inflates them into a balloon and floats away. According to McHale’s description, this sequence seems to “evoke narrative coherence,” but the text’s “commitment” to coherence remains limited, as it lacks a satisfying meaning on its own and lacks continuity with what comes before or after.

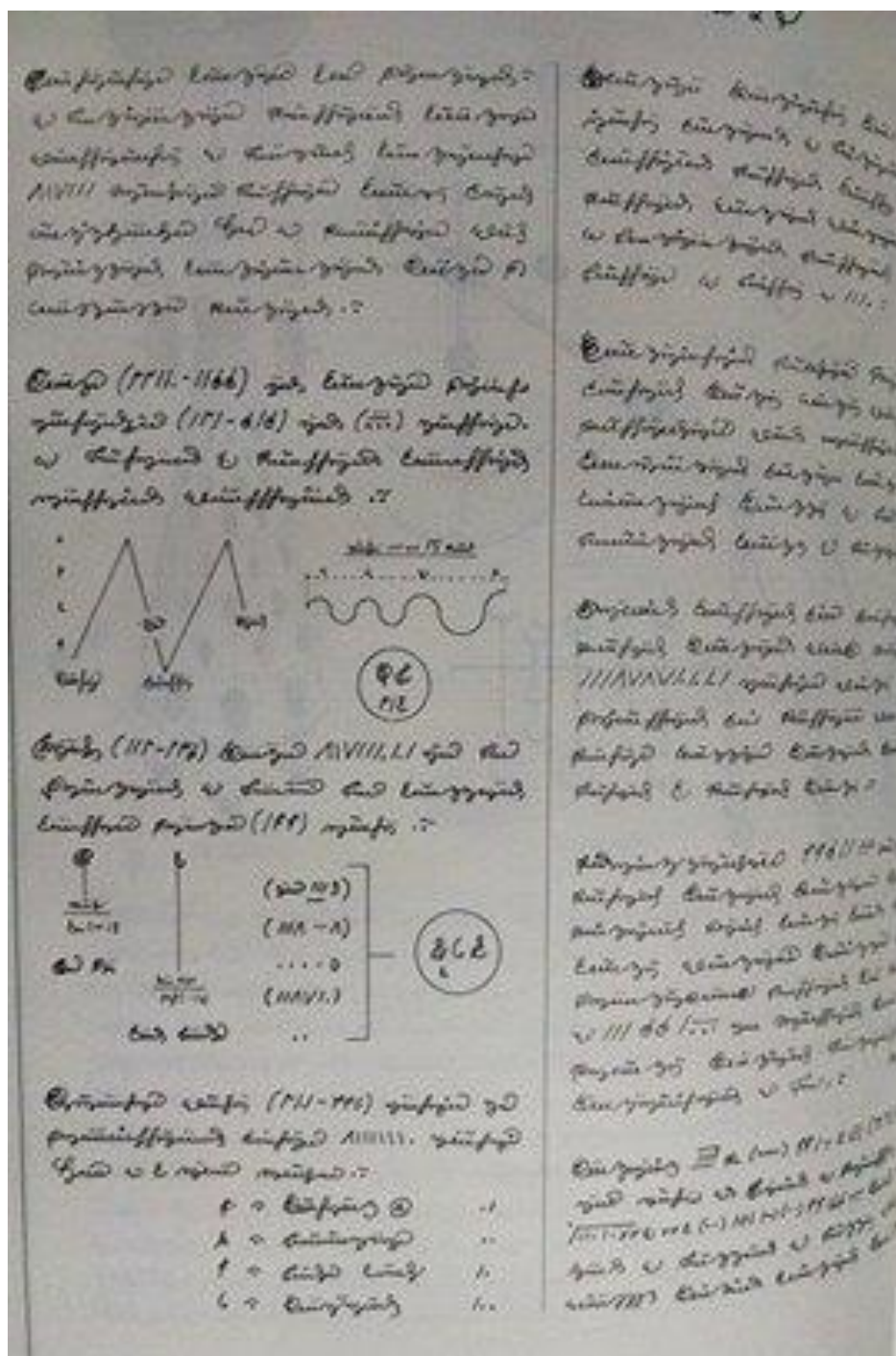
The comparison to comics reveals the way the *Codex* draws on the reader’s codes of interpretation to suggest this weak narrativity. The *Codex* bears a resemblance to the work of many of artists within the field of abstract comics. As Andrei Molotiu describes, the “abstract” in abstract comics “applies to the lack of a narrative excuse to string panels together, in favor of an increased emphasis on the formal elements of comics that, even in the absence of a (verbal) story, can create a feeling of sequential drive, the sheer rhythm of narrative or the rise and fall of a story arc.”⁵² The intention of this is that “reduced to the medium’s most basic elements—the panel grid, brushstrokes or penstrokes, and sometimes colors—they highlight the formal

⁵² p. 1. Like the *Codex*, the *Abstract Comics* anthology uses a fabricated numbering system, so the citation refers to the page of the “Introduction.”



mechanisms that underlie all comics, such as the graphic dynamism that leads the eye (and the mind) from panel to panel, or the aesthetically rich interplay between sequentiality and page layout” (9). By taking away stable content—whether that content is language, existents, or clear sequence—abstract comics seek to expose the operational elements of comics, the structural aspects that frame the experience.

Codex Seraphinianus similarly lays bare its operational elements, but for the encyclopedia, exposing the way that it not only conveys knowledge, but also shapes and confines knowledge. While it bears an occasional resemblance to comics panels, the method Davies suggests works only with specific pages. His reading neglects large portions of the book, especially the pages of pure text. When remembering that Serafini composed the entire book by hand, including pages with elaborate formatting such as figure 14, it seems highly unlikely that he intended for such pages to be wasted effort. Rather, these pages contribute to establishing the structure of the encyclopedia, at which point the reader’s familiarity with the encyclopedia as a genre begins to influence his or her interpretation. Pages such as figure 14, which open every section of the text, contribute to readers’ understanding of the *Codex* as an encyclopedia: they resemble the introductory notes that tend to set up key facts about an encyclopedia entry. The sections themselves have a definite thematic arrangement (even if the theme itself is unclear), much like an encyclopedia organized by topic. Within each section there is a table of contents page (see figure 15), where the words in the middle column match up with headers on subsequent pages. Many images, such as those in figure 16, seem to show a categorical logic, rather than a chronological or causal one; indeed, all of the sections have at least some sort of



cataloging section, where an individual page or series of pages will present comparable instances of some concept. Still other images include maps, and others diagrammatic lines, seeming to indicate measurement or identification of parts.

Organizational logic such as that which underlies genre communicates as a language, informing the reader, not necessarily of meaning outright, but rather of a relationship between parts that the reader then translates into meaning. The reader's experience of the text as a story-world artifact is necessary to expose these structural elements. The reader has no reason to consider the relation between different pages, unless the reader also sees the text-as-artifact, a coherent object from the story-world it represents. Yet just as the artifact adds an element of presence to meaning-dominant texts, in this case the artifact imbues presence with a meaning-laden structure. John Frow has noted, "Textual meaning is carried by formal structures more powerfully than by explicit thematic content; . . . what texts do and how they are structured have greater force than what they say they are about; and . . . genre—by which I mean merely the kinds of talking and writing, of imaging and of structured sound—is perhaps the most important of the structures by which texts are organized" (129). While "more powerfully" might overstate the idea, the organizational logic of tables of contents, sectional groupings, and diagrammatic illustrations certainly act on a reader, and moreover, may do so without the reader's full awareness. As Chatman argues, "Audiences come to recognize and interpret conventions by 'naturalizing' them. . . . To naturalize a narrative convention means not only to understand it, but to 'forget' its conventional character, to absorb it into the reading-out process, to incorporate it into one's interpretive net, giving to it no more thought than to the manifestational medium"

(49). The idea that the discursive structure of a text imparts a significant portion of a text's meaning is critical to cognitive narratologists, who see most narrative elements as a mental construction of the reader in response to a text, based on various mental schemas and frames that have developed from past experience.

While cognitive narratology is not the methodology informing the present study, I would argue that the *Codex* essentially *performs* this process. It guides the reader to interpret it as an encyclopedia, then, once the reader does so, the generic structure of an encyclopedia reshapes the experience of an affective, presence-dominant artist's book into an experience of narrative. Describing graphical elements that often pass unnoticed in reading, Drucker argues that "calling these features back into visibility is preliminary to addressing the way they engineer narrative experience and encode ideological values" ("Graphic Devices" 123). The narrative experience, in this case, transfers to the reader, who begins to produce meaning by filling in the many blanks left by the text itself. This reader engages directly with the narrative in a manner consonant with Richard Walsh's understanding of fabula. He argues that the idea of a "pre-existing" or "neutral" story-world is nonsensical, given that events are already aestheticized, filtered, or framed by the author's invention. The story content is, rather, "a function of interpretation" (*Rhetoric* 66); story and discourse "may still be conceived in terms of a 'what' and a 'how,' but with the poles reversed: sujet is what we come to understand as a given (fictional) narrative, and fabula is how we come to understand it" (68). The reader of the *Codex* both uses the represented story to understand the discourse of the book, and uses the discourse to further understand the story. Both sides remain part of the interpretive process.

