Aesthetic Autobiography and the Poetics of Despair in Post-War American Literature

by

David Bahr

A dissertation submitted to the Graduate Faculty in English Literature
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy,
The City University of New York

2012

© 2012
David Bahr
All Rights Reserved

This manuscript has been read and accepted for the
Graduate Faculty in English Literature in satisfaction of the
dissertation requirement for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy.

Wayne Koestenbaum

April 17, 2012
Date — Chair of Examining Committee

Mario DiGangi

April 17, 2012
Date — Executive Officer

Steven F. Kruger

Robert Reid-Pharr

Supervisory Committee

CITY UNIVERSITY OF NEW YORK

ABSTRACT

Aesthetic Autobiography and the Poetics of Despair in Post-War American Literature

by
David Bahr

Director: Dr. Wayne Koestenbaum

This dissertation repositions “aesthetic” in its ancient Greek context, meaning to apprehend by the senses. The project is framed around my idea of the aesthetic autobiography, a creative work that phenomenologically conveys the embodied experience of its author. I do not use “aesthetic” as a transcendentalist term of critical assessment, as defined by Kant; instead, the term denotes the immanent realm of the senses. This move allows me to connect the aesthetic to affect, whose etymology I trace from the mid 18th Century to contemporary affect theory. I theorize the aesthetic as a dynamic and relational biophysical force. I aim to extend the boundaries of autobiographical “truth” in order to accommodate the feeling body, which exists in excess and often beyond the reach of conceptual language.

Specifically, I examine how five post-war authors formally confront the challenge of conveying the sensation of depression. By focusing on formal experiments in rhythm, syntax, structure, imagery, and genre, I look at texts by Allen Ginsberg, Joan Didion, Tim O’Brien, Art Spiegelman, and Darryl Cunningham. Grounding the project in mid-twentieth century America, chapter 1 begins with Edmund Wilson’s “The Wound and the Bow” (1941), which situates the psychologically wounded artist as a vital and connective social force. In chapters 2 and 3, I juxtapose the respective approaches of Ginsberg and Didion in articulating the physiological experience of a depressive breakdown. Chapter 4

focuses on *The Things They Carried*, by Tim O'Brien, as a self-consciously constructed aesthetic autobiography: I show how "postmodernism" responds to representing the sensational body after the "death of the subject" and I argue for its affective possibilities. Finally, in chapter 5, I turn to graphic memoir, with Art Spiegelman's "Prisoner on the Hell Planet" and Darryl Cunningham's *Psychiatric Tales: 11 Graphic Narratives of Mental Illness*. I explore the formal strategies available to cartoonists in conveying the bodily affect of despair.

I would like to dedicate this dissertation to the memory of
Sadie Bahr

whose dream had been that I "go to college"

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This dissertation could not have been completed without the help of my extraordinary and accomplished advisory committee: Dr. Wayne Koestenbaum, Dr. Steven Kruger, and Dr. Robert Reid-Pharr.

In 2007, when I sought readmission to the English program after a ten-year absence, Steven Kruger was the Executive Officer. Professor Kruger has always been a supportive force. He was my first mentor after I entered the program in 1993. And, in 2007, when I returned, he remained steadfast in his support, despite my shaky self-confidence. He enthusiastically readmitted me into the program and served on my orals and dissertation advisory committees. When, three years into the research and writing of my dissertation, I emailed him at four in the morning because I was despondent about the seventy-five page introductory chapter I was about to submit, he responded the next day. He informed me that self-doubt was part of the process and encouraged me to keep going. I did. Little more than a year later, I finished the dissertation. His tireless morale-boosting and ongoing critical feedback has proven invaluable.

As my dissertation advisory Chair, Wayne Koestenbaum has been an indefatigable source of inspiration. His ability to motivate *and* instruct never fails to astonish me. He has remained an unwavering advocate of my abilities, even during those times when I was not so sure I deserved his unflagging support. I am extremely grateful that, based only on a few published essays of mine he had read, he sat on my orals committee and, soon after, assumed the role of dissertation director. For his seeming blind faith in my scholarly capacities, I am thankful and hope I did not disappoint.

I am incredibly indebted to Robert Reid-Pharr, who joined my dissertation advisory committee literally during the final hour. Even before he came to my rescue, Robert was a helpful resource, particularly during the job application process. His humor, intelligence, and professional advice has repeatedly saved me from myself. I feel lucky to have befriended him.

As the third highly accomplished member of my orals committee, Nancy K. Miller provided indispensible scholarly advice and guidance. Her reading list laid the necessary groundwork for my dissertation. Her lucid, informed, and often wonderfully wry scholarship consistently commands my admiration. I thank her.

Not least of all, I need to express my infinite gratitude to Joan Richardson, who allowed me to join her dissertation workshop in 2008. I arrived at that workshop with scant knowledge as to how to proceed with a dissertation, much less a dissertation proposal. Throughout those first formative months, she was a model of generosity and breathtaking wisdom. Thank you for introducing me to Teresa Brennan and paving the way for my burgeoning scholarship in affect studies.

My knowledge of the extensive research being done on affect and emotion would not have been possible without a 2010-11 Mellon Fellowship on "emotion." I remain indebted to Aoibheann Sweeney, for championing me. Nancy Yousef, Mikhal Dekel, Amy Hughes, Shea McManus, Eugenia Pauliceli, Elizabeth Wissinger, John Collins, and my good friend Steven Pludwin, provided inordinately instructive feedback.

Finally, I must thank my dear friends Marty Fitzpatrick, Eric Rasmussen, Daphne Merkin, Molly Pulda, Louis Bury, Patrick Reilly, and Linda Camarasana, for their emotional, and frequently culinary, nourishment.

PREFACE

In the late nineties, I began to write about my experience growing up in foster care and my relationship with my biological mother, Sadie Bahr, who battled mental illness throughout her life. My attempt to translate my embodied and fragmented memories into a narrative proved difficult. Not only did I not remember numerous details, but my memories seemed to shift and change as I struggled to articulate them through language. I began to find the process of conventional storytelling inadequate and false in regards to what I was attempting to convey. I realized that what I was trying to communicate was not simply the events, either lost of misremembered, but how my experiences had informed my physiological perception of the world. My life involved more than events to be recalled; it also concerned the inarticulate realm of the senses, those embodied memories that colored any cognitive interpretations. It is then that I understood that memory is the phenomenological presence of lived experience. As a (sometimes painfully) analytical person, I have been prone to scrutinize my life and environment in order to understand myself and others. But intellectualization revealed itself to be insufficient in dealing with embodied memories. I found that my phenomenological encounters with acts of creativity—in the form of literature, art, film, music, and dance—stimulated and "articulated" what I could not relay in my own words. Not only did such acts of creativity have the power to express what I could not but they affectively reconnected me with others. As someone who felt often dumb and isolated because of my life experiences, this connection was cathartic and life-affirming.

Over the last ten years, affect theory has explored the forces exerted between organic and inorganic bodies. The arts remain a rich topic for the application of such

theories. As a scholar who is also a creative writer, I have interviewed numerous writers and filmmakers. Having attended several artists' colonies, I have spoken informally with writers, poets, painters, and composers. Creative artists often talk about the emotional and sensational genesis of their work. In most scholarship, however, literature and the arts have historically been viewed as objects of intellectual inquiry, "texts" to be analyzed and interpreted. But creative artifacts, as products of energy, also do work on the body of the critic/scholar. Until recently, scholars have not tended to how creative artifacts involve their senses and their emotions. Such a subjective approach is perceived as neither analytical nor scholarly. Yet, as Rei Terada has written in *Feeling After Theory*: "In the discourse of emotion, specific emotions appear and disappear, carrying peculiar rationales with them, but there is no such thing as the absence of emotion. Emotions arise from others' subsidence, from reflection on emotions, and from the very absence of any particular thing to feel" (13). In *Empathy and the Novel*, Suzanne Keen points out that professors frequently encourage students to think critically about texts; "feelings" are viewed as incompatible with technical and critical analysis (73). I know this is how I was trained as a college English student, despite the fact that affect, sensation, and emotion always seemed to inform all critical analyses. As a result, this project stems from not only an attempt to phenomenologically engage my embodied memories but to assert the crucial role that the body, affect, and emotions have in literary scholarship. My goal is to merge rigorous scholarship with an attuned awareness to how the body, affect, and emotion individually and collectively impact such work. I believe that for most scholars, literature is more than an intellectual endeavor, it is an intensely felt undertaking, at times ethical and restorative, but always very much alive.

CONTENTS

Page

Abstract IV

Acknowledgments VII

Preface IX

Part One. Unwounding the Bow: The Creative Artifact and Affective Connection

Chapter 1. Introduction

I. The Body, Wounded and Collective 3

II. Aesthetics, Relational and Otherwise 15

III. Language and Aesthetic Autobiography 29

IV. Affect—Movement: Feeling: Consciousness 45

Part Two. Grief Unbounded and Chaos Uncontained: The Ineffable Made Visceral

Chapter 2. "From whose pained head I first took vision": The Sensational Allen Ginsberg 76

Chapter 3. Distancing Effects: Joan Didion's Disordered Sixties 131

Part Three. Toward an Autobiography of Feeling, Not Fact

Chapter 4. "Making the stomach believe": Tim O'Brien's Virtual Vietnam 183

Part Four. Picturing Pain

Chapter 5. Labile Lines: The Comics of Mental Illness in Art Spiegelman's "Prisoner on The Hell Planet" and Darryl Cunningham's *Psychiatric Tales* 234

Works Cited 273

List of Figures Page

Chapter 2.

Figure 1. *The Bathers* by Paul Cézanne 101

Figure 2. *Nude with Onions* by Robert LaVigne 105

Figure 3. Peter De Peru annotated by A.G. 109

Figure 4. Naomi and Allen Ginsberg 123

Chapter 5.

Figure 1. "She's Dead!" 243

Figure 2. "You . . . still . . . love . . . me" 247

Figure 3. "Mommy . . . Bitch" 248

Figure 4. "Somewhere in England" 259

Figure 5. Winston Churchill: National Inspiration 262

Figure 6. Dementia Patient: "Stupid Stupid Girl" Jill 266

Figure 7. Anti-Social Personality Skinhead 267

Figure 8. "Redeemed . . . in my own eyes." 269

Figure 9. David/Sadie: An Act of Imagination 272

"The depressed person was in terrible and unceasing emotional pain and the impossibility of sharing or articulating this pain was itself a component of the pain and a contributing factor in its essential horror."

– David Foster Wallace,
"The Depressed Person"

"Physical pain has no voice."

– Elaine Scarry,
The Body in Pain

Part One. Unwounding The Bow: The Creative Artifact and Affective Connection

Chapter 1. Introduction

> he wanders, distraught,
> thrown off balance by simple needs.
> How can he withstand such ceaseless
> misfortune?
> – Chorus, *Philoctetes*

I. The Body, Wounded and Collective

In his 1941 essay "The Wound and the Bow," a critical meditation on Sophocles' *Philoctetes*, Edmund Wilson cites the play's protagonist, Philoctetes, a man banished by his peers because of a wound that will not heal, as a potent symbol of physical and psychic pain transformed into strength. In the classical text, Philoctetes, suffering and isolated, resents humankind, only prizing the magic bow bequeathed to him by the dying Hercules. The drama begins with Odysseus, the fellow Greek who abandoned Philoctetes a decade earlier, returning to "the jagged Lemnos, / a land bound by waves, untrodden, lonely" (McNamee 1-2), to retrieve the forsaken warrior and his bow in order to win the Trojan war. Accompanying him is the empathic young son of Achilles, Neoptolemus, whom Odysseus expects to aid him in tricking Philoctetes to return. In his interpretation of the play, Wilson sees "the conception of superior strength as inseparable from disability" (468) and "the idea that genius and disease, like strength and mutilation, may be inextricably bound up together" (469). Connecting the tragedies of Sophocles with those of Euripides and Aeschylus, Wilson observes that some of the "maladies depicted in these texts are physical in origin, others are psychological; but they link themselves with one another" (472). According to Wilson, for the protagonists of these works and, analogously, creative writers, power and disability are one:

> It is the nature of things—of this world where the divine and the human fuse—that they cannot have the irresistible weapon without its loathsome owner, who upsets the processes of normal life by his curses and his cries. (473)

Wilson reads *Philoctetes* as “a parable of human character” in which “the victim of a malodorous disease which renders him abhorrent to society and periodically degrades him and makes him helpless is also the master of a superhuman art which everybody has to respect and which the normal man finds he needs” (472). Complementing Wilson’s claim that those who have most suffered are most blessed and, as a result, of great value to society, is his assertion that the hallowed sufferer is no help to society or himself—and, in fact, is dangerous to both—if he is isolated and not brought into the social fold. The wounded individual serves humanity, and heals himself, not by turning inward, consumed by his pain, but by applying his talent.

> It is quite right that Philoctetes should refuse to come to Troy. Yet it is also decreed that he shall be cured when he shall have been able to forget this grievance and to devote his divine gifts to the service of his own people. (473)

Pain imprisons Philoctetes, trapping him in voiceless self-referentiality, which he can only escape through engagement with the world. His bow, a divine gift, not unlike the wounded artist’s “talent,” is worthless, even harmful, if unused, captive by the stranglehold of suffering. Yet, as Elaine Scarry argues, the consuming interiority of physical pain *can* be transformed, and alleviated, through objectification. “The only state that is anomalous as pain is the imagination,” she writes. “While pain is a state

remarkable for being wholly without objects, the imagination is remarkable for being the only state that is wholly its objects" (162). For Scarry, pain and the imagination are distinct, opposing, and complementary. Still, it could be argued that objects and the pain they can cause often blur Scarry's decisive boundaries. To those harmed by the scalding heat of fire, the lacerating edge of a razor, or an abusive lover, the source and sensation of such pain can become strongly associated, and demarcations between object and subject fade. Trauma studies has been particularly important in presenting the connection between felt experience and objects.[1] Similarly, the imagination, while dependent on referential objects, is experiential: we frequently feel the things that we imagine. A fantasized lover can produce physiological arousal. The image of flying in an airplane or being in a crowd can induce sweating and a rapid heartbeat for the avio- or agoraphobic. A hypothesized injustice can cause a body to stiffen with rage. Even so, physical pain—as a biological phenomenon involving the nervous system—*is* wholly sensational; it lacks a corresponding representational object that directly signifies its subjective experience. Diffusely and sympathetically felt throughout the body—as waves and pulses, jabs and stabs, heat and chills—pain can be vocalized through cries or verbal imprecision ("I'm in pain" or "my head hurts"). It can be contextually denoted ("I am cut," "I was punched"). But its *feeling* cannot be precisely and indisputably articulated.[2] As Scarry states, it "has no voice" (3); it is only transmutable.[3] Of course, the paradox is that extreme physical

---

[1] See Marianne Hirsch and Leo Spitzer, Michael Rothberg, Dori Laub, and Ross Chambers.

[2] Sensation cannot be precisely articulated in the way that an object or individual can be. I can refer to the late writer David Foster Wallace, who committed suicide after a long history with depression, and it is clear whom I mean; yet I would not be able to articulate the subjectivity of his psychic-somatic suffering with any definitiveness. I further address the problem of language and emotion/sensation in the next section.

[3] The medical "pain chart" employing "smiley" faces exemplifies pain's resistance to language. See www.vac-acc.gc.ca/clients/sub.cfm?source=salute/fall2002/stanne and www.healthcareinspirations.com/hci_pain_assessment_tool.html. Of course, the inability to articulate sensation is not the sole province of bodily pain. It applies to any subjective sensory experience considered

pain is all-encompassing and, as Scarry puts it, in the context of torture, "world unmaking." An individual consumed by profound physical pain is likely unable to transfer her suffering onto a self-displacing object. Indeed, the continuum of pain and individual thresholds further complicate representation. Nonetheless, as Scarry notes, pain (born in objectless sensation) and the imagination (originating with objects) are complementary.

> Physical pain, then, is an intentional state without an intentional object; imagining is an intentional object without an experienceable intentional state . . . one can say that pain only becomes an intentional state once it is brought into relation with the objectifying power of the imagination; through that relation, pain will be transformed from a wholly passive and helpless occurrence into a self-modifying and, when most successful, self-eliminating one. (164)

In "The Wound and the Bow," Wilson anticipates the reciprocity between pain and creativity that Scarry presents. But, more integral to my project, he identifies vital affective connections between the artist and society, finding a potent symbol of their relational dynamics in Sophocles' play. In that text, Philoctetes, master of his own specialized art, returns to society only through the help of a compassionate citizen, Neoptolemus, who is moved by the injured man and his narrative. Hostage to his wounds, Philoctetes initially refuses to reenter society. As Wilson notes, it is his psychological pain that prevents Philoctetes from returning on his own accord. Scarry, however, arguing for the palliative effects that the act of creating has on a body in pain,

---

outside the domain of "reason" and resistant to language—religious feeling and sexual desire, to name two powerful examples. The focus of my project, however, is the psychic-somatic pain of depression and trauma, conditions uniquely characterized and intensified by a sense of disconnection.

distinguishes physical from psychic pain, and thereby maintains a mind/body dichotomy[4]:

> Physical pain is exceptional in the whole fabric of psychic, somatic, and perceptual states for being the only one that has no object . . . it is itself alone. This objectlessness, the complete absence of referential content, almost prevents it from being rendered in language: objectless, it cannot easily be objectified in any form, material or verbal. (161-62)

Scarry attempts to unravel "the fabric of psychic, somatic, and perceptual states" to comment on "pure" physical pain. Yet, as in Scarry's distinction between pain and the imagination, physical pain cannot be so cleanly isolated from the psyche in the gestalt of lived experience.[5] The body and mind exist within a state of relational dynamism, not unlike what Gilles Deleuze, in discussing his term "plane of immanence," has identified as "concrete 'multiplicities' of "processes" and "becomings" (*Negotiations* 146-47).[6] Still, Scarry's argument for bodily pain's "objectlessness" and "complete absence of referential

---

[4] In her discussion of Sophocles' play, Scarry only addresses Philoctetes' physical wounds (5, 10, 17, 53).

[5] In *Affect Imagery Consciousness,* volume I, Silvan Tomkins reports on the diverse responses to electroshock therapy, including agony, amusement, and boredom. As Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick notes: "Against the behavorists, Tomkins consistently argues that relevant stimulus for the affect system includes internal as well as external events, concluding firmly that there is no basis, and certainly not the basis internal versus external, for a definitional distinction between response and stimulus" (104). Tomkins reveals not only the psycho-social dimension of bodily sensation but also the futility of determining fixed correlations between stimulus and sensation. One person's pain may be another's pleasure; at the same time, I would add, we can never cognitively be sure that the subjective physiological experience of pleasure and pain are comparable, much less identical, between any two people.

[6] Deleuze writes: "It is only when immanence is no longer immanence to anything other than itself that we can speak of a plane of immanence" (*Pure Immanence* 27). In other words, in "a plane of immanence," all that constitutes a given state or system is inherent; nothing exists outside of it (i.e., a spirit or divine force or prime mover). Deleuze positions "plane of immanence," which is in flux, against the transcendent, which is unchangeable (i.e., static) and unified. His idea of a world defined by "ceaseless activity" and movement (*Negotiations* 147) can be traced back to Heraclitus's theory of time as a river ("Just as the river where I step is not the same, and is, so I am and am not") (Baer 3). This philosophy of process and becoming can also be found in the work of Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, Karl Marx, Friedrich Engels, William James, Henri Bergson, Jacques Derrida, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, Richard Lewontin, Stephen Jay Gould, Brian Massumi, and others.

content"—its indemonstrable interiority—can be extended to the physiology of psychological pain, specifically trauma and depression.[7]

As Scarry explains, the difficulty of verbalizing physical pain doesn't make it less real: "for the person in pain, so incontestably and unnegotiably present is it that 'having pain' may come to be thought of as the most vibrant example of what it is to 'have certainty' (4). While semiotic "certainty" is suspect in the wake of Derrida, and what has come to be called "postmodernism," the feeling body remains indisputable. In fact, according to Scarry, sentience *is* certainty in regards to pain—*but only for the person in pain*. From the perspective of the observer, sentience remains susceptible to skepticism. Scarry notes that "for the other person it is so elusive that 'hearing about pain' may exist as the primary model of what it is 'to have doubt' (4). Neither rational nor provable, physical pain—both its presence and intensity—is always open to question. And nowhere is this more evident, I argue, than in the physical, yet largely interior, experience of psychic pain, which lacks the potential external markers associated with "pure" physical pain: blood, bruises, torn flesh or broken limbs.[8]

In Wilson's reading of *Philoctetes*, the protagonist's external wound serves as a potent metaphor of bodily suffering. It is not insignificant that Philoctetes' physical wounds are putrid and persistent. Although expressed through "howls" and "evil cries,"

---

[7] In the case of trauma, the object source may be displaced, biologically "stored" via cellular memory and embodied cognition, or lost due to amnesiac shock. For neurological/embodied approaches to depression, trauma, and memory see Walter Glannon, Thomas Elbert and Emily Schauer, Rusiko Bourtchouladze, and Fred Adams; for traumatic displacement and amnesia, see Cathy Caruth, Chambers, Miller and Tougaw.
[8] My focus is limited to depression and trauma and I exclude such medical conditions as schizophrenia, dementia and brain damage. The first group need not prevent an individual from transforming her pain into a self-consciously complex, skillfully executed aesthetic artifact, nor from an awareness of social norms, while the latter group usually does. Lionel Trilling writes that "the one part of [the creative being] that is healthy, by any conceivable definition of health, is that which gives him the power to conceive, to plan, to work, and to bring his work to a conclusion" (152-53). "Conclusion," of course, is a relative term. I will argue in my project that any creative artifact that enters the social sphere is never "finished" in relation to its audience; it is continually reconstituted as a subjective experience.

his suffering can also be smelt and seen. As a result of these phenomenological markers, there is no doubt concerning his pain; there is only revulsion, a desire by his peers to be rid of him. Nonetheless, Wilson emphasizes Philoctetes' psychic suffering, seeing "in Sophocles a cool observation of the behavior of psychological derangements" (470); he reads the character's "wound" as a metaphor for the psychologically troubled artist who is rejected by, and subsequently spurns, "normal" society.

In the preface of his 1986 translation of *Philoctetes*, Gregory McNamee critiques Wilson's interpretation:

> Edmund Wilson, in his famous essay "The Wound and the Bow," sought to read the Philoktetes as Sophokles's universal statement on the role of the artist in society: wounded, outcast, lacking some inner quality that might permit him or her to engage in the mundane events of life. Whatever the considerable merits of Wilson's analysis, argued with great sophistication and learning, in the end to read the bowman as a suffering artist seems more an act of anachronistic self-projection than the drama will admit. (3)

McNamee's objection is persuasive on historical grounds, yet Wilson's understanding of Sophocles' text is born out of an interpretative literary tradition. Creative works can assume diverse meanings to different audiences at disparate cultural moments. And Philoctetes' "wound that will not heal" lends itself to a wide array of metaphoric readings. Published in 1941, Wilson's psychoanalytic interpretation seems germane to the growing physical and psychological trauma of an accelerating world war. Yet, as critical responses to "The Wound and The Bow" then, and over the years, bear out, Wilson's

particular linking of literature and trauma would remain metaphorically powerful.[9] In the decades that followed, psychoanalysis would attain greater prominence as an interpretive approach to, and subject of, the arts, both for defenders and detractors of the social science. More important, however, as my project deals with post-war autobiographical responses to depression and trauma, "The Wound in the Bow" seems like an appropriate framing text. Finally, for me, a former foster child with a depressive mother, Wilson's interpretation of *Philoctetes* persuasively captures the physiological experience of depression and trauma. I think that creative, compelling glosses on classic works, while perhaps unavoidably "anachronistic," make literary criticism exciting, provocative, and relevant. As Gillian Beer notes:

> No genre can preclude the reader's invocation of other knowledge, other questions, than those manifestly indicated by the text. Such other knowledge, other questions, lie latent in the work's terms and forms, waiting for the apt and inappropriate reader. There is, therefore, always the possibility of a vacillation of meaning, a chording of significance, that will break through generic constraints, whether the genre be that of a poem, drama, novel, scientific paper. (187)

Beer is referring to the cross-disciplinary interface between literature and science, a heuristic approach that informs my own work in the pages that follow. Yet her observation serves as a reflection on Wilson's literary analysis, in which he grants that "Sophocles some special insight into morbid psychology" (470). "Morbid," in this case,

---

[9] See Peter Monroe Jack (for the 1941 *New York Times* review of "The Wound and The Bow"), James Seaton, and, Wilson's biographer, Lewis Dabney. Dabney writes: "Wilson's understanding of the relationship between psychology and literature is not, however, a simplistic or exaggerated one. . . This remains one of our best studies of how an artist uses traumatic experience" ("Critic Who Made Us" 158).

suggests “gloomy” and “sensitive” but also its Latin etymology, *morbidus*, “sick” and “diseased.” In this use of the term, Wilson links the psychological and physiological. Yet Wilson does not pathologize or judge Philoctetes and all that he represents. He simply identifies the valuable synergies between mind, body, and society.

Philoctetes’ physical injury becomes inseparable from a psychological wound. Yet the connection between psychological and physical pain is more than symbolic. Physiologic expressions of psychic pain may include insomnia, loss of appetite, digestive problems, mania, panic attacks, sluggishness, difficulty breathing, crying jags, migraines, compromised immunity, and other quite serious somatic conditions (Manu). Physical suffering from psychic hurt also can be more diffuse and difficult to isolate, as with the depressed person who lies curled up on the floor or in bed, finding social interaction and routine tasks to be agonizing. For the afflicted individual, a mind in anguish *is* a body in distress. Nonetheless, within Western discourse, psychic and physical pain often remain linked but distinguished within a mind-body dichotomy—the mind associated with thought; the body with feeling—which can have the effect of disembodying psychic pain and forsaking sentience.[10] Consequently, it is significant that Sophocles connects Philoctetes’ physical suffering with his psychic pain, and it is the latter that establishes the play’s conflict. Betrayed and abandoned because of a physical disorder that is no fault of his own, Philoctetes first refuses to return to those who rejected him. He is eventually persuaded to rejoin society, after trickery fails, because of the entreaties of the

---

[10] Emotion, perceived as “felt,” becomes affiliated with sentience but antithetical to reason. Neuroscientist Alice Weaver Flaherty cites “a long divide in Western psychological theory between affective and cognitive processes, between thought and feeling. Although the divide has been conceptually fruitful, in real life it is often hard to separate the two phenomena. Emotions influence the content of thought; beliefs shape emotions” (89). Antonio Demasio, in a series of books, beginning with *Descartes’ Error*, has further blurred distinctions between mind and body. For a non-dualistic perspective of the mind and body in medieval Europe, see Mary Frances Wack, *Lovesickness in the Middle Ages*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1990.

sympathetic Neoptolemus. Reunited with his community, Philoctetes is healed. In Sophocles' drama, body and mind are not rigid dichotomies; they mutually inform, and fold into, one another.

In *Philoctetes*, the unsustainable distinction between mind and body is an extension of the dynamic interdependence between individual and collective bodies: abandonment and isolation intensify the physical and psychic wounds of Philoctetes; Greek society is diminished because of the gifted man's absence. Complicating this mutuality, both the individual and the community repudiate each other. Philoctetes trusts his gift with no one; the Greeks renounce the gift because of their revulsion toward its owner. Wilson finds a commonality in the relationship between Philoctetes and his community and the one between the wounded artist and society. The wounded artist, not unlike Philoctetes, reacts to rejection by turning inward, embracing solitude and, perhaps, his wounds. Yet, like the depressed or traumatized person who recoils from the world, the perceived source of his pain, the artist privileges isolation over social interaction. Wilson cites the protagonist from André Gide's play *Philoctète*, based on the drama by Sophocles[11]:

> 'I have learned to express myself better' he tells them, 'now that I am no longer with men. Between hunting and sleeping, I occupy myself with thinking. My ideas, since I have been alone so that nothing, not even suffering, disturbs them, have taken a subtle course which sometimes I can

[11] Wilson writes: It is significant the only two writers of our time who have especially interested themselves in Philoctetes—André Gide and John Jay Chapman—should both be persons who have not only, like the hero of the play, stood at an angle to the morality of society and defended their position with stubbornness, but who have suffered from psychological disorders which have made them, in Gide's case, ill-regarded by his fellows; in Chapman's case, excessively difficult. Nor is it perhaps accidental that Charles Lamb, with his experience of his sister's insanity, should in his essay on The Convalescent choose the figure of Philoctetes as a symbol for his own "nervous fever.' (469-70)

> hardly follow. I have come to know more of the secrets of life than my masters had ever revealed to me. And I took to telling the story of my sufferings, and if the phrase was very beautiful, I was by so much consoled; I even sometimes forgot my sadness by uttering it. I came to understand that words inevitably become more beautiful from the moment they are no longer put together in response to the demands of others.' (469)

Wilson states that "The Philoctetes of Gide is, in fact, a literary man: at once a moralist and an artist, whose genius becomes purer and deeper in ratio to his isolation and outlawry" (469). Ultimately, Gide's Philoctetes "lets the intruders steal the bow after satisfying himself that Neoptolemus can handle it, and subsides into a blissful tranquility, much relieved that there is no longer any reason for people to seek him out" (469). In Wilson's view of Gide's play, the hero's carefully guarded gift has been transformed into a shared gift, necessarily passed on to the community of and from which he is (a)part. On the other hand, Gide has transformed Philoctetes into a romantic hero, a lone virtuoso. Gide captures the idealized yet real satisfaction that solitude can offer an artist, potentially fostering creative productivity and psychic-somatic regeneration. Nonetheless, the actual and mythologized creative and psychological benefits of solitude obscure the harm it can cause an emotionally labile artist. Furthermore, romanticized isolation perpetuates a "pure" notion of solitude that is not only unsustainable but false.[12] Both Gide and his character remain dependent on society. For without an audience to receive their art, their talent (i.e., the bow) has no social power; it dies with them. In creating an aesthetic object, the wounded artist may transmute pain into an artifact, as when Gide's

[12] For example, even artist colonies, such as Yaddo and The Edward Albee Foundation, both of which I've attended, interrupt periods of solitude with communal activities such as meals, athletic activities, and social events, including readings, musical performances and gallery shows of the work by the artists-in-residence.

character states, "I took to telling the story of my sufferings, and if the phrase was very beautiful, I was by so much consoled; I even sometimes forgot my sadness by uttering it." But if depression is understood, as it is by some, as a "disease of disconnection" (Karp 15),[13] or, at the very least, to be exacerbated by prolonged solitude, sustained isolation continues to court injury.[14] As Wilson suggests, creativity, although a gift from the gods and born of pain, always has a social context, from its genesis to the production of an aesthetic object that becomes part of the world. When "art," whatever its medium or modality, enters a public sphere, a receptive audience further transforms the art and the artist, turning the creative process into a relational encounter. As Neoptolemus tells Philoctetes: "I grieve for you, sir. Your pain is mine" (McNamee 44).

[13] See also Alain Ehrenberg, *The Weariness of the Self* (2010), and Emily Martin, *Bipolar Expeditions* (2007).

[14] In a published interview I did with the late writer James Purdy, he compared the solitude of the artistic process to "talking to oneself in a mirror"; he asserted the importance of having another person read his work as a corrective to the distortive claustrophobia that the solitary creative process invites. (*Time Out*).

II. Aesthetics, Relational and Otherwise

> The style of a thought is its movement.
> – Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari[15]

> Movement is everything! Movement is life. The second we're born we squall, we writhe, we squirm; to live is to move. Without movement paintings are what?
> – Rothko, from John Logan's play *Red*

In *Relational Aesthetics*, curator and art critic Nicolas Bourriaud defines the term that names his book as an "[a]esthetic theory consisting in judging artworks on the basis of the inter-human relations which they represent, produce or prompt" (112). For Bourriaud, "art has always been relational in varying degrees"; he cites the image's power of "linkage" and ability to "generate bond" (15). Bourriaud's focus is not on aesthetics *per se* but on art's "relationality," particularly as practiced by a community of contemporary artists during the 1990s. In fact, in the book's glossary, Bourriaud lists the term as "Relational (aesthetics)," positioning aesthetics as a parenthetical. Perhaps not surprising, his definition of "aesthetics" in the same glossary is discursive, vague, yet intriguing:

> An idea that sets humankind apart from other animal species. In the end of the day, burying the dead, laughter, and suicide are just the corollaries of a deep-seated hunch, the hunch that life is an aesthetic, ritualized, shaped form. (107)

While I like the idea of a burial and laughter as "corollaries" of "the hunch that life is an aesthetic" "form," the statement, which is more of a riff than a definition, defers—perhaps appropriately—a clear explanation of "aesthetic." If any "definition" of aesthetic

[15] Attributed to Gilles and Deleuze by Nicolas Bourriaud, who does not provide a textual source, in his book *Relational Aesthetics* (114).

is to be found, by way of free play and association, it is in his notion of "form," which Bourriaud defines as:

> Structural unity imitating a world. Artistic practice involves creating a form capable of "lasting," bringing heterogeneous units together on a coherent level, in order to create a relationship to the world. (111)

He brings us full circle: the aesthetic is relational; it is a product of form, which unites multiplicities into an identifiable coherence (albeit temporarily; *viz.* the scare quotes around "lasting"). Bourriaud's expansive concept of aesthetics is quite different from Immanual Kant's formally reasoned move toward universal aesthetic judgment. In *Critique of Judgement* (1790), Kant writes:

> If judgements of taste (like cognitive judgements) had a definite objective principle, then the person who lays them down in accordance with this latter would claim an unconditioned necessity for his judgement. If they were devoid of all principle, like those of the mere taste of sense, we would not allow them in thought any necessity whatever. Hence they must have a subjective principle which determines what pleases or displeases only by feeling and not by concepts, but yet with universal validity. But such a principle could only be regarded as a *common sense*. (S 20)

Kant argues for a "judgement of taste" based on a transcendental universal: *common sense*. For Kant, the hypothetical *common sense*, an abstract touchstone, extends a subjective response to a work of art, through "disinterested" reflection, and reconciles it with how others *might* respond to the work. It is the concept on which he bases his philosophy of aesthetic judgment. Verbatim, Kant defines *common sense* as:

> a faculty of judgement, which in its reflection takes account (*a priori*) of the mode of representation of all other men in thought; in order *as it were* to compare its judgement with the collective Reason of humanity, and thus to escape the illusion arising from the private conditions that could be so easily taken for objective, which would injuriously affect the judgement. This is done by comparing our judgement with the possible rather than the actual judgements of others, and by putting ourselves in the place of any other man, by abstracting from the limitations which contingently attach to our own judgement. This, again, is brought about by leaving aside as much as possible the matter of our representative state, *i.e.* sensation, and simply having respect to the formal peculiarities of our representation or representative state. Now this operation of reflection seems perhaps too artificial to be attributed to the faculty called *common* sense; but it only appears so, when expressed in abstract formulae. In itself there is nothing more natural than to abstract from charm or emotion if we are seeking a judgement that is to serve as a universal rule. (S 40)

Kant's *common sense* depends on his faith in a transcendent universal and in an ability to put "ourselves in the place of *any* other man" [italics mine] through reason. In absence of that faith, his notion of *common sense* seems hard to sustain. Allowing for a multi-cultural, multi-perspectival arena, such a posited transcendent universal, regardless of how well-argued, seductive or informed, is at best subjective, at worst dogmatic and exclusive.[16]

[16] Deleuze notes: "Many people have an interest in saying that everybody knows 'this,' that everybody recognizes this, or that nobody can deny it. (They triumph easily so long as no surly interlocutor appears to

Kant's reasoning on aesthetic judgment derives from his concepts of determinative and reflexive judgment. In determinative judgment, a particular is assigned "under a universal"; in other words, a clear category already exists under which to classify a particular (i.e., a La-Z-Boy recliner and a Mib are both chairs).[17] With reflexive judgment, in which there is no universal available, a particular becomes the model for a universal (i.e. Dada). Kant's concept of reflexive judgment—i.e., "to abstract from charm or emotion" to arrive at a "universal rule" of judgment—is crucial to his aesthetic philosophy; it accommodates both the subjective component of aesthetic judgment and the role that "originality" is perceived to play in art. The aesthetic, he reasons, transcends reason. As Charles Altieri comments, "in my view Kant's ability to use reason against itself is the most important contribution of Enlightenment thought to contemporary theory" (183). Indeed, Kant's philosophy of aesthetics is inescapably "reasonable," despite the fact that, based on a *common sense* that is *a priori* and universal, it can never be objectively corroborated. For Kant, an aesthetic judgment is achieved through "abstracting from the limitations which contingently attach to our own judgement. . . by leaving aside as much as possible the matter of our representative state, *i.e.* sensation, and simply having respect to the formal peculiarities of our representation or representative state." The goal is to subsume sensation, and all its potentially corruptive static, to reason, allowing the intellect to gauge "the formal peculiarities of our representation or representative state" and align it with "other men in thought." Accordingly, aesthetic

---

reply that he does not wish to be so represented, and that he denies or does not recognize those who speak in his name.) The philosopher, it is true, proceeds with greater disinterest" (*Repetition* 131). "Greater disinterest," but, as Deleuze later points out, not without interest.