This process of meaning is most apparent on the level of the book's eleven sections, which guide the reader from presence to meaning by guiding the reader into, first, identifying the subject area that links the section, then, second, establishing how the more cryptic pages fit into that subject area, and, finally, seeing a thematic, political, or ethical concern underlying the images and their placement in an encyclopedia. The reader's interpretation is incorporated at each stage, as even the subject area is not always immediately obvious. For instance, in section 7, commonly identified as world history, the subject takes time to establish itself, and before it does, many of the images are indecipherable. Figure 17 shows two pages featuring figures engaged in some form of ritual or activity. In the first, an almost-nude male stands in a shallow pit, holding a rainbow-colored balloon, while robed figures with elaborate headgear stand nearby in a field of rabbits. In the second, a floating device of some sort suspends a figure above a pool of water, in which several other figures stand or float. Neither image in isolation, nor in conjunction, suggests any immediate meaning, even if given the comic book treatment Davies suggests. Other images from the section are similarly prone to initial uncertainty. Figure 18 shows figures in clear, coffin-like boxes at the top of the page, with a larger park-like space at the bottom of the page. The park features the clear boxes arranged architecturally. This page seems more open to interpretation than figure 17, but a relationship between the images remains elusive. Thus, at first, a reader opening to pages at random would likely be unable to establish section 7 as having any discernible content theme.

In contrast, figure 19 should be familiar to most readers of textbooks or encyclopedias. All the reader's prior experiences will suggest a map, and the repetition of the (mostly) same

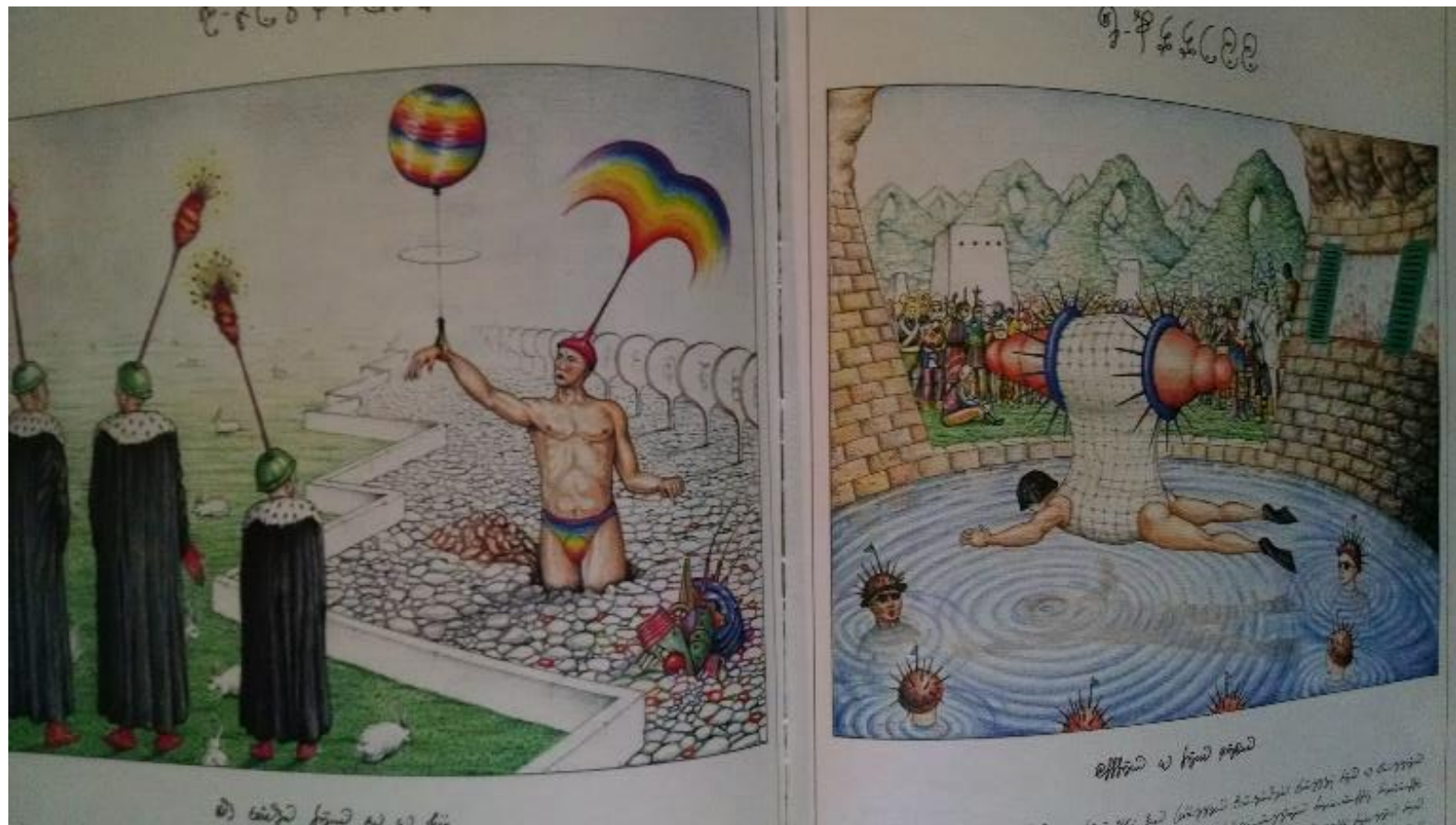


Figure 17: Unexplained Seraphinian Activities (7.22-7.23)

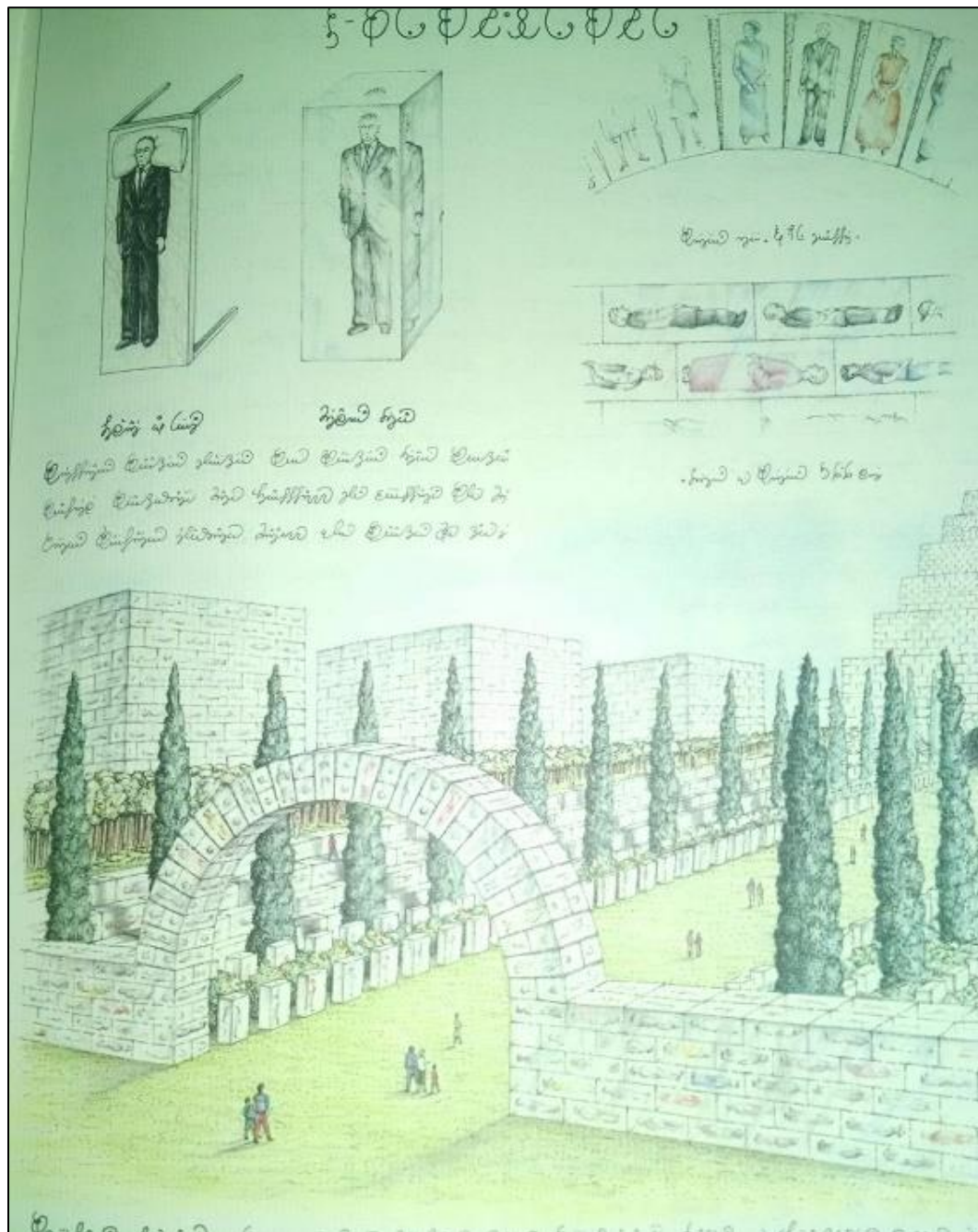


Figure 18: Burial Park (7.11)

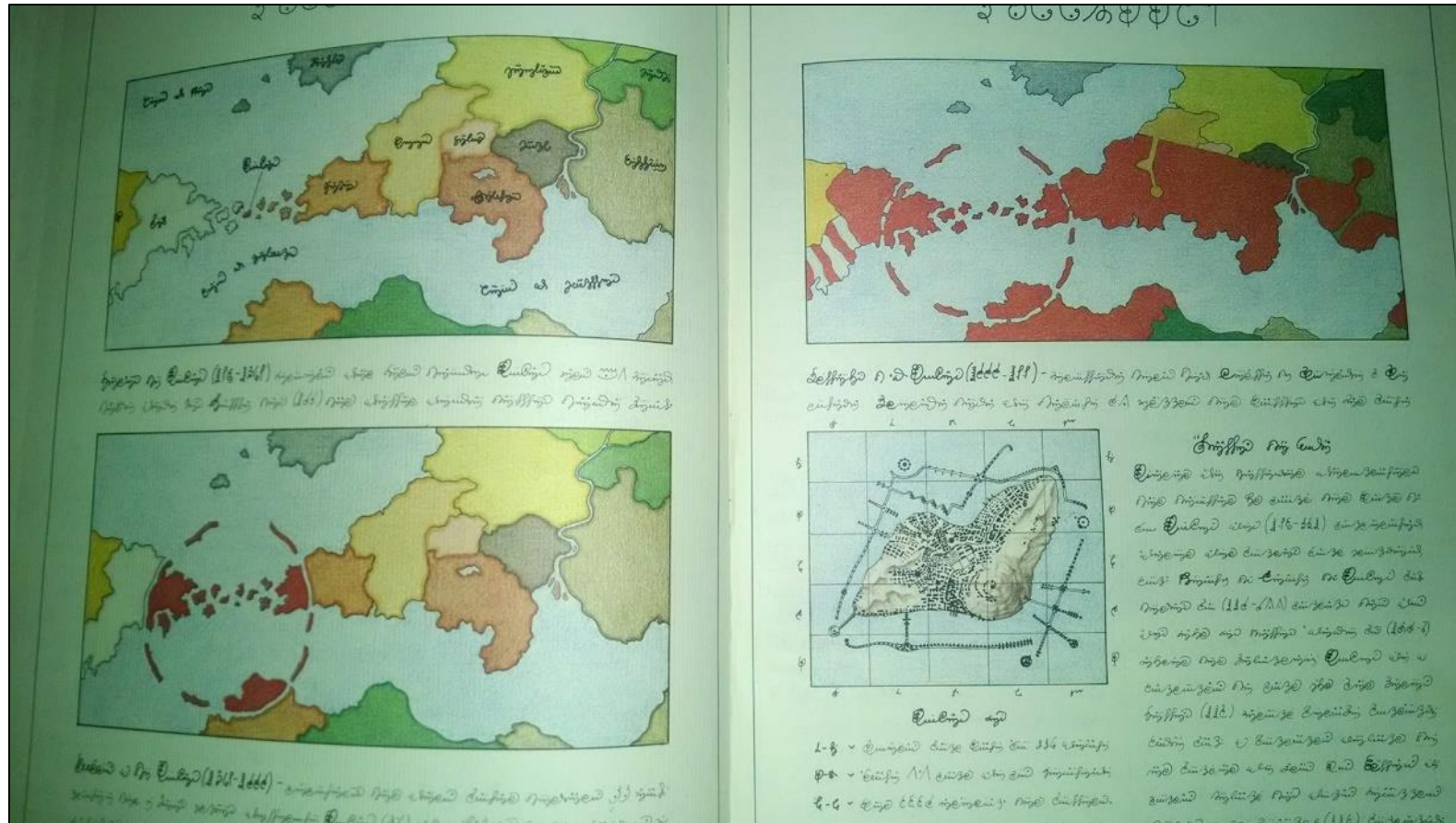


Figure 19: Map of the Codex World (7.14-7.15)

map three times, with different colors expanding and shrinking, immediately suggests a historical dimension, particularly of territorial or cultural influence. Because the reader is familiar with encyclopedias organized by topic, with the expectation that images within the same section will share that subject area, understanding this image as a map allows the reader to begin fitting the other images into that connection. It isn't that the map image works as a key from which the others may be conclusively deciphered. Rather, the reader connects these images based on lessons of interpretation and discourse learned from past reading. Once the reader has found an acceptable frame for the section, that frame helps the reader to interpret the other images in a way that would fit a thematic connection. The images in figure 17, showing people engaged in strange acts, would make sense in a world history section if the book were showing the customs of different peoples, particularly rituals or illustrations of important moments in history. Figure 18's clear, coffin-like containers, along with the people casually walking amongst those containers, suggest some kind of park or memorial, perhaps indicating the way important people are memorialized in the history of the society that "produced" the *Codex*. Already, this allows for a type of thematic statement to emerge, as the society is literally building on its dead, past members, instrumentalizing their bodies for current needs.

Such initial interpretations remain fairly tenuous, but the reader is guided to them through the operations of the genre. Both Schwenger and Faucher argue that the project is a deconstruction of the encyclopedia, with Schwenger saying that it's "designed precisely to reveal the unreality of the encyclopedic project." Yet, Faucher's insistence that the text is aseptic writing seems on the wrong track. As Faucher notes, Serafini gave a talk for the Oxford

Bibliophiles Association in 2009, during which he supposedly called the *Codex* asemic.

However, this anecdote comes from a Master's thesis on the *Codex* by Jeffrey Christopher Stanley, where he explains that Serafini "announced clearly . . . that the writing . . . does not represent any language, known or secret. It is asemic" (8). As Stanley notes, the speech was not recorded or published, so comments are based on the audience's recollections, and according to the audience member Stanley cites, Serafini's exact words were "The writing of the *Codex* is a writing, not a language, although it conveys the impression of being one. It looks like it means something, but it does not; it is free from the cage of language" (Prodi, qtd. in Stanley 9).

Stanley's use of "asemic" refers to the *Codex*'s text not being a language, but Faucher shifts that usage into a claim of total non-meaning. I would argue that Faucher's usage thus distorts Serafini's point. The text is *highly* communicative, but by taking away language, Serafini makes us aware of the discursive structures at work on us.

In this way, the *Codex* works similarly to abstract comics, as an exposure of structure that reveals how that structure operates on a reader. As Drucker notes, "If the world is experienced according to the stories we tell, think we can tell, and will tell about that world, then recognition of the structuring principles on which this telling operates—mostly mechanisms rendered invisible and natural through habits of use—is an essential critical and analytical tool" ("Graphic Devices" 136-137). However, the *Codex* does not simply reveal the structures. Rather, the *Codex* shows us how a seemingly innocuous, reference textbook that is meant to educate can also, simultaneously shape its readers' perspectives through the very claim of conveying a total body of knowledge. Hilary Clark argues that "part of the allure of encyclopedias is the encyclopedia's

very *unreadability*. . . . It is the nature of the encyclopedic enterprise itself—the audacious project of encompassing *all that can be known* within the covers of a book or books—that challenges one’s imagination and will” (95). Seth Rudy equates this project with taking the place of epics as a structuring aspect of society. Just as epics tried to present themselves as all-encompassing at a given time, “The encyclopedias in this way offered themselves as epics freed from poetry and plot” (422).