[17] Nonetheless, as Delueze states, "there exist differences between things of the same genus" (*Dessert Islands* 33), so the notion of a stable, unified category is in itself false and will always fail to "capture" the multiplicities and dynamic potentialities of the categorized. Of course, this does not mean that categories are not conceptually useful, but it must be acknowledged that categories, like the categorized they attempt to "contain," are always various and variable.

judgment, which is transcendent yet governed by an "objective principle," is *recognized* by the senses but only "formally" "abstracted" with the aid of reason. "Mere taste of sense" is unacceptable as a condition for aesthetic judgment because of the chaos and relativity it invites. Kant works hard to salvage reason from the clutches of sensation, and to assert its sway.

Yet despite his regard for reason, Kant insists on the ineffability of sentience, its conceptual elusiveness. He writes of escaping "the illusion arising from the private conditions that could be so easily taken for objective" and of "comparing our judgement with the possible rather than the actual judgements of others." In "using reason against itself" and acknowledging both the "illusions" of the "objective" in "private conditions" and the judgments of "the *possible* rather than the actual," Kant maintains the mystery of aesthetics. In fact, turning to Kant as the basis for his own "aesthetics of the affects," Altieri states: "One might even say that Kant virtually invented the aesthetic in order to establish a mode of judgment and related attitudes toward intentionality that were not trapped in Enlightenment fealties to the criteria-based, rule-governed practices governed by the understanding" (14). Like a mathematician striving to get as close to precision as calculus will allow, Kant offers a "mode of judgment" that accommodates the ungraspable infinite while arguing for a universal criterion. Still, in the end, it is sensorial mystery, not "sound" reason, that rules the aesthetic.

Etymologically, "aesthetic" (*ästhetisch* in German and *esthétique* in French) derives from the ancient Greek *Αισθητικός* (aisthetikos) and *αίσθηση-αισθάνομαι* (aisthese-aisthanomai), which are defined, respectively, as "esthetic-sensitive-sentient" and "to perceive-feel-sense." In *Critique of Judgement*, Kant responds to, and formally

systematizes, Alexander Baumgarten's then radical definition of aesthetics, which, in *Metaphysics* (1739), Baumgarten designates as the ability to judge what is pleasing to the senses. Yet Baumgarten's conception of the aesthetic—its association with criteria of "beauty"—remains with us today, having subsumed its earlier, once primary meaning.[18] Kant, however, rejects Baumgarten's "criticism of taste," which fails to distinguish between *Αισθητά* (things perceptible by the senses) and *νοητά* (things thinkable). Kant maintains the classical definition of aesthetic as it pertains to "sense" and "perception," as seen in the passage below:

> The judgement of taste is therefore not a judgement of cognition, and is consequently not logical but *aesthetical* [italics mine], by which we understand that whose determining ground can be *no other than subjective.* Every reference of representations, even that of sensations, may be objective (and then it signifies the real in an empirical representation); save only the reference to the feeling of pleasure and pain, by which nothing in the Object is signified, but through which there is a feeling in the subject, as it is affected by the representation. (§ 1)

Kant's project of reconciling the limits of reason with the transcendental began earlier, in his *Critique of Pure Reason* (1781; 1787), which was a metaphysical response to the empirical skepticism of David Hume, who argued that experience and belief, not reason, determine human behavior.[19] In both cases, Kant works to find a subtle balance

---

[18] The OED online states: "Recent extravagances in the adoption of a sentimental archaism as the ideal of beauty have still further removed *æsthetic* and its derivatives from their etymological and purely philosophical meaning." (http://dictionary.oed.com/cgi/entry/50003631?single=1&query_type=word&queryword=aesthetic&first=1&max_to_show=10.)

[19] Bonta and Protevi write: "Kant began the 'transcendental turn' in philosophy with the *Critique of Pure Reason*, which set out to determine the universal and necessary conditions of possibility for the unified

between cognition and sensation. In *Critique of Judgement*, Kant anticipates Scarry's position on pain when acknowledges the ineffability of the subjective experience of pleasure and pain ("by which nothing in the Object is signified"). He is aware that, as subjective sensorial bodies, we can never fully escape sensation's power and pull. Kant's ideal of diligent reasoning and sensorial policing offers a viable, if ultimately irreconcilable, option for those attempting to formulate a criterion of the aesthetic. And it probably accounts for his persistent influence on Western thinkers like Altieri.[20] In *The Particulars of Rapture: An Aesthetics of the Affects* (2003), Altieri turns to Kant, his "inspiration" (183), to "adapt Kant's sense of purposiveness for speaking about intentionality in affective states" (15).[21] Positing an "intentionality" "directed by an intelligence and will" that "do not seek discursive knowledge," Altieri employs Kant's concept of reflexive judgment (i.e., particulars with no assigned universal), which Kant

---

experience of human beings" (163). They cite Deleuze, who, in *Anti-Oedipus*, states: "In what he called the critical revolution, Kant intended to discover criteria immanent to understanding. . . . In the name of *transcendental* philosophy (immanence of criteria), he therefore renounced the transcendental use of syntheses such as appeared in metaphysics" (75). In other words, as I noted above, Kant acknowledges the limits of reason, proposing that which we cannot know lies outside (transcendental to) thought. For Deleuze, however, the transcendental, as far as he redefines and uses the term, is that which is overdetermined (i.e. "overcoded") yet unified in the mind and ascribed to a singular force (God, spirit, the divine etc.). Or, as Deleuze writes: "the multiple . . . to which One is added" (*A Thousand Plateaus* 21).

[20] At a 2009 MLA panel, "Sites of the Aesthetic: The Meaning of the Aesthetic," which I attended, Michel Chaouli delivered a paper, "A Phenomenology of Aesthetic Judgment," informed by Kant's *Critique of Judgement*. In a discussion that followed, a second of the four panelists, Benjamin Butt Robinson, also acknowledged Kant's aesthetic judgment as informing his work. Only one panelist, Carsten Strathausen, rejected Kant; his paper, "Bio-aesthethics," argued in favor of a Deleuzian scientific model of the aesthetic. Those who resisted Strathausen's approach, including the other panelists and more than a few attendees, seemed to find it anti-humanist and deterministic. As the young man beside me remarked, "I don't know exactly what he said but I don't like it." In defense of Strathausen I think that some believe that a biological approach to aesthetics robs it of its mystery; I would counter that it doesn't: science abounds in the inexplicable and awesome (precisely one of the main points of my project). A Deleuzian position does, however, remove the transcendent from the equation, which for those who view art as spiritual and holy—no matter the scholarly empiricist clothing they don—might reject. I would also add that an immanentist position is not necessarily atheist. Transferred from a dualist to an immanent perspective, God can be understood as inherent to the energy-matter that constitutes all states and systems.

[21] Altieri writes: "Kant sees purposiveness as an intelligent causal force that cannot be subsumed under the languages we have for dealing with purposes. Instead purposiveness appears 'as if' there were an underlying will, even though no such rule can be established. Purposiveness emerges when we cannot posit a will acting in terms of beliefs and projects, yet we can determine a forming power within the activity 'only by deriving it from will'" (14).

also called "purposiveness without purpose" (14). *The Particulars of Rapture* is a response to "three decades" of philosophy "attempting to reverse a longstanding cultural bias that set irrational, seething emotions against the cool, analytic operations of reason" (4). Altieri cites the importance of such work, which "has made us aware of the many ways in which the emotions, if not all the affects, complement reason" (4). Nonetheless, he believes that it has produced "an inability to appreciate the differences that attracted them to one another in the first place" and, consequently, "we lose sight of both the danger in and the appeal of affective states that generate values resistant to reason's authority" (4). His stance on reason's limits in the affective realm of the aesthetic, and the necessity of distinguishing between cognition and sensation, has clear affinities with Kant's *Critique of Judgement*; at the same time, Altieri, not unlike Kant, presupposes faith in a recognizable universal "that can define versions of realism sufficient to resist cultural relativism" (4-5). Adopting "a fundamentally expressivist view of affective agency" (18), Altieri turns to expressivist theory. Yet, his desire to "set performing one's affects" (19), the Nietzschean notion of "pure performativity as an end to itself" (18), "against understanding one's affects," causes him not only to question the limits of reason but almost abandon it where aesthetics are concerned.[22] He concedes:

> The more I reflect on the limitations of epistemically driven attitudes toward the psyche, the more I am tempted to let the arts have the entire stage. It becomes increasingly difficult not to identify with prophets of the anti-epistemic like Nietzsche and Deleuze. But, as Nietzsche once put it,

[22] For the cognitive position on expressivist theory, Altieri draws on the psychological approach of Sue Campbell, *Interpreting the Personal: Expression and the Formation of Feelings* (1997), supplemented by the ethical perspective of Simon Blackburn, *Ruling Passions: A Theory of Practical Reasoning* (1998). Altieri states, "[m]ost expressivist theory tilts toward the epistemic because it retains a strong interest in how we know what we feel and what others are feeling" (18).

> he who hovers long over an abyss had better be an eagle. And I am no eagle. So I have to find a rapprochement with standard forms of rationality. (23)

For those seeking such a unifying "rapprochement" as a defense against the "abyss" and potential chaos of bodily sensation, Kant's *Critique of Judgement* is compelling and attractive.

For a "prophet of the anti-epistemic" like Deleuze, however, such a "rapprochement" might suggest philosophical business as usual. What Altieri calls "standard forms of rationality," according to Deleuze, assumes "a certain distribution of the empirical and the transcendental" (*Repetition* 133), which relies on the model of recognition. And what the philosopher "proposes as universally recognized is what is meant by thinking, being and self—in other words, not a particular this or that but the form of representation or recognition in general" (131). Kant may have upended certain notions of reason during the Enlightenment by arguing for reason's limits,[23] but his idea of reflexive judgment, of "purposiveness without purpose" depends on an abstract yet recognizable universal, manifest in his idea of *common sense*. For Deleuze, standard forms of rationality assume "that there is a natural capacity for thought endowed with a talent for truth or an affinity with the true, under the double aspect of a *good will on the part of the thinker* and an *upright nature on the part of thought*" (131). It is what Deleuze calls the "image of thought":

[23] It could also be argued that Kant, as a product of his intellectual and cultural environment, was asserting reason's place in the world while preserving some aspect of metaphysics. This is the "transcendental turn" that Bonta and Protevi, via Deleuze, ascribe to Kant and which causes Deleuze to perceive Kant as a "closet" immanenist. On the other hand, Kant's stance that certain things are outside the domain of reason does not necessitate that they are immanent. For Kant, only the system of reason is immanent, his ontology and cosmology still allow for the transcendent, which, unlike Deleuze's notion of the immanent, is dualist.

> According to this image, thought has an affinity with the true; it formally possesses the true and materially wants the true. It is in terms of this image that everybody knows and is presumed to know what it means to think. Thereafter it matters little whether philosophy begins with the object or the subject, with Being or with beings, as long as thought remains subject to this Image which already prejudges everything: the distribution of the object and the subject as well as that of Being and beings. (131)

Deleuze identifies recognition, as employed by Kant and Descartes, as presupposing "a certain distribution of the empirical and the transcendental, and it is this distribution or transcendental model implied by the image [of thought] that must be judged" (133). Recognition, when understood as transcendental and universal, "relies upon a subjective principle of collaboration of the faculties for 'everybody'—in other words, a common sense as a *concordia facultatum*; while simultaneously, for the philosopher, the form of identity in objects relies upon a ground in the unity of a thinking subject, of which all the other faculties must be modalities" (133). According to Deleuze, this "ground in the unity of a thinking subject," what Altieri suggests as "standard forms of rationality," only re-inscribes and repeats the *status quo*: "The form of recognition has never sanctioned anything but the recognizable and the recognized; form will never inspire anything but conformities" (134).[24] For Deleuze, "form," as used above, denotes a constructed and codified set of limits. Of course, constrictions, whether as established social norms or presupposed rules, also create possibilities. For example, in regards to language, a circumscribed vocabulary makes communication possible; if new words were constantly

[24] Even so, I believe that recognition—not as an abstract Kantian transcendent but re-envisioned as part of a dynamic Deleuzian immanence manifest in specific localities—has applied potential in the realm of aesthetics and autobiographies of psychic pain, to which I will later return.

invented at whim, verbal communication, limited as it already may be, would be impossible. Similarly, at a more mundane level, deadlines and a scheduled routine often foster greater productivity than an unstructured and open-ended environment. Yet there is a difference between constrictions that are consciously imposed in order to facilitate action/agency and constrictions that are unquestioningly perceived as *a priori* and transcendent. These include, but are of course not limited to, notions of truth, God, love, and aesthetics. In a Deleuzian context, those readily accepted and unexamined constrictions of "form" become "invisible" straightjackets—i.e, "conformities"—at odds with the dynamic, immanent possibilities that actually comprise matter-energy.[25]

Deleuze believes that Kant, who effectively used reason against itself, "seemed equipped to overturn the Image of thought"; but, "in spite of everything, and at the risk of compromising the conceptual apparatus of the three Critiques, Kant did not want to renounce the implicit presuppositions" (136) of the transcendent and universal. Deleuze states that Kant's "Critique amounts to giving civil rights to thought considered from the point view of *natural law*: Kant's enterprise multiplies common senses, making as many of them are there are natural interests of rational thought" (136). As a result, the Western concept of aesthetics, what Deleuze calls "the science of the sensible" (56), as initiated by Baumgarten and codified by Kant, may originate with the senses but only becomes justified by cognitive judgment. Within such a system, sensorial responses to creative works are to be evaluated, articulated, and defended. I would argue that, particularly in cultural and academic criticism, this view has tended to: 1) overshadow the sensorial

[25] By matter-energy, I refer to the standard physics definitions of the terms, which, according to the OED, defines matter as "that which has mass and occupies space," and energy as "the power of 'doing work' possessed at any instant by a body or system of bodies." As a result, energy, as generally understood, may be kinetic, thermodynamic, electrical, chemical, molecular, radiant, atomic, etc.

origins of the aesthetic; 2) diminish the validity and value of sensorial responses that cannot be verbalized; and, 3) foster the idea that a sensorial response that cannot be articulated cannot be shared. Furthermore, it has positioned the sensorial self, from which the aesthetic derives, as the passive receptor of others' creativity. As Deleuze notes: "Kant defines the passive self in terms of simple receptivity, thereby assuming sensations already formed, then merely relating these to the *a priori* forms in their representations" (98). This perspective unifies "the passive self by ruling out the possibility of composing space step by step" and deprives "this passive self of all power and synthesis (synthesis being reserved for activity)" (98).[26] In other words, the audience becomes static, lacking agency; it does not act but is acted on. Passive reception precludes the possibility that not only does the creator create but so does the audience. Both do work. Passive reception denies the inter-subjectivity of the art experience, in which "inter-subjectivity does not only represent the social setting for the reception of art, which is its 'environment,' its 'field,' but also becomes the quintessence of artistic practice" (Bourriaud 22). From a relational aesthetic perspective, an audience is not a passive, unified body with a possible transcendental principle for judgment; it is dynamic and active, a product of its particular bio-psychic potential and "defined in terms of the formation of local selves or egos" (Deleuze *Repetition* 98). As Oliver Sacks notes, "experience itself is not passive, a matter of 'impressions' or 'sense-data,' but active, and constructed by the organism from the start" (44). In Deleuzian terminology, an audience is a "body," "a system considered in

[26] It must be noted that for Deleuze, this "passive self" is not the same as "passive synthesis," the latter being the "asymmetrical" "contraction" of past and future as they coexist in the present that happens *in* the mind. He writes: "Although [passive synthesis] is constitutive it is not, for all that, active. It is not carried out by the mind, but occurs *in* the mind which contemplates" (71). In other words, in context of contemporary neuroscience, passive synthesis could be seen as the brain's constructing and processing of temporalities—past and future—in an ongoing present.

terms of appropriation and regulation of matter-energy-flows" (Bonta and Protevi 61); potentially, an audience is also a "full Body without Organs," a receptive and connective force.[27]

Reception. Connection. Inter-subjectivity. Privately experienced matter-energy-flows. In such biophysical contexts, the sensorial eludes reason and language *if* language is understood as a tool of reason. If someone is looking to language to convey objectively the subjectivity of sensation, then, as Scarry notes, language will fail. It is at this juncture that the connection between the aesthetic and somatic experiences of depression and trauma emerges. The subjective experience, the *feeling*, of both the aesthetic and psychic pain is beyond reason. And, as a result, the aesthetic realm is an appropriate and *de facto* domain for conveying the subjectivity of such pain. Therefore, it is crucial to understand that although language, if perceived as a tool of reason, cannot precisely and indisputably articulate—i.e., explain—the subjectivity of depression and trauma, it still can communicate it. I also want to make clear that I am not saying that language cannot explain and make understood certain dynamics of psychic pain—I believe that psychology has arguably demonstrated that it can to an extent. Nonetheless, the embodied subjectivity of psychic pain, like the physiological experience of the aesthetic, exists outside reason. In a society that values reason and sees language as its tool, people in emotional pain—a condition characterized and intensified by a sense of disconnection—might feel compelled (internally and externally) to articulate their pain. The inability to

[27] In *Deleuze and Geophilosophy: A Guide and Glossary*, Mark Bonta and John Protevi note that the Body without Organs (BwO) is "released from the habitual [organism] patterns," i.e., "a centralized, hierarchical and strongly patterned body," and is transformed into a "destratified (decentralized, dehabituated) body" (65). Furthermore, in *Anti Oedipus*, "the BwO is 'full' when it is catatonic, a moment of anti-production, a mere surface across which desiring-machines are splayed and upon which a nomadic subject moves." "In ATP [*A Thousand Plateaus*], however, the full BwO is positively valued" and "allows for connection with other destratified bodies" (62). It is in the last sense that I use BwO here.

articulate and explain that pain, despite being encouraged to do so by others who might want to “understand,” would likely exacerbate the feeling of isolation. On the other hand, the creation of an aesthetic artifact might give a person suffering from depression and trauma the ability to express and transmute (however temporarily) their pain and to provide a means of reconnecting with others. The creative artifact born out of, and capable of producing, sensory experience then becomes a medium of inter-subjectivity. It is what I term aesthetic autobiography.

III. Language and Aesthetic Autobiography

> There is too much, more than one can say.
> "Structure, Sign and Play"
> – Jacques Derrida

> Language as a model! To rethink everything through once again in terms of linguistics!
> *The Prison-House of Language*
> – Fredric Jameson

Pioneering autobiography theorist Philippe Lejeune defines the autobiographer's role and responsibility, which he aptly names the "autobiographical pact":

> "I swear to tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth." The oath rarely takes such an abrupt and total form; it is a supplementary proof of honesty to restrict it to the possibility (the truth such as it appears to me, in as much as I can know it, etc., making allowances for lapses of memory, errors, involuntary distortions, etc.), and to indicate explicitly the field to which this oath applies (the truth about such and such an aspect of my life, not committing myself in any way about some other aspect). (22)

This "told" autobiographical truth, like the pact that defines it, is verbal. Language is understood as representational of the "facts" such as they appear to the autobiographer, "making allowances for lapses of memory, errors, involuntary distortions, etc." In *Narrative and the Self*, Paul Kerby identifies this linguistically constructed self as the "semiotic subject," a product of "signifying practices" (1). As with the language of reason, the language of self-representation is descriptive, explanatory and evaluative, meant to offer a direct correlation between the signifier and, in autobiography, the living signified. Allowing for human fallibility, Lejeune's pact is fair yet ethically rigorous. The

autobiographer must choose language that most "accurately" represents the events, places and people being depicted, with given "allowances." But how does Lejeune's pact relate to a writer's feelings and sensations? The implied move is descriptive and evaluative: emotions are described and reflected upon as they are recalled and re-experienced, which may or may not represent how they were historically felt. Emotions are recollected sensory states "as they appear" to the autobiographer at the time of writing.[28] But can sensations—which elude language even in the present—be recalled from the past? Sensation is a phenomenon of presence. A nervous system exists solely in the here and now. An autobiographer must search for signifiers of the past and try to examine how those connotations currently make her feel. For example, I might write about my mother's death, which occurred in 1978 or 1979—I can't be sure; I know I was 15: "I felt a stunning sorrow when my mother Sadie died, yet I alternately cried and laughed during her funeral, as if I could not believe the absurdity of her death." But is this true? I can picture one image: me standing beside my frowning foster mother—she disliked Sadie—my body stiff, my face frozen. I think I laughed. I believe I sobbed. But what did I *feel*? I rewrote the sentence numerous times, never quite satisfied that it captured my actual emotions from that recollected event, my memory of the moment reshaped and re-imagined by the available language at each instance of revision. As Israel Rosenfield notes: "Recollection is a kind of perception . . . and every context will alter the nature of what is recalled" (89). The process of finding the "right" word for a convergence of specific sensations evokes Kant's determinative judgment: a particular is assigned under a universal. But, unlike material objects such as chairs (divergent as they may be), sensations shift, merge, attenuate, and reemerge—resulting in a kaleidoscope of feeling.

[28] Both senses of the verb "appear" —to seem; and to become perceptible—fit nicely here.

There are different shades of “sorrow,” various contours of “joy.” Furthermore, as Anna Wierzbicka notes, “the way people interpret their own emotions depends, to some extent at least, on the lexical grid provided by their own language” (26). And so the difficulty of finding the words to convey an emotional state is compounded not just by a dynamic spectrum of how it *feels* to be “sad” but also what it *means*.

To a certain degree, narrative context situates emotions but it cannot decisively define and convey them. In *The Navigation of Feeling*, William Reddy addresses the question “what is emotion?” “To most of us, the question hardly needs asking,” he writes. “But the moment the question is taken seriously, troubling difficulties in definition arise” (3).[29] He cites the common comparison between emotions and colors, their “strong subjective or experiential character” (3), and he notes the “long-standing common sense” that both “color perception and emotional experience are biologically based,” “hardwired” and therefore “universal”; but “while scientific evidence on color perception supports this commonsense view, research into emotions has failed to substantiate it” (3). Reddy suggests that emotions are primarily socially constructed: “this study aims at elaborating a formal theory that establishes emotions as largely (but not entirely) learned” (xi). Earlier, however, he states a “trend” in the fields of psychology and anthropology toward “a conception of emotions as largely (but not entirely) the products of learning” (x). These statements on page x and xi, respectively, seem to express the same point but they can be understood differently, with the assertion on page xi addressing emotion *en*

[29] The problem of defining emotion is reflected in much literature on the topic. For some recent and characteristically conflicting definitions of the terms, including “feeling,” “emotion,” and “affect,” see Brennan (2004), Altieri (2004), Jesse Prinz (2007), and Jonathan Flatley (2008). In the past decade, the emergence of affect studies (c.f. Brian Massumi, Patricia Clough, and Melissa Gregg and Gregory J. Seigworth), which I address in the final section of this chapter, has only further complicated glosses on emotion.

toto, and that on page x addressing the *concept* of emotion. Any concept of emotion is cognitive. But emotion is also sensational, with the body as its locus. And while language may induce or foster emotions, as Reddy's chapter on sentimentalism persuasively presents, language cannot produce the physiological capacity to feel. That capacity *is* biological. So like all concepts, those of emotion may be learned, but can sensations? And do sensations that inform emotion require concepts to be felt? These questions are at the center of the cognitive and noncognitive debate on emotion.[30] Jesse Prinz nicely summarizes the arguments of both camps in his book *The Emotional Construction of Morals* (2007). Presenting data from neuroimaging studies, he notes that "there is strong evidence that cognition is not necessary for emotion" (61). Emotions are "meaningful" in that they "represent," but there is "equally good evidence that they do not require the deployment of concepts" (61). Whether emotion originates in the body or with concepts is not my concern here, because, in the end, whatever its wellspring, as Prinz persuasively concludes after considering both sides: "I submit that no bona fide emotion is disembodied. Every apparent candidate proves visceral to the core" (60). The problem with conceptualizing emotions, as I have tried to show throughout this chapter, is that semiotics and emotion are distinct, incomparable, although potentially mutually informing realms. Language is primarily, although not exclusively, a semiotic system. (I will address the sensational aspects of language later, when I look at the literary texts.) Emotion can inform or be induced by language, but the two are not mutually dependent. Emotion can exceed or escape language, and words need not stimulate discernible

[30] For cognitive perspectives, see Magda B. Arnold (1960), Robert C. Solomon (1976), Richard S. Lazarus (1991), Klaus R. Scherer (1993) Martha Nussbaum (2001); for noncognitive perspectives, see David Hume (1739), William James (1884), Carl Lange (1885), Robert B. Zajonc (1984), Joseph LeDoux (1996), J.S. Morris et al (1999), and B. de Gelder et al (1999).

sensations. Signs and symbols are obviously everywhere (which probably accounts for the perceived dominance of concepts) but, despite its less visible presence, so is emotion. Reddy's indistinguishing between the concept and physiology of emotion can be seen, I believe, as an example of how semiotics tends to subordinate, or obscure, sensation.

To recognize language and emotion as distinct but mutually informing complicates the process of writing feelings. The problem with assuming the role of "semiotic subject" in a written autobiography, particularly in memoirs of emotional states like depression and trauma, is that attempted conceptual definitions of sensation are unavoidable. A difficulty that I have encountered, in writing about my own clinically depressed mother,[31] is how quickly conventional terms for emotion ("sad" "down" "blue") become cliché and affectively "dead." Furthermore, if an autobiographer wants a reader to understand emotionally what she is feeling, simply citing an emotion does not usually translate into a sensorial response, much less the cited feeling.[32] An autobiographer may write "I was sad," and a reader might respond, "I understand; I've been sad" but remain devoid of any connective feeling for the author or work. In the case of depression, a reader might likely respond to an author's "I'm depressed" with "I can't relate—explain what you mean" or "what does that feel like?" The difficulty of explaining emotions undoubtedly accounts for the famous dictum "show, don't tell" in fiction writing, generally perceived as a more affective medium than "nonfiction." But

---

[31] See Bahr, "Mothered" and "No Matter What Happens."
[32] Similarly, the narrating of an emotional experience does not necessarily translate into an anticipated emotional response. For example, in-person responses by readers to my two published essays about my mother have been unpredictable. A few people have told me they cried. Others expressed indignation or apathy. A few people I know found the essays a source of discomfort and avoided discussing them. And several readers responded with a passionate embrace. The actual emotions that I have encountered have never been singular or easily qualified; they remain simultaneously various, variable and dynamic. I can, however, divide the sensational responses into two categories: those defined by emotional connection and those by emotional disconnection.

even the “showing” in fiction can easily be reduced to conventional signifiers of emotion—”tears streamed down my face”; “my body trembled with rage”—that leave the reader cold.[33] The problem is further exacerbated in autobiography, which, under Lejeune’s pact, must strive to “tell the whole truth and nothing but the truth.”

But what of the traumatized person who cannot remember part or all of the traumatizing events? What of the depressed person who cannot articulate her embodied pain? What about historical hurts that cannot be recalled but continue to live in the body? The purview of most autobiographies, certainly those covered under Lejeune’s pact, is not to reproduce an author’s sensory experience within an audience. In some cases, the intention might be to avoid that, especially if the experience is painful or traumatic and risks turning away readers. Moreover, a text that is perceived as purposely designed for emotional effect could be seen as manipulative and dismissed—although, as Terry Eagleton notes in his response to Russian formalist assertions that literary language, by definition, is artificial and self-conscious: “there is no kind of writing which cannot, given sufficient ingenuity, be read as estranging” (6)—not to mention manipulated.[34] Nonetheless, Lejeune’s pact suggests that the aim of the autobiographer is to describe, explain, and recount “the facts as they appear.” The autobiographer provides a point of view and perspective. The primary emphasis is on cognitive understanding, enabling a reader to picture and, therefore, imagine what is being relayed.[35] The affective is

---

[33] At the same time, if the emotive recounted by an author deviates too much from social conventions, it may alienate a reader. (For example: an autobiographer writing of laughter as a response to sadness or pain—her own or someone else’s; or sexual arousal as a reaction to fear or anger, in the case of a rape or attack.) Yet the unexpected is more likely to arouse a sensory reaction, perhaps positively connective (empathy, sympathy, affection) but also, and more likely if at odds with a reader’s values, antipathy and disconnection.

[34] See Mikhail Bakhtin, Viktor Shklovsky, Jan Mukarovsky, Roman Jakobson, and Terry Eagleton.

[35] I use “cognitive” to denote thinking and conceptualization. As Prinz writes: “If concepts are the constituents of thoughts, then they must play a foundational role in any complete theory of cognition”

understood as secondary, a potential consequence of the imagination. But fiction and especially poetry—not to mention film and mixed media—reveal that language *can* be primarily affective, enabling an embodied understanding—recognition, if you will—that is outside, or besides the point of, cognitive understanding.

Music, dance, painting, sculpture, and even film, are acknowledged as sensorial media. Although language may play a role, particularly in music and film, it is a subordinate or, at most, auxiliary one. The process of creating a painting, sculpture or film culminates in an artifact; yet recording and film technologies frequently transform the temporally fleeting media of live music and dance into material objects as well. Consequently, an aesthetic autobiography—a creative work born out of, and capable of (re)producing, a sensory experience—can assume any art form.[36] Furthermore, as any creative work is essentially born out of, and capable of producing, a sensory experience, any creative work can theoretically be labeled an "aesthetic autobiography." As a result, the term itself does not reveal anything "new" about art, despite the fact that, as I have argued, the sensorial aspect of aesthetics has been subordinated to the evaluative. The value of the term lies in it as a tool to approach the sensorial aspect of a work of art from an autobiographical perspective, regardless of the medium. I want to expand our

(*Furnishing* 2). Ultimately, my project is aligned with Prinz's move "to blur the boundary between conception and perception" by "embracing the idea that concepts have a perceptual basis" (23). This blurring informs my critique of language as a self-contained semiotic system that exists apart from the sensational body. It is the structuralists' faith in language as a self-contained system and poststructuralists' exploitation of that faith that allowed the latter to deconstruct the "semiotic subject" and pronounce the author conceptually dead. Nonetheless, embodied sensational subjects, both particular and collective, remain very much alive.

[36] Throughout, I use the term "creative artifact" to refer to the production of an experiential form that is the product of the creative process. Because texts (written, graphic, and photographic) are the subject of this project, the term should not cause confusion. Nonetheless, as this chapter presents, a "creative artifact" is merely a subcategory of the term "creative work," which includes performed dance and music that, unless filmed or recorded, are not "artifacts." Of course, a live dance or music performance is as experiential and "real" (in terms of energy-matter) as any painting, sculpture, film, or book, and, therefore, also qualify as aesthetic autobiographies but are outside the scope of my project.

understanding of autobiography beyond the limits of the semiotic, which in itself places a limit on the understanding of autobiographical processes. In Deleuzian terms, my focus is on process, not on creating static, universalizing categories. For example, what I term an aesthetic autobiography is not a particular work but the relationship that a particular creative work might foster. An aesthetic autobiography needs to be understood as a relational encounter between author-artifact-audience, in which all three are affectively aligned. Such alignment is not dependent on any one aspect of this triad but on a dynamic affective connection between all three. Of course, once an artifact has been created, the relationship between the work and audience is most conspicuous; yet, dead or alive, the creator remains a presence, her emotional and physical energy having produced the art. With an aesthetic autobiography, the creative work sensationally expresses something autobiographical about its creator and its receptive audience. A relational encounter, an aesthetic autobiography is not static but in flux, its autobiographical potential activated and short circuited depending on when, where, and by whom the artifact is being received.

The sensational dynamism of music and dance are, I believe, fairly well appreciated. I do not think that the same can be said for written language, particularly in regards to autobiography. I would say that most discussions around written autobiography focus on the cognitive: how we understand, learn and think about another person, culture and/or historical moment. Paul John Eakin writes:

> Given the face-off between experiential accounts of the "I," on the one hand, and deconstructive analyses of the "I" as illusion on the other, my own instinct is to approach autobiography in the spirit of a cultural

anthropologist, *asking what such texts can teach us about the ways in which individuals in a particular culture experience their sense of being "I"*—and, in some instructive cases that prove the rule, their sense of not being an "I." (4)

"I" is the linguistic signifier *par excellence* of autobiography and, as Eakin tracks in "Registers of the Self," from *How Our Lives Become Stories*, a particularly contentious one. Still, Eakin's view of autobiography as something that can "teach us" about others' *experience* nudges away from the language-centered paradigm, if only for a moment. "Experience" encompasses more than language; it comprises the sensational. He could have written "tell," and the following paragraph suggests that is what he means. He writes: "How much of what autobiographers *say* they experience is equivalent to what they really experience, and how much of it is merely what they know how to say?" (4, emphasis added). Eakin's question takes us back to Lejeune's acknowledgment of the "truth" problem, with the best reconciliation between experience and language being "the truth such as it appears to me, in as much as I can know it, etc., making allowances for lapses of memory, errors, involuntary distortions, etc." In the language game as usually practiced, in which sensation is subordinate to cognitive understanding, meaning depends on a correlation between an identifiable and stable signified and signifier. Of course, in "Structure, Sign, and Play," Derrida highlighted the instability between signifier and signified. It is his "notion of a structure lacking any center" (279), along with Friedrich Nietzsche, Roland Barthes, and Michel Foucault's slaying of the authorial subject,[37] that led to the illusive "I" to which Eakin above refers. This "illusion" is the logical

[37] See Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*, Roland Barthes, "The Death of the Author," and Foucault, "What Is an Author?"

conclusion of a perceived language-based reality. Reduced to signs and ever-slippery signifieds, we are indeed, to quote Derrida, a "non-species" "in the formless, mute, infant, and terrifying form of monstrosity" (297). In this context, as Michael Sprinkler notes, autobiography becomes an untenable exercise (342). Eakin writes:

> While Lejeune sought to map the boundaries of autobiography as a distinct genre, anchoring it in a world of reference beyond the text, Michael Sprinkler pictures such a task as hopeless. In "Fictions of the Self: The End of Autobiography" (1981), driving home his view that autobiography is fundamentally unstable and hence unclassifiable, a shifting, borderless locale where 'concepts of subject, self, and author collapse into the act of producing a text.'" (2)

Of course, as I have noted, there is a reciprocity between the constructions of language and self, but people exceed the bounds of language,[38] and, for that matter, the parameters of "self." Within the realm of structure, sign, and play, Sprinkler's identified conceptual instability of subject, self, and author, is not limited to autobiography. Nor does instability—semiotic or sensorial—make an autobiographical work untrue, particularly when emotions are involved. Sensational truth *is* shifting, borderless, and dynamic. Autobiography can be sweepingly classified as a fiction only when truth is rigidly understood as stable, which may be the greater fiction. Teresa Brennan notes that postructuralism "when it cast its eye back over the pathways the subject had traversed in

---

[38] When meaning and subjectivity are only the provenance of language and the ability to signify, the sensational body becomes chaotic or an illusion, an example of "mind over matter." What sort of subjectivity and meaning does this language-privileged perspective allow the preverbal and deaf- blind? I would further posit that positioning language as the sole maker of meaning can lead to the assumption that animals lack interpersonal or subjective affect and have no sense of the world as place of potential meaning. As someone who feels a strong affective connection to many animals, I do not share that assumption.

attempting to make meaning a human affair, rightly found them absurd" (151). According to Brennan, a consequence of this rationalistic trajectory has been the denial of sensational logic:

> when the idea of a suprasensible and subject-centered God was deconstructed for the fiction it is, the deconstruction accepted the terms resulting from the splitting of mind and body, individual and environment. Deconstruction, poststructualism, and Lacanianism alike accept these terms insofar as they deny the embodied logic of the flesh. (158)

To be fair, in "Structure, Sign, and Play," if Derrida denies the logic of the flesh, that denial is only a logical consequence of the language paradigm. He writes:

> If totalization no longer has any meaning, it is not because the infinity of the field—that is, language and a finite language—excludes totalization. This field is in fact that of *freeplay*, that is to say, a field of infinite substitutions in the closure of a finite ensemble. This field permits these infinite substitutions only because it is finite, that is to say because instead of being an inexhaustible field, as in the classical hypothesis, instead of being too large, there is something missing from it: a center which arrests and founds the freeplay of substitutions. (289)

In *The Prison-House of Language*, Fredric Jameson notes that structuralism, "the primacy of the linguistic model," is a move "to rethink everything through once again in terms of linguistics" (vii). Building on Jameson's point, Terry Eagleton observes: "It is a symptom of the fact that language, with its problems, mysteries and implications, has become both paradigm and obsession for twentieth-century intellectual life" (84-85).