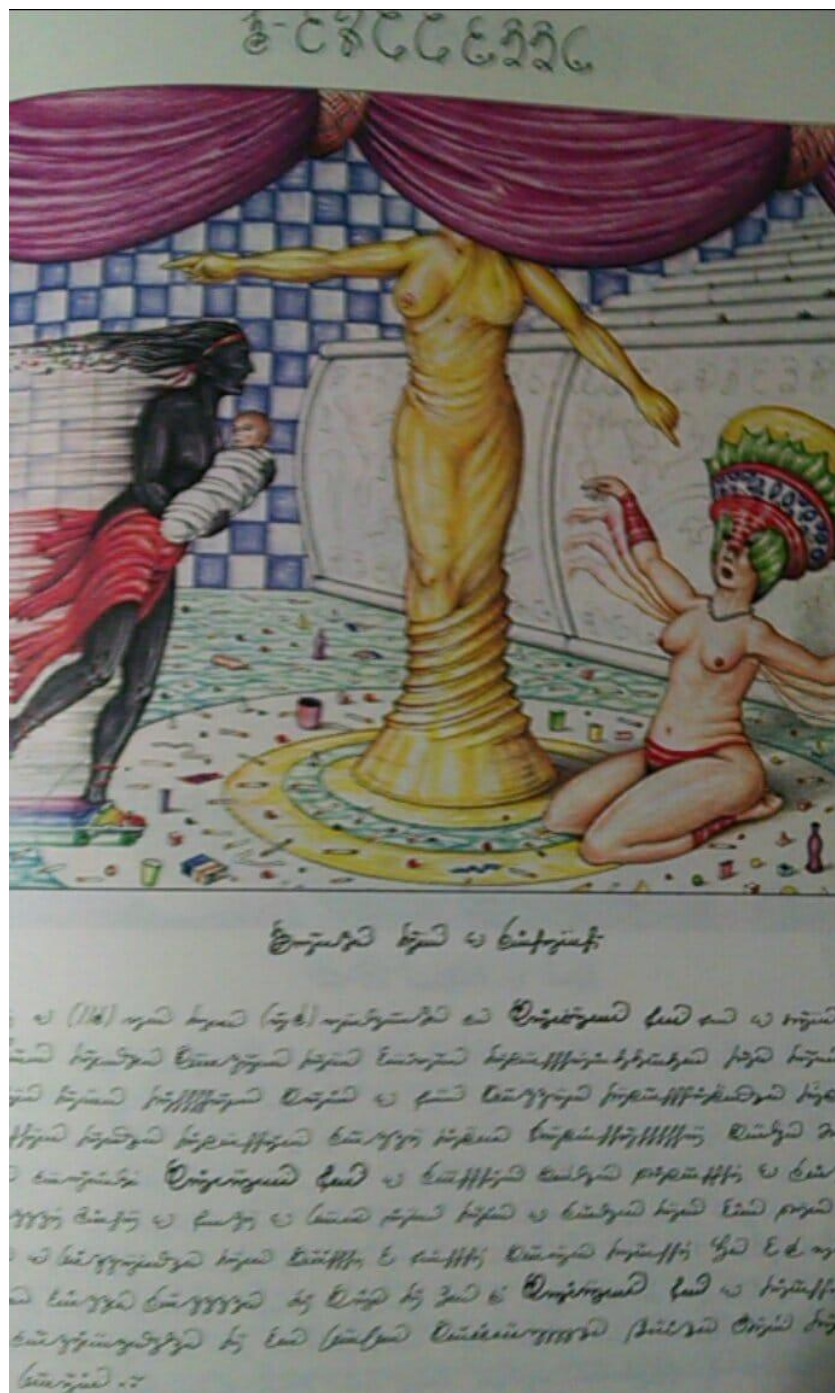
Such a project, though, is resisted by the fact that an encyclopedia is always produced from within a perspective, whether individual or collective, and that perspective defines—and limits—what is to be included in “all that can be known.” Matthew Raese divides early encyclopedias into two traditions: pedagogic and dialogic (9). The pedagogic, often featuring a “strong theological center,” was a teaching tool meant to convey a full education, according to that culture’s standards, a project that “had the effect of placing boundaries on the knowledge to be conveyed” (10). The dialogic encyclopedia was more open-ended, considering “the encyclopedia to be a mediating text between scholars, or between author and reader” (12). Nevertheless, Raese cites Diderot’s encyclopedia as an exemplar of the dialogic, while noting that Diderot had the express purpose of promoting Enlightenment rationality (13). Thus, even the open-ended encyclopedia, envisioned as a continuing, expanding process, has a perspective underlying its goals. Taking this further, Clark argues that the encyclopedia operates as one of Foucault’s “modes of control” over discourse, claiming, “The encyclopedia is a form that seeks to expand its boundaries ever wider to incorporate new knowledge as the centuries pass. However, it is also by definition a practice that ‘encircles,’ encompasses, delimits knowledge. It

seeks order in the chaos of things to be known and said; it categorizes and divides while amassing, excludes while including” (96). The reader of the *Codex* can conceive of it as taking either the pedagogic or dialogic approach (with evidence for both), but experiencing it as artifact implies the presence of its creator. That creator can be considered an individual like Diderot, judging by the single scribal hand evident in the consistent illustrations and script, or the scribe could be working on behalf of a larger culture. In either case, perspective is implied, and with that, the text raises the issue of how encyclopedias are used to support national ideologies and state hegemony.

Upon identifying a plausible subject area for a section, the artifact encourages the reader to find explanations to make the other images fit into that subject, and by doing so, the perspective shaping the *Codex* within the story-world becomes more apparent. Returning to section 7, the map image that helps the reader begin to interpret the section isn’t simply a map, but one showing the expansion of a single territory, colored in red, eventually overtaking the majority of the landmass. A later image in the section depicts a battle scene with literal piles of bodies and rivers of blood, suggesting that this expansion was not entirely peaceful, but rather part of a history of violence and conquest. A sense of the *Codex* world begins to emerge from this, in which the red territory historically rose to dominance, potentially being the very culture from which the *Codex* arises, telling its own history. This possible explanation then colors our understanding of the other images in the section. Initially, images such as figure 17 were notable for their very strangeness, depicting acts that could be anything from a game to a scene from religious or mythical stories. However, seen in the context of a “history” section, such images

now might be seen as a sequence of rituals from the various cultures of the *Codex* world. Each displays an activity with onlookers, they often include strange apparel similar to ceremonial garb, and others, such as figure 20, seem to emphasize the very exoticism that often underlies such texts. Figure 20 displays two bare-breasted women, one dark-skinned and holding a baby, and the other light-skinned, kneeling in some ritualistic movement, and wearing an elaborate hat. Behind both is a gold-colored statue of a woman with a similarly bared breast, resembling a fertility statue or shrine. The strange activities of the other images gain a racial and sexual charge through this image, and this charge reverberates through the other pages, sensitizing the reader to associations with imperialism and hegemony. The symbolism of figure 20 might have been apparent on its own, and the map page and battle scene could be interpreted in isolation. It is only by seeing each of these as part of a larger, unified section, though, that the reader's understanding of these more "obvious" images allows the reader to make sense of the others. Strange behaviors, pages cataloging different faces, and bodies preserved in glass coffin-like cases all take on a more sinister undertone than memorializing the various people of the world. Rather, this advancement of knowledge could very well be occurring from within a culture that has conquered and subjugated others.

The interpretive process is fairly straightforward in section 7, where an image such as the map helps guide the process; however, I'd like to show how this circular relationship between discourse, content, and interpretation applies to more cryptic sections as well, such as section 4, which reveals a focus on the natural sciences that suggests humanity's mechanization and



instrumentalization of the natural world. While most sources agree the subject area of section 4 is the natural sciences, it is not immediately clear what makes this the case, as the section never includes as clear an indication as the map or battle scenes are for section 7. Figure 21 shows the images that open the section, featuring a catalog of shapes. The shapes in the top two rows are particularly simple, possibly being symbolic rather than representational. The next row shows red and yellow barred images, and the final three rows show more freeform line shapes. None of the three directly resemble anything from chemistry or physics, seeming rather too artfully geometric to be naturally occurring shapes. Following these are several pages depicting what seem to be small objects with simple shapes and patterns, seeming more artificial than natural, and moreover, figure 22 seems to show a human-made device, hardly an obvious fit for a natural sciences section.