Jameson's "prison-house of language" is what Derrida refers to as that field of freeplay, of "infinite substitutions," from which there is no escape. That prison, Derrida states, exists *within* a finite field as conceived by structuralism. Yet, as Brennan notes, language is only a part of the whole. As "both a paradigm and obsession for twentieth-century intellectual life," language has been positioned as the whole. Within such a system, only what can be named or assigned a concept is entertained as "real" and "true," i.e. stable and centered enough to be consensually referenced, referred to, and cited—even though, as Derrida presents, language *per se* is never stable or centered. As Nietzsche writes:

> Every word immediately becomes a concept, inasmuch as it is not intended to serve as a reminder of the unique and wholly individualized original experience to which it owes its birth, but must at the same time fit innumerable, more or less similar cases—which means, strictly speaking, never equal—in other words, a lot of unequal cases. (*Portable* 46)

This dynamic variance disguised as stable universality was addressed earlier in my analysis of Kant's *common sense* and Deleuze's critique of the universal (see footnote 17). Of course Jameson's "prison-house" and Derrida's "formless" "mute" originate with Nietzsche, whose thoughts on "reason and logic" are frequently represented by his famous aphorism: "We have to cease to think if we refuse to do it in the prison-house of language; for we cannot reach further than the doubt which asks whether the limit we see is really the limit" (*Will* 522).[39] As Nietzsche notes, that "prison-house" can only lead us

[39] Jameson's unattributed translation of Nietzsche is the most cited version of the philosopher's aphorism that I found—and for good reason, as its distinct wording is eminently quotable and provides Jameson with his book's title. My bibliographic source, however, the well-known Vintage/Random House edition *The Will to Power*, as translated by Walter Kaufman, words the sentence as follows: "We cease to think when we refuse to do so under the constraint of language; we barely reach the doubt that sees this limitation as a limitation" (522). John R. Betz, in his article *After Enlightenment: The Post-Secular Vision of J. G. Hamann,* also cites Jameson's unattributed translation but offers the following German sources, *Ueber*

to the threshold of doubt, at which point we ask: is this really the limit? Derrida is correct that there is "something missing" from this "field of infinite substitutions," this "prison-house of language." And Brennan is correct that what is missing is the energy matter of affective bodies. Perhaps to turn away from the "prison-house of language" is to cease to think, and to begin to feel. But "any inquiry into *how* one feels has to take account of physiology as well as the social, psychological factors that generated the atmosphere in the first place" (Brennan 1).

Positioned solely as a meaning-making linguistic enterprise, autobiography suffers the same disembodiment. In the study of autobiography, the affective becomes subordinate (or irrelevant) to rational analysis and understanding. Still, readers usually turn to autobiographical subject matter that resonates with them cognitively *and* emotionally, with, I believe, an emphasis on the latter. The concept of aesthetic autobiography, however, reverses that dynamic. Cognitive understanding is secondary (or irrelevant) to an embodied, affective response. The "burden of truth" that adheres to autobiography has bound the genre to the semiotics of fact rather than emotional truth. And I am not saying that "facts," one way of defining "truth," "such as it appears to me, in as much as I can know it, etc., making allowances for lapses of memory, errors, involuntary distortions" are not relevant to autography. But there is more to truth, and more to autobiography, than facts if we are interested in the full spectrum of how people, as affective bodies, actually live. And, although autobiography can be a form of history grounded in research and buttressed by data, it is still "his" or "her" story at its most subjective.

Wahrheit und Lüge im aussermoralischen Sinne, *KSA*, vol. 1, pp. 875ff.; *KSA*, vol. 3, p. 592. Personally, I also prefer Jameson's version as it gestures further toward a realm beyond language.

As an example of the subjectivity of autobiography, I return to Lejeune's "allowances for lapses of memory, errors, involuntary distortions." In my own life, for instance, there are crucial dates of events (like the deaths of my biological mother and foster sister) that I simply cannot remember; while other experiences (like my time in kindergarten) or events (my arrival at Pleasantville Cottage School at age 10) appear to me only as a series of wavering images.[40] Further, as a former foster child and ward of the state with no extant immediate family, I can neither verify nor learn much about certain events in my life. Several years ago, trying to locate certain "facts" about my childhood, I contacted my childhood legal guardian, The Jewish Childcare Association (JCCA). Not only did JCCA have my birth date wrong but I was informed that my records were lost (during a fire or flood). Despite these large lacunae in my personal narrative and history, my childhood remains alive in my body, not only as fractured, protean memories but as affective responses that are activated in certain situations. I understand my life not only as an accumulation of recordable facts—most of which, I admit, I cannot unequivocally recall or verify—but also as a series of emotional encounters (some traumatic; others sublime). For me, there are aesthetic autobiographies (texts, paintings, sculptures, films, and other artifacts, as well as live performances) that physically resonate with me. They momentarily ground, shape and express the mute swirls of my sensational memories. Encountering such works, I shiver, my breath alters; I unexpectedly sob or laugh. My perception of the immediate environment dramatically

---

[40] In revising this section, I searched the web and found a Flickr page with photographs of The Pleasantville Cottage School (PCS) in the late 1970s (http://www.flickr.com/photos/conti1410yahoocom/page7/); viewing the buildings and campus that I have not seen since I was 12 produced a profound visceral response: a shock of recognition that manifested itself in a shiver, faint nausea, nervous giggles, and tears. The webpage for the school, describes PCS, as "This coed residential treatment center cares for 118 emotionally troubled youngsters. The cottage-based campus program works with residents and their families, helping them build on strengths to resolve the problems that made it necessary to come into care" (http://www.jccany.org/site/PageServer?pagename=cottage_pcs).

shifts, intensifying my awareness of people nearby, elsewhere, or deceased. In short, I experience an undeniable somatic recognition. And although I wish I had more verifiable data to anchor my past, I have also experienced that what I identify as aesthetic autobiographies are often, to quote Tim O'Brien on the force of storytelling, "truer than the truth" (*Things* 83), in their emotional immediacy and ability to reveal the past as a sensational presence.

For those in psychic pain, who feel the need to convey their embodied experience in order to bridge their isolation, as well as for readers who need to experience physically that someone else knows their pain, an aesthetic autobiography can be a medium of catharsis and (re)connection. When an embodied experience, such as that of depression and trauma, eludes language, to evoke a sensory state in another person might be the best, if not only, means of transmitting an otherwise inarticulate subjective experience. Even when language fails as a semiotic tool of reason, impotent in its ability to directly explain or describe, it can still be affectively quite powerful. Eugene T. Gendlin writes:

> It is widely assumed that language is inherently just a conceptual system. If language is more than that, we seem unable to say what exceeds concepts . . . because we can only speak by means of concepts. . . . It is assumed that if anything did exceed concepts. . . it would only work to disorganize what we say. In contrast . . . language has an order greater than its conceptual system, its distinctions, rules. . . . The body functions vitally in that thinking and saying which exceeds forms. ("Wider Role" 192-93)

Certain aesthetic autobiographies may “speak” to particular individuals at certain moments in particular contexts. Such communication may involve, and also exceed, concepts, with the “body functioning vitally” in that process. The connection between the artist, art, and audience is sensorial, embodied, affective. Language may be a vehicle, but, as Brennan notes, it can never be an endpoint, especially in regard to the fluid, uncontainable flow of feeling.

IV. Affect—Movement: Feeling: Consciousness

> Does the earth gravitate? does not all matter, aching, attract all matter?
> So the body of me to all I meet or know.
>
> Walt Whitman
> "Children of Adam"

> Everything seems connected: disparate locations twitch and burst into activity like limbs reacting to impulses sent from elsewhere in the body, booms and jibs obeying levers at the far end of a complex set of ropes and cogs and relays.
>
> Tom McCarthy
> *C*

> Emotions, far from being private, self-contained, and self-sustaining entities, are transpersonal and contagious phenomena that reshape the contours of the social body.
>
> Rita Felski
> "Suspicious Minds"

In *The Body in Pain*, Elaine Scarry notes that physical pain "has no voice" because it has no direct and exact correlative in language, and, as a result, the specter of doubt confronts anyone who attempts to "write" her pain. Through the aesthetics of creation, however—or as Scarry puts it, "self-displacing, self-transforming objectification" (166)—an observer "hearing about [another's] pain" *can* be moved to feel that pain:

> For not only are the interior facts of sentience projected outward into the artifact in the moment of its making, but conversely those artifacts now entered the interior of other persons as the content of perception and emotion. (176)

She writes that through "acts of making, human beings become implicated in each other's sentience" (176). Scarry distinguishes between "imagining," when the "activity" and "object" are internal, and "making" or "creating," when the process of imagining results in a tangible object in "the external world" (177). Such transference of feeling via the imagination results in what composition scholar Sondra Perl calls "this bodily process of knowing" (10). Similarly, for philosopher Richard Rorty, his "utopia" of "human solidarity" is "achieved not by inquiry but also by imagination, the imaginative ability to see strange people as fellow sufferers" (xvi). For Rorty, the imagination is a vigorous defense against the powerlessness of poststructuralist *thinking* and the limitations of language.

Nonetheless, Rorty's arrival at feeling through the imagination privileges cognition over sensation, reinforcing the self-contained aspect of sentience and precluding its nonconceptual transmission. The aesthetic object is processed through the imagination before being felt. Conceptualization precedes feeling. Scarry, however, is less decisive in the distinction between thinking and feeling. She writes that "seeing" a creative work is also to see "the one who has made" that work; both enter the "interior" of an audience through the process of "perception" (176). Although she emphasizes sight, an act of perception may include hearing, touch, smell, and taste. Further, the senses may fuel the imagination, but they also shape experience in nonconceptual ways. My project builds on the idea that through "acts of making, human beings become implicated in each other's sentience"; it assumes a more fluid connection between the imagination and body, and acknowledges that perception exceeds conceptualization in experiencing any work of art. Sensation stimulates the imagination as the imagination stimulates sensation; they are

complementary and often inextricable. Yet a body may be moved toward affective receptivity that elides, or only tangentially involves, the imagination. In these, and other moments, sensation's dynamism exceeds the individual; it is, as Rita Felski states in regards to emotion, "transpersonal" (8), with "trans" defined here as "across" and "through" although *not* "beyond" if transcendence is implied, which is at odds with my project's immanent perspective. Like Scarry and Rorty, I believe that the subjectivity of suffering *can* be conveyed through art but I also believe that such transmission surpasses the imagination (although the imagination remains an integral component). The subjectivity of another's suffering can—in fact, I will argue, *must*, if emotional identification is to occur—be *sensationally* experienced. Such embodied experience is actuated through a gestalt of form, content, color, texture, tone, context, and imagery—operating in relation to the history, biology, and context of a given audience.

The "recent" move toward dismantling distinct boundaries between thinking and feeling, as recounted by Reddy, contextualizes and grounds my project.[41] Summarizing what Kurt W. Fischer and June Price Tangney have identified as a "revolution in the study of emotions" (3) in the last quarter of the twentieth century, Reddy notes that cognitive "psychologists have moved away from linear models of cognition toward models involving multiple pathways, multiple levels of activation and types of activation, involving complex combinations of suppression and enhancement" (31). He states that:

> emotion was associated both with nonlinear (free-associational, poetic, or symbolic) thinking and with physiological arousal (blushing, adrenaline

[41] Sociologist Deborah B. Gould tracks a similar pattern in her own discipline. In *Moving Politics*, she writes that prior to the 1970s , emotion was "typically understood as natural impulses that interfered with reason" (16). As she notes, the "emotional turn" in the late 1990s and "continuing today," however, "is a response to the excesses of the rationalist paradigms, but it is an effort to offer a corrective without resurrecting the problems presented by the classical collective behavior models" (16).

> flow, changes in heart rate, and so on). These two types of phenomena were linked in that they both departed from a vision of conscious, rational, voluntary action that was believed to be the hallmark of human intelligence. Symbolic thinking is not strictly rational; physiological arousal is not strictly under voluntary control. But as notions of "voluntary" and "conscious" have broken down, and as thinking has increasingly been regarded as reflecting multiple levels of activation, attention, and coherence, it has become difficult to sustain the distinction between thought and affect. (31)

He reveals that arguments for noncognitive and cognitive bases for emotion, notably represented by R.B. Zajonc (for the noncognitive) and R.S. Lazarus (for the cognitive) have only complicated distinctions. "According to [Brian] Parkinson and [A.S.R] Manstead who reviewed the debate in 1992, the problem lay with the definition of the two terms," Reddy explains. "Zajonc defined emotion broadly and cognition narrowly; Lazarus the reverse" (13). As noted in the previous section of this chapter, language, already a slippery system, becomes more elusive in the domain of sensation, emotion and affect. It can be entertaining, when not frustrating, to witness informed thinkers spar in their search for stable and universal definitions to anchor emotion. As A. Ortony and Terrence J. Turner observe, according to Reddy, "all emotions" are "assemblages of components, and . . . such assemblages could vary almost infinitely" (13).[42]

Aesthetic Autobiography and the Poetics of Despair embraces the infinite variations of emotion and the fluid interplay between thought and feeling. Aligned with

[42] For a neuroscientific perspective, see La Doux, who identifies emotion and cognition "as separate but interacting mental functions mediated by separate but interacting brain systems" (69).

Prinz, and what may be termed a "neo-Jamesian" framing of feeling, I situate emotion as "perceptions of bodily changes *and* causes of bodily changes" (*Construction* 54) [italics mine]. In other words, emotions originate in concepts and sensations. William James understood emotion solely as perceptions of bodily changes, i.e., sensation. In "What is an Emotion?" dated 1884, he writes, "My thesis . . . is that the bodily changes follow directly the PERCEPTION of the exciting fact, and that our feeling of the same changes as they occur IS the emotion" (Flatley 13).[43] Flatley provides an example that he prefaces as "counterintuitive," "[t]hus . . . weeping did not follow on sadness, but the reverse: sadness *was* the feeling of weeping, happiness was the feeling of smiling, and so forth" (13).[44] Although I think that Flatley's illustration is somewhat reductive—the sensation of sadness encompasses more than weeping, the physiology of happiness more than smiling—I do believe that James' understanding of emotion rings true in how it *can* be experienced.[45] But, like Prinz, I also believe, as noted above (i.e., sensation stimulates the imagination as the imagination stimulates sensation), that thinking can trigger bodily changes—emotion—as well. Accommodating the cognitive and noncognitive aspects of emotion, Prinz offers the "*embodied appraisal theory,*" in which he states: "Emotions are embodied, because they are somatic signals, just as James and Lange maintained. But emotions are also appraisals, insofar as they represent concerns, as standard cognitive theories maintain" (*Construction* 65). I think that Prinz's embodied appraisal theory is helpful and correct, but I would amend it to say that "emotions *can* originate as

[43] Carl Lange independently developed his theory of the body as the source of emotion around the same time as James, resulting in what has been coined the James-Lange theory.
[44] Brennan notes: "The James-Lange theory (miscalled in that there were real differences between James and Lange, especially concerning James's awareness of the external factors influencing the emotions) essentially dictates that bodily responses give rise to affective states. This view is popularly rendered by examples such as 'crying make us sad,' although for William James the issue was far more nuanced" (4).
[45] Research by neuroscientists Damasio and Le Doux supports the supposition that many emotional responses seem to occur automatically, prior to cognition.

appraisals" and they *can* also stem from "perceptions of bodily changes." In other words, their provenance may be either noncognitive or cognitive, although, in the end, emotions are always embodied and involve an appraisal or connotation.[46] Further, in practice, the cognitive and noncognitive dynamics of emotion are always in flux, so origins are moot. Appraisals can produce emotions, and modes of thinking can attenuate or intensify existing bodily states; however, a perceived change in the body can also foster or color appraisals. For example, I may be feeling good (which would have specific cognitive and noncognitive origins). I then walk into a room full of angry people and experience a physiological shift in my body (one that is not solely cognitive), which, in turn, affects my immediate, and possibly subsequent, perceptual and cognitive states. Or, in another situation, I may be sad. I am then visited by attentive and positive-feeling individuals who produce a temporary or enduring change in my psycho-somatic condition.

With depression and trauma, sensation and appraisals become even more complexly intertwined. For example, prior to introducing his term *embodied appraisal*, Prinz contrasts the agency of irrational thinking with the lack of agency of "irrational" feeling:

> We can be blamed for reasoning badly, but it's hard to blame someone for getting depressed. We can say that a thought is unreasonable and that a thinker is unreasonable for having that thought. With emotions, it's harder to criticize the person, because we exercise less control over how we feel than over what inferences we draw. (64)

[46] Silvan Tompkins, pioneering theorist of emotion, which he termed affect, wrote in the 1960s about the unsustainability of a mind-body divide in regards to emotion. As Flatley nicely summarizes it: "Affects, in Tomkins's view, are not productively examined in terms of a body-mind dichotomy; they occur neither in mind nor body but in an assemblage, network, or system that is not comprehensible in terms of its corporeal or cognitive component parts" (14).

Privileging the cognitive aspect of emotion can lead people to blame depressed and traumatized individuals for what Joan Didion calls "wrong-think" (*The White Album* 168) in regards to certain outside perceptions of others' psychic-somatic pain. The complicated interplay between sensation, emotion, and the intellect is especially salient in Didion's essays, which, in my reading of "The White Album" as a work of aesthetic autobiography, is addressed in chapter three. In any event, I think that Prinz's point that "we exercise less control over how we feel than over what inferences we draw" is particularly relevant to the noncognitive, *a*rational aspect of embodied trauma and or depression. Yet, if thought and feeling are mutually informed, when an emotion, "which we exercise less control over," affects our thinking, thinking may be less under an individual's control than Prinz suggests. Consequently, it is important not only to move beyond a purely cognitive position on emotion but to recognize how an individual's emotions are produced and altered through interaction with others and the environment.

In *Aesthetic Autobiography*, the sensational dynamics between author and the communal body—to which, as a reader, I belong—are integral. My interest is not in locating stable concepts of emotion, which, as noted, I do not think is feasible anyway. Nonetheless, it is important to situate my own terms within the recent literature on the subject, evolving and dynamic as it thrillingly is. As such, *sensation*, the most elemental of my terms, is positioned as purely physiological. It is employed here, as defined by entry 1a of the OED online, as "the subjective element in any operation of one of the senses, a physical 'feeling' considered apart from the resulting 'perception' of an object." Yet *feelings* and *emotion*, as I use the nouns, involve object perception. Of course, "feeling" is often "synonymous" with sensation, as when a doctor says to a patient,

"when I apply pressure here, how does that feel?" On the other hand, "feeling" can also be synonymous with emotion, as when a psychologist asks her patient, "how does my question make you feel?"[47] In terms of the theorists informing my work, I like both Brennan and Altieri's definitions of "feelings" as, respectively, "sensations that have found the right match in words" (Brennan 5) and "elemental affective states characterized by an imaginative engagement in the immediate process of sensation" (Altieri 2). In both definitions, as is often the case, the medical and psychological meanings are interwined. For my project, I tend to use the noun "feeling" in line with Prinz's "neo-Jamesian" framing of emotion: "perceptions of bodily changes and causes of bodily changes" (54). As a result, feelings and emotion are understood as connotative sensations not necessarily "matched" in words, thereby finding room for value-assigned sensations that exceed or escape concepts. Finally, and most germane to my work here, *affect* is identified, to borrow from Brian Massumi by way of Deleuze and Félix Guattari, as an embodied "intensity" (*Parables* 27), which is derived from the matrix of circulating energy in all its forms. Accordingly, affects are energetic "forces" registered through the senses, from which, in turn, feelings and emotions are formed, and potentially conceptualized. Accordingly, affects are always relational and inter-subjective. Affects *affect*.

As a noun, affect is derived from classical Latin, *affectus*, which, as traced by the OED, variously meant "mental or emotional state or reaction (especially a temporary one), physical state or condition (especially a pathological one), influence or impression, permanent mental or moral disposition, eagerness, zeal, devotion, love, intention, purpose." Despite the wide-ranging associations—whether as temporary or permanent,

[47] Feeling, as a gerund, like the infinitive "to feel," can also connote a state of being, as in "feeling pretty makes me confident" or "I feel pretty"; but it is a state of being that is qualified and contingent. To say "I feel pretty" or "feeling pretty" are not as decisive or stable as stating "I am pretty."

"mental" or emotional—the irrational, or *non*rational, connotation of *affectus*/affect remains fairly constant up to the present. Interestingly, however, the OED groups definitions of affect under two distinct categories: "I. Senses relating to the mind," which spans from 1348-2002, and "II. Senses related to the body," which spans from about 1537 to 1793, with category II's definitions limited to "an abnormal state of the body; a disease or disorder." With this categorical distinction, the OED maintains a mind/body divide. Moreover, in its survey of definitions under "senses related to the mind," from the Fifteenth to the Seventeenth Century, the OED lists the following: "a mental state, mood, or emotion, *esp.* one regarded as an attribute of a more general state; a feeling, desire, intention"; "An inner disposition or feeling (rather than an external manifestation or action)"; "Feeling towards or in favour of a person or thing; kindly feeling, affection"; "A desire or appetite." In all the aforementioned definitions, "feeling" and "emotion" remain prominent, so the listing of the term under "senses related to the mind" reinforces feeling and emotion as cognitive phenomenon, despite the recent framing of emotion as embodied as well as cognitive. Nonetheless, it is OED's listings of affect under philosophy and psychology that are most relevant here. They are also the most recent. Philosophy's use of affect as "an emotional, unreflective response" spans less than hundred years, from 1799-1885. It is not until 1891 that the term is used within psychology and psychiatry, whose definition remains with us into the twenty-first century:

> a feeling or subjective experience accompanying a thought or action or occurring in response to a stimulus; an emotion, a mood. In later use also

> (usu. as a mass noun): the outward display of emotion or mood, as manifested by facial expression, posture, gestures, tone of voice, etc.

As might be expected, quoted psychological/psychiatric examples from the late nineteenth century still use the term as synonymous with emotion. For example, as cited from his *Collected Essays and Reviews*, dated 1920, William James writes: “We may also feel a general seizure of excitement, which Wundt, Lehmann, and other German writers call an *Affect*, and which is what I have all along meant by an emotion” (358). However, three decades later, in an unattributed quote from a publication entitled *Sociometry*, an author writes: “The perception of affect within 10-man groups is surprisingly accurate . . . which suggests that perceptual behavior is . . . based on a valid assessment of the feelings of others” (263). And, in 1974, from *The Godwulf Manuscript*, crime novelist Robert Brown Parker writes: “Like Terry, he showed no affect. No response to stimulus. It was as though he’d shut down” (53). In these last two examples, as well as a final quotation from *The American Journal of Psychiatry* in 2002, the relational and responsive connotations of affect are clear. Still, general use of the term as synonymous with emotion persists.

In his book *Affective Mapping*, published in 2008, Flatley begins with a glossary of emotion and affect. He writes:

> In the long history of work on affect and emotion, sometimes the two terms are taken to be synonymous, other times a sharp difference is asserted, and in both cases the meaning of the terms is and has been highly variable. In everyday usage, while the words are often interchangeable, there are significant connotative differences. Where *emotion* suggests

> something that happens inside and tends toward outward expression, *affect* indicates something relational and transformative. One *has* emotions; one is affected *by* people or things. (11-12)

As the OED reveals, the connotative differences between the two terms has occurred largely in the second half of the twentieth century, particularly in psychology and medicine. Postmodern philosophy and academic theory have built on those psychological and medical connotations of affect, which I will look at shortly. I am not sure, however, that "in everyday usage," not to mention academic discourse, those connotative differences are so clear.[48] For example, in the epigraph from Rita Felski that opens this section, the "transpersonal and contagious phenomena" that she calls "emotion" are, in the context of affect studies, more specifically (and accurately) categorized as the affect of emotion. Even Flatley states that "a strong conceptual distinction between affect and emotion is not central" to his book's purpose, which is an argument for a non-depressive and generative concept of melancholy. He notes "a preference" for the term affect because of its precision and his project's focus on the relational as opposed to the expressive. Still, he writes that "it seems least confusing to follow everyday usage of the two terms (that is, more or less synonymous but with the aforementioned connotative differences) and to be explicit about it when I think a difference between them needs to be emphasized" (12). Given that I do not think that the connotative distinctions between the two terms are always so clear, and that those distinctions are integral to my project, I do not use the terms interchangeably (as I do for the nouns feeling and emotion).

[48] In a recent conversation I had with a well-regarded, notable literary critic and essayist, she identified emotion and affect as synonymous, with no mention of any connotative distinctions.

In *The Transmission of Affect*, Brennan presents a compelling, and I think important, case for affect as relational and transpersonal. As a relatively early and lucid contribution to affect studies, it is a good starting point for explaining my project's positioning of the term within the current theoretical literature. Brennan draws on philosophy and science but especially, as might be expected given the etymology of "affect," psychology. She views emotion and affect as synonymous, but, unlike Flatley, she does not articulate connotative differences between the two terms. For her, however, there is an important distinction between feeling and affect/emotion: "feeling" is closer to sensation; affect is a "physiological shift accompanying a judgment" (5). As she puts it: "when I feel angry, I feel the passage of anger through me. What I feel with and what I feel are distinct" (5). Affect/emotion is framed as autonomous from the physiology of "feeling." For her, feelings are "sensations that have found the right match in words" (5), which is how I will essentially define "feelings" *and* "emotions," except that they need not find explicit expression in langauge; they need only be connotative. I make this definitional tweak because, as addressed in this chapter's previous section, of the difficulty of articulating sensation, feeling, and emotion. Just because I cannot find the words to describe a sensation does not mean it has no connotation for me; in which case, it is a feeling. For example, I may identify a feeling as somewhere between fear and excitement, but also tinged with something like awe and desire, yet with a shadow of shame—or, rather, humiliation—or, maybe, embarrassment. I may still struggle as these words are not "the right match" for what I am fleetingly or inchoately experiencing. Moreover, the sensation(s) may shift further once I attempt to articulate a match and objectify them for public apprehension. Even so, what is happening in my body—

something between fear and excitement, within the shadow of shame or humiliation or, perhaps, embarrassment—involves more than a "meaningless" twitch or trembling. It has a connotative value that I sense and understand but cannot clearly or coherently articulate but nonetheless results in a felt bias or stance (although it may not have been conceptualized into a judgement). Furthermore, emotion/feelings are not usually experienced discretely but simultaneously, either in competitive tension, or as complements, or some sort of kaleidoscopic fusion.[49] In fact, sensational experience is often closer to analogue than digital. Although sensations and emotion/feelings can suddenly be activated or re-routed, they frequently tend to gradate, vacillate, and blend. The problem of trying to contain and stabilize the language of emotion becomes immediately apparent with Brennan. She writes that "what I feel with and what I feel are distinct" but that claim is hard to substantiate empircally. It is overly intellectual, suggesting that emotions can be separated from sensation when, in fact, as Prinz persuasively argues, sensation is integral to emotion. Moreover, what is this "what" that she "feels"? If it exists outside "what she feels with," is it transcendent? And how does the body recognize it? In her book, she discusses chemical and electrical "entrainment" (9) as transmitters of affect, but she still leaves the "what" undefined.[50]

Brennan attempts to reify emotion as a circulating "what" in order to ground her more persuasive presentation of affect as relational and transpersonal. The reasoning seems to be that if emotion/affect travels between bodies, resulting in a "physiological shift accompanying a judgment," it should be conceptualized outside the body. But by

---

[49] My thanks to theater scholar Amy E. Hughes, who, during our work together as Mellon fellows, highlighted the simultaneity of experienced emotions.

[50] Brennan notes that what neurologists call entrainment is the process "of transmission whereby people become alike" by which "one person's or one group's nervous and hormonal systems are brought into alignment with another's" (9).

conflating affect and emotion, her conceptual distinction between emotion and sensation cannot be exchanged for a lived distinction if one accepts that emotion and sensation are inseparable. Further, emotion, having a connotative value, is generally understood as culturally specific; affect, however, as addressed below, is not. A more applicable approach is assumed by Reddy, who, realizing the complexity and problem of locating stable and universal signifiers for emotion, suspends the "what." Instead, he opts for "a concept of 'translation' as a replacement for the poststructuralist concept of 'sign'" (78).

> By using the concept of translation, I will argue, one can avoid the problem of the raw signified. One can, if one chooses, think of the signified as just another signifier within its own semiotic system. Or, one can think of it as something other than a sign. Either way, I propose, one can fruitfully think of the signified as being "translated" when one attempts to apprehend it, when it is "found" as the shadowy complement of a signifier. (78)

This idea of "translation" has applied possibilities and will be helpful when I discuss specific aesthetic autobiographies. On the other hand, Brennan's concept of emotion/affect does not lend itself to an experiential translation. The "what" that she claims that I feel is too rarefied and the sensation/emotion dichotomy unsustainable. I point this out because her overarching thesis—that affect is dynamic and interpersonal—is drawn on, and applied to, lived experience. As a result, I think her fundamental argument is clearer and more helpful if we distinguish between affect, elemental sensation and sensation that has a connotative value, which can be defined as emotion or feeling (when a noun).

Brennan's claim that affect is autonomous is consistent with that of other affect theorists.[51] Distinguishing affect/emotion from feeling/sensation enables her to comprehend and frame affect's contagious and inter-subjective effects. But, as Massumi and Reddy have realized, instead of attempting to reify emotion or affect as an unspecified "what," suggesting a thing, it seems more viable to approach both as variable processes. Tomkins, writing on the topic more than half a century ago, offers one of the earlier attempts at adopting this strategy. He sees affect as autonomous and insists on its variability. For Tomkins, affect is a part of an independent but converging set of self-sustaining systems. As Flatley writes:

> Tomkins argued for treating the affects as a kind of irreducible "motivation system" or "assembly," one that inevitably interacts with but is nonetheless distinct from the drives, from strictly physiological factors, from perception, and from elements of "cognition" such as belief, thought, and choice. Like visual perception or the reasoning mind, the affects have an internal logic—a systematicity—all their own. (12)

Like Brennan, and to some extent Flatley, Tomkins does not distinguish between affect and emotion (as I do, in line with most contemporary affect theorists).[52] His not distinguishing between the two terms seems appropriate to his historical moment, when, unlike at our current theoretical juncture, affect and emotion were widely understood as synonymous (and, which, in certain contexts and for many people, they remain). Similar to today's theorists, however, Tomkins views affect as a "motivational system of great

[51] See Massumi (whose first chapter of *Parables for the Virtual* is entitled "The Autonomy of Affect"), as well as Eric Shouse, Patricia Clough, Melissa Gregg and Gregory J. Seigworth.
[52] See Massumi, Shouse, Patricia Clough, Melissa Gregg and Gregory J. Seigworth.

freedom" (*Shame* 34) that is not reducible to physiology or cognition.[53] Yet the distinctions between affect, physiology, and cognition that Flatley claims for Tomkins above can be misleading. If affect is distinct from the body and reasoning mind, it is distinct in the way that hydrogen and oxygen are distinct from water. As Sedgwick observes regarding Tomkins' thinking on the motivational forces that produce affective responses, there "is virtually never a direct translation of some external event that could be discretely segregated as 'stimulus'" (*Shame* 10-11). In other words, there is no "what." Rather, the *process* "reflects the complex interleaving of endogenous feedbacks, motives, long-term states such as moods and theories, along with distinct transitory physical or verbal events" (11). Despite his limiting and, from today's perspective, unpersuasive identification of eight basic affects, Tomkins does not view affect as stable.[54] Instead, in a Deleuzian sense, he situates it as a *distinct system* of "independent variability" "by which the human being generates complexity" (43). In fact, Tomkins' affective system is quite compatible with current affect theory, in which theorists see affect emerging "out of muddy, unmediated relatedness and not in some dialectical reconciliation of cleanly

---

[53] This "freedom" is relative to the complete lack of affective freedom imposed by the drives (hunger, thirst, sleep, and often yet complexly, sex). Tomkins, however, does discuss how non-drive affects can be systemically over-determined (which he terms redundancy) as to be outside the control and agency of an individual.

[54] In her introduction to *Shame and Its Sisters: A Silvan Tompkins Reader*, Segdwick addresses Tomkins' elemental affects, which would seem "an irresistibly easy" basis for "discreditation" of his work. She writes: '"You don't have to be long out of theory kindergarten to make mincemeat of, let's say, a psychology that depends on the separate existence of eight (only sometimes it's nine) distinct affects hardwired into the human biological system" (2). She continues, noting that such "scientism" of Tomkins' "formidably rich phenomenology of emotions" can be quite justly read as "an alternative" to the "far coarser scientism" of contemporary anti-biological stances that find his work "so easy to dismiss." That there are certain aspects of Tomkins' theory of emotions that sound "cockamamie" today while contemporary, anti-biological stances seem to be "virtual common sense—or that one sounds ineluctably dated and the other, nearly fresh as print—may reveal less about the transhistorical rightness of 'theory' than about the dynamics of consensus formation and cross-disciplinary transmission" (2). I would add that throwing out an entire theoretical perspective because of certain contradictions, "flaws," or historically informed "shortcomings" would leave few, if any, theoretical perspectives intact, resulting in the loss of many compelling and powerful intellectual ideas/movements.

oppositional elements or primary units" (Seigworth and Gregg 4). As a result, "easy compartmentalisms give way to thresholds and tensions, blends and blurs" (4).

Notwithstanding Brennan's attempt to reify emotion and separate it from sensation, her view of affect as a process of independent variability is similar to that of Tomkins and contemporary affect theorists. In fact, her classification of emotion/affect as a "what" is inconsistent with her otherwise more persuasive and process-oriented perspective. As she writes, "anything that takes account of systems and codes is to be preferred to biological studies that isolate entities from their context and place" (158). Similarly, for Flately, affects "are always amplifying, dampening, or otherwise modifying some other affect, or drive, or perception, or thought process, or act or behavior, resulting in a well-nigh infinite number of combinations between different affective microsystems and their feedback mechanisms in interaction with their environments" (16).

This Deleuzian notion of affect as variable and process oriented, not a "what" but a dynamism of "intensities" and "becomings," itself derived from Baruch Spinoza (Massumi 17; Bonta and Protevi 49), is given renewed currency by Massumi. The noted translator of Deleuze and Guattari's *A Thousand Plateaus* (1987) and *Nomadology: The War Machine* (1986), Massumi adapts their definition of affect (which is sometimes shorthanded, as I do here, as Deleuzian) in *Parables for the Virtual*. Along with Sedgwick and Adam Frank's resurrection of Tomkins in *Shame and Its Sisters*, Massumi's framing of the term has proved influential in shaping current theoretical conversation on the subject. As Melissa Gregg and Gregory J. Seigworth write in their introduction to *The Affect Theory Reader*:

> Undoubtedly the watershed moment for the most recent resurgence of interest and intrigue regarding affect and theories of affect came in 1995

> when two essays—one by Eve Sedgwick and Adam Frank ("Shame in the Cybernetic Fold") and one by Brian Massumi ("The Autonomy of Affect")— were published. Not only has the theoretical content of these particular works proven to be invigorating (combining affect's displacement of the centrality of cognition with affect theory's own displacement of debates over the centrality of structuralism and poststructuralism) but the voice and stylistics of their writings—where affect serves as force and form—have likewise contributed to their wide circulation and considerable influence in the years since. (5)

According to Deleuze and Guattari, affects "are becomings," "the relations composing, decomposing, or modifying an individual," in which "there correspond intensities that affect it, augmenting or diminishing its power to act; these intensities come from external parts or from the individual's own parts" (*ATP* 256). In *Parables for the Virtual*, Massumi presents a series of real-life examples of how in "motion, a body is in an immediate, unfolding relation to its own nonpresent potential to vary" (4). From the lightning-speed game play of soccer, to the neurological processing of color and brightness, to the skin's differing responses to linear and nonlinear narratives, Massumi reveals "the pressing crowd of incipiencies and tendencies," what he calls "the virtual" (30). The virtual is a product of relational bodies and their affects. It is the competing and complementary simultaneities outside, or tangential to, consciousness, which are experienced as singular. A good example of competing and complementary simultaneities experienced as singular is human sight, hearing, taste, touch, and smell—

the senses.[55] In this theoretical context, the distinct *relationship* between affect (as a force) and emotion (as the embodied registering of that force) becomes clearer. Emotions are a consequence of affects but affects exceed emotions. In this Spinoza-Deleuze/Guattari-Massumi conceptualization, affect, even as a noun, functions more as a verb, denoting an ongoing action, state, occurrence, or potential. In fact, Deleuze and Guattari's frequent reference to it in the plural—as affects—better characterizes its systemic multiplicity (thereby avoiding the "what" trap).

This emphasis on process and indeterminacy may make affect seem like a dancing chameleon, only less tangible. For example, Flatley states, "Massumi writes that 'an emotion is a subjective content, the sociolinguistic fixing of the quality of an experience which is from that point onward defined as personal'" (202).[56] Flatley responds that he is not convinced "that emotions cannot be collective" (although Massumi makes no such claim) yet he sees "the usefulness of having a term to talk about those experiences of affect that *are* more fixed and located squarely in the personal" (202). Even so, he views "Massumi's concepts of emotion and affect" as "too specific; they leave too much out" (202). He elaborates:

> This is especially true regarding his understanding of affect, which he . . . sees as a kind of irreducible, nonassimilable intensity ("intensity is the inassimilable"). Whereas affect is nonsubjective because it exceeds subjectivity, as a moment of disorienting intensity, emotion would be the

[55] Similarly, recent neurological theories of consciousness view consciousness as embodied and overdetermined yet experienced as singular. See Gerald Edelman, *Wider than the Sky* (2004) and Damasio, *Self Comes to Mind* (2010). Edelman writes that the "unitary scene" of consciousness "can contain many disparate elements—sensations, perceptions, images, memories, thoughts, emotions, aches, pains, vague feelings, and so on." "The number of such differentiated scenes seems endless, yet each is unitary" (7-8).

[56] Flatley's citation is from "The Autonomy of Affect," in *Deleuze Reader,* ed. Paul Patton (Oxford: Blackwell, 1996), page 221. That article is reprinted as chapter two in *Parables for The Virtual*, with the same quote appearing on page 28.

> term to describe our internal, iterable, recognizable experience of an affect. . . . It is the apparent valorization of affect as the "inassimilable," and the all too handy opposition between (pure? transcendent?) affect-as-intensity and ("conventional," "owned") emotion that seems least helpful to me here. (202)

By viewing affect in opposition to emotion, and reverting to binary thinking, Flatley misinterprets Massumi, and, as a result, Deleuze. Flatley falls into a similar trap, which I address above, concerning Tomkins on affect, physiology, and cognition, when Flatley fails to sustain how, in practice, such theoretically useful terms are not discrete but fold into each other. In other words, the multiplicities that function together as a distinct system (producing affect, emotion, cognition, etc.) still interact with, and cannot be isolated from, other systems. Still, despite his resistance, Flatley does seem to understand Massumi's framing of affect when he writes:

> In contrast to affects, then, we might distinguish emotions as the result of the inevitable interaction of affects with thoughts, ideas, beliefs, habits, instincts, and other affects. If affects are not reducible, emotions are, and it is emotions that vary from context to context, person to person. (16)

I think a potential for continued confusion between emotion and affect may result from the fact that, in contemporary affect theory, both are dynamic and associated with the senses. But, emotion, as a socially mediated process, is laden with cultural meaning and limited to the human sphere. Affect, on the other hand, exceeds such codes; it has yet to be captured. Emotion is a shifting constellation of affects (i.e., forces, impingements, intensities), which is why emotions are constantly being reconfigured and, as Flatley and

Felski rightly observe, *are* often contagious and collective. But, as Massumi writes, "emotion and affect—if affect is intensity—follow different logics and pertain to different orders" (27). With affect, Seigworth and Gregg explain, "any notion of strict 'determination' or directly linear cause and effect goes out the window," thereby destabilizing notions of "subject/object, representation and meaning, rationality, consciousness, time and space, inside/outside, human/nonhuman, identity, structure, background/foreground" (4). They note that "approaches to affect would feel a great deal less like a free fall if our most familiar modes of inquiry had begun with movement rather than stasis, with process always underway rather than position taken" (4).

Indeed, the attempt to capture affect through language, *when approached strictly as a system of signification and representation*, will often confuse and mislead those seeking to "understand" it. Massumi notes:

> The problem is that there is no cultural-theoretical vocabulary specific to affect. Our entire vocabulary has derived from theories of signification that are still wedded to structure even across irreconcilable differences (the divorce proceedings of poststructuralism: terminable or interminable?). In the absence of an asignifying philosophy of affect, it is all too easy for received psychological categories to slip back in, undoing the considerable deconstructive work that has been effectively carried out by poststructuralism. (27)

Even more than emotion, affect does not lend itself to signification, an identifiable and corresponding "what." Dynamic abstractions like emotion and affect expose language's failure to center and contain. Yet, if there is a language frequently found in discussions of

affect it is that of science. Words such as "molecular," "energy-matter," "force," "quantum," among others, are not uncommon in the writing of Deleuze and Guattari, Brennan, Massumi, Seigworth and Gregg, and Patricia Clough. Massumi notes that "the point . . . is not to make the humanities scientific" but "to borrow from science in order to make a difference in the humanities" (21). "In other words," he continues, "part of the idea is to put the humanities in a position of having continually to renegotiate their relations with the sciences—and, in the process, to rearticulate what is unique to their own capacities (what manner of affects *they* can transmit)" (21). At the same time, the potential and kinetic (chemical, electrical, thermodynamic, etc.) "forces" identified by science are what the above theorists often mean by affects. The interplay of bodies is irreducibly the result of such scientifically designated energy, which is understood as the ability to do "work," i.e., affect. But as Seigworth and Gregg comment on the use of the term "force," the emphasis is on movement and action, not necessarily strength, which is why affects are frequently virtual and nonconscious:

> The term "force" . . . can be a bit of a misnomer since affect need not be especially forceful (although sometimes, as in the psychoanalytic study of trauma, it is). In fact, it is quite likely that affect more often transpires within and across the subtlest of shuttling intensities: all the minuscule or molecular events of the unnoticed. (2)

Consequently, affect studies have become theoretically useful in "post-humanism," in which human values and concerns are understood as culturally specific and neither transcendent nor universal. In the post-human, all energy-matter, from inorganic to organic, is part of a continuum. As Clough writes, with "pre-individual bodily forces"

and "quantum indeterminacy," "distinctions of living and nonliving, the biological and the physical, the natural and the cultural begin to fade" ("Political Economy" 1, 3).

Nonetheless, although I draw on some science in the following chapters, my focus is neither on science nor the post-human, but on language as transmitter and producer of sensational affect, in other words, the aesthetic. Although language is a semantic system, albeit one that is in constant flux, it is also an affective one, because it is in constant flux. As such, I look at language as a poetical process that moves, shapes and affects—particularly well captured in my project's chosen autobiographies of trauma and depression "where affect serves as force and form." Although those working in semiotics—including, perhaps especially, those in the arts and literature—understand the instability of language after postmodernism, it still seems that the search for meaning and decisive definitions is not easily relinquished, as Massumi notes. "The problem with the dominant models in cultural and literary theory is not that they are too abstract to grasp the concreteness of the real," Massumi writes, paraphrasing Deleuze, and anticipating Flatley's objections. "The problem is that they are not *abstract enough* to grasp the real incorporeality of the concrete" (5). For Massumi, and Deleuze, abstract is not understood in opposition to the physical and concrete; rather, the abstract is "real" but in the sense of "never present in position, only ever in passing" (5).[57] It is "an abstractness pertaining to the transitional immediacy of a real relation—that of a body to its own *indeterminacy* (its openness to an elsewhere and otherwise than it is, in any here and now)" (5). I believe

[57] Deleuze and Guattari repeatedly asserted that their philosophy was not metaphorical: "By this they mean that their work is not dependent upon semantic effects caused by a transfer of a term from a literal to a figurative sense. . . When DG show that different actual or intensive registers of concrete strata or assemblages are grounded in an identical virtual abstract machine they are not relying on linguistic effects, but are undertaking an ontological demonstration of 'divergent actualization' or 'differenciation'" (Bonta & Protevi 113).

that it is through the aesthetics of language that affect is best conveyed and conceptualized, not in any "tidy" way, but as a dynamic abstraction.[58]

Ironically, in terms of the applied aspirations of my project, a potentially problematic contention by current affect theorists is that affect is not conscious. Perhaps this seemingly "fixed" claim is a symptom of what Massumi identifies as "signification" "still wedded to structure." For example, Seigworth and Gregg write:

> Affect, at its most anthropomorphic, is the name we give to those forces—visceral forces beneath, alongside, or generally *other than* conscious knowing, vital forces insisting beyond emotion—that can serve to drive us toward movement, toward thought and extension, that can likewise suspend us (as if in neutral) across a barely registering accretion of force-relations, or that can even leave us overwhelmed by the world's apparent intractability. (1)

Similarly, Massumi, who equates affect with "intensity," characterizes it as "a nonconscious, never-to-be-conscious autonomic remainder" (25). It is "the charge of indeterminacy carried by a body" yet "inseparable from it," or, in another phrasing, "the incorporeal dimension of the body," "of it, but not it" (5). But definitions of "consciousness" vary. In their introduction to *Consciousness: From Perception to Reflection in the History of Philosophy*, Sara Heinämaa, Vili Lähteenmäki and Pauliina Remes, trace the development of the concept. They cite the "one central feature of consciousness is its intentionality or aboutness: conscious beings relate to the world in a specific way; they are not just causally influenced by external objects, but are also

[58] Arguably, Roland Barthes remains one of the best practitioners of language as such a Deleuzian "abstraction."

informed by things and their environments" (10). Heinämaa, et al., stress that although "modern thinkers tend to conceive of this relation as an active intending or directing of oneself toward the object," "not all our predecessors agreed with this assumption" (10). In other words, there have been historical shifts in thinking on how much agency, or how "active" a role, a subject has in conscious experience. One stake that emerges is "for and against reification" of the subject. For example, some "propose that the subject of experience is a special type of movement and change; others claim that the subject must be understood as a special 'pole' or 'node' which merely ties together conscious experiences and does not add any matter or content to them" (17). Moreover, there is a long history of disagreement about the temporality of the subject, with some seeing it as a "stable, unchanging and self-identical structure," while others view it as evolving over time (18). Finally, there are those who "have decided that we cannot think subjects and subjectivity at all, our intellectual and reflective capacities cannot capture this area of experience" (19). Instead, all we can do "is to live through our own subjectivity" (19), "at best, examining its effects on those levels of mentality and life that are within the reach of our powers of reflection; alternatively, we can engage in this task more actively, by construing, constructing and creating ourselves" (19-20).

Current affect theory is obviously more compatible with concepts of self and consciousness in which "the subject of experience is a special type of movement and change" or a "pole" or "node." Recently, however, in *Self Comes to Mind: Constructing the Conscious Mind*, Damasio—not an affect theorist but a popular neuroscientist—defines a crucial component of consciousness as having "an automatic, unprompted, undeduced sense of self as protagonist of the experience, no matter how subtle the self

sense may be" (161). At moments, it seems as if Damasio's view of consciousness might have affinities with affect theory. "Consciousness fluctuates," he writes. "Below a certain threshold consciousness is not operating, and along a scale of levels it operates in the most efficient way. Let us call this the 'intensity' scale of consciousness" (167). Even so, while acknowledging the "variability," "continuum," and "gradations" of consciousness, Damasio is ultimately on the side of subject reification, arguing for a certain identifiable stability to consciousness grounded in a sense of self. It is, as neurologist Ned Block states, a position of consciousness "based on self-consciousness—on knowledge, rationality, reflection and wakefulness."[59] Indeed, according to Damasio's criteria, sleep and any "altered" states induced by drugs and alcohol are not consciousness. The human trait of self-awareness is one way to define consciousness but, as Block notes, "experiential phenomenal consciousness," "what it is like to *experience*—is something we share with many animals." Unlike self-consciousness, phenomenal consciousness is purely sensational and nonconceptual. Allen Ginsberg, as I address in chapter two, sought to represent something like phenomenal consciousness in his work. Similarly, in chapter four, I look at how Tim O'Brien strives to produce an abstract autobiographical fiction that moves the reader through the senses. Spiegelman and Cunningham, the subjects of chapters five, explore phenomenal consciousness by destabilizing conceptual language with graphics and photography. Nonetheless, within the context of affect theory, affect is by definition not self-consciously experienced—for then it would move into the realm of the captured and conceptualized. It can, however, arguably be experienced through phenomenal consciousness. Massumi writes:

[59] http://www.nytimes.com/2010/11/28/books/review/Block-t.html.

> If incorporeal materialism is an empiricism it is a radical one, summed up by the formula: *the felt reality of relation*. A complication for radical empiricism is that the feeling of the relation may very well not be "large" enough to register consciously. It may be what Leibniz termed a "small perception," or microperception . . . The vast majority of the world's sensations are certainly nonconscious. (16)

As a result, in keeping with the fluidity and the spectrum of affect as part of the "felt reality of relation," affect *can* be registered by the body. For although affect *may* "not be 'large' enough to register consciously," that does that mean that it cannot, in certain circumstances, be detected phenomenally. It is through the accumulation and constellation of affects that bodies respond and act. Eugene Gendlin writes:

> it can seem as if phenomenologically speaking, experience has no order of its own at all, as if it depended *entirely* on the distinctions that one reads out or into it. Martin Heidegger, who followed Husserl, wrote early on that all concepts and distinctions depend upon a more basic kind of understanding that already exists in all human living and practice. It is that felt, "moody" kind of understanding with which we create our situations, the implicit understanding with which we go about acting, trying, going-for, and avoiding. It is an understanding which, he said, "reaches much farther than cognition." (*Giving* 195)

Although not an affect theorist in the Deleuzian-Massumi context, philosopher and psychotherapist Gendlin argues for a Massumi-like "felt reality of relation" in which the body is moved by nonconceptual, as well as conceptual, forces. "The physical body is

continuous with the universe," he writes. "Starting with this ordinary body you get a wider, at first confusing, murky (. . . .) sense that we're taught to consider as nothing. But a felt sense comes" (194).[60] He then notes, striking a Deleuzian chord: "This *coming* is characteristic of the body" (194). Still, not unlike Altieri, cited in my section on aesthetics, Gendlin is critical of "the relativism that is current today," viewing it as "nihilistic" (196). Of course, "relativistic" need not be equated with "nihilism," although such relativism does tend toward the "post-human." But a relativistic system need not discount meaning and value in the contingent, yet nonetheless real, interpersonal sphere occupied by sentient beings.

My point: affect, when experienced as a phenomenological event, is not unconscious; further, it has potential ethical implications. As discussed in the beginning of this chapter, pain is real, and the creation of an aesthetic artifact can be a means of alleviating pain, for both the creator and potential audience—whether through catharsis, transmutation, or the redirecting of affect. Moral concerns motivate both Altieri and Gendlin in their work, the former in arguing for aesthetic value and the latter for an ethical felt sense. Both turn to universal paradigms, whether Kant in Altieri's case, or a phenomenological order suggestive of God in Gendlin's. Yet both seem to believe that ethics cannot exist in a relative, relationally specific arena. (The term "relativity" takes on a decisively negative connotation in Gendlin and Altieri's ethical system, as the word "liberal" does for John Boehner in his political one.) Still, Gendlin's argument for what is essentially the affects of language, what he calls "felt sense," and in the context of my project can be called "aesthetic," is relevant here. He notes that the "body can always

[60] Gendlin frequently uses the ellipses to express the inarticulate, nonconceptual.

give the words more feedback than can possibly be derived just from concepts or forms or distinctions" (193). Distinctions give way to "a much greater order" of "intricacy" (200). Citing the narratives that patients formulate while in treatment from his work as a psychotherapist, Gendlin states that words always "work in a new way" (201). "*Any situation, any bit of practice, implies much more than has ever been said*," he writes. "That is how poets and artists are possible" (201).

That is how poets and artists are possible. Creative artifacts, like the emotions that produce them, are constellations of affects. And like emotions, they are inseparable from the sensational body. As a result, poetics—when framed as the art of "literary" discourse—is a perfect subject for the study of affect; poetics thrives on multivalence, ambiguity, and play (between its own significations, between creator and artifact, between artifact and audience).[61] Moreover, as affectively driven, autobiographical projects of depression and trauma are especially suited to such an approach. These autobiographical works examined in the following chapters, as I will argue, unlock the closed system of a mind/body/individual in psychic pain by reconnecting with the larger, open system in which it participates. This larger, interrelated system is not merely social but energetic, affective, virtual. In turn, these aesthetic autobiographies reveal how—echoing Wilson's idiosyncratic reading of *Philoctetes*, in which "normal man finds he needs" "the master of a superhuman art which everybody has to respect" (472)—the wounded artist exists as an extension of society, and society as an extension of the wounded artist. Or as Brian Massumi writes, "Individuals and societies are not only

[61] I draw on the OED online definition of poetics, 6Bb: "The creative principles informing any literary, social or cultural construction, or the theoretical study of these." http://www.oed.com.ezproxy.gc.cuny.edu/view/Entry/146532?rskey=NzTlkM&result=1&isAdvanced=false#. December 2010.

empirically inseparable, they are strictly simultaneous and consubstantial. . . in other words, they might be seen as differential emergences from a shared realm of relationality that is one with becoming—and belong" (71).

As a project of autobiography and the affects, which are always contingent, specific and relational, I insert my own autobiography as I emotionally and sensationally experience it, where appropriate. Throughout *Aesthetic Autobiography*, I strive to approach language, emotion, and affect as Deleuzian abstractions: never fully present, always in passing. As Seigworth and Gregg write:

> At once intimate and impersonal, affect *accumulates* across both relatedness and interruptions in relatedness, becoming a palimpsest of force-encounters traversing the ebbs and swells of intensities that pass between "bodies" (bodies defined not by an outer skin-envelope or other surface boundary but by their potential to reciprocate or co-participate in the passages of affect). Bindings and unbindings, becomings and un-becomings, jarring disorientations and rhythmic attunements. (2)

What is art—in all its forms—but "bindings and unbindings, becomings and un-becomings, jarring disorientations and rhythmic attunements"? And how appropriate, then, is the common term "body of work," when used to refer to an artist's output. For in this project, as co-participant in the passages of affect, I aspire, as Brennan writes, to extend the "knowledge of sensation, following it farther along its pathways," "extending consciousness into the body, infusing it with the conscious understanding from which it has been split hitherto" (154).

Part Two. Grief Unbounded and Chaos Uncontained: The Ineffable Made Visceral

Chapter 2. "from whose pained head I first took Vision": My Sensational Allen Ginsberg, 1948-1959

Naomi and Allen Ginsberg, 1930s

> "Blocked by appearances, love comes through in the free play of the imagination, a world of art, the field of space where Appearance—natural recognition of social tragedy & world failure—shows lesser sentience than original compassionate expansiveness of heart."
>
> Allen Ginsberg, preface to *Howl Annotated*

> "Love is a form of mental illness not yet recognized by any of the standard diagnostic manuals."
>
> Stuart Sutherland, *International Dictionary of Psychology*

> "sweet holy blessed love"
>
> Allen Ginsberg, Journal, August 1954

I

Prelude: In Which David Bahr's Dying Mother Leaves No Trace

I'm 15. My foster mother June tells me to pick up the phone. It's Sadie, my mother; she's been in the hospital. I'm still not sure what's wrong. Haven't spoken in weeks. Her voice is tinny, mechanical, like that computer in 2001 Space Odyssey. I don't recognize this person: I panic—dizzy—regrettable stammer: "You're not going to die?" A crackle—an electronic sob—a human voice interrupts (a nurse?): "I'm sorry, the patient can't talk right now." Hangs up. A few days later I am informed Sadie "expired." Cancer. She will be cremated.

There is no grave. I kept no diary. My state records have been lost.

II

My Pained Protagonist

In 1957, Allen Ginsberg began his poem "Kaddish," an elegy to his schizophrenic mother, Naomi, who died a year earlier. Ginsberg was 31 and had long struggled with his own bouts of depression. In 1945, his father Louis had expressed concerns that the then 18-year-old "Allen seemed to be following [his mother's] path to self-destruction and possible madness" (Morgan, *Celebrate* 63). The poem, inspired by the Jewish prayer for the dead, originated in an outpouring of emotion. Ginsberg writes in a letter to Jack Kerouac, dated November 13, 1957, after composing the first lines of "Kaddish," what would be the penultimate stanza of the completed work: "I write best when I weep, I wrote a lot of ['Kaddish'] weeping . . . but I got a get a rhythm up to cry" (*Kerouac Letters* 369). As with much of the poet's writing, the sensational body is both source and subject. Lawrence Ferlinghetti recalls of Ginsberg, in *Starting from San Francisco*, "he is the flippy flesh made word / and he speaks the word he hears in his flesh / and the word is death" (27).

The son of a high school English teacher and struggling poet, Ginsberg was encouraged early in his career by his father, a self-described traditionalist, to compose clear and concise verse. The elder Ginsberg found his son's work tending toward the "knotty," "impacted," and "inchoate" (Breslin 91)—words that, not surprisingly, suggest the flesh. Ginsberg's "flesh made word" was a life-long project, with varying degrees of success. Early in his career, he labored to find a language that avoided, as he would later write, "the anachronism" of "outworn verse of previous century voices" that he associated with his cerebrally bound father. In "How *Kaddish* Happened," Ginsberg explains, in a characteristic verbal stream, the need to mend "the broken consciousness of mid twentieth-century suffering anguish of separation from my own body and its natural infinity of feeling its own self one with all self" (347). He sought to resurrect sentience, a casualty of bloodless intellectualization and ruthless individualism, resulting in what he saw as personal and collective "madness."

It is through the subject of "madness" that he famously finds his voice, which, in those mute pockets of memory, has now become my own. For Ginsberg, it begins with his breakthrough poem, "Howl," composed from 1955-1957, a chronicle of "the best minds of" his "generation destroyed by madness." It is subtitled "for Carl Solomon," whom the poet met in 1949, while both were patients in New York State Psychiatric Institute of Columbia Presbyterian Hospital.

After his release from the institute in February, 1950, Ginsberg attempted to conform to social norms. Convinced by hospital doctors (and his father) that his homosexual obsessions and behavior were destructive,[62] he dated women and took a

[62] In an undated letter from the 1940s, Louis Ginsberg writes to Allen: "Even if normal values are rationalizations as well as abnormal ones, the latter, as normal values *qua* normal ones, result in a better

series of "legit" office jobs. He wrote to Jack Kerouac, "A turning point has been reached in that I am not going to have anymore homosexual affairs anymore: my will is free enough now to put this in writing as a final statement" (Ginsberg, *Letters* 56). But the next five years proved painful. Called up for the draft later that year, he was "summarily excused on psychological grounds" (Morgan, *Celebrate* 129). By sleeping with women, Ginsberg briefly maintained the illusion of leaving behind, as he put it, his "schizoid paranoid belief" "and queerness" (Ginsberg, *Letters* 65); yet, at the same time, as Morgan comments, he "still wanted to die, but his fear of the act of suicide and the pain that went with it preserved him" (129). His self-delusions would become harder to sustain. In December 10, 1951, Ginsberg wrote in his notebook: "I waste time—whole days, weeks, years have passed by. I walk around aimlessly not noticing things, not experiencing anything new, emotionally or spiritually, just dreaming or analyzing without result and with an aimless aim" (Ginsberg, *Martyrdom* 348). In 1952, he entitled one notebook "The Life Failure of Allen Ginsberg," concluding an entry with "Quiet desperation, as Louis used to say, which is to say the subject matter is still Death, now in its creeping form" (Morgan, *Celebrate* 153). In 1953, he wrote to his unshakable sexual obsession Neal Cassady: "Mainly I discover life so unsatisfactory that I am beginning to use my imagination to invent alternatives" (157). By 1954, after a short trip to Mexico, he again attempted to break away from Cassady after a disastrous sexual encounter, in which Neal's wife Carolyn had walked in on Ginsberg performing oral sex on her husband and promptly threw him out. That night, writing in his journal, Ginsberg again considered

---

and safer adjustment to society and a greater integration of the person. According to your blanket statement, you would bracket the rationalizations of a homosexual or an insane person as satisfactory for society and for the person. The homosexual and the insane person is a menace to himself and to society. Danger and disaster lie that way! Your clever verbal solutions are incongruous with [the] reality of life. You are developed intellectually; but, emotionally, you lag" (Breslin 90).

killing himself: "Back alone in a hotel and once again the great battle for survival. . . How sweet to be finished with Neal. The pain of masochism and the absolute angel gone. The absolute angel comes and goes. Suicide again?" (180). Later that year, while still struggling to sustain a heterosexual relationship with a young woman named Sheila Williams, Ginsberg met Peter Orslovskly, who would become his life-long companion. He also began another round of therapy, this time with Dr. Philip Hicks, a young psychiatrist at the Langley Porter Clinic.

Unlike his previous doctors, as Ginsberg recounts it, Hicks did not reinforce Ginsberg's fears that he was sick and his desires perverse. In *Allen Ginsberg in America*, Jane Kramer records Ginsberg's account of his breakthrough session with Hicks:

> I had like a beautiful conversation with him one day, and the key thing I said was that I was dissatisfied with what I was doing, I was very unsure of myself. So he said, 'What would you like to do? What *is* your desire, really?' I said, 'Doctor, I don't think you're going to find this very healthy and clear, but I really would like to stop working forever—never work again, never do anything like the kind of work I'm doing now— and do nothing but write poetry and have leisure to spend the day outdoors and go to museums and see friends. And I'd like to keep living with someone—maybe even a man—and explore relationships that way. And cultivate my perceptions, cultivate the visionary thing in me. Just a literary and quiet city-hermit existence.' Then *he* said, 'Well, why don't you?' (42)

Ginsberg's above statement, reported in the late Sixties, during his reign as "guru and paterfamilias" of "poetic heroes and prophetic poets" (9), has become part of his self-

perpetuated mythology. Accordingly, after this moment, he moved in with Orlovsky and proceeded to pound out "Howl," becoming the Ginsberg that America knows. Regarding this therapeutic transformation, Morgan states in *The Typewriter Is Holy: The Complete, Uncensored History of the Beat Generation*:

> Allen then had an epiphany and realized that if he was not true to himself, life really was not worth living. He resolved to change in the ways that he wanted to change and not alter his feelings just because others thought he should. It was a turning point in his life and in the course of American literature. (92)

Morgan—who, as Ginsberg's archivist, rigorously and subtly renders the poet in his biography, *I Celebrate Myself* (2006)—opts for the Ginsberg myth in *The Typewriter is Holy* (2010), a short, sweeping work apparently meant for popular readership. Although in that same book, Morgan acknowledges that Ginsberg and Orlovsky's "romance was rocky from the very start" (92), Ginsberg's transformation into "Ginsberg" was not—as *I Celebrate* supports—as smooth as the above passage implies. Also citing the anecdote reported by Kramer in his article "The Origins of 'Howl' and 'Kaddish,'" James Breslin responds: "Actually, Ginsberg continued to work at his market research job for three or four months *after* he moved in with Orlofsky and in so far as his journals reveal his mood at the time, they suggest he felt depressed, not liberated, when he lost his job (86)." Further, his relationship with the essentially heterosexual Orlovsky failed to ease Ginsberg's loneliness and self-doubt. Breslin notes that "daily entries from late 1954, when he first met Orlofsky, show that Ginsberg entered into this relationship with the same expectations of salvation and the same premonitions of disaster with which he then

launched all his activities" (86). In an entry from April 20, 1955, Ginsberg writes:

> Not writing enough what can I say—rapid exchange of events, jobloss, peterloss,—isolation, no one I love loves me no contact, the isolation. . . No male on horizon for such protection, I not being a young boy who needs outside strength, thus complete isolation. . .
>
> Peter I can't talk to when I need comfort, he repelled by my need as I was repelled by [William] Burroughs' attachment to me for support. (*Journals Mid-Fifties* 128-29)

In his psychoanalytic reading, Breslin holds that Ginsberg's search for acceptance from psychiatrists such as Hicks can be read as a reaction to his early, unsatisfied longing for loving support from his father. He writes: "In this exchange we can see some of the motives for Ginsberg's own later adoption of the role of the tolerant, benign patriarch toward younger people" (Breslin 87). Indeed, the poet would become nurturer to many wounded youths, specifically men (of which Keroauc and Orlovsky were among the first). Nonetheless, Ginsberg still struggled with bouts of profound despair as he embarked on, and wrote, "Howl." In fact, more than therapy, writing, or romance, fame would seem to become the best antidote to Ginsberg's depressive tendencies. As a renowned public figure, he took on so many causes—anti-drug laws, free speech, Buddhism, the anti-war movement, gay rights, to name a few—that he could be perceived as dodging any darkness within. Yet, I would also contend that his intense engagement with society—as a Philoctetes of his time—also transformed him. The lack of appreciation he failed to find as a young man, he found in abundance from the

burgeoning youth culture of the Sixties. That attention, from teen strays to the likes of Bob Dylan, appears to have physiologically buoyed him.

III

Interlude: In Which David Bahr Wishes He Kept a Journal

Increasingly I wish I'd kept a diary, not as a record of truth but as what Ann Cvetkovich calls "an archive of feeling." My mother left me no letters, no photos, no records. What will I leave? My memories are fuzzy and fading. Reading Ginsberg's correspondence and poetry has initiated a rediscovery of a young gay boy named David and his unstable mother Sadie.

IV

In Which My Pained Protagonist's Sensational Style is Collectively Fostered

> "'Tis by society alone he is able to supply his defects, and raise himself up to an equality with his fellow-creatures, and even acquire a superiority above them."
> David Hume, *Treatise on Human Nature* (III.II.II)

Like Ginsberg's sexuality and psychology, his poetic diction did not follow a simple and straightforward trajectory. As a young poet, he composed in the formal style encouraged by his father Louis, a school teacher who had published his own poems in local papers. While at Columbia University, under the instruction of the poetically conservative Lionel Trilling and Mark Van Doren, he sought the approval of his mentors by continuing to produce traditionally metered verse. In a long poem from 1945, entitled "The Last Voyage," Ginsberg writes of "bodiless" sensation, as if the conventional form could not accommodate his visceral self.

> We live in worlds that are not real,
>
> And move in nights of days to death;

And all sensation that we feel

Is as bodiless as breath. (l 215-18; *Martydom* 406-7)

As a counterpoint to the strictures of Louis, Trilling, and Van Doren, William Carlos Williams proved influential. Ginsberg would later credit him as having "an enormous moral impact, moral influence, an esthetic influence" (Morgan, *Celebrate* 127). In 1950, the 24-year-old attended a public reading by Williams; Ginsberg immediately wrote him a series of enthusiastic letters, moving Williams to meet with him.[63] In addition to Williams' credo "no ideas but in things," which guided Ginsberg to become more concrete in his writing (as his father had also advised), the elder poet believed an allegiance to rhyme and meter would stymie Allen's creativity; Williams encouraged him to compose in "everyday speech" to liberate him from his struggle with traditional formal constraints (127). As a result, Ginsberg began to translate some of his prose into "poetry," culminating in such works as "The Bricklayer's Lunch Hour," which began as a diary entry in the summer of 1947.[64] Decades later in *Collected Poems, 1947-80*, Ginsberg would assemble his poems in "straight chronological order to compose an autobiography" (xix). Section I of *Collected Poems*, "Empty Mirror: Gates of Wrath (1947-1952)," combines *Empty Mirror: Early Poems* and *Gates of Wrath, Rhymed Poems: 1948-1952*, originally published in 1961 and 1972, respectively. Of the 68 poems in section I, 39 are dated prior to 1950, and 14 of those are written in a more

---

[63] In 1946, Ginsberg had tried to interview Williams about his book, *Patterson, Book I*, for the local *Passiac Valley Examiner*, but that never materialized; instead he wrote a review, which was apparently badly edited and Ginsberg subsequently regretted. In a letter to Williams several years later, he writes that the older poet had invited him to return "but I did not, as I had nothing to talk about except images of cloudy light, and was not able to speak to you in your own or my own concrete terms" ("A Prefatory Letter," *Gates* [vii]).

[64] Morgan notes that Williams's advice was harder to follow then it might seem. "Without a pattern or model to follow Allen felt lost. After several failed attempts, he decided to find some of his old prose fragments in his notebooks and rework them into shorter lines of poetry. He sent a few of them, including "The Bricklayer's Lunch Hour," to Williams, who immediately and enthusiastically replied, 'You've got it!'"(*Celebrate* 127).

"conversational" style, while 25 are rhymed. Of the 29 poems dated 1950 or later, only six are rhymed. Further, many if not all of the unrhymed poems dated prior to 1950 appear to be journal entries that were later transformed into poems at Williams' suggestion.

Although Williams was "an enormous aesthetic" influence, Ginsberg's literary sensibility had begun to take shape years earlier, in the mid forties, while a freshman at Columbia University. There, he became smitten with the insouciant insolence of Lucien Carr, who introduced him to William Burroughs, David Kammerer and others "who were more honest about their homosexual nature, even if it wasn't openly condoned" (Morgan, *Celebrate* 36). In a diary entry from August 3, 1944, Ginsberg states: "Know these words and you will speak the Carr language: fruit, phallus, clitoris, cacoethes, feces, fetus, womb, Rimbaud" (*Martyrdom* 50). In fact, Ginsberg modeled his ambitious piece of juvenilia from 1945, "The Last Voyage," on Rimbaud's "Le Bateau Ivre." Morgan notes that Ginsberg "thought it was a stroke of genius for Rimbaud to see that art was a tool and a salvation for battered souls" (*Celebrate* 68). Drawn to, as Ginsberg wrote in 1944, the "campus bohemian, the whores, the fags, the sterile drunkard, and all the intellectual maniacs that clustered around the college" (*Martyrdom* 88), he took his aesthetic cues in coming years from William Burroughs, Jack Kerouac, Neal Cassady, and Carl Solomon. They provided a liberating contrast to the more authoritarian figures—his father, Trilling, Van Doren, various psychologists—weighing on him well into the mid 1950s.

One significant event, often cited as a creative turning point in the Ginsberg myth (Miles, Schumacher, Morgan), is the poet's famous Blakean vision in August 1948. Ginsberg was living in Harlem and taking several summer courses in order to graduate.

Lying in bed one day, he read Blake's "Ah! Sunflower," from *Songs of Innocent and Songs of Experience*, and masturbated. After ejaculating, he claims to have heard the voice of Blake. Later, in an interview with Tom Clark for the *Paris Review*, published in 1966, Ginsberg recalled that "the peculiar quality of the voice was something unforgettable because it was like God had a human voice, with all the infinite tenderness and anciency and mortal gravity of a living Creator speaking to his son" (53). In *Ginsberg: A Biography*, Barry Miles states that his subject "suddenly had a deep understanding of the meaning of the [Blake] poem and realized that he was the sunflower" (99). Along with "the auditory vision came a heightened visual perception" (99-100). According to Miles, "Ginsberg never did renounce his Blake vision; even in 1986, he described it as '[t]he only really genuine experience I feel I've had, something that seemed like a complete absorption of all my senses into something totally authentic as an experience" (104).[65] Of course, the factuality of that experience as a "vision" is not important. Ginsberg evidently felt something, whatever its physiological cause, which propelled him to seek further "visions" (of which he had several during those months) as well as other heightened sensorial experiences.

Ginsberg's correspondence and journal entries during these years reveal his early struggle with emotion and those—like his early analysts, father, and Trilling—who mistrusted it, especially at the expense of form and "intellect."[66] Such anti-emotive attitudes suggest, at best, a suspicion, at worst, an antipathy towards the sensational

---

[65] In an editorial note found in *Jack Kerouac and Allen Ginsberg: The Letters*, Morgan and David Stanford write that, at one point in the summer of 1948, Ginsberg did renounce his visions to Kerouac: "Once again Ginsberg wrote to Kerouac about his visions, this time denying that they had happened. Jack wrote in the margin of the letter, 'when he was flipping!' which was accurate. Ginsberg was never closer to madness than he was during this period" (Kerouac 41). Subsequently, however, Ginsberg reaffirmed them.