Only a few details, including some graphical and structural elements, seem to indicate that the section might focus on science. The introductory page for this chapter marks a shift from previous chapters. In those, which seemed to classify plants and animals, the introductions included classificatory trees common to most biology textbooks. Section 4, on the other hand, has table-like boxes and lines of text with repeating marks (figure 23). The marks are simpler than the writing scheme used in the rest of the book, showing dots and slash marks rather than script, and could presumably indicate formulae or chemical symbols, which often have more repetition and benefit from simpler symbols. Beyond that, the clearest scientific link seems to come from images such as figure 24. Putting the illustrations on the right side of the page within

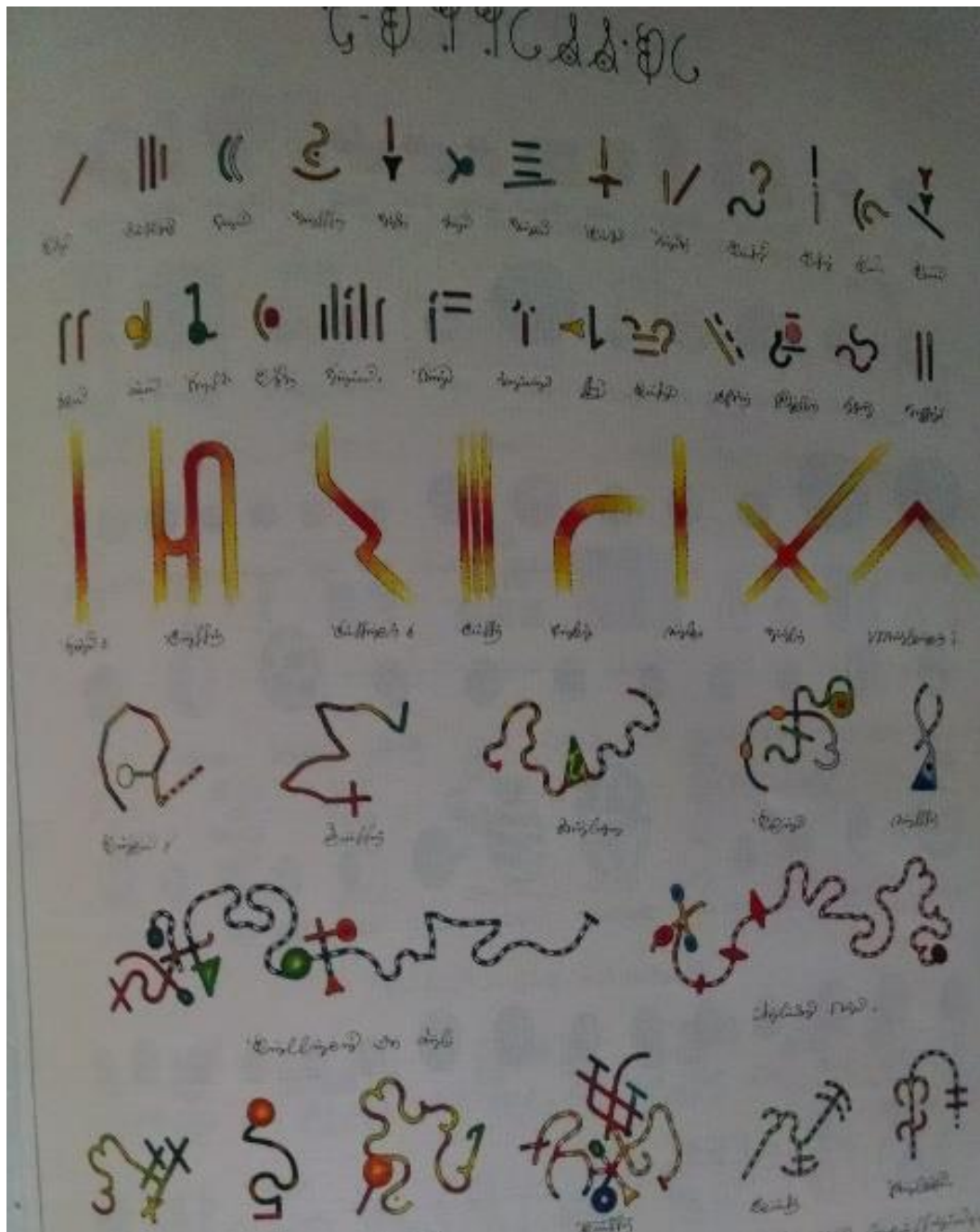


Figure 21: Opening Images to Section 4

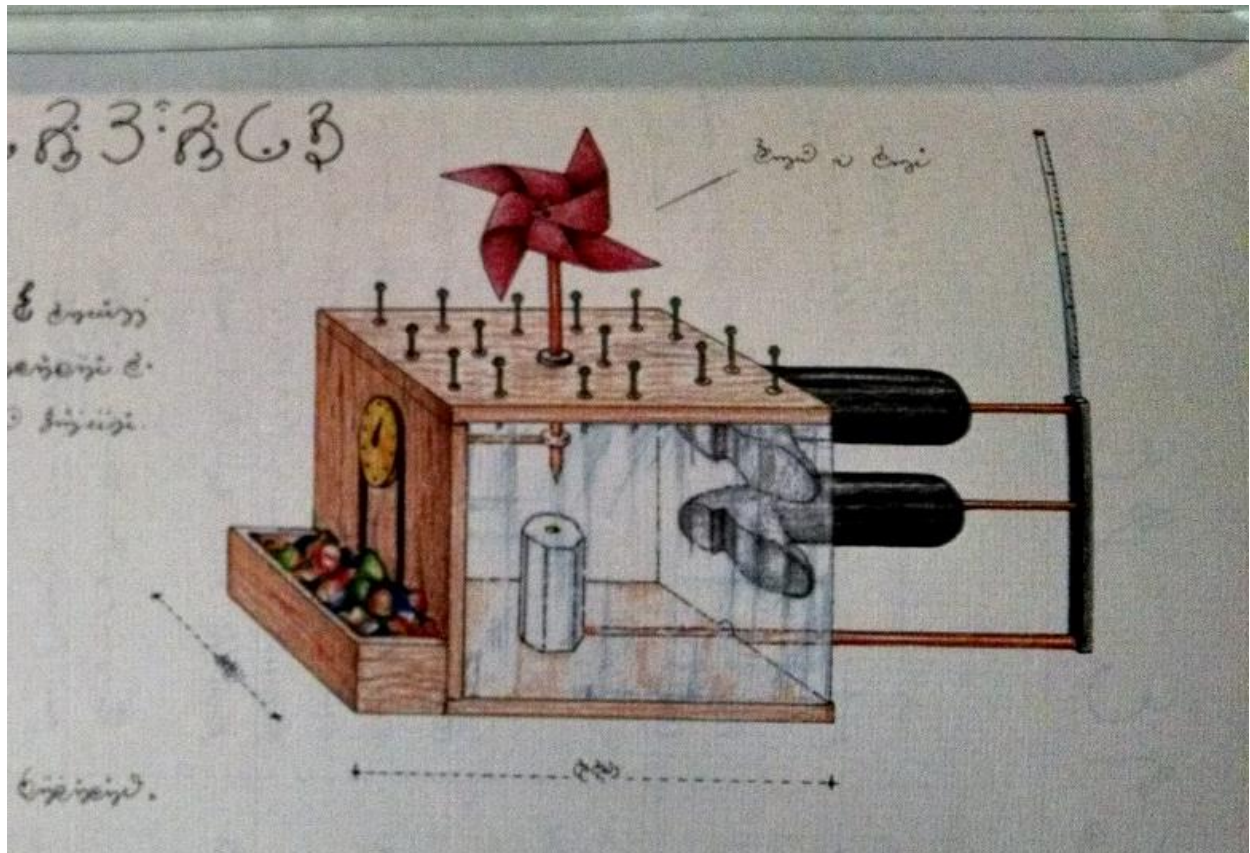


Figure 22: Unknown Machine (4.19)