[66] In a June 14, 1949, journal entry, Ginsberg writes of Trilling's fictional characters: "Why do they continue to pursue the falsities of barren social and political forms, and try continually to invigorate or recombine and invent new forms, when it is feeling that they lack" (*Martyrdom* 319).

body,[67] which the "visionary" Ginsberg would ultimately reject. But prior to 1949, and throughout much of the early fifties, he often agonizes over emotion's "disordering" influence. In a March 2, 1947, journal entry, he writes:

> If I follow "emotion," respond automatically, I fear people, work, sports, etc., get into school troubles, become eccentric and disordered, melancholy, suicidal, ingrown and *jejune* and "juvenile" emotionally—I become morbid and "romantic." If I think, I become mechanical and sterile, shallow, embarrassed, conflicted. (*Martyrdom* 180)

His early, fraught stance towards his body can be interpreted as a battle with his homosexuality, which his father, doctors, and society saw as an illness. Yet, if Ginsberg saw his homosexuality as a sickness (and many of his early journal entries from the forties and early fifties show that he did), it was part of a potentially larger physiological disorder: being the child of a "mad" woman whose own flesh betrayed her.[68]

The idea that Ginsberg was damaged, mind and body, like his mother, was a frequent concern of his father. It came to a head on April 22, 1949. Ginsberg was in a stolen car with group of thieves who were living with him because of his friendship with a junkie named Herbert Hunke.[69] The vehicle had crashed and made headlines, with *The*

---

[67] See Brennan and her critique of the affective body as chaotic: "Just as intelligence was considered supraordinate to flesh, so was form conceived of as an external addition or imposition. Form is not considered inherent to matter, except as a potentiality at best" (158).

[68] Naomi's first emotional breakdown, at the age of 19, coincided with a painful sensitivity to light and sound (Miles 14).

[69] In a "notebook confession" entitled "The Fall," composed after his "bust," Ginsberg writes: "Who is Herbert Huncke? When I first knew him I saw him in what I considered the 'glamorous' light of a petty criminal and Times Square hustler who was experienced in the ways, thoughts, and activities of an underground culture which is enormously extensive. The attempt to dismiss him because of his social irresponsibility is something that I was never able to conceive as truthful or productive. I saw him as a self-damned soul—but a soul nonetheless, aware of itself and others in a strangely perceptive and essentially human way. He has great charm. I see that he suffers, more than myself, more than anyone I know of perhaps; suffers like a saint of old in the making; and also has cosmic or supersensory perceptions of an

New York Times reporting on the following day that Ginsberg "was a copy boy for a news service who had 'tied-in' with the gang, all with police records, to obtain 'realism' he needed to 'write a story'" (*Martyrdom* 277). As if implying an explanation, the news article closes with his statement: "Ginsberg told Lieutenant Sloan that his father lived in Paterson, N. J., and his mother was a patient at Pilgrim State Hospital" (277). Morgan writes about this period of Ginsberg's life:

> Allen's own self-esteem was so low, at that point, that once again, he thought he must be mad. . . all of his friends certainly thought he had finally gone over the deep end. His visions of Blake had been suspiciously questioned and condemned all around. He knew that his father thought he was going insane, Louis' response to his recent confession about his homosexuality was proof of that. Allen certainly felt that he was crazy in the eyes of the world. (*Celebrate* 113)

Soon after the accident, Louis wrote to Trilling, thanking the professor for helping his son, who, in lieu of prison time, would be sent to New York State Psychiatric Hospital, where Ginsberg would meet Solomon, the dedicatee of "Howl." In his letter to Trilling, Louis states: "As you no doubt know, Allen's mother has had a long series of nervous breakdowns; and she has been in and out of sanitariums for the last twenty-five years. I tried to give Allen what compensations I could; however, I suppose his wounded childhood had secreted some imbalance; or some trauma had precipitated some disorder deep in his psyche" (*Martyrdom* 321).

---

extraordinary depth and openness. I learned a great deal from him—I treated him as if he had come to give me metaphors for poetry. . . At any rate I sensed a great deal of understanding in him (*Martyrdom* 280).

As Ginsberg's correspondence and diaries reveal, the decade preceding and period during the composition of "Howl" was emotionally turbulent for the writer. He frequently mentions suicide, repudiates his homosexuality, and berates himself—"I am sick" (*Martyrdom* 280); "I am a madman angry at self" (*Journals Mid-Fifties* 115); "This pose, this prose, its afflatus and stupidity. How can I ever save myself from all this sordidness. Stop!" (*Martyrdom* 171). Despite his attempts to work through his "eccentric and disordered, melancholy, suicidal" feelings rationally, Ginsberg remained emotionally labile. Perhaps his "visions" were a physiological response to the conservative forces around him, his mother Naomi's deteriorating health, and the fact that, in November of 1947, at the age of 21, he was pressured to approve her lobotomy.[70] In any event, in April of that same year, before Naomi's operation and his visions, he wrote of his paralyzing capacity to identify emotionally with others.

> It strikes me that I attempt to integrate my personality by making up my mind, making decisions as responses, analyses of situations, identifying that singleness of mind with integration. This leads to the thought that at home, I received and submitted, with awareness of a true nature, to my mother's paranoid emotions: this identification with my mother's feelings. Then, listening to my father's complaints, I identified myself with his emotions: the result was that in one hour, I was on her "side" and "his" and continually felt called upon to make a decision in who to think with:

[70] On November 14, 1947, Ginsberg was informed by a letter from Dr. Harry J. Worthing, the senior director of Pilgrim State hospital, that Naomi's condition "is serious enough to warrant a prefrontal lobotomy." Because the hospital required the consent of her nearest relative, and Louis and Naomi were already divorced and Allen's brother Eugene refused responsibility, the decision was left to the 21-year-old Ginsberg. "Reluctantly, he put his faith in the doctors and signed the papers authorizing the drastic step, hoping that it would help free her from her paranoid fears; but sadly, Naomi was never the same again," Morgan writes. "For the rest of his life Allen felt guilty about what he had done. On November 25, terribly depressed, he wrote only a single line in his diary, 'Allen, don't die.'" (*Celebrate* 98).

> this decision, when conscious, is the neurotic mask, when unconscious, without decision, I am flying from pole to pole: whoever I'm with I understand and identify myself with. . . (*Martyrdom* 180)

Following Naomi's lobotomy, the emotionally liminal Ginsberg further destabilized, causing him to seek the ostensible order and authority of psychotherapy. In 1949, he approached his time in the psychiatric hospital with manic hopefulness.

> I dreamed of a madhouse and now tomorrow I am going to New York to a mental hospital. . . All my images now are of heaven. I dream of incomprehensible love and belief. I think always that I am about to put an end to my life, only now there is no worry as to how I will do it, as last summer after the vision. In the hospital I hope to be cured. My images tell me that hours of truth are at hand. I am not going to die, I am going to live anew. My thought has been peaceful all week. I have been reading *The Possessed* [by Dostoyevsky]. My devils are going to be cast out. (*Martyrdom* 316)[71]

Despite his "optimism," he closes the journal with "Tonight all is well. . . . What a terrible future [. . .] I am ill [. . .] I suddenly realized that my head is severed from my body; I realized it a few nights ago, by myself, lying sleepless on the couch" (316).[72]

Although Ginsberg hoped that his stay in the hospital would integrate his mind/body split, he expressed doubts immediately upon arriving. "[Carl] Solomon, a twenty-one year old Jew, an intellectual—said that they, the doctors, make no attempt

---

[71] See Janet Hadda, "Ginsberg in Hospital," for an argument that Ginsberg's hospitalization in 1949 did indeed exorcise his "devils": it allowed him to face and accommodate "the chaos that had always shadowed him" (230), eventually enabling him to "transform his own visionary capacities in poetry" (257).

[72] Guided by William Carlos Williams, he would later transcribe, almost verbatim, the final word of this diary entry into the lines a "poem," "Tonight all is well. . ." See *Empty Mirror: Early Poems*.

(even encourage in sublimate activities) the abstract madness; as long as behavior is socially acceptable," he wrote on June 29, 1949, the day he checked in. "It is only when abstract systems are carried out (particularly Solomon's absurd sense of them) in flesh does society object" (*Martrydom* 322). Five days later he wrote: "I am torn between putting aside my loyalty and love directed to the past (the underworld, the mythical symbols of tragedy, suffering and solitary grandeur) and the prosaic community of feeling which I might enter by affirming my own allegiance to those bourgeois standards which I had rejected" (322, 324). With social pressure to conform to the less emotional "prosaic community of feeling," and outwardly behave in a way that betrays his feelings, Ginsberg also wearies of thinking:

> Yet what do I know of the reality of all these bridges and ideas which make up the visible and invisible world? And why am I in the madhouse? How easy it is to reverse these values entirely and consider myself the patient and forbearing wiseman in a nation of madhouses. Neither of these are true, I tire of this thought. (*Martyrdom* 322, 324)

Following his release from New York State Psychiatric on February 27, 1950, Ginsberg worked hard during the next five years to conform to "bourgeois standards." He struggled with dating women and a series of office jobs, most successfully as a research marketer. In a diary entry from July 20, 1952, he writes: "I never ride on the subway toward an interview for a new job without dreaming of suicide" (Morgan 152). Conformity remained difficult for him, as Morgan notes:

> During these years Allen tried as best he could to do what society expected of him. He made an effort to hold down a regular job, but he was

> a terrible employee and didn't seem to be suited for anything practical. He was always late, he was clumsy by nature, he was forever daydreaming on the job, and most of the work he could find was not interesting to him. He longed for adventure. Nothing had ever held his interest for long, except poetry and writing. (152)[73]

By 1954, Ginsberg took a break from playing the role of heterosexual company man. On December 31, 1953, he left for a trip down the East Coast to Florida, where he would board a boat to Cuba, then fly to Mexico before finally ending up, six months later, in San Jose, California, with Neal and Carolyn Cassady. During his half-year adventure, low on cash and periodically in dire straits, he fervently returned to writing poetry (of which he had done little while working full time) and spiritual contemplation. At the end of the trip in June, after months of celibacy, he also had sex with a man, a painter he met at an artist's colony. Once in California, the conventional life that he had miserably maintained in New York was not easily resumed. Living with Cassady, Ginsberg again obsessed over Neal, and the two men reignited their sexual relationship, leading to Carolyn's throwing Allen out and personally driving him to San Francisco. There, Ginsberg tried to land a writing job but was instead forced to take another market research position. Suicidal thoughts returned; he again repudiated his homosexuality and began seeing Sheila Williams, a jazz singer. Yet by October 1954, the Dionysian Ginsberg resurfaced: high on a peyote, he looked out of Williams's apartment window and had another vision; he

---

[73] Throughout college and the first four years of graduate school, I worked as a temp on Wall Street. Although a valued employee (like Ginsberg), I was frequently late and daydreamed. After earning a Master's degree in English literature, I applied to business school to study finance. I remember standing in the office of one of the stock analysts during this time, imagining the room was mine, and having a brief but paralyzing anxiety attack.

saw “the robot skullface of Moloch,” the “Moloch whose eyes are a thousand blind windows!” (Morgan 184).

Ginsberg’s image of Moloch alludes to the god of antiquity and the Bible, for whom children were sacrificially killed (Leviticus 18:21). The OED states that the “rabbinical teaching” “that children were burnt alive (being placed in the arms of the idol, whence they fell into the flames) is widely known, and has influenced the extended use,” and Moloch has become broadly associated with human sacrifice. Morgan writes that for Ginsberg “Moloch was the personification (or deification) of the mechanical, insensitive, inhuman world he lived in and was ready to accept for ‘success’” (*Celebrate* 184).[74] The poet wrote in his journal:

> Uprising in the timeless city gloom, Dark Tower above ruddy building, suddenly a vision the Death Head—The building an evil monster—A tower in Hell—(“Those poor souls making it up in the tower”)—Two eyes blast light far apart brick glass illuminated from within—A painter might make it look like surrealistic reality, that would be too corny—this is deep gong religious. Impassive robot (antennalike structure) of Sir Francis Drake Hotel. And quite vegetable that monster too—it may be coming to eat me someday. . . (*Journals Mid-Fifties* 61)

Ginsberg’s use of parataxis, a style of diction that would become closely associated with the writer’s prose and poetry, is notable in the above entry. His early journals, until about 1949, prior to his vision and hospitalization, are more conventional, their syntax

[74] I wonder: what would Ginsberg think of union-busting America in 2011? Since Ginsberg’s death in 1997, the exodus of middle and working class in my Greenwich Village neighborhood has about reached completion; glass towers proliferate. In the now disproportionately affluent and privileged kingdom of New York City, Moloch swaggers proud.

hypotactic, the imagery less impressionistic. This stylistic shift shows up in his diaries and correspondence before it appears in his verse, as if he were not quite ready to take on the conservative literary conventions represented by his father, Trilling, and Van Doren.

When Ginsberg finally met William Carlos Williams in 1950—after the turmoil of sanctioning his mother's lobotomy, of the visions, and of subsequent hospitalization—he was in an intermittent state of relative stability; his literary tastes, however, continued to veer toward the marginalized, the maverick, the queer. For years, he had admired the work of Williams along with that of Rimbaud, Whitman, Céline, and Blake; more recently, Solomon had turned him on to Jean Genet, whom Ginsberg declared "about the greatest—greater than Celine, perhaps, but similar," "the homosexual hipster" author of "Huge apocalyptic novels" like "*Miracle de La Rose*, as massive autobiography, a long prose poem on prison life!" (*Letters* 54).[75] Likewise, Ginsberg desired to create a language of his own, a poetry born out of sensory experience, particularly his psychic pain. A letter that Ginsberg composed to Williams in 1950 was printed as the preface to *The Gates of Wrath, Rhymed Poems*: 1948-1952.[76] Entitled "A Prefatory Letter," Ginsberg writes:

> I do not know if you will like my poetry or not—that is, how far your own inventive persistence excludes less independent or youthful attempts to perfect, renew, transfigure, and make contemporarily real an old style of lyric machinery, which I use to record the struggle with imagination of the

---

[75] I first read Jean Genet, *The Thief's Journal*, three years ago, around the same time I first read Ginsberg's "Kaddish": two distinct, but equally unforgettable acts of fleshy ventriloquism.

[76] As published in *The Gates of Wrath*, Ginsberg misdates the correspondence "? Month 1949" but, according to biographers Miles and Morgan, he attended Williams' reading at the Guggenheim, mentioned in the letter, in 1950.

clouds, with which I have been concerned [. . .] I envision for myself some kind of new speech—different at least from what I have been writing down—in that it has to be clear statement of fact about misery (and not misery itself). (viii)

Ginsberg had expressed similar concerns to John Clellon Holmes in their correspondence a year earlier when he affirms Holmes' statement that "flesh will be the language" (Ginsberg, *Letters* 48).

The year prior to meeting Williams, Ginsberg was "working on fifty and sixty line psalms" (*Martyrdom* 260). From that period, the shorter "Psalm I" is published in *Empty Mirror: Early Poems*, dated by the author, in *Collected Poems*, February 1949. The freer form of the psalm apparently attracted Ginsberg, allowing him a fairly "clear statement of fact about misery":

> These psalms are the workings of the vision haunted mind and not that
> reason which never changes.
> I am flesh and blood, but my mind is the focus of much lightning.
> I change with the weather, with the state of my finances, with the work I
> do, with my company.
> But truly none of these is accountable for the majestic flaws of mind
> which have left my brain open to hallucination.
> All work has been an imitation of the literary cackle in my head.
> This gossip is an eccentric document to be lost in a library and
> rediscovered when the Dove descends. (*Empty Mirror* 9)

Although the psalm is an attempt to distance himself from the “imitation of the literary cackle,” it lacks the lively dynamism captured by the parataxis of his later journals and verse. In the context of his biography, I find it a moving record. But, viewed alone, with its flat and labored syntax, the language fails to stir me; it lies stillborn on the page.

Consider, on the other hand, the “poem” that begins *Empty Mirror*, dated from “Early 1952,” which, in *Collected Poems*, is titled “I feel as if I am at a dead end.”

> I feel as if I am at a dead
> end and so I am finished.
> All spiritual facts I realize
> are true but I never escape
> the feeling of being closed in
> and the sordidness of self,
> the futility of all that I
> have seen and done and said.
> Maybe if I continued things
> would please me more but now
> I have no hope and I am tired. (*Empty Mirror* 7)

More conversational than the earlier “Psalm I,” “I feel as if I am at a dead end” is another “clear statement of fact about misery,” but the form, with its compressed enjambment, fosters a sense of suffocation, exhaustion, and hopelessness. The diction is less self-conscious, perhaps reflecting the advice of Williams, who favored a “working American idiom” and a shorter line (Ginsberg would move away from the latter). As a result, the speaker is more immediate, familiar. I don’t need to know much about the subject’s life

to identify with his sorrow, to feel it. Still, it never becomes visceral for me in the way the "tragic custard-pie comedy of wild phrasing" (Ginsberg, "Notes Written" 132) of "Howl" and "Kaddish" do; it fails to imprint itself.

Williams' mentoring may have pushed Ginsberg to write in more relaxed poetic forms, but his distinctive voice seems to have been aided by others, notably Neal Cassady and Jack Kerouac. Cassady's long-lost "Joan Anderson letter," as it has become known, is frequently cited as a significant example (Miles, Schumacher, Morgan). Dated December 17, 1950, the letter recounts one of Cassady's romantic affairs but, according to Ginsberg, in a fast and frenetic "molten flow; no boring moments, everything significant and interesting, sometimes breathtaking in speed and brilliance" (*Letters* 67). Reflecting the manic, hepped-up speaking style of Cassady, the letter is attributed with prompting Kerouac to revise *On The Road*, adapting its idiomatic "freewheeling" narrative structure as the voice of that and subsequent novels.[77] Cassady's letter seems to have had a more immediate impact on Kerouac, whom Ginsberg quotes as saying "Neal is a colossus risen to Destroy Denver!" (67). Despite his own admiration of the letter's energetic prose, Ginsberg tempers his enthusiastic reaction with a characteristic intellectual analysis in which he critiques Cassady's "masterpiece" (67). "It's easier to speak of the flaws, which I will do," he writes. "Mainly, since it was a rambling letter, the subplots and flashbacks were a little in the way but could be easily edited to fit right in, but since you stopped short of the ending, made more chaos" (67). Instead of encouraging

---

[77] In 1959, television personality Steve Allen introduced Kerouac on his show as "the embodiment of a generation"; awkward and nervous, Kerouac reads a poetic passage from *On The Road* as Allen riffs on the piano: Kerouac's wounded masculinity rarely fails to move me. http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QzCF6hgEfto&playnext=1&list=PL1031F727AADDF935

Cassady to continue with his writing, and produce the novel he spoke of doing, Ginsberg's criticism, however supportive, had the effect of making Neal too self-conscious to continue. Ironically, Ginsberg, often trapped in his own head during these years, similarly paralyzed Cassady, who wrote as he lived: undisciplined, uncensored, and driven by unchecked libidinal energy. Despite Cassady's carnal appeal, Ginsberg remained too conflicted toward his own body—the locus of a troubling sexuality and possible madness—to yet "speak the word he heard in his flesh."

Cassady's aesthetic influence would be especially felt by Ginsberg through Kerouac. In 1953, Kerouac wrote his own "aesthetic statement" in a letter to Ginsberg and Burroughs, at their urging (Charters 197). Alternately titled "Essentials of Spontaneous Prose"[78] and "Belief and Technique of Modern Prose,"[79] it lists 30 requisites. Of note here, for their sensational emphasis, are the following, as numbered by Kerouac:

> 2. Submissive to everything, open, listening . . .
>
> 5. Something that you feel will find its own form . . .
>
> 8. Write what you want bottomless from bottom of the mind
>
> 9. The unspeakable visions of the individual
>
> 10. No time for poetry but exactly what is
>
> 11. Visionary tics shivering in the chest . . .
>
> 13. Remove literary, grammatical and syntactical inhibition . . .
>
> 28. Composing wild, undisciplined, pure, coming in from under, crazier the better . . . (*Howl annotated* 136-37)

---

[78] See Charters, Miles, Schumacher, Morgan.
[79] See Ginsberg, *Howl Annotated*, Kerouac, *Heaven*.

Kerouac's "essentials," which reads like a prose poem, excites with improvisational energy, inspiring his reader to compose wild jolts of pure visionary tics. In 1954, Ginsberg "tacked" the list above his "bedstead in North Beach hotel a year before 'Howl' was written" (137). That same year, Kerouac's felt form found expression in *San Francisco Blues*, a jazzy collection of, as he called them, "sensory meditations" (Charters 220) composed from his hotel window, while looking out at the "skid-row" denizens on Third Street in San Francisco.[80] By October's end, Ginsberg had read Kerouac's manuscript for *San Francisco Blues*, which he called "nearer to center of poetry than elsewhere can be found" (*Kerouac Letters* 245). In the same letter, he cites the French impressionist Paul Cézanne, an aesthetic inspiration for Ginsberg since 1948: "but since my effort in last two years has been to find a formal look (as Cézanne said he wants to paint pictures that look like classics in museums, and did) your poems are satisfactory at special moments" (245). In the past two years, Ginsberg had been seeking a way to reconcile the colloquial language of Williams and jazz-slang of Kerouac with a traditionally recognized poetic structure. As Cézanne wanted to paint pictures that "look like classics in museums," Ginsberg wanted to write poems that look like classics in the academy.

Ginsberg first refers to Cézanne in a letter to Lionel Trilling, dated June 1, 1948. At the suggestion of Trilling, he had taken an art history course with the Columbia professor Meyer Shapiro. "I don't know anything about fine art and sat terrified in the front row," he wrote. Too scared to write term papers, he only took the final examination,

---

[80] The poem's sensational dimension can be heard on the recording *Readings by Jack Kerouac*, "San Francisco Blues (fragments)" (Verve): "Praised be man, he is existing in milk and living in lilies/And his violin music takes place in milk and creamy emptiness/Praised be the unfolded inside petal flesh of tend'rest thought."

and went to see Shapiro “the same afternoon to try to explain” his exam “and held forth frantically on some mad idea about Cosmic Vibrations in Cézanne” (*Letters* 23). The next month, he wrote in his journal: “I have been doing a lot of thinking about Cézanne, and through him have begun to recognize signs of truly living personality and intelligence in works of art” (*Martyrdom* 255). In Cézanne’s work, he believed that he found an aesthetic model combining intellect and sensation, anchoring his contemporaries’ liberating ideals within the literary traditions of the past. “I am like Cézanne, sketching; or Kerouac’s idea of prose sketching a personal originality of his,” he wrote in April 1952 (*Journals Early Fifties* 8). Ginsberg’s thinking on Cézanne culminates in his journal entry from June 8, 1955.[81] In that diary, he records, and reflects on, a dream in which he encounters Joan Burroughs, who had been shot dead four years earlier by her husband William.

> she sat in a chair in a garden with the smile on her face: restored to its former beauty, the sweetness of intelligence which I eternalized in my imagination, that had been lost thru years of Tequila in Mexico City, for Tequila had ruined her face & beauty before the bullet in her brow. (*Journals Mid-Fifties* 136)

The description of their meeting ends with “her small rain-stained tombstone” (136). Commenting on the dream’s temporal leap from life to death—an “Aesthetic experience of the sublime: an experience of Time” (137)—Ginsberg refers to Cézanne, whose life and work he had been studying with renewed intensity. He cites the painter’s “juxtaposed planes” of *The Bathers* (Figure 1), in which the warm earth tones of the foreground and

[81] See the poem “Dream Record: June 8, 1955,” the near word-for-word “versification” of this entry (*Collected Poems* 124).

horizon are separated by the cool blue pond, creating a spatial dimension solely through color, without perspective lines. Ginsberg identifies the dividing "cold receding tone" of the water or "plain" as "the infinity ellipsis" between "the foreground" and "central image" "of the faraway city," all "painted flat" (137).[82] Ginsberg connects the physical

Figure 1. *The Bathers* by Paul Cézanne —Creeping abstra-realism: the painting becomes more alive for me the more I return to it. The woman leaning against the right tree: a haunting!

experience of that infinite ellipsis, or "great gap of change" (139), with Cézanne's notion of *la petite sensation* (137, 139).[83] Ginsberg posits a poem using the same method of

---

[82] See the 1949 journal entry, and basis for the poem "Cézanne's Ports" (*Empty Mirror* 10): "foreground is time and life, swept in a race toward the left hand side of the picture, where shore meets shore—but that meeting place is not represented. It occurs not in the dream; only the other side is heaven and eternity with a bleak white haze about the far mountains—with L'Estaque Bay in a V between" (*Martyrdom* 321).

[83] See Emile Bernard, *Souvenirs sur Paul Cézanne* (Paris: Chez Michel, 1912), and John Rewald, *Cézanne: Sa Vie, son oeuvre, son amitie pour Zola* (Paris: Albin Michel, 1939), both of which Ginsberg cites as

juxtaposition to reproduce “in verbal images the visual & other images of the dream of Joan” (137). As the apposition of contrasting “cool” and “hot” colors produce the “great gap of change” in *The Bathers*, it is the juxtaposed images of Joan that cause “the awe & terror & knowledge in the dream” (137). He notes that “an ideal poem could reproduce Cézanne’s ‘petite sensation’ in the reader” (137).

According to Ginsberg, the “petite sensation” is the “jump,” the sensed “gap,” between images; it produces that feeling of “eternity” (138). In 1955, Ginsberg’s understanding of the “petite sensation” anticipates contemporary formulations of affect. Both are embodied, sensational effects that are dynamic and relational but outside cognitive capture. The “awe & terror & knowledge in” Ginsberg’s dream are the result of juxtaposition, the “Setting up two (images) points (with a gap) separate in time and showing the distance between them” (Ginsberg, *Journals Mid-Fifties* 138). Ginsberg wonders how he might transpose this sensational experience of the infinite, conveyed by Cézanne’s paintings, into poetry. “What is needed in a poem is a structure (magical, miracles in the head) of clear rational actualities put next to one another to suggest (in the eclipse of Time between the images) Eternity” (137-138). He writes that “We have not yet had a crystalization [sic] of real grief in a poem since imagism, nor any of a gamut of human experiences” (142). In an unacknowledged response to more cerebral symbolist poetry, he argues to “Do away with symbols and present the facts of the experience”; “They will speak for themselves whatever they say” because “Ellipsis in event gives rise to the grief-realization of time, or the cold shiver of eternity” (142). For Ginsberg, the

---

sources of “petite sensation” (*Howl Annotated* 138). To listen to a 1981 talk by Ginsberg on Cézanne and *la petite sensation*: http://www.naropa.edu/archive/syllabi/syl_poetrysince1944.cfm.

unspoken speaks, enabling, as Brian Massumi notes, “a different connectivity” (25) than that of signifier-sign correspondence.

For Ginsberg, the embodied, unspeakable intensity of grief is expressed within the “gap between content and effect.” On the level of basic grammar, he conveys this through “Ellipsis in syntax—dropping of articles, connectives, sawdust of the reason—to join images as they are joined in the mind: only thus can two images connect like wires and spark” (*Journals Mid-Fifties* 142). He concludes: “Phrasing & plot follow the same method, thus” (142). This leads him to consider “the phrasing of the poem” that would function like a Cézanne painting: “need to trap sensations and collect the fragments which give rise to them, by any means, reconstructing [sensations] in images” (*brackets in cited text* 142). According to Ginsberg, “This means, automatically, narrative of one kind or another, that is, events in time perceived, giving rise to a subjective emotion” (142). He defines “narrative of one kind or another” as “events in time perceived” which is not necessarily the same as a “narrative of meaningful progression.” For Ginsberg, meaning is achieved through juxtaposition not a plotted “resolution.” This is an important distinction because emotional events, particularly those that cause pain, often exceed concepts and escape resolve. As affect studies suggest, the perception of events is variously, and frequently nonconsciously, registered. Further, present memories of past events often interrupt and alter the perception of other ongoing events. Ginsberg seems to acknowledge this perceptual flux of “events in time perceived” when he concludes with the decision to work out of “[t]he modesty of subjective” over “the pomposity of objective” (142). Then, as if channeling Gilles Deleuze, he follows that self-prescription with a single-sentence paragraph: “Absolute relativity, that is, life” (142).

Ginsberg's drug-induced roof-top Moloch vision on October 17, 1954—in which he saw "a ferocious building" "tower in Hell" (61)—was not unlike his more intense 1949 hallucinatory "vision"; it appears to have steered Ginsberg again toward the poetic expression of less tangible forms of consciousness. By March 1955, he moves beyond the pedantic details of metrical exercises in his journal toward thoughts of adjusting his notes into three-line stanzas and the use of active words (125). Schumacher writes that "Ginsberg was interested in Williams's triadic structure, yet he was equally fascinated by Kerouac's long line, particularly in the rambling descriptive passages of *Visions of Neal*. The line, [he] concluded, could be governed by breath measures, image, or thought" (197). Looking to Williams and Kerouac, as well as the impressionists, Dadists, and practitioners of haiku, Ginsberg seems to be both refuting and acknowledging his father and former professors. It is as if only by grounding his work in an artistic tradition could he respond to, and thereby free himself from, more conservative influences.

By the time that Ginsberg sat down to write "Howl," in August 1955, he had begun therapy with Hicks, entered into a complicated homosexual relationship with Orlovsky, and no longer worked a corporate job. All three of these pivotal events, along with his years of aesthetic theorizing, peers' creative influence, and his persistent writing, led to the "tragic custard-pie comedy of wild phrasing," "the flippy flesh made word," that is "Howl." On July 10, 1955, he writes of studying Robert LaVigne's painting of Orlovsky (Figure 2), entitled *Nude with Onions*, that Ginsberg had purchased.

> As I sit naked before it staring it seems to move, the golden head—[. . .] A certain calculation about the face, watching itself feel loved, beautified—Certainly the beauty there is not abstracted but made to live, it is here alive

> [. . .] It stares down on me (as strangely it had on La Vigne) tho Peter is gone to the East [. . .]—remains of a dream, which was real as long as he loved La Vigne & me, now real only in the picture, reminder of our ideal of youth.
>
> Peter, come down and join me in bed, open your arms again, cry "Take me," act like a living soul my equal and not my superior removed in time to another plane of beauty in this picture. (*Journals Mid-Fifties* 145)

In the passage above, both Ginsberg and the painted Orlovsky sit nude, watching each other. Elsewhere in the journal entry, he notes how "the space behind" Orlovsky's head "shifted, an optical trick" (145). The optical effect is not unlike what Ginsberg saw in

Figure 2. *Nude with Onions* (1954) by Robert LaVigne—Felt flesh: Note tensed right foot & glistening shin; tactile hands: taut abdomen: beauty "not abstracted but made to live."

Cézanne's *Bathers*, the "petite sensation," later also termed "eyeball kicks" (Ginsberg *Annotated* 125, 130-31); although, in the above example, it is not produced through physiological effect of juxtaposing a "cool" and "hot" color but by the textured swathe of burnt orange framing Peter's head. The result, for Ginsberg, is that the painting lives but as a "superior removed in time to another plane of beauty." It also anticipates Ginsberg's claim from his 1991 essay, "Brief Commentary on Sacramental Companions," in *Allen Ginsberg Photographs*: "The poignancy of a photograph comes from looking back to a fleeting moment in a floating world" (n.page). The past moment is fleeting, lost to change, and floating—alive in the art and as an affective possibility that can always be recaptured. In the same dated diary he states in a single-line paragraph, "Writing as fakery—rhythm the essential, rhythm of individual's feelings & nature" (*Journals Mid-Fifties* 145). The line is a curious juxtaposition, suggesting that the "fakery" of writing is counter to—and a counterfeit of—the "essential" "rhythm of individual's feelings & nature." In the context of Ginsberg's concerns, the "fakery" can also be read to suggest that the conveyed "rhythm" of art is a sensory trick, not unlike Cézanne's "petite sensation." In other words, the "fakery" of writing is not one of fraudulence but of legerdemain, i.e., "magical, miracles in the head" (*Journals Mid-Fifties* 142).

Around the same time that Ginsberg wrote the above journal, he would read his friend Gregory Corso's first book *The Vestal Lady on Brattle and Other Poems*. According to Morgan, it "moved Allen to tears" and "helped to inspire" him to resume working on his unfinished poetry collection (*Celebrate* 203). In the journals from July 21 to August 22, Ginsberg mentions the "sensation" of the "gap," "valley," "alley," "interruption" (148-49, 153-54). On July 22, he writes: "The sensation already gone, no

further dreams remembered, no gaps" (*Journals Mid-Fifties* 148). He also includes a couple of skeletal drawings illustrating two dreams, one with the caption "Diagram on left with trees and a man—the relative sublime vast of the cliffs glimmering above" (149). He remains concerned with the "Eternal Time in vast space" (149), an affective dynamic that cannot be captured but only sensationally conveyed. In an entry that suggests reference to a nightmare, he writes:

> The "S.F. Bldg." on Telegraph Hill Cliffs overlooks the terraces of Bohemian Broadway & the International settlement [. . .]—a gap, a void in the city [. . .]—an alley emerging upstairs high on Telegraph Hill walled in with wooden fence leading to a door—locked to the garden—can't get in. (153-54)

"Bohemian Broadway & The International settlement" might be read as representing two competing literary sensibilities: progressive and established (i.e., traditional, conservative). Overlooking both, Ginsberg is unable to enter "the garden" in the "alley" "upstairs," implying his desire and inability to convey the "infinity ellipsis" within his poetry. His struggle to translate sensibly that which affect theory identifies as "never present in position, only ever in passing" is further evoked on August 21, 1955, with "Note for Joan Dream: 'What consciousness in oblivion?'" (154). He is referring to death, but also, as in the June 3 journal, the "great gap of change" (139). Then, a few pages later, in an undated two-line entry, he writes: "I saw the best mind angel-headed hipsters damned. What consciousness in oblivion, Joan?" (159).

Behind the composition of that famous line is the back story of Carl Solomon. In 1952, Solomon took a job as an editor for Ace Books, owned by his uncle, and was

instrumental in getting Burroughs' novel *Junkie* published. Assuming the role of literary agent to Burroughs, Kerouac, and himself, Ginsberg pushed Solomon to publish other works of theirs but, for various reasons, was not successful. Later that year, Solomon had another breakdown.[84] In early 1953, Ginsberg makes a few references to him in letters to Kerouac, mostly concerning the marketing of Burroughs' book. By mid 1954, however, Ginsberg refers only to Solomon's absence, and becomes increasingly concerned. "Have you seen Holmes, Kingsland, Solomon, and the others, Alene [Lee], and Dusty [Moreland]?" he writes to Kerouac on June 8. "Please give me news of them" (*Kerouac Letters* 222). On September 5: "Where where—is Carl Solomon?" (244). December 29: "Carl Solomon has not arrived, can you investigate?" (258). And on January 12 and 18, respectively: "Is Carl Solomon free still? Not out here, not arrived" (262); "Carl Solomon must be in Denver seeing Rudolf Halley. How can I check on him? He musta left that place on Madison by now" (272). Finally, by April 22, 1955, Ginsberg received word from his brother Eugene about Carl's whereabouts: "Carl Solomon is in Building 22, Ward 3, Pilgrim State Hospital, L.I., New York, same as my mother. Carl's mother called Gene and said Carl asked me to write, I wrote yesterday. What'll happen to Carl in time?" (285). Solomon's return to a psychiatric hospital, the same as his mother's, was likely quite destabilizing to Ginsberg. "What'll happen to Carl in time?" is a question that probably resonated with Ginsberg concerning his own future, with instability,

[84] In a letter to Kerouac and Burroughs on June 12, 1952, Ginsberg writes: "Carl Solomon has gone almost absolutely crazy. Broke up with wife, attacking books with knives, stopping traffic on 8th and 50th St. by throwing briefcases and shoes at passing cars, been in and out of Bellevue, breaking glasses, taking planes to Cape Cod, flooding up apartments, smearing walls with paint, screaming in public. This been going on for 2 weeks and I can't get anything done at Wyn till he calms down. Gad. Seems better now" (*Letters* 77).

psychological and otherwise, a constant in his life.[85] His relationship with the heterosexual-inclined Orlovsky was rocky. His writing aspirations remained unfulfilled. And he continued to be drawn to those living on a social and psychological precipice, most recently befriending Peter DuPeru, whom he describes in a letter to Kerouac as "like Solomon a Zen ex amnesia-shock patient who wears no socks and is always beat and *sensitive* and curious and interested and has the best mystic mind I've met here [in North Beach]" (242).

Figure 3. Peter De Peru annotated by A.G.—Ghost from Allen's past recognizable as ghost of my present. Why do I *feel* as if I know him?

[85] The question once haunted me; the statistics for former foster kids are pretty bleak. See Erik Eckholm, "For Former Foster Care Youths, Help to Make It on Own," *The New York Times*, January 27, 2007.