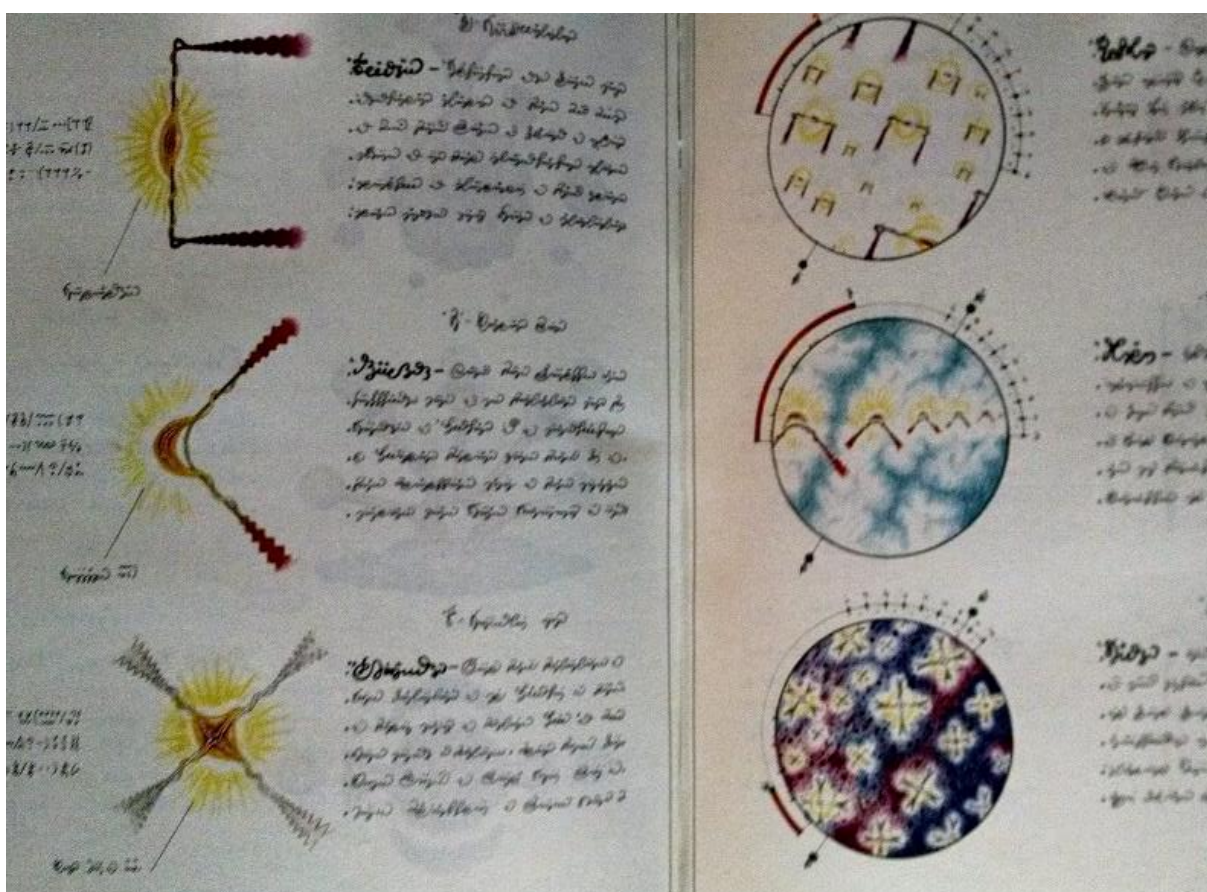


Figure 24: Chemical Processes and Microscopes

circles suggests microscopic images. The contents of the images as well appear to be some form of chemical or physical process, bearing some similarity to common science images such as Feynman diagrams or other electrical/chemical interactions or processes. Despite these similarities, the scientific focus is never obvious.

Rather than indicating an answer from the images themselves, the force of the artifact and genre guide the reader to establish the natural sciences as section 4's focus. The similarities to science textbook diagrams and illustrations work to give the reader the basis to make an initial possible link. From there, a similar process as seen with section 7 takes over, wherein the artifact guides the reader to interpret *other* images in a way that can fit with these seemingly scientific ones. For instance, the opening images (figure 21, above), which didn't make sense before, can be seen as molecular structures or basic elementary particles. The bottom row's freeform shapes resemble the filamentary shapes of proteins. The top rows' simplistic shapes seem closer to the symbolic way elementary particles are often represented in introductory textbooks. Other strange images can also be made to fall into place. Figure 25 displays several objects catching or emitting ball shapes. Vaguely organic, they nevertheless lack any meaning before the reader begins to establish a plausible connection to the natural sciences. Upon making that connection, they can be seen to resemble chemical receivers such as neurotransmitters. It should be emphasized that in most of these figures, the interpretation I offer is not the only possible meaning. However, the artifact guides the reader to take the most immediate resemblances, and through the workings of genre, the artifact pushes the reader to turn those connections into a link between the different images of the section.



Figure 25: Seraphinian Body Chemistry (4.8-4.9)

Like section 7, as the reader establishes a connection between the images, it becomes clear that the encyclopedia—containing all that is known—does not convey neutral, objective knowledge but is rather shaping that knowledge to a discourse, in this case seeing the natural sciences particularly through their instrumentalization for human ends. While the reader may find the natural sciences explanation satisfying, that reader may also notice that the chapter contains a high number of machines and contraptions. One is pictured above (figure 22), but approximately half of the image pages in the section include machines, and by the final pages, the machines have gained primary focus (see figure 26). The devices in figure 26 suggest chemical apparatuses, creating a refined product out of some resource. In one, a liquid goes through the tubes and emerges from a spout as individual pellets, and in the other, a machine converts a mineral into liquid. Looking for connections between images in the section, it appears we see all the stages taking a raw mineral and converting it into a refined product. Figure 27 seems to show the initial mining of raw materials. Here the natural and mechanical seem fused. The larger shapes in each image resemble internal organs, yet their arrangement, spread across the page, appears closer to some sort of material processing assembly line. Moreover, the reader has been guided into seeing mechanical contraptions throughout the section. Thus, though these final contraptions blend an organic and mechanical appearance and on their own might be seen as the processes of internal organs, the weight of the sequence emphasizes the mechanical aspects, or at least highlights their presence.

Rather than a neutral presentation of all that's known—the supposed aim of encyclopedic texts—the prevalence of machinery and artificial processes in a section about the natural

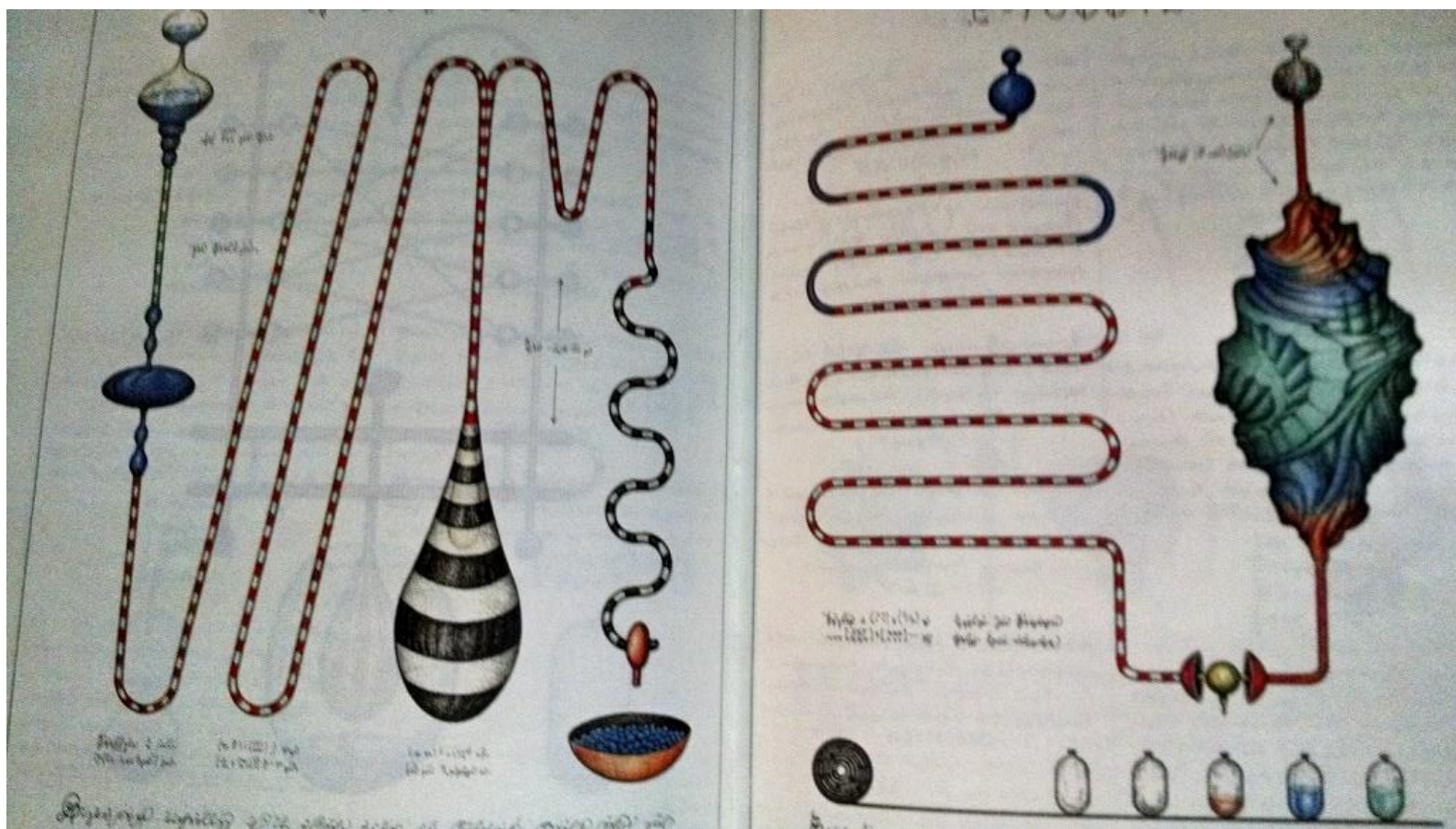


Figure 26: Chemical Apparatuses (4.24-4.25)