It is in this biographical context that Ginsberg produced, in a fit of writing during early August 1955, the first draft of "Howl," Part I. The exact date is unclear. It was written prior to a letter he mailed Kerouac, "before August 15, 1955" according to Morgan and David Stamford, editors of *Jack Kerouac and Allen Ginsberg: The Letters*, published in 2010.[86] In that letter, Ginsberg writes, "I enclose first draft scribble notes of a poem I was writing, nearer in your style than anything" (315), which was "Howl." At the beginning of August 1955, a certain balance of instability and liberation converged in Ginsberg, admitting him into that dreamt garden and, in the fashion of Kerouac, he composed "wild" and "pure." Feeling had found its form.

In the years ahead, the sensational Ginsberg—as a body of work and collectively formed mythology—would become something like Deleuze and Guattari's "body without organs" (BWO); in other words, a "non-organismic body"—a shifting formation of intensities that trigger a change in habit (Bonta & Protovi 62-63). This "body without organs" can feasibly be applied to any transgressive and/or affectively destabilizing work, which "Howl" and "Kaddish" have been and potentially remain. In the end, "Howl" is the product of many forces acting on and through Ginsberg; but, as its publication, obscenity trial, and eventual iconic status as a poem that "speaks" for a generation reveal, it is also a product of the social realm.

[86] In *I Celebrate Myself*, however, Morgan incorrectly dates the composition of "the original draft of what would become the first section of *Howl*" as August 25 (203). Schumacher dates its composition to "One early-August afternoon, a week or two after he had written the line [about angel-headed hipsters in his journal], he sat down at his desk and began to expand upon it" (200). In *Howl: original draft facsimile*. . ., Miles situates the poem's composition to "early in August 1955 (before August 16th)" (xiii).

V

Personal Interlude

A friend tells me I need to let go of the past, it's holding me back. Chastened, I nod. Later I recall how much of my past I cannot remember; it's my body that won't let it go.

VI

In Which My Protagonist Becomes a Sensational Body Without Organs

"Howl" as a living social body, one that feeds and is feed by readers, is evident in the publication of *The Poem That Changed America: "Howl" 50 Years Later*. A collection of 26 essays by a range of people, including poet Carol Muske-Dukes, novelist Rick Moody, essayist Phillip Lopate, and composer John Cage. In his introduction, Jason Shinder calls the first two lines, and by association the poem, "deeply rooted in our collective consciousness" (xv). He notes how the contributors "all detail the context and content of how the poem changed their lives—as authors, as persons, as community members" (xvii). In one of the less personal, more academic pieces, "'A Lost Battalion of Platonic Conversationalists': 'Howl' and The Language of Modernism," Marjorie Perloff presents a neo-new critical reading of "Howl," locating it in a modernist tradition in order to "shift the discourse from the biographical-cultural preoccupation, which continues to dominate most studies of Ginsberg's work" (32). Perloff argues for the craftsmanship of the poem, which, "Contrary to [John] Hollander's stricture," in his *Partisan Review* take-down from 1957, "does not just ramble on and on" (35-36). She cites similar criticism by Harold Bloom, Denis Donoghue, and Richard Howard, who have viewed "Howl" and "Kaddish" as essentially lacking poetic control and structure (31).[87] Regarding the now iconic first

[87] See Harold Bloom, "On Ginsberg's *Kaddish"* in *The Ringers in the Tower: Studies in Romantic Tradition* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1971), pp. 213-14; Denis Donoghue,

line of “Howl,” revised from “I saw the best mind angel-headed hipsters damned” of Ginsberg’s journal into “I saw the best minds of my generation destroyed by madness, starving hysterical naked” (*Howl Annotated* 3), Perloff mentions a gloss by Breslin, in *The Psycho-Political Muse: American Poetry Since the Fifties*. Concerning the revision of the first draft facsimile from “starving, mystical, naked” to “starving hysterical naked,” she notes that Breslin, “in an essay otherwise quite critical of ‘Howl,’ was perhaps the first to remark how odd the use of the phrase ‘starving hysterical naked’ is in context, since all three adjectives designate bodies, not ‘minds’” (34). Perloff notes that the word “Hysterical derives from the Greek *hystera* (womb), and Freud, who wrote so much about hysterics, considered it a somatic illness, usually of women” (34). She concludes that “hysterical” is “a more accurate term than ‘mystical,’ the three-adjective unit providing a graphic image of a mental hunger so intense as to seem literally physical” (34).

Personally, I largely agree with Perloff’s defense of “Howl” as a formally complex aesthetic object situated within an poetic tradition. But I also believe that the poem cannot be isolated from its “biographical-cultural preoccupation,” as the publication of *The Poem That Changed America* attests. Perloff, herself, reinserts “Howl” within a cultural-historical moment when, in the same article, she later insists on another aspect of the poem “that continues to be misunderstood”: “This so-called Cold War poem” “must be understood” “as very much a poem of World War II, the war Ginsberg, born in 1926, narrowly missed” (40-41). She then brings in numerous examples of the poem’s language reflecting “surely the presence of that war, at its height when young

---

Connoisseurs of Chaos (New York: Macmillan, 1965), p. 49; Richard Howard, *Alone with America* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1980), p. 149.

Allen arrived at Columbia in 1942 and studied in classrooms and dorms filled with returning GIs, that accounts for the displaced violence at the heart of 'Howl'" (41).

> Consider the strangeness of the poem's diction. Here human beings don't walk: they "drag themselves," "stagger," "cower," "leap," "chain themselves to subways," "jump off the Brooklyn Bridge," "pick themselves up out of basements," "plunge themselves under meat trucks," "barrel down highways," and "crash through their minds in jail." Again, these "angelheaded hipsters" don't meditate or contemplate; they "burn for the ancient heavenly connection," "bare their brains to Heaven under the El," "hallucinate Arkansas," "listen to the crack of doom on the hydrogen jukebox," "howl on their knees in the subway," "sing out of their windows in despair," and spend their days "yacketayakking screaming vomiting whispering facts and memories and anecdotes." (41)

As with much poetry, the language of "Howl" is heightened, metaphoric, and symbolic—indeed *estranging*. In keeping with the modernist tradition that Perloff seeks to align the text, "Howl" frequently defamiliarizes the everyday (as lived by Ginsberg) in order to experience it anew. Although Perloff initially embarks on new-critical reading of "Howl" by looking at its language and form within a modernist context, she still argues, selectively, for a its cultural-historical situatedness. But, as Ginsberg's letters and journals show, World War II was not on his mind at the time of composition; his psycho-somatic condition and those closest to him were. That does not mean that the social and cultural affects of the war did not influence Ginsberg's psyche. As I have tried to point out, "Howl," like Ginsberg, was and remains produced many forces. For example, the

language that Perloff cites could just as easily, and perhaps more convincingly, be said to reflect the themes and concerns in Ginsberg's journals and letters leading up to "Howl." The brokenness depicted by those who "drag themselves," "stagger," "cower," "leap," "chain themselves to subways," "jump off the Brooklyn Bridge," "pick themselves up out of basements," "plunge themselves under meat trucks," "barrel down highways," and "crash through their minds in jail" vividly evokes those in psycho-somatic distress. The previous decade's war may have contributed to that brokenness, but so did other, more immediate factors described in Ginsberg's personal papers. Ultimately, the "mental hunger" or deprivation and suffering does not merely "seem" physical; it is.

"Howl" is a work of "screaming vomiting whispering facts and memories and anecdotes and eyeball kicks and shocks of hospitals and jails and wars." It is Ginsberg finally realized as "the flippy flesh made word" speaking "the word he hears in his flesh." Through the juxtaposition of vivid, frequently startling images and phrases, Ginsberg creates an affective space—his poetic equivalent of Cézanne's "petite sensation" and Keat's "negative capability" (Ginsberg *Howl Annotated* 124)—which is potentially experienced by the body as emotion, recollection, a shiver along the skin. I know that it had, and still has, the power flip my flesh.

Even Ginsberg's "Guide to Original Manuscripts, Part I," published in 1986, is, for me, more affective than explicative. He notes how, in revision, he refined "rhythm, syntax or diction to create an even and elastic flow verse to verse" and condensed "the syntax into solid blocks of 'chains of flashing images'" (*Howl Annotated* 11). According to him, Part I has a "relative integrity of progression": "personal apocalypsis, estrangement, breakthrough to social solitude, disaster or triumph, mixed illumination

and/or madness, travel, unthinkable dramas, comedies & tragedies of maturation—arrest, hospitalization, outcast status—degradation and transcendence" (11). It culminates as "verses conjoin images of practical transformation of self-defeat & social ignominy into conscious illumination via artworks for Eternity, 'Calling the Great Call' of candor and actuality: 'alchemy of the use of the [ellipsis]' (haiku), 'catalogue' (Whitman), 'a relative measure [the meter]' (W. C. Williams), the 'vibrating plane' (Cézanne)" [all brackets from cited text] (11).

For me, those "chains of flashing images," the snapshots based on Ginsberg's life, limn an affecting picture of people at a specific time and place. I read about those "who wandered around and around at midnight in the railroad yard wondering where to go, and went, leaving no broken hearts" (Ginsberg *Howl Annotated* 22), or of those "who walked all night with their shoes full of blood on the snowbank docks waiting for a door" (45) and I am pained. In those lines, I see my former self, despite my unscathed feet, and those I knew: former foster kids, institutionalized children, many orphaned and/or abandoned. I see people I met during my first years in New York City, people who used drugs and hustled their bodies, transgendered club-goers, many eventually lost to AIDS. Throughout "Howl," Ginsberg's past and my own converge, the marginalized and forsaken eternally alive in the ghostly in-between.

Perloff, however, mostly sees humor. Updating "'A Lost Battalion of Platonic Conversationalists'" for a review of Rob Epstein and Jeffrey Friedman's 2010 film *Howl* in *The Times Literary Supplement*, February 18, 2011, Perloff opens with an epigraph from the poem: "Dreams! adorations! illuminations! religions! the whole boatload of sensitive bullshit!" (90). She then cites the moment in the film when Ginsberg, played by

James Franco, reads those words and "the guys in the front row, including Neal Cassady, 'secret hero of these poems, cocksman and Adonis of Denver,' break into laughter" ("Holy" 17).

> *The whole boatload of sensitive bullshit:* they know, and Allen knows, that "Howl," far from being the romantic cry of the heart or grand political jeremiad it is often presumed to be, is in fact a brilliantly absurdist poem, whose complex baroque structure teeters between high seriousness and wry self-mockery, hallucinatory fervour and comic deflation. (17)

Again situating "Howl" within a modernist tradition, Perloff identifies the text's "complex baroque structure" of "high seriousness and wry self-mockery." She also cites Ginsberg's own annotation of the poem's first line, which establishes the "poem's tone" as "the mixture of empathy and shrewdness, the comic realism of Chaplin's *City Lights*" (*Howl Annotated* 124). But she remains focused on Ginsberg's "humorous hyperbole" not his "empathy," which, in context of the journals and letters, is also a "cry of the heart." In fact, the humor reads to me as a form of camp irony that complements the often dark testimony, an ecstatic roar from the trenches, in which art transforms pain.

In "Human Seraphim: "Howl," Sex, and Holiness," also from *The Poem That Changed America*, Mark Doty highlights the comical as well, noting that Ginsberg's "pose—transcendent wild boys versus spirit-crushing monolithic Moloch—is an affecting one, in small doses, though it might be a bit hard to take were 'Howl' not so exuberantly funny" (15). Unlike Perloff, Doty, an openly gay man who has written about his lover's

death from AIDS,[88] notes the pathos. He offers a more personal response that reveals the poem's power as an aesthetic autobiography:

> Which isn't to say there isn't real horror in 'Howl,' and genuinely [sic] vulnerability. I can't read this line without a shiver: *who broke down crying in white gymnasiums naked and trembling before the machinery of other skeletons.* [33] That's a strophe in which sexuality, shame, and mortality intersect with grim power. And the threat of the ferocious "normalizing" force of the mental hospital looms everywhere, with its policing of consciousness, its brutal medical intervention in unacceptable states of mind. (15-16)

For a gay man like myself, close enough to Doty's generation, the "white gymnasium" evokes the psychiatric unit, the AIDS ward, and the gym class, all historical arenas of gay male suffering. Doty then cites lines 66 and 67:

> who threw potato salad at CCNY lecturers on Dadaism and subsequently
> presented themselves on the granite steps of the madhouse with
> shaven heads and harlequin speech of suicide, demanding
> instantaneous lobotomy,
>
> and who were given instead the concrete void of insulin Metrazol
> electricity hydrotherapy psychotherapy pingpong & amnesia,

Doty notes the comic counterpunch of a single word, "pingpong," which he calls "a signature gesture; any time [Ginsberg] might start taking himself too seriously, there's that laughter that keeps perspective, keeps—despite the rants and big claims the poem

---

[88] See Doty's memoirs, *Heaven's Coast* (New York: HarperCollins, 1996) and *Firebird* (New York: HarperCollins, 1999).

makes all along the way—one foot planted firmly in a sense of the absurd" (16). For Doty, the poem has the potential to produce the physiological responses of shivering and laughter. For me, lines 66 and 66 reflect the comic absurdity of life seen clearly from the eyes of a former hospital patient. It reminds me of when I was 10, and the months I spent in Mount Sinai's children's psychiatric unit, where my then-depressed mother left me because I was truant and she couldn't care for me. Each morning, we would line up for our medication—two pills followed by a sip of water, each served in a paper cup—and then attend group therapy or go to class or play ball on the fenced-in roof. Everything seemed so mundanely normal amid our otherwise atypical lives. At the same time, forced containment and regimentation offered a degree of liberty from emotional chaos. So when I arrive at the penultimate line, directed at Solomon, Ginsberg's former Columbia Presbyterian mate now at Pilgrim State Hospital,[89] where his mother resides—"O starry-spangled shock of mercy the eternal war is here O victory forget your underwear we're free" (111)—I smile. And then I come to the end, "I'm with you in Rockland in my dreams you walk dripping from a sea-journey on the highway across America in tears to the door of my cottage in the Western night" (112). And all I feel is sorrow.

VII

Personal Interlude

Sadie—what remains: a faded death certificate; a single photo; some shifting memories.

VIII

Because "What Comes Is Gone Forever Every Time"

[89] In his annotated version of "Howl," Ginsberg writes: "New York's Rockland State Hospital's name was substituted for rhythmic euphony" (130).

If "Howl" is the flippy flesh made word, a triumphant cry of gallows humor infused with painful loss, "Kaddish" is sensational Ginsberg's Philoctetean corollary, a realization of the earlier poem's cathartic effects. While "Howl" seems born out of the suffocating self regard of mental anguish reflected in Ginsberg's prior journals and letters, "Kaddish" is a more expansive mourning of connected suffering. Gone is the absurdist roar. In its place is a quieter, often gently ironic sorrow, grounded in an acceptance of that "release of particulars," death. Like Wilson's Philoctetes, the Ginsberg prior to "Howl" bears "a malodorous disease": his mental instability and homosexuality render "him abhorrent to society," degrade him, and make him helpless; but they also lead him to become "the master of a superhuman art which everybody has to respect and which the normal man finds he needs" (Wilson 472).[90] The creation and public reception of "Howl" enabled Ginsberg "to forget" his "grievance and to devote his divine gifts to the service of his own people" (463). Born is the communally written Ginsberg: "guru and paterfamilias" of "poetic heroes and prophetic poets" (Kramer 9).

In "'Strange Prophecies Anew': Rethinking the Politics of Matter and Spirit in Ginsberg's 'Kaddish,'" Tony Trigilio brings Deleuze to bear on his reading of "Kaddish." He states how "critics conflate" Ginsberg's two "best-known" poems and, as a result, tend to "understate important differences between them" (773). Comparing the texts,

[90] As Schumacher notes "Ginsberg received a huge boost, as did the other poets in the Bay Area, when Richard Eberhart's eagerly awaited article "West Coast Rhythms" appeared in The New York Times Book Review on Sunday, September 2, 1956" (239). In that article, Eberhart writes: "The most remarkable poem of the young group, written during the past year, is 'Howl,' by Allen Ginsberg. . . . My first reaction was that it is based on destructive violence. It is profoundly Jewish in temper. It is Biblical in its repetitive grammatical build-up. It is a howl against everything in our mechanistic civilization which kills the spirit, assuming that the louder you shout the more likely you are to be heard. It lays bare the nerves of suffering and spiritual struggle. Its positive force and energy come from a redemptive quality of love, although it destructively catalogues evils of our time from physical deprivation to madness" ("West Coast" 7, 18). He also notes that the "poem has creative a furor of abuse or praise whenever it is read" (18). For the "abuse" see Perloff and footnote 26.

Trigilio identifies the later poem's "less trustful attitude toward prophetic naming" as well as "Ginsberg's manipulation of psychiatric and antipsychiatric historical contexts to forge a revisionary poetics of mind and matter" (773). Finally, and most relevant here, he cites the significance of "Kaddish" in Ginsberg's "antilogocentric prophetic career" (773). Although Trigilio's concern is on religious prophecy, I think it is fair to say that the poem's "vision" refers to both the prophetic and perceptual.[91] The prophetic, in its biblical revisioning, situates Ginsberg and Naomi as wounded oracles of the divine, while the perceptual reflects Ginsberg's embodied perspective of inherited pain and loss. It is this perceptual understanding of vision, conveyed in the affective space that exceeds language, that informs my focus.

Trigilio acknowledges the greater expansiveness of "Kaddish," which he attributes to its guiding female presence, polyvocality, and decentering. He notes that "Howl" "represses signs of women in order to forge male prophetic comradeship within the poem's pilgrimage; in 'Kaddish,' by contrast, Ginsberg constructs maternity as a source of vision, an influence that precedes and sustains prophetic language" (776). Turning to the poem's breach of tradition, Trigilio cites Mortimer J. Cohen's early review of "Kaddish" in the *Jewish Exponent*, November 10, 1961. He writes that "Cohen observes, correctly, that Ginsberg's revisionary response to the Kaddish is unlawful precisely because it decenters the authority of Hebrew monotheism and of the monovocal, 'definite meaning' of the liturgy" (777). Trigilio connects Ginsberg's "desire

[91] See Paul Portugés, *The Visionary Poetics of Allen Ginsberg*, for a prophetic perspective on "Howl" and "Kaddish" that analyzes both works in context of Ginsberg's 1948 Blakean, positioning them as "ultimate poems of doom" (45). See Joseph Wittreich, *Milton and the Line of Vision*, for the significance of the poet-prophet to be "authenticated by scriptural prophecy" in order to find a voice and engage "in corrective criticism" (xvi-xviii). See Frank D. Casale, "Madness, Speech, and Prophecy in Allen Ginsberg's *Howl*," for a Freudian, castration-complex perspective on the poem's "often awarded visionary status" (Casale 111); James Breslin, "Allen Ginsberg: The Origins of 'Howl' and 'Kaddish,'" argues simply for the poem as a regressive, if creatively influential, expression of feared castration.

to multiply, rather than fix, meaning" with Deleuze and Guattari's "'schizophrenic taking a walk,' their model figure for psychic and social deterritorialization" (781). It is a compelling comparison. In *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, Deleuze and Guattari define the Oedipal as normative fixing and the anti-Oedipal as transgressive destabilization. Similarly, in "Howl" and "Kaddish," it is the "mad" outsider—Carl Solomon and Naomi Ginsberg, respectively—that inspires Ginsberg's (re)vision, destabilizing not only poetic-prophetic tradition but also poetic form, in "which the mind would fill with the sensation of existence" (Miles 97).

As with "Howl," the embodied pain of "Kaddish" is conveyed through the same affective strategy of ellipsis and cataloguing. The long free-verse lines, or strophes, of both texts convey the rhythms of "one speech-breath-thought" (Ginsberg *Howl Annotated* 153). Schumacher writes of "Kaddish": "instead of letting each line build up momentum, as he had with the biblical oratorical structure of 'Howl,' he broke many of the lines with dashes, so that thoughts (or long lines) would be broken by a series of 'sobs'" (300). The propulsive energy introduced by "angelheaded hipsters" "starving hysterical naked" of "Howl" is exchanged in the first line of "Kaddish" for somber reflection: "Strange now to think of you, gone without corsets & eyes, while I walk on the sunny pavement of Greenwich Village." The successive rush of the anaphoric "who" of "Howl" is replaced by extended contemplative recollections, a music of remembrance. Ginsberg writes through "The rhythm the rhythm," the memory of Naomi, as he "wept, realizing how we suffer" ("Kaddish" 3). In that "we," he recognizes the connection between artist, art, and humanity. Ginsberg, Naomi, and the reader are bound in the eternal dynamic of "What came is gone forever every time" (22), suggesting what Deleuze identifies as the

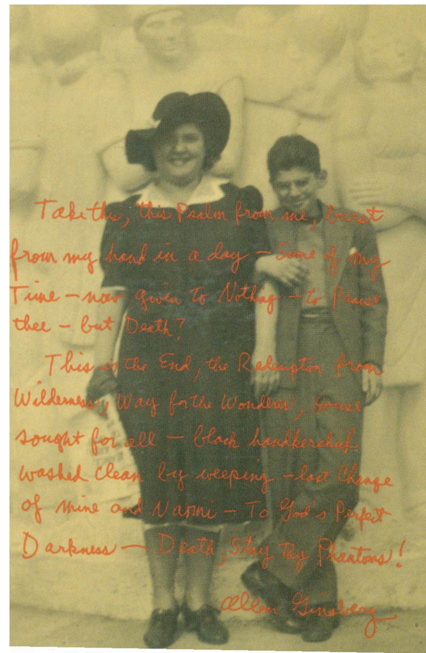
“ceaseless activity” (*Negotiations* 147) of “relations composing, decomposing, or modifying an individual (*ATP* 256).

Ginsberg’s aesthetic theorizing on Cézanne and “le petite sensation” in his journals and letters found notable expression in line 74 of “Howl”: “who dreamt and made incarnate gaps in Time & Space through images juxtaposed, and trapped the archangel of the soul between 2 visual images and joined the elemental verbs and set the noun and dash of consciousness together jumping with sensation of Pater Omnipotens Aeterne Deus.” The juxtaposed “visual images” strung together throughout “Howl” refer to specific biographical events and people; but they are globally drawn, telescoped, meant to chart the speaker’s psyche by canvassing a generation of post-war casualties. “Kaddish,” on the other hand, is an immediate, often naked, narrative of a woman and her relationship with her son. Its intimacy fosters a bond with readers, as it attempts to fulfill the speaker’s “vow to illuminate mankind” (60). As Trigilio notes, citing Rabbi Maurice Lamm’s *The Jewish Way in Death and Mourning*, “the Kaddish is communal and is meant to affirm faith in Hebraic law as a social rather than individual enterprise” (779). And Ginsberg’s “Kaddish,” despite its radical revisioning and autobiographical particulars, remains potentially communal through its compositional strategies.

Like “Howl,” “Kaddish” employs the ellipsis, but differently, juxtaposing a series of narrative jump-cuts that unfold and coalesce, like the rhizomatic process of memory itself. Part I begins in a sensational moment of remembrance. Ginsberg is walking through the Manhattan streets after a night of “talking talking” “reading the Kaddish aloud” and “listening to Ray Charles blues shout blind” (2). The past is like “a poem in

the dark—escaped back to Oblivion" (9). There is "No more to say, and nothing to weep for but the Beings in the Dream, trapped in its disappearance" (line 10). Walking through

Figure 4. Naomi and Allen Ginsberg: Two Beings



the Manhattan streets, light swelling, Ginsberg is born into the past, as he remembers to remember: "still haven't written your history—leave it abstract—a few images / run thru the mind—like the saxophone chorus of houses and years— remembrance of electrical shocks" (57). And the electrical shocks of remembrance. Jolts, the perceptions of the past are a presence: what came—comes—is—but "gone forever every time." The continuous company of loss causes Ginsberg, a being trapped in his own disappearance, to wonder:

> Is it only the sun that shines once for the mind, only the flash of existence,
>
> than none ever was?
>
> Nothing beyond what we have—what you had—that so pitiful—yet
>
> Triumph,
>
> to have been here, and changed, like a tree, broken, or flower—fed to the

> ground—but mad, with its petals, colored, thinking Great
> Universe, shaken, cut in the head, leaf stript, hid in an egg crate
> hospital, cloth wrapped, sore—freaked in the moon brain,
> Naughtless. (39-41)

And so the reader enters "the flash of existence" that was once Ginsberg's memory and imagination. Ginsberg—now gone—reflects on Naomi—then, and still, gone. Yet both live in me now as I write this. Through flashes, the memories of Ginsberg merge with my recollections of Sadie and my younger self, also both gone. "Nothing beyond what we have" remains, and, reading this poem, I feel the ghost of Sadie's pain and the presence of her loss. If I recite the poem aloud or listen to Ginsberg's recorded readings, further images and sensations emerge, infinitely summoning his archangels of the soul. Trigilio writes that "Ginsberg's "pilgrimage" in "Kaddish" is "one that incorporates desire to multiply, rather than fix, meaning" (781). I would add that such multiplicity is not only "conceptual" but sensuous.

In 1961, two years after the publication of "Kaddish," Ginsberg wrote to his father about the limitations of language and his inarticulate flesh.

> Lately words and language itself seem to be a kind of mistake. I would like to try to reach some level of consciousness involving another part of my brain . . . which reduces all experiences to "structure," "meaning," and words, language, logos. I get there with some drugs often, and it was a different universe—much richer and more "real" though extremely painful as it involves the death of Self, etc. (1961)

The above letter anticipates Ginsberg's future poetic endeavors, beginning seventeen years later with *Mind Breaths*, reflecting his involvement with Buddhism. As Trigilio points out, the alternating "caw" and "Lord" in Part V of "Kaddish," and Ginsberg's later "elemental" "Ah" of *Mind Breath*s "represent the fullness of a prophetic language emptied of absolutist meaning" (789). He notes that in Ginsberg's "Ah" (and earlier incarnations "caw" and "Lord"), the "principle of one speech-breath-thought denies a transcendent referentiality; yet its emphasis on embodied divinity distrusts language that refuses to point beyond its own textuality" (789). Despite Ginsberg's reservations about language in his letter, I would say to him that "Kaddish" does move beyond its own textuality. Its verbal images produce affective sparks that resonate in ways that "Ah" and "caw" and "Lord" do not. Past becomes present, a presence, a transfiguring of time.

IX

Ginsberg, my Virgil, explains: "poetry generally is like a rhythmic articulation of feeling. The feeling is like an impulse that rises within . . . It's a feeling that begins somewhere in the pit of the stomach and rises up forward in the breast and then comes out through the mouth and ears, and comes forth a croon or a groan or a sigh" (*Beat Writers* 41-21). Or a shiver, shudder, or cry.

X

Postlude—My Kaddish[92]

"Strange now to think of you, gone without corsets & eyes, while I walk on the sunny

pavement of Greenwich Village," *my Jane Street apartment dark.*

downtown Manhattan, clear winter noon, and I've been up all night" *insomniac,* "talking,

talking" *to myself,* "reading Kaddish aloud, listening to" *that fatherless child*

Harry Nilsson—'I Guess The Lord Must Be in New York City'—on my iPod.

Think I spot you at a local diner, or walking slowly down the street, alone, unnoticed—

No make up, clothes from 14th Street—practicality your fashion police. You focus

on the daily special—roasted chicken, carrots—or perhaps soup and free

crackers—dollars tight—clouded memories bring little joy—

"you stared out the window on the Broadway Church corner, and spied a mystical

assassin from Newark."—*Newark—where you grew up—visited once: my*

Grandfather, 80 or 90, full head of white hair—Dead of cancer now—

"So phoned the Doctor—'OK go way for a rest'—so I put on my coat and walked you

downstreet—On the way a grammarschool boy screamed, unaccountably—

'Where you goin Lady to Death'? I shuddered—"

OD on tranquilizers! I want to shout—a response to some tantrum of mine—smashing

toys & cassette tapes: Bobby Brady (I loved you so much) unraveling—planned to

go to California—my obsession state—join Mike & Carol & Greg & Cindy &

Marcia & Jan & Peter (I loved you more)—

Sadie now garbled speech & fainting body—Frightened, I called 911—Paramedics

---

[92] Quoted, non-italicized lines from Ginsberg's "Kaddish," except where otherwise noted; all italicized lines mine.

arrived & placed you on a stretcher—I ride in ambulance, clutching your hand,

oxygen mask holding your face. "Don't go" I say (What answer?)

Alone in hospital waiting room, I worry homeless, as clinical depressives like you come

And go.

—hours later, pushed in a wheelchair, you emerge, ashen but alive.

Alive "We got there—Dr. Whatzis rest home—she hid behind a closet"

—Hand on forehead: 'What have I done to deserve such a wretch'—me,

in the middle of the floor, tear-faced, screaming red—

*"*We were kicked out—tramping with Valise to unknown shady lawn houses—dusk, pine

trees after dark—long dead street filled with crickets and poison ivy—I left on the

next bus to New York—laid my head back in the last seat, depressed—the worst

yet to come?—abandoning her, rode in torpor—I was only 12"—

'We are going to the doctor,' you say—I object 'Again!'—I'm ten—walk on my toes—

'When he feels safe he will walk flat' doc once said—

Like Columbus, from bad to worse—truant now, frightened to leave the house—I leave

my tape recorder, my second family—bye Brooklyn! & black man in tight suit &

bright hat—

Manhattan, Spanish Harlem, Mount Sinai—elevator to a door & long white hall &

room of doctors—concerned looks—questions

then you stand—

'David, we'd like to keep you with us for a while'—

'nooooo!'—strong dark arms hold me back—

you walk down the hall, toward the door with glass wire window—Joan Crawford heels

click click click against white linoleum floor—jaw tensed tears, don't look back—

*no pillar of salt for you—"*realizing how we suffer"

Never said goodbye, now say it all the time:

"'All right—put on your coat Mrs.—let's go—We have the wagon downstairs—you

want to come with her to the station?'

The ride then—held Naomi's hand, and held her head to my breast, I'm taller—kissed her

And said I did it for the best—" "Needs—

To me—'Why did you do this?'—'Yes Mrs., your son will have to leave you in an

hour'—The Ambulance

came in a few hours—drove off at 4 A.M. to some Bellevue in the night downtown—

gone to the hospital forever. I saw her led away—she waved, tears in her eyes."

* * *

"Or actually what happens is,"

he explains,

"at best what happens, is

there's a definite body rhythm

that has no definite words,

or may have one or two words attached to it,

one or two key words attached to it.

And then,

in writing it down,

it's simply by a process of association

that I find what the rest of the statement is—

what can be collected around that word,

what that word is connected to" (Ginsberg *Beat Writers* 41-42).

* * *

I ride the rhythm: "O glorious muse that bore me from the womb, gave suck first mystic life & taught me talk and music, from whose pained head I first took Vision—Tortured and beaten in the skull—

O Sadie, O Naomi, O Allen—"Sweet Holy Blessed Love"[93]

"What mad hallucinations of the damned that drive me out of my own skull to seek Eternity till I find Peace

for Thee, O Poetry—

and for all humankind

call on the Origin Death which is the mother

of the universe!"

I wish we could have meet—but you left

me, in absence of my own journals & photos & records, Yours:

"Work of the merciful Lord of Poetry that causes the broken grass to be green, or the rock to break in grass —or the Sun to be constant to earth—Sun of all sunflowers and days on bright iron bridges—what shines on old hospitals—as on my yard—"

* * *

[93] Ginsberg, *Journals Mid-Fifties 1954-58*, 41.

My yard—

Sadie and David Bahr: two beings.

Chapter 3. Distancing Effects: Joan Didion's Dissociated Sixties

> whatever I do write reflects, sometimes gratuitously, how I feel.
> Joan Didion, *Slouching Toward Bethlehem*, "Preface"

> my God how strongly things exist today.
> Jean-Paul Sartre, *Nausea*

I

I begin with a series of images: A five-year old girl goes for a drive with her 26-year-old mother, her stepfather, and her two siblings. Five miles south of the last Bakersfield exit, the girl is forced to get out of the car and left on a deserted road in South Central California. She chases after the car for "a long time." Twelve hours later, the California Highway Patrol finds the child clinging to a cyclone fence; they have to pry her fingers from its metal coil.

The above scene appears in the fourth paragraph of the first section of Joan Didion's essay, "The White Album"; she concludes: "Certain of these images did not fit into any narrative I knew" (13). According to Didion, the scenario—the child abandoned; her running after the departing car; the forced removal of the girl from the fence to which she is clutching—is representative of an historical moment "more electrical than ethical" (13): 1966-1971.

Didion first captured what many perceive as the electric chaos of the sixties in her first essay collection, *Slouching Toward Bethlehem*, published in 1968. Writing for the *New York Times Magazine* in 1979, Michiko Kakutani states that "in telling what has happened to California in the past few decades, Didion finds a metaphor for some larger, insidious process at work in American society" (29). Two years later, scholar Katherine

Henderson asserts that "there are few writers—male or female—with her dramatic ability to present and evaluate American culture" (146). In 1986, Wayne Show, writing in *English Studies*, makes the claim that "Didion's dilemmas of physical and mental health, of personal ambivalence and nihilism . . . epitomize the age, and they are inseparable from it" (38). And in 1986, scholar Mark Winchell writes that the final paragraph of "Slouching" "is eloquently symbolic, a veritable ideogram of the pathological self-absorption and moral disorder which pervade Haight-Ashbury" (38). By 1991, Didion continues to be viewed as a messenger of an age when cultural critic Jutta Ernst states that Didion's work provides "the imagery, the points of reference, organized in such a way as to help to understand the time and culture in question, the USA in the 1960s" (315). In his introduction to *We Tell Ourselves Stories to Live*, a collection of Didion's nonfiction from 1968-2003, John Leonard identifies her as the "geomancer of deracination" (xi); she is "part sybilline icon and part Stanford seismograph, alert on the faultlines of the culture to every tremor of tectonic fashion plate" (ix). Most recently, journalist Boris Kachka reflects: "In the sixties, she observed, from the vital center, the dangers of the counter-culture, and long before Woodstock" (37). Indeed, her status as oracle of American society, particularly of the sixties counter-culture, has only grown.

Yet not everyone has embraced Didion's role as social seismograph. Perhaps most famously, in "Only Disconnect," essayist Barbara Grizzutti Harrison writes that Didion's "subject is always herself" (115). In a more measured response, critic Rosemary Regan-Gavin observes, in her reading of "On The Road," from *Slouching*, "we have the sense that the author is aware that she is viewed (for the purpose of the talk-show circuit on which she finds herself) as a commentator on our society, but who is unable to kid

herself; in fact, who realizes that she is as confused and psychologically fragmented as the next person" (152). In *The White Album*, even Didion resists her role as prophet: "I am not the society in microcosm. I am a thirty-four-year-old woman with long straight hair and an old bikini bathing suit and bad nerves sitting on an island in the middle of the Pacific waiting for a tidal wave that will not come" (135). As she stares out the window, from within a hotel in Honolulu, and imagines "a swell of water" (133) soon after an earthquake in the Aleutians, the anticipated tsunami is literal and figurative, external and internal. Nonetheless, scholar Mark Z. Muggli agrees with Henderson that "Didion gives us 'her private and often anguished experience as a metaphor for the writer, for her generation, and sometimes for the entire society'" (406). And in response to citing Didion's demurral to being a cultural microcosm, Leonard comments that she "had nevertheless a lot to say about Huey Newton and the Panthers" (xvi).

But did she?

Harrison argues that "when [Didion] reports—selectively and superficially—on the Black Panthers, on campus disorders, she zeroes in on the most foolish of spokespersons, making a mockery of the causes that inspired good men to good action by ridiculing the worst of the best" (124).