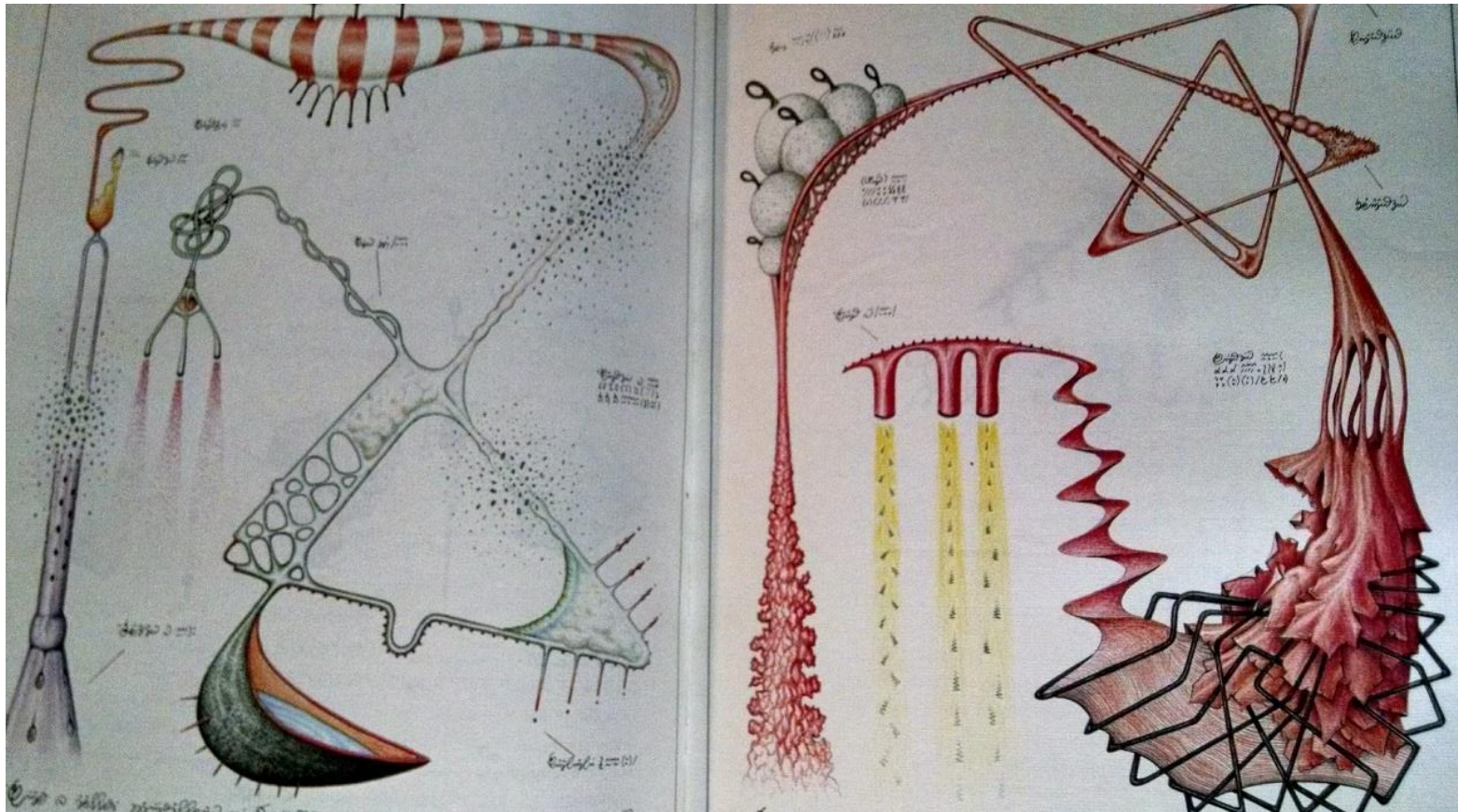


Figure 27: Biomechanical Resource Extraction (4.26-4.27)

sciences suggests the instrumentalization of the world, where science is only understood from the vantage point of what human use it can be put toward. As in section 7, detecting a political connotation underlying a section causes other images within that section to take on the same connotation. Figure 28 shows two of the section's opening pages, cataloging simple shapes with different colors and patterns. There is little to explain these shapes, but the emphasis on refined products and chemical apparatus in the rest of the chapter works backward to suggest these to be a finished product of some sort. In particular, they resemble to pharmaceutical pills in their distinct markings and regular shape. Regardless of whether that is what Serafini intended with this image, they nevertheless seem artificial in origin, and thus, their presence at the start of the section, one supposedly focusing on the natural sciences, reveals the priorities of the scribal figure and the culture from which this text originates. In the case of both sections, Serafini uses the lack of language to put the reader in a position of having to establish connections on his or her own, but through that, the reader can see the control that the encyclopedia's generic structure exerts over that process. Serafini also re-establishes a sense of meaning to the text and a reason for interpreting. Even more, while a clear "story" of the Seraphinian world doesn't emerge, the reader's actions take on the very dimension of narrative that had been threatened by the book.

Narrating the Reader

By seeing the book's artifact features, specifically its discursive structure, as a communicative channel, we're able to see the *Codex Seraphinianus* both as narrative and as a

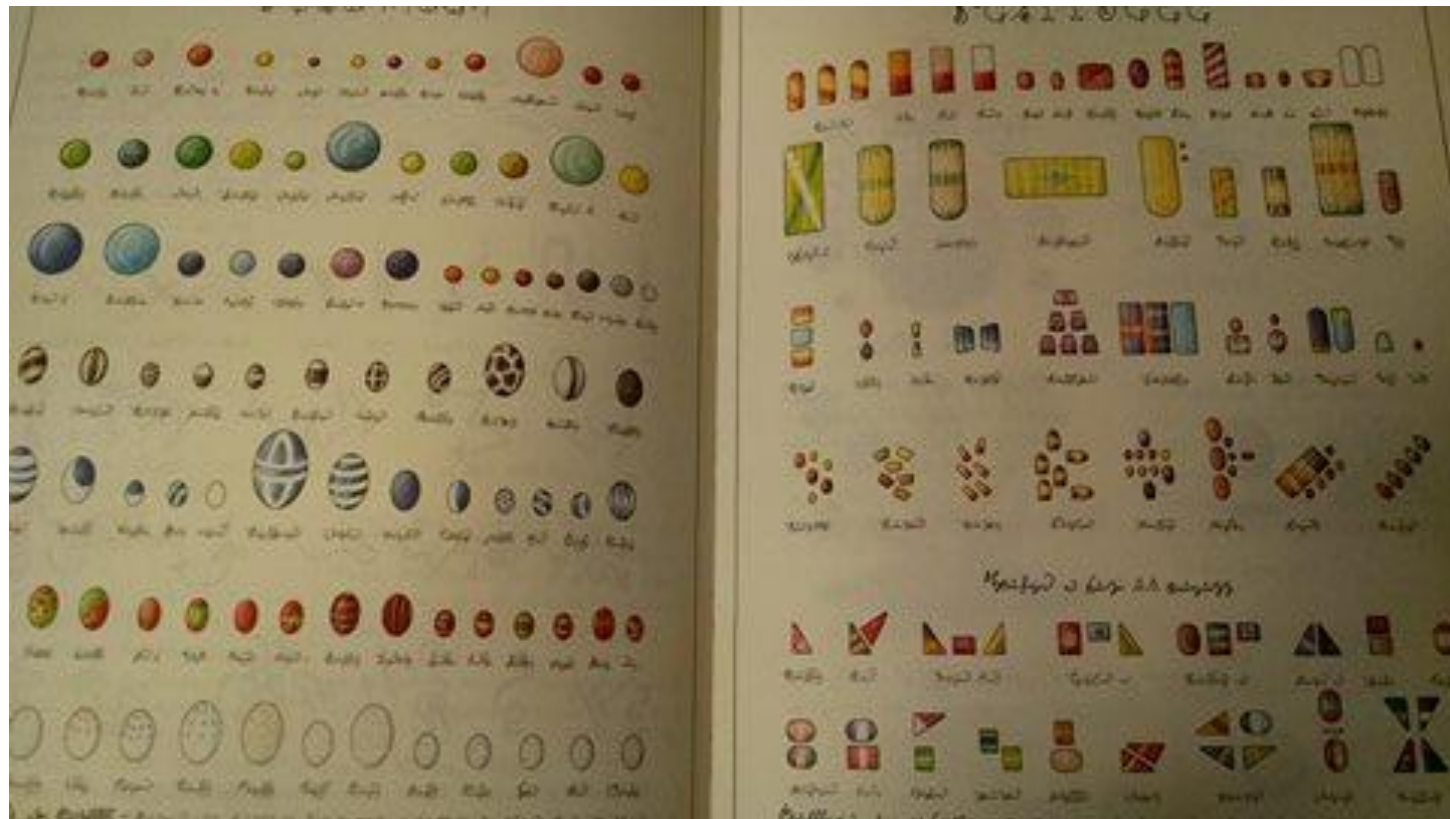


Figure 28: Pills Catalog (4.6-4.7)

whole text, rather than as a collection of individual images. In this way, narrativity becomes something close to what Ryan describes as an “underlying narrativity”:

there is no narrator, but in forming a narrative interpretation the receiver acts under the guidance of an authorial consciousness. This is the unmediated narrativity of drama, movies, ballet, or of dialogue novels. The plot is not represented diegetically by a narrative discourse, but enacted mimetically by the dialogues and gestures of the actors (or characters in the dialogue novel). The spectator constructs a narrative structure as a way to rationalize speech acts and physical actions. (“Modes” 377)