I believe that positioning Didion as a definitive, if not *the* definitive, sibyl of sixties, is more indicative of how people, particularly those with a more conservative bent, want to view the era—as chaotic, amoral, fragmented, disconnected, etc.—than Didion's status as soothsayer. At the same time, I do not disagree with Didion's assessment of certain lost souls of the American counter-culture, as when she writes in "Slouching":

> Of course the activists—not those whose thinking had become rigid, but those whose approach to revolution was imaginatively anarchic—had long ago grasped the reality which still eluded the press: we were seeing something important. We were seeing the desperate attempt of a handful of pathetically unequipped children to create a community in a social vacuum. Once we had seen these children, we could no longer overlook the vacuum, no longer pretend that the society's atomization could be reversed. (108)

Still, as the above paragraph makes clear, Didion's inductive reasoning draws on the particular (a handful of children) to make a claim for the general (society's atomization). Yet it is hardly the entire picture. As Harrison combatively counters:

> Children playing odd games, she calls campus protesters, committing a sin of omission: these "children" were playing for their lives (Kent State?); the fact that there were con artists and idiots and tricksters among them does not alter that fact. (Because Jerry Rubin is now in love with hot tubs are we to believe that all protest against our criminal engagement in Vietnam was inspired by lunatics?) It is because Didion does not believe that human beings can modify or transform the world that she is obliged to call attention—in a series of verbal snapshots, like a Diane Arbus of prose—only to the freaks of the 1960s. (124)

To be sure, Didion's cultural assessment in "Slouching" overlooks some of the radical progress and communal strides being made by activists in the civil rights', feminist, and gay and lesbian movements. At the same time, I think that Harrison, like many of

Didion's supporters who judge "Slouching" and "The White Album" as authoritative chronicles of a decade, overlooks the subjective phenomenology that informs both texts. As I will argue, these two essays, particularly "The White Album," are aesthetic autobiographies: their style and form are a product of an embodied perspective of the world that reveal more about the author then the environment that they ostensibly chronicle. These works provide a measure of insightful commentary about a given time and place, but they reveal only a very small part of the picture. These works are perceptual accounts. And for many readers, of which I include myself, they are perceptually experienced.

II

> Order and control are terribly important to me. . . . I would love to just have control over my own body—to stop the pain, to stop my hand from shaking.
> Joan Didion, *The New York Times Magazine*, June 10, 1979

In her 1976 essay "Why I Write," Didion explains why she "stole" the title from George Orwell's similarly titled text:

> I liked the sound of the words . . . There you have three short unambiguous words that share a sound; and the sound they share is this:
>
> I
>
> I
>
> I
>
> In many ways writing is the act of saying *I*, of imposing oneself upon other people, of saying listen to me, see it my way, change your mind. It's an aggressive, even a hostile act. . . . there's no getting around the fact that

> setting words on paper is the tactic of a secret bully, an invasion, an imposition of the writer's sensibility on the reader's most private space. (5)

Didion is aware that no matter how "objective" a work of writing may appear, a individual is responsible for choosing and arranging words within blank space (as the arrangement of the triple "I" above demonstrates). The subjective forces behind a written text are not limited to the author whose name appears in the published work but also includes editors and other "readers."[94] But the focus here will be primarily on the "author" whose name appears on the text: Joan Didion. In fact, the line readings and structural suggestions offered by editors and outside readers of a work do not usually efface the initial perceiving subject that drafts the work and provides a text to edit or structure. And the perceiving subject identified in Didion's prose is a fairly distinct one, as noted by many critics of her work.

For example, Katherine Usher Henderson has characterized Didion's prose as "a highly artful style, combining many traditional rhetorical techniques with some less traditional ones, and governed overall by an acute sensitivity to cadence, the rising and falling rhythms of words" (133). At the same time, Henderson acknowledges the difficulty of generalizing about Didion's style because "it is so various in its use of rhetorical and stylistic devices" (136). She notes that Didion's prose "ranges widely in diction, using both simple and esoteric words; in sentence structure, using long and short sentences, loosely and tightly coordinated ones; in tone, from mocking irony to straightforward praise or blame; in manner, from the most intimate to the rather formal"

[94] For example, Didion has been forthcoming about the input of her late husband, John Gregory Dunne, and her editors in her writing.

(136). I would argue that Didion's moments of "intimacy" are frequently quite detached and that she is a fairly indirect straight-shooter. Still, Henderson concludes that "[t]wo generalizations can safely be made" about Didion's style: "first . . . [it] is invariably graceful, for she has a practiced ear for the rhythms of language; second, her style is never inflated—every word counts" (136). Of course, for many skilled and accomplished writers, "every word counts." Yet, the cadences of Didion's prose, derived from her word choices, and her sentence and paragraph structures, are fairly distinct, and "contained." Samuel Coale notes Didion's "obsessive deliberateness, her excessive control of language in an almost procedural and surgical lucidity. Pressure builds from that damned precision" (136). Citing Didion's own terms from *The White Album* and *Slouching*, respectively, Coale states how every "word carries 'totemic weight'" and the "tight skein of language stretches to the breaking point in its attempting 'a perilous triumph of being over nothingness'" (136). In a close, formalist reading of "On Going Home," from *Slouching*, Dilek Direnç cites the "major techniques" that Didion employs in that essay, and, I would add, much of her writing, are "the collage/montage, the list, the labyrinthine sentence, synchronicity, the 'crot'-like paragraph, repetitions, and refrains" (36).[95] These techniques, many of which have been classified as "metonymic," have also been called cinematic (Coale, Weathers, Hult, Silverman). Direnç, however, argues that, "as a result of her attempt to reveal the fragmentation of contemporary experience, Didion's prose is

[95] Direnç notes that the "word 'crot,' an obsolete word meaning 'bit' or 'fragment' was given a new meaning by Tom Wolfe, the leading New Journalist" (39). For this idea that a "new grammar," as practiced by New Journalists such as Wolfe and Didon, Direnç draws on a 1967 article by Winston Weathers, "Grammar of Style: New Options in Composition." Direnç writes that "in the alternate grammar of style, a crot is 'fundamentally an autonomous unit characterized by the absence of any traditional devices that might relate it to preceding or subsequent crots' (Weathers 4-5)" (39). As an "independent unit of meaning, the crot varies in length; it may consist of one sentence as well as of twenty or thirty sentences. A crot is purposefully kept free of verbal and logical relationships with other surrounding crots because the absence of logical ties enables the writer to make 'leaps of logic' and suggests correspondence with the fragmentation of contemporary experience" (39).

more photographic than cinematic" (36). I would offer that cinema, particularly *La Nouvelle Vague* of the mid twentieth century, can reveal the fragmentation of "contemporary" experience as much as photography. Yet both the cinematic and photographic comparisons to Didion's nonfiction prose reinforce its documentary status, and, as a result, its seeming objectivity.

Didion herself, however, makes no such claims to objectivity. In the preface to *Slouching*, she states:

> not all of the pieces in this book have to do, in a "subject" sense, with the general breakup, with things falling apart; that is a large and rather presumptuous notion, and many of these pieces are small and personal. But since I am neither a camera eye nor much given to writing pieces which do not interest me, whatever I do write reflects, sometimes gratuitously, how I feel. (xxvi-xxvii)

Muggli agrees with Didion's above self-assessment. While he acknowledges the postmodern debates about truth and objectivity that directly implicate journalism, he states that "judging the possibility of objectivity is less important than noting the rhetorical effect of data that claim to be merely objective" (404). And, as he notes, one of Didion's most distinctive stylistic choices "is not her presentation of self but her presentation of objects and events" (402). Although Muggli also states that "at some points Didion and the newsreporter share the crucial assumption that they present objects and events as documents that recreate history" (404), he points out that "Didion is so unlike a camera that she occasionally creates details for her stories" (404). He notes that in *Slouching*, Didion's details are often subjective hypotheses, such as the objects on then

Governor Regan's bookshelves in her essay "Many Mansions" (405). He observes that such a "distinction between what actually happened and what generally happens is the basis of Aristotle's distinction between history and poetry" (406). He adds that for "the 'objective' journalist," this Aristotelian difference between history and poetry "is fundamental" (406) and he then cites one of Didion's lines from "On Keeping a Notebook": "I always had trouble distinguishing between what happened and what merely might have happened, but I remain unconvinced that the distinction, for my purposes, matters" (Didion; *Slouching* 120). Muggli believes that Didion's admitted creative license is what sets her apart from other journalists: "her dependence on an extreme form of metaphor that moves along a spectrum beyond symbol to what we might call 'emblem'" (407). He argues that images "become emblems that reverberate with an intensity that suggests a large world of meaning beyond the confines of the particular story" (408). As such, the "emblem does not illustrate, or even represent—it evokes" and therefore "seems timeless because it has been released from history" (408). In other words, the emblem is still a "true" and valid nonfiction technique. For Muggli, it is what makes Didion's journalism poetic.

It is worth noting, however, that Didion wanted to be a fiction writer before she became a journalist (Kachka 33; Nance 54). She started writing nonfiction as a way to pay the bills and initially saw it as "something that was getting in the way of a novel, rather then as something I specifically set out to do" (Nance 54). Although, as Calvin Trillin notes, Didion has become known "first and foremost as an essayist, and rightly so, given her output" (54), her nonfiction reveals a sensibility profoundly rooted in poiesis, defined by the OED as "creative production, esp. of a work of art." Further, as someone

often celebrated as one of America's preeminent social critics and journalists, she has admitted to a general disinterest in politics and the inner lives of others. When asked in 2006 about covering the political conventions of 1988, she reflects that "domestic politics . . . was something I simply knew nothing about" and she had never before been to a political convention (Als 488). And most recently, in a 2011 interview, she confesses "that her writing might lack empathy, even human curiosity" (Kachka 37): "I'm not very interested in people," she says. "I recognize it in myself— there is a basic indifference toward people" (qtd. in Kachka 37).

My point is that although Didion has been designated as a major cultural critic, I see her essays more as an effective expression of her own subjective experience and her writing as means of objectifying and managing her sensational responses. Although her subjective experience is influenced by a specific time and place, and it conveys striking aspects of a particular historical moment, it can not be seen as offering a definitive record, or even an objective journalistic account, of an era, notably the sixties. Essays such as "Slouching" and, even more so, "The White Album," are aesthetic autobiographies that largely recount the subjective perspective of a time and place. These autobiographical works resonate with others because they affectively corroborate certain phenomenological perspectives of the sixties, either as embodied memories by those who have lived through it or as adopted cultural post-memories of the period. For me, however, these texts register phenomenologically as aesthetic artifacts of depressive dissociation.

III

> There used to be an illustration in every elementary psychology book showing a cat drawn by a patient in varying stages of schizophrenia. This cat had a shimmer around it. You could see the molecular structure breaking down at the very edges of the cat: the cat became the background and the background the cat, everything interacting, exchanging ions.
>
> Joan Didion, "Why I Write"

The rhetorical effect of objectivity in Didion's writing, through her selective and seemingly detached foregrounding of objects and events, leads critics such as David Ulin to identify Didion's tone as possessing a "cool, ironic distance" (53) and "sun-bleached neutrality" (54). It is what Wayne Koestenbaum calls "hotel prose." Koestenbaum notes that "Didion's emotional signature is lack of affect—indifference," and indifference "characterises hotel prose, which never indulges the pathetic fallacy" (20). He further states that the "[s]toic breakdown is Didion's territory" and that she captures "the music of the thin blue line between catatonia and competence—that twilit state when one is 'coping,' but only barely" (20). And although, in "hotel prose," the wallpaper may not embody Didion's melancholy (20), the objects that Didion homes in on does offer a phenomenological presentation of her emotional life. Paraphrasing Robert B. Silvers, Didion's editor at *The New York Review of Books*, Nance states in his 2011 profile of Didion that her "great stylistic achievement is a seeming emotional detachment that can't quite suppress the passion lying just beneath" (54). Silvers cites Didion's "cool, detached voice," and that "behind that voice, for all its factuality and coolness, is an underlying tone of intense moral concern, and feelings of anger, of indignation, of sympathy" (qtd in Nance 54). Passion is not the word I would use to characterize the emotion behind Didion's seemingly disaffected stance in "Slouching" and, especially, "The White

Album," although none of Didion's essays exist outside an economy of effect. As Rei Terada contends, "In the discourse of emotion, specific emotions appear and disappear, carrying peculiar rationales with them, but *there is no such thing as the absence of emotion*. [Italics mine.] Emotions arise from others' subsidence, from reflection on emotions, and from the very absence of any particular thing to feel" (13). Didion's "cool, ironic distance," her "detached voice," her "hotel prose," is something of a "stylistic achievement." In *The Year of Magical Thinking*," Didion writes:

> As a writer, even as a child, long before what I wrote began to be published, I developed a sense that meaning itself was resident in the rhythms of words and sentences and paragraphs, a technique for withholding whatever it was I thought or believed behind an increasingly impenetrable polish. The way I write is who I am, or have become . . . (7)

Didion's uncertainty, as to whether how she writes is who she is or who she has become, begs the question as to how much of her "withholding" writing style is willed or simply a non-conscious reflection of who she is. In an interview with Sara Davidson, from 1977, Didion says in regards to her shyness, "I like a lot of people, and I'm glad to see them, but I don't give the impression of being there. Part of it is that I'm terribly inarticulate. A sentence doesn't occur to me as a whole thing unless I'm working" (19). This self-assessment of not "being there," along with her later confession to a temperamental disinterest in politics and the inner lives of people, suggests a dissociative personality that goes beyond a cultivated writing style and instead originates from a psychological disposition.

In *Feeling Unreal: Depersonalization Disorder and the Loss of the Self* (2006), Daphne Simeon and Jeffrey Abugel offer what they claim as "the first definitive work" on the disorder, which they state has been "well-documented" in medical literature for over a century (3). The fourth edition of the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Psychiatric Disorders* (DSM-IV) defines the "essential features" of the condition as involving "persistent or recurrent episodes of depersonalization characterized by a feeling of detachment or estrangement from one's self" (12). Further, the manual states:

> The individual may feel like an automaton or as if he or she is living in a dream or a movie. There may be a sensation of being an outside observer of one's metal processes, one's body, or parts of one's body. Various types of sensory anesthesia, lack of affective response, and a sensation of lacking control of one's actions, including speech, are often present. The individual with Depersonalization Disorder maintains intact reality testing (e.g., awareness that it is only a feeling and that he or she is not really an automaton). (12-13)

Simeon and Abugel, however, maintain that *Modern Clinical Psychiatry* (MCP), a medical textbook from the 1930's and the first to include depersonalization, offers a "particularly insightful description" in its sixth edition from 1964. It is also useful in relation to Didion.

> Depersonalization, a pervasive and distressing feeling of estrangement . . . in which feelings of unreality and a loss of conviction of one's own identity and of a sense of identification with and control over one's own body are the principal symptoms. The unreality symptoms are of two

> kinds: a feeling of changed personality and a feeling that the outside world is unreal. The patient feels that he is no longer himself, but he does not feel that he has become someone else. The condition is, therefore, not one of so called transformation of personality. Experience loses emotional meaning and may be colored by a frightening sense of strangeness and unreality. The onset may be acute, following a severe emotional shock, or it may be a gradual onset following prolonged physical or emotional stress. It is more frequent in personalities of an intelligent, sensitive, affectionate, introverted, and imaginative type. The patient may say his feelings are "frozen," that his thoughts are strange; his thoughts and acts seem to be carried on mechanically as if he were a machine or automaton. People and objects appear unreal, far away, and lacking in normal color and vividness. . . . He appears perplexed and bewildered because of the strangeness of unreality feelings. He has difficulty in concentrating and may complain that his brain is "dead" or has "stopped working." (11-12)

Whereas the DMV offers a compact yet fairly general definition of the disorder, it emphasizes an estrangement from self. A sense of disconnection from the external world is listed as a supplementary symptom along with other possible manifestations (13). The MCP, however, presents a less decisive distinction between the internal and external. The loss of emotional meaning that "may be colored by a frightening sense of strangeness and unreality" is less individualized; it is more holistically constituted. The result is an amplified paradox—the sense of atomization, of disconnection, of fracture, is a globally

produced phenomenon. The individual cannot be isolated from her environment. Internal and external forces are mutually dependent. As Simeon and Abugel note:

> But the question also arises of whether or not modern society is, in itself, a cause of depersonalization. Writing about depersonalization and its relation to society in the 1970s, James Cattell and Jane Schmahl Cattell said, "People working under centralized bureaucracies are routinized, humiliated, and thereby dehumanized. The economic system prevents involvement and fosters detachment. It generates competition, creates feelings of inadequacy and fear of human obsolescence. It creates hostility and suspiciousness." (63-64)

Further, as with Didion, the onset of disorder "may be acute, following a severe emotional shock," as in *The Year of Magical Thinking* and *Blue Nights*,[96] "or it may be a gradual onset following prolonged physical or emotional stress," as in "Slouching" and "The White Album"; additionally applicable to Didion, the disorder "is more frequent in personalities of an intelligent, sensitive . . . introverted, and imaginative type." Finally, a "difficulty in concentrating" and feeling that the brain is dead has "stopped working" resonates with Didion's references to writer's block.

In her preface to *Slouching*, Didion recounts her emotional state prior to taking on the assignment that resulted in the titular essay: "I went to San Francisco because I had not been able to work in some months, had been paralyzed by the conviction that writing was an irrelevant act, that the world as I had understood it no longer existed" (xxv). Reflecting on the entire collection of essays, Didion writes: "I could tell you that I liked

---

[96] *The Year of Magical Thinking* and *Blue Nights* respectively recount the death of her husband and daughter.

doing some of them more than others, but that all of them were hard for me to do, and took more time than perhaps they were worth; that there is always a point in the writing of a piece when I sit in a room literally papered with false starts and cannot put one word after another and imagine that I have suffered a small stroke, leaving me apparently undamaged but actually aphasic" (xxvii). She also notes that:

> I was in fact as sick as I have ever been when I was writing "Slouching Towards Bethlehem" . . . (I would like you to believe that I kept working out of some real professionalism, to meet the deadline, but that would not be entirely true; I did have a deadline, but it was also a troubled time, and working did to the trouble what gin did to the pain.) (xxvii)

These statements reveal that the composition of the seemingly objective "Slouching" was informed by a particular subjectivity, one which corresponded with certain aspects of a particular time and place. The essay famously begins "The center was not holding" (75). Didion then lists a series of selective social ills, including bankruptcies, public auctions, casual killings, "trailing bad checks and repossession papers," and, most significant to her, "misplaced children" and disappearing families (75). She writes that "a great many articulate people seemed to have a sense of high social purpose and it might have been a spring of brave hopes and national promise, but it was not, and more and more people had the uneasy apprehension that it was not" (75-76). Many could apply her description of the mid- to late sixties to the Great Depression or to the years following the election of Barack Obama in wake of the mortgage-loan debacle, not to mention an inexhaustible number of historical periods. Still, Didion's characterization of the sixties resonates with many readers. In an essay that largely follows a select group of irresponsible, drug-using

teenagers, Didion ends with the famed image of a five-year-old girl on acid and an unattended three-year-old named Michael chewing on an electrical cord while his mother and her friends obsessively try to retrieve some "very good Moroccan hash" beneath the floorboards (113). I have already mentioned that Winchell views this last scene in "Slouching" as "a veritable ideogram of the pathological self-absorption and moral disorder which pervade Haight-Ashbury." That the "self-absorption" and "moral disorder" of this singular group of people that dominate "Slouching" becomes representative of an entire era overlooks the values of a decade that also produced the March on Washington and Stonewall riots. This is not to say that Didion does not reveal the dangers and contradictions of a group of aimless "children" who decide to "turn on, tune in, drop out": individuals like "Mike" who see his life "as a triumph over 'don'ts" by getting rid of his "middle-class Freudian hang-ups" and finding acid (Didion; *Slouching* 78-79). As Harrison states, "Many of Didion's observations about the self-serving 'children' of the 1960s are dead accurate; but that doesn't give her the right to fiddle while Watts burns" (126). I would add that the paradoxes and self-harm—the "atomization"—represented by those like "Mike" are not the sole provenance of the sixties. In any event, the essay elides any positive, communal forces at play in "the United States of America in the cold late spring of 1967" (75) and proximate years. By focusing on a group of inarticulate, undirected, and mostly apolitical characters, "Slouching" offers a limited spectrum of human behavior and does not seem to acknowledge the coexistence of destructive *and* constructive impulses within people. As Didion later writes in "On the Morning After the Sixties," from *The White Album*, she tends to be "still" when confronted with the choice to politically act or not. She states that

her sensibility reflects “the ambiguity of belonging to a generation distrustful of political highs, the historical irrelevancy of growing up convinced that the heart of darkness lay not in some error of social organization but in man’s own blood” (206). In fact, Didion’s essays frequently reflect same “Manichean conflicts” that Coale locates in her fiction and which he claims “threaten to evaporate, dissolve into that state of paralysis her heroines inhabit” (160). Or, as Harrison writes: “to swallow Didion it is necessary to swallow the notion that all acts of virtue are—must be—divorced from politics . . . I wonder if Didion is acquainted with the Manichaean heresy” (128).

Didion’s personal sense of atomization and dislocation that informs “Slouching” is more salient in “The White Album,” which I believe is why that later essay has been assessed as less “successful.” For example, Winchell states that, in “The White Album,” Didion presents fifteen segments of “physical and psychic violence” in order “to convey a sense of American life at a particular historical moment” and “to represent American culture as a whole in the late 1960s” (35). Winchell finds that the suggested connections between the scenes are “interesting” but notes that “none is really followed through” (36). He believes that essay’s “possibilities” are “undeveloped” and that it “would have been more effective had Didion’s focus been less diffuse” (36). Winchell believes that some greater narrative structure would have made the essay more successful. He acknowledges that “the fragmentation is intentional” (36) and cites Robert Towers from the 1979 *New York Times Book Review*. In his review, Towers writes that “The White Album” is “the best short piece . . . on the late 1960’s that I have yet read” (1). For Towers, the most “striking” reason for the “effectiveness” of the piece “has to do with the use to which personal neurosis is put” and how Didion has “refined it to the point where it vibrates in

exquisite attunement to the larger craziness of the world she inhabits and observes" (1). But Winchell feels that any sustained "interest" in the piece has been "allowed" "to dissipate by sacrificing coherence for the sake of scope" (36). Although Winchell does not believe that essay is "without merit," he suggests that a "way out of the impasse might have been for Didion to inject herself more into the piece" and that the essay "is most affecting when the pathetic fallacy is most evident" (39).

As with most critical readings of "Slouching," both Winchell and Towers interpret "The White Album" as a work of journalism meant to capture an entire era and its cultural psychology. For Towers, the effort is successful, while for Winchell, it is not. Yet if the essay is read as an aesthetic autobiography instead of a work of "objective" journalism or cultural criticism, the "problem" of historical representation is not a concern. If, hypothetically, Didion experienced a dissociative episode during the composition of "The White Album," the fact that she did not "inject herself more into the piece" would not be a stylistic choice but a possible consequence of dissociative distancing.[97] Winchell states that the essay works best "when the pathetic fallacy is most evident," and that is my point: in "The White Album," the historicity that Didion most effectively documents is the affect of her subjectivity at a given moment. That affect is conveyed by Didion through the images she selects and their formal presentation. Winchell, looking for a more coherent narrative of the late sixties, resists Didion's form,

[97] I want to make it clear that my intent is not necessarily to "pathologize" Didion. As with other "mental conditions," such as depression, depersonalization exists on a spectrum. Simeon and Abugel note: "Depersonalization has been found to occur, at least fleetingly, in 50-70% of the population" (14); "Often, initial depersonalization goes away as mysteriously as it came, but sometimes it becomes more chronic, with an enigmatic life of its own" (14). Or, as Aldous Huxley writes in *Heaven and Hell*: "Sanity is a matter of degree" (135). My interest is in how specific texts and literary forms can communicate certain phenomenological experiences of despair. While I argue that "The White Album" conveys the phenomenology of dissociation, I am not interested in whether or not Didion possesses a chronic "dissociative personality." I do believe, however, that many of her essays, such as "The White Album" and "Slouching, transmit a dissociative affect.

critiquing the "effect" as "what critics used to call the 'fallacy of imitative form,' which is sort of like writing about boredom in a boring way" (36). Yet the "fallacy of imitative form" *can* be an effective mode of conveying the phenomenological experience of an author, or in the case of fiction, the protagonist. Its "success," as with the use of any literary device, depends on the author's style and how that style resonates with the reader. For me, Didion's form resonates. It captures the sensation of despair and disconnection, notably my experience of the mid-to- late 1980s, when, as young gay man, the AIDS epidemic ravaged the gay community. Having "aged out" of foster care, I was sleeping in someone's kitchen in Chelsea, Manhattan. I would soon learn of my foster sister's AIDS-related illness, which she had contracted through a sexual relationship with a bisexual man. Those years would be remembered by me as a collage of disconnected "crots" and physiological breakdowns. Frequently ill with fevers and overwhelmed by snapshots of dying men (a crippled thirty-year-old covered in eggplant blotches), passionately staged protests (the grimace of furious faces and shouting open mouths), and emotionally charged political icons (the green flesh of Ronald Reagan and his demonic pink eyes on an ACT-UP placard), I withdrew from any physical or emotional intimacy.[98] Many years later, I would read "The White Album" as a portrait of a dissociative breakdown in which any sense of personal agency has not only been lost but is essentially besides the point. For me, those years were, as Didion writes in "The White Album," "flash pictures in variable sequence, images with no 'meaning' beyond their temporary arrangement, not a movie but a cutting-room experience" (13). It was "to know that one could change the sense with every cut was to begin to perceive the experience as rather more electrical

---

[98] See "'Can You Believe My Luck," an autobiographical story that I wrote in response to my foster sister's death.

than ethical" (13). It was, in short, a period in which "these images did not fit into any narrative I knew" (13).

Muggli writes that, when in despair, Didion "is unable to generate the large cultural emblems that typify her best journalism" (415). He cites the example in "The White Album" when she composes a list of things "TO PACK AND WEAR" and "TO CARRY" (34-35). For Koestenbaum, the list belongs to his "favorite Didion passage of all time"; it "typifies "hotel prose," which represents a "disinterested"—or, as I reframe it, dissociative—authorial position. In the essay, Didion writes that it "should be clear that this was a list made by someone who prized control, yearned after momentum, someone determined to play her role as if she had the script, heard her cues, knew the narrative" (35). She states that the omission of a watch from that list is significant: "I had skirts, jerseys, leotards, pullover sweater, shoes, stockings, bra, night- gown, robe, slippers, cigarettes, bourbon, shampoo, toothbrush and paste, Basis soap, razor, deodorant, aspirin, prescriptions, Tampax, face cream, powder, baby oil, mohair throw, typewriter, legal pads, pens, files and a house key, but I didn't know what time it was" (36). She supposes that this "may be a parable, either of my life as a reporter during this period or of the period itself" (36). Despite the conditional "may," and her claim elsewhere that she is "not a microcosm of society itself," Didion leads the reader to interpret the passage, and whole essay, as parable of the "period itself." She suggests that a sense of temporality, a recognition of cause and effect, has disappeared for her and an entire generation. But as Muggli notes in regards to what he interprets here as Didion's inability "to generate the large cultural emblems" of her "best prose":

> We recognize the incident [of the atemporal list] as a symbol of her life, and we might even be able to see it as an emblem of the period as it is characterized in "The White Album." But even the care she gives the explanation of this image cannot bring us to see it as an emblem of the whole diverse period that *The White Album* documents. (415)

Didion may encourage readers to view the passage of the missing watch, and the fifteen "electric" fragments that comprise the essay, as an "emblem of the whole diverse period," but Muggli is not persuaded. As a result, he sees Didion's despair as an obstacle to the essay's true subject, the broken late sixties; I am arguing, however, that the essay's subject *is* Didion's despair.

Arguably the least convincing leap that Didion makes in "The White Album" is between her psychiatric report and the era. I cite most of the report:

> *In June of this year patient experienced an attack of vertigo, nausea, and a feeling that she was going to pass out.*[. . .]*The Rorschach record is interpreted as describing a personality in process of deterioration with abundant signs of failing defenses and increasing inability of the ego to mediate the world of reality and to cope with normal stress. . . . Emotionally, patient has alienated herself almost entirely from the world of other human beings. Her fantasy life appears to have been virtually completely preempted by primitive, regressive libidinal preoccupations many of which are distorted and bizarre. . . . In a technical sense basic affective controls appear to be intact but it is equally clear that they are insecurely and tenuously maintained for the present by a variety of*

> *defense mechanisms including intellectualization, obsessive-compulsive devices, projection, reaction-formation, and somatization, all of which now seem inadequate to their task of controlling or containing an underlying psychotic process and are therefore in process of failure. The content of patient's responses is highly unconventional and frequently bizarre, filled with sexual and anatomical preoccupations, and basic reality contact is obviously and seriously impaired at times. In quality and level of sophistication patient's responses are characteristic of those of individuals of high average or superior intelligence but she is now functioning intellectually in impaired fashion at barely average level. Patient's thematic productions on the Thematic Apperception Test emphasize her fundamentally pessimistic, fatalistic, and depressive view of the world around her. It is as though she feels deeply that all human effort is foredoomed to failure, a conviction which seems to push her further into a dependent, passive withdrawal. In her view she lives in a world of people moved by strange, conflicted, poorly comprehended, and, above all, devious motivations which commit them inevitably to conflict and failure* . . . (14-15)

All the symptoms cited above fit with Simeon and Abugel's description of "features common in depersonalization disorder," which "include anxiety symptoms, depressive symptoms, obsessive rumination, somatic concerns, and a disturbance in a person's sense of time" (17). Yet after mentioning this rather striking list of psycho-somatic disturbances, Didion flippantly comments, "By way of comment I offer only that an

attack of vertigo and nausea does not now seem to me an inappropriate response to the summer of 1968" (*The White Album* 14-15). But "vertigo and nausea" is the least acute of her symptoms. She ignores the otherwise severe psychiatric diagnoses. By and large, critics have complied with Didion's curious self-assessment. Henderson writes that "Didion's inclusion of the report was a bold stroke, for it was presumably an 'objective' view of her, and it invited us to think of her as crazy" (15). Henderson states that, by the end of book, "we feel that Didion's emotional state was not madness but the appropriate response of a sensitive woman to a chaos she personally witnessed" (16). Besides her use of the universalizing "we," from which I feel excluded, it is interesting that Henderson qualifies the objectivity of the medical report with both the adverb "presumably" and scare quotes. What would lead Henderson to suggest that the medical report was biased except for perhaps buying into Didion's own suspicion of psychiatry? Jeffrey Berman asks in *Companionship in Grief*, published in 2010: "How do we interpret Didion's psychiatric profile? Do we read it straightforwardly, as an indication that her life was so out of control during this period that it was a miracle she could still function . . . Or do we read it ironically, as an example of how out of touch psychiatry was in the 1960s?" (196). Like Henderson, Berman tends to side with the latter view. He contends that

> Nowhere in Didion's writings do we see her in the process of self-deterioration, not even in *The Year of Magical Thinking*, where she tells us that she was "incapable of thinking rationally" (35) but shows us remarkable self-control. A social worker describes her, minutes after Dunne's death, as a "pretty cool customer" (15), and though she later

repeats this comment three times, each time with the intention of ironically undercutting it, she remains composed. (197)

Although I disagree with Berman's assessment that an author's "composure" on the page translates into the author's psychological composure in life, I am not even sure how one could accurately gauge someone's psychological competence based on their writing alone. In "The Implied Author, Deficient Narration, and Nonfiction Narrative: Or, What's Off-Kilter in The Year of Magical Thinking . . . ," James Phelan notes "the significant role of self-presentation in the construction of narrative, either fictional or nonfictional: a writer inevitably constructs one version of herself rather than another through her choices of technique, subject matter, narrative sequence, ethical values, and so on" (127). Further, in *Reading Autobiography* (2001; 2010), Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson, unpack the four autobiographical "I's" (the historical-I of the living author, the narrating-I, the narrated-I, and the ideological-I), and note that, from the text alone, the "historical I" remains unknowable and the "narrative I" is shifting and multiple (71-78). Finally, as Simeon and Abugel state, an individual suffering from dissociative disorder possesses a functional capacity for reality testing and therefore would not be incapable of presenting a fairly coherent, constructed self; they then offer their own reading of productive writers who they believe may have suffered from the disorder, including Jean-Paul Sartre and Aldous Huxley. My hypothesis that Didion suffered, intermittingly or extensively, from depressive dissociative disorder is drawn from the psychological report, her own statements in interviews, and her fairly insular presentation of sixties America in "Slouching" and "The White Album."

In fact, much of Didion's major fiction and nonfiction conveys a depressive affect. On this point, Berman agrees. He writes that "there is one striking way in which the psychiatric report is true: throughout Didion's writings her vision has remained 'fundamentally pessimistic, fatalistic, and depressive" (171). He confirms that "[m]any of her novels and essays are undeniably dark, stark, and bleak," and "it is startling to hear her observe toward the end of *The Year of Magical Thinking* that her impression of herself 'had been of someone who could look for, and find, the upside in any situation'[. . .] I had looked for the silver lining'" (171). This quote reveals not only Didion's cognitive dissonance but also the gaps in her narrative persona. Berman is also convincing when he observes that regardless of how Didion saw the psychiatric report in 1967, it is, by the time she finishes the essay in 1978, "one of the narratives that no longer make sense to Didion, if it ever did" (197). The report "is not a story she tells herself in order to live"; it "is a counterstory she must resist if she is to continue to live and write" (197). Even so, Berman claims that "if she felt, as the report claims, that 'all effort is foredoomed to failure,' then she would not have written *The White Album*. But that is not necessarily true. As a I explore in the next chapter on Tim O'Brien, individuals often write out of a need to do so, but the motivations are various and may not be compelled by notions of "success" or "failure," but a drive to objectify affective energies. As Didion claims, she is "a person whose most absorbed and passionate hours are spent arranging words on pieces of paper" and that she writes "entirely to find out what I'm thinking, what I'm looking at, what I see and what it means. What I want and what I fear" (6). It may or may not result in a "coherent" or "redemptive" narrative.

Yet critics insist on locating a coherent, often redemptive, narrative in “The White Album.” According to Henderson, “The White Album” “tells the story of the sixties from the perspective of a woman who has banished the demons of the nightmare through the written record of their devastation” (120). Friedman finds a narrative of universal nihilism in Didion’s work, which “mirrors a melancholy and deprived world, a world that is without joy, suspicious of good works and optimism” and, as a result, “Didion’s is the most depressing writing I know . . . and also among the truest” (90). In response to Friedman, Muggli contends that “although much of Didion’s journalism may be depressing in its portrayal of failed acts and blunted desires, it is not depressing in Friedman’s sense that it shows our lack of ‘power to recreate the world, imbue it with meaning, restore coherence and purpose’” (Muggli 416). He agrees with Irving Malin’s conclusion to “The White Album”:

> Didion ends by not believing that we live better lives because of stories. But she lies (and knows it). She deliberately writes this essay to *affirm* (after all the empty spots) that her experiences, which she claims have no significant meaning, *do have a meaning*. I think the meaning is quite clear in spite of the various lies and games and detours: there is a pattern that we make (criticism often does); if the pattern is not “correct”—whatever such a word may mean—we should not care because criticism reflects our larger cares and it helps us to live better days. We write criticism—which is, after all, a “story” about a “story”—to demonstrate that we can bring it home, “that we can light private fires.” Maybe such fire is finally enlightening. (Malin 180)

Muggli ends his citation of the above passage by Malin with "I think the meaning is quite clear in spite of the various lies and game and detours," which leaves his interpretation of "The White Album" ambiguous. A longer citation of the passage reveals that Malin backtracks slightly, finding "meaning" not necessarily in the text itself but in the process of writing criticism, of making patterns. Otherwise, there is no redemptive social commentary in "The White Album." In terms of content, it is too selective, subjective, and insular. The patterns are primarily those of form and aesthetics, not of American cultural history. If there is a message, it is: "Disorder was its own point" (37), but the disorder is not wholly external; it is also internal. By the end, Didion may claim that "writing has not yet helped me to see what it means" (48) but it has helped her rationalize and displace her embodied chaos. In that sense, the writing of "The White Album" does "light" Didion's "private fires," and, as Malin notes, "*maybe* such fire is finally enlightening." But maybe not. What is clearer is that the essay is a carefully orchestrated self-justification of a somatic state that does not reflect the sixties so much as it mirrors Didion's phenomenological experience of the world.