The lack of a narrator is debatable, since an important part of interpreting the *Codex* is the reader’s sense of an implied scribe at work, creating the *Codex*, but otherwise, this is quite close to what the book presents. Rather than being told, the story is shown, and the reader creates the narrative structure to make sense of what is shown.

Just as with the previous artifact texts considered, discourse crosses over into the realm of story, so that the “telling”—in this case the structural elements that make the text into an encyclopedia—becomes a form of showing. Like Borges’s “Tlön,” Serafini presents us with a radically strange world, but while Borges frames his world entirely within a familiar, friendly narratorial voice, Serafini shows the world in all its strangeness, giving only a structural frame. Writing on various types of “fragments,” in which he includes the *Codex*, Sean Braune argues that with fragments of this type, “A new agentic force is adoptable by both the reader and literary critic in that both reading and literary criticism become a conceptual writing that creates a metatext by extending beyond the physical object of the book/text” (241). By giving a limited

foundation of this radically alien story-world, the *Codex* brings the reader/critic into the process of constructing the narrative, and complicit in the control the narrative then asserts over an implied reader. As noted above, Serafini said in an interview, “I wanted to be heard and understood, but I wanted an understanding without the text, a more profound and personal understanding” (Babkina). By not having access to the text’s language, the reader is able to reach this more personal understanding, as the reader participates in its construction. Thus, while Faucher argues that “the heterotopia of the *Codex* is monstrous not because the images inscribed therein cause fright or revulsion, but that we cannot situate it in a stable frame,” I’d argue the opposite. The stable frame enables the reader to encounter the “monstrous” or otherwise unfamiliar in a way that gives purpose: it isn’t just a shocking image on its own, but a series of surprising twists on the expectations created by the generic structure.

Another way of conceiving of the heightened presence and showing that occurs in the book is as epiphany. Braune considers this as another form of fragment, taking up Joyce’s original notion of the word:

By separating life into heterogeneous moments that exist in their own singular particularity (or what Baudrillard would call the “fragment”), Joyce emphasizes the singular in the particular, a dawning awareness in a moment that is only a fragment of a larger moment, or one instant in a series of moments. The experience of such peripeteia acts as an example of “epiphany” where events change, perceptions alter, or reality becomes highlighted as “real” . . . Following from Joyce’s aesthetic theory of the epiphany, and using his term as another loc[us] in a theory of the fragment, then every

epiphany can be said to reveal a supplemental externality, exteriority or radical alterity underwriting all writing, or undergirding all discourse. The epiphany is, in essence, a fragmented experience, a moment that is entropic in its brevity but timeless and total in its after effects. (251-252)

That is, Joyce's sense of the epiphanic moment was that it was a fragment that increased awareness of everything beyond that fragment. The *Codex*, likewise, can be considered to be evoking a story-world that always remains both present and beyond reach at the same time. Gumbrecht too emphasizes a sense of epiphany in relation to aesthetic objects as one of the key outcomes of the oscillation between presence and meaning that he advocates, ascribing to it the features of "coming out of nothing," having a "spatial articulation," and having a "sense of eventness" (111). Along with this, though, he emphasizes the ephemerality of the experience:

it makes sense to hope that aesthetic experience may help us recuperate the spatial and the bodily dimension of our existence; it makes sense to hope that aesthetic experience may give us back at least a feeling of our being-in-the-world, in the sense of being part of the physical world of things. But we should immediately add that this feeling, at least in our culture, will never have the status of a permanent conquest. Therefore, it may be more adequate to formulate, conversely, that aesthetic experience can prevent us from completely losing a feeling or a remembrance of the physical dimension in our lives. (116)

Thus, the sense of presence Gumbrecht advocates is always unstable, always threatened with being reabsorbed or displaced by meaning. This tension between presence and meaning

“endows the object of aesthetic experience with a component of provocative instability and unrest” (108).

I believe that *Codex Seraphinianus* embodies the oscillation that Gumbrecht seeks just as much as the previous artifact texts considered, simply from the other direction. While Serafini presents a picture of an unfamiliar world, intuitively he is aware that such sheer presence can lose its efficacy because of the ephemerality of the moment. The meaning-giving structure is a way of supporting that presence. Even though the content of the book is radically alien, eventually a familiar aesthetic sinks in. The book establishes patterns and allows the reader to gain familiarity with it, so that the destabilizing sense of presence can continually regain its force and strike again.

This tension between structure and content, meaning and presence, gains an improvisational aspect over the course of the text. In *Philosophy of Improvisation*, Gary Peters argues that improvisation—whether musical or in other arts—isn’t about a constant, radical newness. Rather:

it is by thinking freedom as the *beginning* rather than the end of the artwork that the link between freedom and origination is established. Thought in this light, free-improvisation is no longer presented as a radically autonomous art, outstripping the past and the present in transcendent acts of innovation pure and immaculate, but as a predicament in which the artist performer is saddled with the “tragic” task of preserving the beginning of art without destroying the freedom of this origin through the creation of an artwork conceived as an *end*. (2-3)

The emphasis is on the beginning, and on the constant recreation of that beginning moment, even against the impossibility of continuing it forever. He goes on to describe this as an essentially doomed act, that as soon as the artist begins, there will be material constraints, temporal constraints, constantly seeking to control the work. The value of this, as he describes it, is that “by drawing this pleasure to the surface, the artwork does not . . . signal a liberatory or liberated future yet to come but an existing (if forgotten) freedom to be affirmed” (28), and in that sense Peters seems to echo the value of presence. As Gumbrecht and most other authors on the subject argue, presence is a sense that was once accessible to people but has been lost, forgotten, or diminished over time. Improvisation’s reminder of an originary artistic freedom could be considered to work alongside that. Michael Titlestad, drawing on Michel de Certeau, links improvisation and narrative directly, claiming, “Stories are a way of managing the noise of potential meaning, the infinite cacophony of possibility against which any sequence of tropes establishes itself. They organize the ‘real’ through description. . . . To narrate, then, is to establish an ontological itinerary on foot, to become being-in-motion along self-world borders” (25). This reinforces the project apparent in the *Codex*. Serafini tries to allow for a “more personal understanding” through immediacy with the complete unknown, but in order to “manage the noise,” as Titlestad says, Serafini gives the text its narrative dimension that guides the wandering. Perhaps fittingly, Hofstadter likens the book to music, saying, “I see some parallels between musical composition and this kind of invention. Both are abstract, both create a mood, both rely largely on style to convey content” (229). The “style,” in this case, is more

accurately speaking the form itself, which shapes and gives purpose to the content that would otherwise remain inaccessible.

In his lecture to the Oxford Bibliophiles, Serafini claimed his *Codex* created a feeling of illiteracy, similar to a child seeing a book; “they cannot yet read it, but they realize that it must make sense” (Prodi, qtd. in Stanley 9). A child would not yet have the maturity to understand the ideological aspects of even “neutral” documents like encyclopedias. Yet, an adult cannot easily see past the language to discern those ideological operations in action. By presenting an encyclopedia in an impossible language, Serafini manages to create that middle ground, allowing his reader to sense how discourse and power shape knowledge, even when the content of that knowledge remains inaccessible. And by presenting this text as an artifact, Serafini is able to keep the reader perpetually in a state of *almost*, continually running up to an understanding of some significance, but never able to reach it. While the reader will never reach the destination, by perpetuating that state of almost through familiar textual structures, Serafini allows the experience of unknowing to be simultaneously a form of understanding.

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