IV

> O Rose thou art sick.
> The invisible worm,
> That flies in the night
> In the howling storm:
>
> Has found out thy bed
> Of crimson joy:
> And his dark secret love
> Does thy life destroy.
>
> William Blake, "The Sick Rose"

In “Phenomenological Psychology and Literary Interpretation,” Joseph P. Natoli offers a phenomenological interpretation of the William Blake’s “The Sick Rose.” He states that the objects of the poem—the worm and rose—are not the “true characters” of the text (206). The true character is the speaking subject who “reveals himself or herself in the comments about the worm and rose” (206). Although the rose is commonly associated with beauty and vitality, the speaker associates it with sickness. Our perceptual experience of the world is challenged and we become uneasy:

> something is wrong with the speaker, something is wrong with the way he or she perceives the world. The speaker’s perceptions are “sick.” The speaker is “sick.” [. . .] the speaker reveals to us a sick world, a world unrelieved by any of the virtues we, as readers, know the world holds in abundance. This speaker sees a ravished, dying world, and “his” or “her” poem is a cry for help from somewhere in that fragmented world. (207)

Natoli uses the above example to contextualize his analysis of Maria Wyeth, the protagonist of Didion’s second novel, *Play It As It Lays*. He wonders whether the dissociative, depressive, and nihilistic perspective of Maria belongs to Didion. By locating characters who inhabit “a life-world contrary” (223) to Maria, such as the woman who runs a coffee shop and whose philosophy is to “play it as it lays,” Natoli determines that the darker perspective is not Didion’s. Instead, Didion is offering Maria as a cautionary tale, perhaps the embodiment of a narcissistic and disconnected age. Similarly, in “The Dissociation of Self in Joan Didion’s *Play It As It Lays*,” Rodney Simard views Maria Wyeth as possessing “an anesthetized sensibility . . . the apathy of the narcissistic personality” (276). Maria is someone who “rejects her earlier, destructive

belief in external control, in reward and punishment" and contrasts herself with those who "still believe in cause-effect" (285). Simard cites the psychologist Heinz Kohut regarding how "the devaluation of objects and object images" through dissociation can result in "pervasive feelings of emptiness and depression" and the sense that one "is not fully real, or at least that his emotions are dulled" (286). Like Natoli, Simard views Maria's depressive, dissociative, and narcissistic perception of the world as distinct from that of Didion. Through stychomythia, or internal debate, the reader obtains a glimpse of Didion's attitude toward Maria. He writes that "Didion may be indicating her own criticism of Maria's narcissism, forcing readers to recognize that the novel itself is not inherently narcissistic: the alternating voices strongly suggest the infusion of a new sense of subjectivity" (285). For Natoli and Simard, the characters' phenomenological perspectives—the world as a sick rose—are interpreted as not belonging to Didion. A reading of her nonfiction, however, complicates such distinctions.

The perspective of the sixties as chaotic, fragmented, and disordered is hardly anomalous. It is one reason, along with Didion's formal approach, why I believe that many critics read "Slouching" and "The White Album" as works of objective journalism: they view, or want to view, the sixties as a pathological speed bump within history. Yet, Didion's selective and totalizing images offer "us a sick world, a world unrelieved by any of the virtues" of that era. Of course, a nonfiction writer may assume a persona not unlike a character in a novel. Merrit Mosley believes that whether the speaking "I" of *Slouching* or *The White Album* "differs in any substantial way from the Joan Didion who drives and sews is not important" (62). For him, the persona is what matters and "the world is reflected—and more important—*judged* by the way it registers on the sensibility of the

persona" (62). The chosen symbols and images by "Didion" supply the "emotional tone to the engagements of this persona with the world, help to gauge the objects perceived" (62). In other words, the subjective lens through which the rose is seen determines whether the reader experiences the rose as healthy or sick. But a nonfiction persona stands in for the author in a way that an ostensibly fictional character does not. The nonfiction persona possess a phenomenological authority signified through witness and testimony. In other words, the presented perceptions of a nonfiction narrator are based on the author's sensorial experience of the world. So whether the "Didion" of "Slouching" or "The White Album" is a persona or not, she is still perceived as possessing the authority of someone who bore witness not only to the atomization of the sixties but also to the phenomenological experience of such witnessing. Such perceived authority allows Henderson to assert that Didion is motivated by a "strongly felt need not only to understand the social and political currents that swirl around us all, but also to become immersed in these currents long enough to experience them emotionally as well as intellectually" (90). It also allows Mosley to comment that "one could become impatient with" Didion's approach, "and some readers have, seeing it as a narcissistic and self-indulgent way of writing, which is always, whatever the ostensible subject, really about Joan Didion; and which always seems to dramatize her sensitivity to things that are too much for her" (62-63). Mosley believes that such an assessment of Didion—as a 1960's "Roderick Usher, fragile, anxious, neurasthenic, undone by life"—is "too superficial and reductive a view of her method" (63). Rather, her approach is meant to reproduce a phenomenological experience of the period. It is a strategy through "which the moralist avoids 'moralizing,' but communicates a clearly moral system of reactions to life. They

penetrate and disturb, and ultimately persuade" (64). Like a number of other critics, Mosley perceives Didion as an authoritative moral witness who strategically employs language for effect.

As I have argued, I do not view "Slouching" or, especially, "The White Album" as objective journalistic accounts of an era. They are largely subjective works, aesthetic autobiographies of Didion's phenomenological experiences of various people and places during a given time. The external disorder that Didion chronicles is real, but her presentation of that disorder, to the exclusion of any other perspective or emotional engagement, reveals that the disorder being chronicled is also internal. In "The White Album," Didion presents her "attack of vertigo and nausea" as an appropriate response to the summer of 1968. She uses it, and others have read it, as, a metaphor of a period. But the report, if real, is not a metaphor and the symptoms described are fairly severe. They certainly do not represent everyone's physiological response to that year. The select and troubled aspects of the world that Didion identifies resonates with her somatic experience of the world. As she notes in her preface to *Slouching*, she felt impelled to go to Haight-Ashbury because she was already "paralyzed by the conviction that writing was an irrelevant act, that the world as I had understood it no longer existed." And in "The White Album," she explains her attraction to writing about Jim Morrison and The Doors: "On the whole my attention was only minimally engaged by the preoccupations of rock-and-roll bands (I had already heard about acid as a transitional stage and also about the Maharishi and even about Universal Love, and after a while it all sounded like marmalade skies to me), but The Doors were different, The Doors interested me"; and her reason for that interest: "The Doors seemed unconvinced that love was brotherhood and

the Kama Sutra" (21). Similarly, in the preface to *Slouching*, she reflects on her attraction to Yeats' poem "The Second Coming," a line from which gave her the title of the piece. She states how that poem provided her with "the only images against which much of what I was seeing and hearing and thinking seemed to make any pattern" (xxvi). But this pattern of disorder, this "center that will not hold," reflects a personal existential crisis. As Didion herself stated in a 1977 interview with Susan Stamberg, of "All Things Considered," on National Public Radio:

> I came late to the apprehension that there was a void at the center of experience. A lot of people realize this when they're fifteen or sixteen, but I didn't realize until I was much older that it was possible that the dark night of the soul was . . . it had not occurred to me that it was dryness . . . that it was aridity. I had thought that it was something much riper and more sinful. One of the books that made the strongest impression on me when I was in college was *The Portrait of a Lady*. Henry James's heroine, Isabel Archer, was the prototypic romantic idealist. It trapped her, and she ended up a prisoner of her own ideal. I think a lot of us do. My adult life has been a succession of expectations, misperceptions. I dealt only with an idea I had of the world, not with the world as it was. The reality *does* intervene eventually. I think my early novels were ways of dealing with the revelation that experience is largely meaningless. (*Long pause*) (27)

"Slouching" and "The White Album" are the aesthetic autobiographies of someone still trapped in her own ideals, expectations, and misperceptions. Reality intervenes but only

to the extent that it intensifies and justifies Didion's own disposition. By her own account, Didion's depressive world view began long before 1968.

V

> Does the world you are writing about become more real than reality?
> DIDION: Yes. More real. And I really resent any intrusion.
> "All Things Considered" NPR, 1977

"Slouching Toward Bethlehem" and "The White Album" are viewed as authoritative chronicles of history by those who share Didion's perspective of the sixties as a time of universal atomization and disorder. For Ernst, and, to a similar extent, Henderson, Mosley, Muggli, Winchell, Kakutani, and others, the essays help "to draw the reader into them and the social contents they represent"; the reader "is engaged in a parallel mental process, with Didion's texts providing the imagery, the points of reference, organized in such a way as to help to understand the time and culture in question, the USA in the 1960s" (Ernst 315). The psychic-somatic breakdowns that inform Didion's phenomenology become a convenient and convincing metaphor for an era. But, as I contend, the reader "is engaged in a parallel mental process" of a dissociated and depressed witness to highly selective historical events. The disturbing aspects of the chosen images and scenes are amplified precisely because they are being filtered through an already disturbed subjectivity. For those who largely define the sixties as a time of disorder, chaos, and atomization, the essays are read as the work of an author strategically employing her subjectivity in the service of social commentary (Anderson 142). Didion's politically palatable presentation of the sixties in an increasingly

conservative culture lends the essays their aura of objectivity. Yet the perception of Didion's reportorial authority and accuracy is also an effect of form.

In *Style as Argument: Contemporary American Nonfiction*, Chris Anderson offers a close reading of the rhetorical devices that Didion uses in her writing. Like Muggli, Anderson offers Didion's essays to make an argument for a poetics of nonfiction. He contends that for Didion, along with other "new journalists" Tom Wolfe, Truman Capote, and Norman Mailer, "literary devices" become important "rhetorical strategies for shaping the reader's attitudes and perceptions" (2). In the case of these writers' work, as in "all literature, style is best understood as a reflection and enactment of a content *and a point of view*" (italics mine; 4-5). For Anderson, Didion's prose is defined by "the rhetoric of concreteness and implication, symbol and gap, process and struggle" (134). Her use of the concrete has been cited by others. Friedman notes that although "Didion doubts the meaning of facts, doubts 'narratives,' she has always trusted in the particular, in the reality of facts" (88). Although it can be argued whether Didion does indeed doubt "the meaning of facts" (her rhetoric of implication suggests otherwise), Friedman corroborates and universalizes Didion's approach to the particular: "Didion is interested in the specific, the particular, the personal, the individual because having come of age in the fifties, in the 'silent' generation, that is how she experiences the world" (89). Friedman then quotes Didion from *The White Album*, "We were silent because the exhilaration of social action seemed to many of us just one more way of escaping the personal, of masking for a while that dread of the meaningless which was man's fate" (206-207). The particular is defined in opposition to social action, and social action

becomes synonymous with abstraction.[99] Her reliance on the particular suggests that Didion is an impartial observer. She simply reports "the facts" but offers no interpretative commentary. As Muggli states in regards to "James Pike, American," from *The White Album*, "the particular historical facts . . . somehow release the story from its historicity and allow it to evoke the much larger story of a nation" (409). Although Didion's use of the "concrete" suggests a report that is "factual" and "objective," any set of chosen particulars involves exclusion. Observation *is* perspective. And an account of exclusively disturbing "facts" suggests a "disturbed" perspective.

"Slouching" and "The White Album" are disturbed dispatches from disturbed pockets of America. The psychic-somatic distress that informs "The White Album" is more overt than it is in "Slouching." Yet the phenomenological perspective of both is depressive. Along with her tendency toward the concrete, Didion employs language to foster a felt sense of process. Anderson notes that her "strategies of particularity and process create presence, magnifying our awareness of the events she claims are beyond language"; the "concreteness of her prose, its sense of ongoing process, make the issues and events vivid and immediate" (152). According to Anderson, this "rhetoric of process" is conveyed through her "highly tentative" commentary and so the reader is "left with the impression that Didion is exploring the theme in writing, transcribing her reflections at

[99] For example, in her representation of Huey Newton, from "The White Album," Didion associates abstraction with hollow activism: "I kept wishing that he would talk about himself, hoping to break through the wall of rhetoric, but he seemed to be one of those autodidacts for whom all things specific and personal present themselves as mine fields to be avoided even at the cost of coherence, for whom safety lies in generalization" (30). In a later essay from *The White Album*, "On The Morning After the Sixties," she reflects, "If I could believe that going to a barricade would affect man's fate in the slightest I would go to that barricade, but it would be less than honest to say that I expect to happen upon such a happy ending" (207). Referring to this statement by Didion, Anderson justifies her dissociative position: It "is not an expression of resignation or a withdrawal from responsible action in the world; still less is it a product of what happens to be Didion's own temperament. Rather it is apolitical and moral philosophy rooted in a skepticism towards abstractions" (166-167). In fact, the statement very much does appear to reflect Didion's temperament.

the instant they occur, allowing the various versions of her thought to stand side by side rather than cancelling the abandoned interpretations or resolving the ambiguities in fixed, balanced sentences" (139). Didion may allow various versions of her thought to stand side by side, producing a sense of "balance" and authority, but the affect of these "versions" remains dissociative and depressive. For example, in the second paragraph of "The White Album," she writes: "I am talking here about a time when I began to doubt the premises of all the stories I had ever told myself, a common condition but one I found troubling. I suppose this period began around 1966 and continued until 1971" (11). (Note the tentative "suppose.") Although the essay ends with the dates 1968-1978, Didion closes the piece with the assertion that writing still has not helped her make sense of her experiences during the late sixties. Even after finishing the essay, well past 1971, this later version of Didion remains unable to construct a narrative. In fact, this presented split self—of someone who once had faith in narrative but no longer does—is a fairly constant persona in all of Didion's nonfiction, from *Slouching* to *Blue Nights*. What emerges from these claims of an unrecuperable narrative is that life is meaningless and lacking any center. "It's a narrative of conditionality, of breakdown, in which the physical environment and the human environment can't help but reflect each other" (Ulin 52). Even so, the perspective that life is ultimately "meaningless" need not be depressive. Simeon and Abugel discuss the similarities between the depersonalizing effects of dissociation disorder and existentialism. But whereas existentialism may "inspire courage and the will to act" (Harrison 120), dissociative disorder results in a sense of unbridgeable disconnection and paralysis (Simeon and Abugel 135). Friedman notes that Didion "shares the existentialists' sense of sickness and dread, but she does not believe in

their, or in any, general cure" (81-82). Still, for Friedman, "Didion's sensibility is stubbornly moral" (84): it is grounded in the belief that "an individual's commitments are determined by personal, inner compulsion and that these commitments are special to each individual" (85-86). Perhaps, but such devout individualism underscores a sense of disconnection. It overlooks the potential positives of communal action and fellowship. Sometimes going to the barricades does effect man's fate for the better, the unrealized "happy ending" notwithstanding.

In addition to Didion's rhetoric of concreteness, implication, process, and struggle, another formal device that she employs to convey a phenomenological sense of despair is the gap. Fragmented syntax and imagery suggest "cultural breakdown" (Anderson 149) and a rupture between the narratable "past" and post-war present (Direnç 38). Similarly, Anderson notes, the "failure to signify signifies" (154): the "stylistic fragmentation and authorial silence or self-dramatization effectively act out the fragmentation of the experience they seek to describe" (155). As with most critical assessments concerning the content of Didion's essays, Direnç and Anderson view her form as a strategy for social commentary. Direnç sees Didion's "rhetoric of fragmentation" as reflecting "the complexity and the confusion of the relationship between the past and the present and between the family and the individual"; "these bits and pieces of objects and information thrown upon the reader . . . convey the sense of a world relationally broken" (37). The phenomenology of fragmentation in "The White Album" may be presented by Didion, and interpreted by certain readers, as a mirror of a perceived late sixties' atomization. But, as I have argued, this perspective of atomization cannot be understood as either universal or, in its totalizing depiction, objective. On the

other hand, for an individual suffering from an inability to process an event, the gap and fragment mark the structure of this encounter (Caruth; "Trauma and Experience" 4). The experience of discontinuity is "to be possessed by an image or event" (5). With dissociation disorder, Simeon and Abugel state that the condition "may happen after a traumatic event, while in new or foreign surroundings, or in times of severe stress" (3). Dissociation can serve as "a defense mechanism . . . to mentally distance an individual from . . . overwhelming circumstances" (3). Severe stress can be caused or intensified by external events but an individual's temperament and biological disposition can play a significant role.[100] Simeon and Abugel note that the amygdala has been identified as "the seat of emotional memory" (109) within the brain and that "a number of anxiety disorders in humans, such as social anxiety disorder, panic disorder, specific phobias . . . appear to be correlated with an overactivation of the amygdala when a person is presented with disorder-specific frightening stimuli" (108). Further, an individual's emotions can be triggered by stimuli that "reminds" her of a previous intense experience which has not been consciously processed. It can result in an equally "intense emotional and behavioral reaction based on what the amygdala 'knows' but [which an individual may] have no concrete memory for what actually took place" (109). Therefore, the environment can strongly affect an individual but the individual may not be fully aware of how they respond to external events. The individual may unconsciously, and selectively, register what they "see."

[100] For some recent studies on the role of biology in PTSD, see K.B. Mercer, et al, "Acute and Posttraumatic Stress Symptoms in a Prospective Gene x Environment Study of a University Campus Shooting." *Archives of General Psychiatry*, 2012 Jan;69(1):89-97; L.E. Duncan and M.C. Keller, "A Critical Review of the First 10 Years of Candidate Gene-by-Environment Interaction Research in Psychiatry," *American Journal of Psychiatry.* 2011 Oct;168(10):1041-9; K.J. Reesler, et al.,"Post-Traumatic Stress disorder Is Associated with PACAP and The PAC1 Receptor." *Nature.* February 24, 2012. 470 (7335): 492-7; M.B. Stein, "Psychiatry: A Molecular Shield from Trauma." *Nature*. 2011 February 24, 2011. 470(7335): 468-9.

Didion's responses to events she witnessed, and focused on, during the sixties are triggered by external phenomena, but her responses to, and interpretation of, those responses are subjective and particular. The essays that result in her attempt to find out what she thinks, sees, and fears may resonate with other readers who share her phenomenological response to the sixties. Or readers, such as myself, simply may register her phenomenological process. Although I cannot identify with her totalizing view of the sixties, I can recognize how certain scenes shimmer and stick and activate specific sensations. For example, in "The White Album," the image of the five-year-old girl abandoned on the highway, of her running after the car for a "long time," and of her subsequent inability to let go of the fence once she is discovered, induces a strong physiological response within me. Serially abandoned as a child, although never in quite such a traumatic way, I can perceptually identify with that girl.[101] Specifically, I cognitively and sensationally remember my mother taking me to the children's psychiatric ward at Mt. Sinai Hospital when I was ten and leaving me with strangers: I remember screaming and trying to run toward her but being restrained by two men as she walked toward the door without looking back. But the phenomena that most sticks: my mother's black high heels clicking on the linoleum floor. I also have a felt sense of the fragmented and dissociated presentation of other events within "The White Album." My own experience of the world, in regards to significant moments, painful or not, consists of somatically registered snapshots and cinematic scenes. Regarding many such moments, I have significant trouble constructing a reliable and "truthful" narrative that

[101] According to recent studies, those with early life trauma (ELS) are more likely to experience adulthood depression and other mood-related disorders. See F. Gould, et al, "The Effects of Child Abuse and Neglect on Cognitive Functioning in Adulthood." *Journal of Psychiatric Research.* February 13, 2012. [Epub ahead of print.] http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/22336639.

does not seem false and/or imposed. Often the best I can do is construct a cause and effect, but such structure is only temporal (this happened and then this happened) and does not produce a story, or even fabula, that makes emotional "sense" or appears "logical."[102] At the same time that these snapshots and scenes are somatically registered, they also may exist at a remove, as if they happened to someone else.

In her totalizing structuralist interpretation, Direnç reads the "broken rhythm" of "fragmentation and discontinuity" (37) of Didion's writing as "a deliberate effect the writer seeks to produce" (38). Didion is attempting to phenomenologically "recreate the sense of the fragmentation of social order in her sentence patterns and in their jarring rhythms" because she "wants the reader to feel the potholes and discontinuities of experience and deliberately sets out on a bumpy ride" (38). As noted above, Didion acknowledges in *The Year of Magical Thinking* that she has long had an awareness of how the rhythm of words and sentence and paragraphs can both convey and withhold information. Like most skilled writers, Didion is attuned to the effects of technique, but I think it is idealization that prompts a critic to assert that a writer is not only totally in control of the effects of her writing but completely conscious of her experience and interpretation of the world.

Didion's photographic and cinematic approach recreates the experience of the unassimilable event, and her infrequent and limited commentary furthers the idea of objectivity. But the juxtaposition of images also fosters associations and makes implications. And Didion's compilation of despairing images, unmitigated by any

[102] In *Narratology: Introduction to the Theory of Narrative*, Third Edition, Miele Bal writes: "A story is the content of [a] text, and produces a particular manifestation, inflection and 'coloring' of a fabula; the fabula is presented in a certain manner. A fabula is a series of *logically* and chronologically related events that are caused or experienced by actors" (italics mine; 5)

counterpoint, encourages a claustrophobic sense of despair. This does not reflect a universal experience of the world but it does mirror the subjectivity of the depressive. If, as Direnç contends, Didion purposefully chose to depict the sixties as she did, she not only chose to represent it as fragmented—which I see as a phenomenological perspective that is neither limited to the sixties nor necessarily negative—but she also choose to portray it as unremittingly despairing. And, as such, she choose to falsify the period. Another, more convincing possibility, as I have been arguing, is that Didion did experience her life at that time and place, in such a despairing manner. In the formation of her persona, she may have indeed edited out things that contradicted her impression of the period. Such a strategy might have allowed her to justify the idea that her distress was wholly a product of the era; she provides a narrative of social atomization that justifies her psychic-somatic breakdown that otherwise would have no locus or logic. The error becomes one not located in her "own blood" but in "social organization."

VI

> It does not escape me that the consensus on what is wrong with me has once again insinuated the ball into my court
>
> Joan Didion, *The Year of Magical Thinking*

Didion immediately establishes a causal relationship between historical events and her somatic state in section I of "The White Album." The events are selective and extreme and her phenomenological responses skillfully universalized. She begins the first paragraph with a series of "we's": "We tell ourselves stories," "We look for the sermon in the suicide," "We interpret what we see," and "We live . . . by the imposition of a narrative" (11). She then shifts to the first person: "Or at least we do for a while. I am

talking here about a time when I began to doubt . . ." She simultaneously universalizes and particularizes her experience. It is a "common condition" to impose a narrative and to doubt the "premises of all the stories." She proceeds to suggest a timeframe, "I suppose this period began around . . ." (11). Her use of "suppose" has the effect of creating "identifications by revealing her doubts and fears and her inability to synthesize, limitations that presumably everyone in her audience shares" (Anderson 152). It is the form of "immediacy and spontaneity," of process; it narrows "the distance between the writer and the reader" as "the writer comes into existence before the reader as a person who, thinking and writing" reveals "a mind flowing naturally" (Direnç 14).

Didion's strategy of universalizing the extreme and extraordinary continues as she presents herself as "a competent enough member of some community or another" ("The White Album" 11-12). During those five years, she is the "signer of contracts," the mother "a small child," the maker of "gingham curtains for spare bedrooms;" she cooks "lentil soup on Sunday," pays her quarterly F.I.C.A., and renews her driver's license. She is someone who "published two books, worked on several motion pictures; participated in the paranoia of the time, in the raising of a small child, and in the entertainment of large numbers of people passing through my house" (12). Her interweaving the identifiably mundane (mother, homemaker, taxpayer, "citizen") with the exceptional (published author, Hollywood insider) positions her participation in the "paranoia of the time" as both remarkable and commonplace. But surely not everyone one was paranoid, despite her casual presentation of this "fact." The extraordinary nature of her life is further presented, and downplayed, with her identifying this period of her life as a time of being "named," as a "godmother to children," a "lecturer and panelist, colloquist and

conferee" (12). She then states: "I was even named, in 1968, a *Los Angeles Times* 'Woman of the Year,' along with Mrs. Ronald Reagan, the Olympic swimmer Debbie Meyer, and ten other California women who seemed to keep in touch and do good works" (12). (Note the offhand "even.") In a gesture toward self-awareness, she offers that "I did no good works but I tried to keep in touch. I was responsible. I recognized my name when I saw it" (12). This gradual move toward dissociation culminates in

> Once in a while I even answered letters addressed to me, not exactly upon receipt but eventually, particularly if the letters had come from strangers. 'During my absence from the country these past eighteen months,' such replies would begin. (12)

By this point in the essay, we are clearly no longer bearing witness to the "commonplace" and "mundane" despite its strategic presentation as ordinary. Despite the wry tone, Didion offers her experience as emblematic of the era. She then brings in an extreme historical event: the story of the abandoned five-year-old on the highway.

Didion follows this selective and highly disturbing "cutting room" picture with another seemingly impromptu "flash cut," her psychiatric report. Her cursory and ironic response increases the distance between herself and the report but it also intensifies a connection between the report and social anomie, the extreme and everyday, and Didion and the reader. The report recounts an individual suffering from more than "an attack of vertigo and nausea" but from serious psychic-somatic symptoms. Through her tone and purposeful elision, Didion implies that the report is just another illogical historical event. The psychiatric report is therefore a portrait of the atomized and unnarratizable world, not

of Didion.[103] Didion continues this strategy throughout the essay. She introduces extreme events, couched in the aura of the everyday, and implicates them as emblematic of a senseless era that eludes narration. The reader is encouraged to identify, if not with Didion's life, with her phenomenological response to it.

Didion's cool compilation of odd particulars continues in section 2. While living in what Didion's acquaintance describes as a "senseless killing neighborhood" of Hollywood, she recounts her fascination with the murder trial of Ramon Novarro, the silent film star slain at age 69 by two young hustlers, Robert and Thomas Scott Ferguson. She notes that "I read the transcript several times, trying to bring the picture into some focus which did not suggest that I lived, as my psychiatric report had put it, 'in a world of people moved by strange, conflicted, poorly comprehended and, above all, devious motivations'; I never met the Ferguson brothers" (17-18). Why the murder trial, and its principals, might be emblematic of one era as opposed to any other is not clear. The claim, however, that Didion "never met the Ferguson brothers" is an opportunity for her to cast another sardonic glance at her diagnoses. Didion also presents her fascination with the Fergusons in order to introduce an extraordinary individual from another, more notorious murder case specific to the era. This time, it is someone she did know: Linda Kasabian, "star witness for the prosecution in what was commonly known as the Manson Trial" (18).

Didion then returns to the mundane, again portraying the striking singularities of her own life as somehow universal. After noting her acquaintance with Kasabian, she inserts a paragraph break and introduces the reader to a more recognizable domestic

---

[103] In *Blue Nights* (2011), published more than three decades after "The White Album," Didion remains circumspect of psychiatry: "I have not yet seen that case in which a 'diagnosis' led to a 'cure,' or in fact to any outcome other than a confirmed, and therefore an enforced, debility" (47).

setting made strange: "It will perhaps suggest the mood of those years if I tell you that during them I could not visit my mother-in-law without averting my eyes from a framed verse, a 'house blessing,' which hung in a hallway of her house in West Hartford, Connecticut" (18). The blessing ends with, "*And bless each door that opens wide, to stranger as to kin*" (18). Didion sees this final line as ironic and predictive, a chance to transform the everyday into the extreme. She states that "In my neighborhood in California we did not bless the door that opened wide to stranger as to kin" (19). She cites the Ferguson brothers as strangers at the door of Novarro, and members of the Manson family as strangers at the door of Rosemary and Leno LaBianca. She then recalls a series of odd visitors at the door of her own house, which she has already established as located in a then less-than-desirable part of town. There is the stranger who wanted to use the phone to call Triple A "about a car not in evidence" (19). "Others," she claimed, "just opened the door and walked in, and I would come across them in the entrance hall" (19). Although it is not clear why the door would be regularly open, considering the neighborhood and her state of mind, she remembers looking at "one such stranger" and, after asking him what he wanted, "we looked each other for what seemed a long time, and then he saw my husband on the stair landing" (19). She mentions taking down the license number of that man's panel truck and putting it with all the other license plates she collected during those years, "where they could be found by the police when the time came" (19). She adds: "That the time would come I never doubted, at least not in the inaccessible places of the mind where I seemed more and more to be living. So many encounters in those years were devoid of any logic save that of the dreamwork" (19). In a detached and reportorial tone, she casually moves from her mother-in-law's safe but

haunting home in Hartford, Connecticut, to her own uncertain belief that she will be murdered like Novarro and the LaBiancas. Despite her self-justified paranoia (i.e., it is a symptom of the times, not Didion), her fears are irrational and ultimately unfounded. In the end, they support the psychiatric report's claim that Didion possesses "a personality in process of deterioration with abundant signs of failing defenses and increasing inability of the ego to mediate the world of reality and to cope with normal stress." She immediately follows her detached acceptance of her eventual murder with a mundane account of

> taking a 25-mg. Compazine one Easter Sunday and making a large and elaborate lunch for a number of people, many of whom were still around on Monday. I remember walking barefoot all day on the worn hardwood floors of that house and I remember "Do You Wanna Dance" on the record player, "Do You Wanna Dance" and "Visions of Johanna" and a song called "Midnight Confessions." I remember a babysitter telling me that she saw death in my aura. I remember chatting with her about reasons why this might be so, paying her, opening all the French windows and going to sleep in the living room. (20)

By way of explaining her depressive and dissociated reaction to her "aura of death," she offers

> It was hard to surprise me in those years. It was hard to even get my attention. I was absorbed in my intellectualization, my obsessive-compulsive devices, my projection, my reaction-formation, my somatization, and in the transcript of the Ferguson trial. (20)

Again, she “objectively” presents a string of odd but seemingly routine events and uses them as an opportunity to highlight the absurdity of her medical diagnoses. In the end, however, her strategy to undermine the psychiatric report through detached irony also undercuts her authority as a sincere and impartial reporter of her own life. Her whole extraordinary existence seems suspended in a state of ironic remove.

Didion makes no reference her psychic-somatic condition in the subsequent fragments on The Doors, the music business, Huey Newton, and the student and faculty activists of San Francisco State college. Didion is more traditionally reportorial in her presentation of these “emblems” but her observations remain subjective and partial. Her portraits are not even remotely representative of the sixties music industry (a rather dynamic time for Motown and rock artists), civil rights leaders, and student activism. Rather, they reveal Didion’s attraction to those lost cultural satellites who reinforce her view of the era as involving “scenes of industrious self-delusion, scenes of people absorbed in odd games” (39). It is another depressive series of people running in place and getting nowhere. In section 10, consisting of a single paragraph, she presents a rather brief account of the night of the Manson murders at “Sharon Tate Polanski’s home on Cielo Drive” (42).

> I imagined that my own life was simple and sweet, and sometimes it was, but there were odd things going around town. There were rumors. There were stories. Everything was unmentionable but nothing was unimaginable. This mystical flirtation with the idea of “sin”—this sense that it was possible to go “too far,” and that many people were doing it—was very much with us in Los Angeles in 1968 and 1969. (41)

It is hard to imagine, from her portrayal of herself during this period, that she ever viewed her own life "as simple and sweet," amid her somatic disturbances, paranoia, and demanding writing career. Still, despite her own possible self-delusions and skewed "objectivity," she states that on the night of August 9, 1969, "I remember all of the day's misinformation very clearly, and I also remember this, and wish I did not: *I remember that no one was surprised*" (42). No one? In her already established dissociative state, it is hard to believe Didion would affectively register someone else's surprise. As with her reaction to her mother-in-law's "house blessing," Didion attempts to present "the mood of those years" but her affect dominates, like a black hole from which nothing escapes. In section 11, Didion returns to Kasabian and recalls her personal encounters with the "star witness." Didion remembers her dreaded prison visits with Kasabian and the conversations about "Linda's childhood pastimes and disappointments, her high-school romances and her concern for her children," never once discussing the actual case. Regarding the elision of the grisly events hovering between her and Kasabian, Didion notes: "This particular juxtaposition of the spoken and the unspeakable was eerie and unsettling, and made my notebook a litany of little ironies so obvious as to be of interest only to dedicated absurdists" (44). Didion expresses no curiosity about Kasabian's interiority; the gap between the two women encompasses more than the spoken and the unspeakable, and Didion conveys little awareness of this affective break between her and other human beings.

Didion follows this "unsettling absurdity" with a final reference to her somatic state.

> Certain organic disorders of the central nervous system are characterized by periodic remissions, the apparent complete recovery of the afflicted nerves. What happens appears to be this: as the lining of a nerve becomes inflamed and hardens into scar tissue, thereby blocking the passage of neural impulses, the nervous system gradually changes its circuitry, finds other, unaffected nerves to carry the same messages. During the years when I found it necessary to revise the circuitry of my mind I discovered that I was no longer interested in whether the woman on the ledge outside the window on the sixteenth floor jumped or did not jump, or in why. I was interested only in the picture of her in my mind: her hair incandescent in the floodlights, her bare toes curled inward on the stone ledge. (44)

It is unclear whether Didion is conscious of the extent of her dissociation, in which living subjects have been transformed into incandescent shimmers. Despite her ironic stance toward the psychiatric report throughout the essay, Didion confirms in the above passage that, emotionally, the "*patient has alienated herself almost entirely from the world of other human beings*." In the penultimate section of the essay, after mentioning a visit to the doctor for "a series of periodic visual disturbances," she states that "I was told that the disorder was not really in my eyes, but in my central nervous system" (46). As a woman who prizes control and individualism, Didion reacts to this attunement between mind, body, and environment, with helpless resignation: "The startling fact was this: my body was offering a precise physiological equivalent to what had been going on in my mind" (47).

In the end, “The White Album,” with its rhetoric of elision, concreteness, implication, and process, becomes a textual equivalent of what is happening within Didion’s body. Reading it, I experience not what I perceive to be the sixties but the struggle of a woman attempting to map the phenomenological experience of a dissociative disorder. I recognize the physiological stranglehold that embodied memories can have when sensation and images are the only “narrative” available. I sense the shimmer and am suspended in the gaps. The abandoned girl on the highway takes hold of my body. She is not easily relinquished.

Page intentionally blank.

Chapter 4. ”Making the Stomach Believe”: Sensational “Truth” and Tim O’Brien’s The Things They Carried

> Mental language is rendered significant not by virtue of its capacity to reveal, mark, or describe mental states, but by its function in social interaction.
> – Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*.

> Legally accredited truth is one thing—the truth of a life is another.
> – Bruno Dossekker as Binjamin Wilkomirski
> Afterword *Fragments: Memoirs of a Wartime Childhood*

In 1994, Tim O’Brien reflected on his psychological state in a *New York Times Magazine* article, “The Vietnam in Me,” two decades after leaving the war:

> Last night suicide was on my mind. Not whether, but how. Tonight it will be on my mind again. Now it’s 4 A.M., June the 5th. The sleeping pills have not worked. I sit in my underwear at this unblinking fool of a computer and try to wrap words around a few horrid truths. (50)

It wasn’t the first time O’Brien had turned to writing as a way to work though his despair. Twenty years earlier, he had published a memoir, *If I Die in a Combat Zone*, about his experiences as a drafted soldier in Viet Nam. And, in 1990, after two novels on the subject, *Northern Lights* (1975) and *Going After Cacciato* (1978), he published a genre-defying work of autobiographical fiction, *The Things They Carried*.[104] As with the three books preceding it, *The Things They Carried* is informed by O’Brien’s time in the military. While *If I Die* and *Going After Cacciato* depict the theater of war, and *Northern*

[104] Some, like scholars Robin Blyn and Maria Bonn, have categorized *The Things They Carried* as a novel. But as Catherine Calloway notes, “many” “refer to the work as a series of short stories” (250). Calloway cites reviewer Gene Lyons, who describes it as a “collection” of “short stories, essays, anecdotes, narrative fragments, jokes, fables, biographical and autobiographical sketches, and philosophical asides” (250). Less favorably, Bruce Bawer, in his *New York Times* review, termed it “22 discontinuous sections” (A13). Finally, Steven Kaplan writes: “in a recent interview, I asked Tim O'Brien what he felt was the most adequate designation” and O’Brien “said that *The Things They Carried* is neither a collection of stories nor a novel: he preferred to call it a work of fiction” (52).

Lights examines a veteran's return, *The Things They Carried* is alternately set during, before, and after its protagonist, Tim O'Brien,[105] is deployed to Vietnam. Understandably, it is within the context of the Vietnam War that literary scholars often discuss *The Things They Carried*, frequently by connecting Viet Nam, post-modernism, and meta-fiction.[106] While O'Brien has stated that *Going After Cacciato* is not "a book about war" (Schroeder, "Two Interviews" 143), the same claim could be made about *The Things They Carried*. Personally, I have neither been in combat nor the military, yet I feel a sensational connection to the work. In fact, *The Things They Carried* is what led me to think about aesthetic autobiography. Because of that text, I began to reconsider concepts of autobiography, truth, and language, particularly in regard to emotional distress. Like many critics, I view *The Things They Carried* as postmodern, in that it is intentionally unstable, fractured, and affectively "schizophrenic." Its schizophrenia—i.e., its "polyphonic" perspectives and conspicuous contradictions—keeps the text in play, resembling the shifting dynamics of an organic system (biological, ecological, cosmic). In sum, I argue that the text is an aesthetic autobiography because it attempts to convey an embodied sense of what cannot be conceptually explained: the despair resulting from extreme events.

The Things They Carried as a Meta-Fictive Work of War

In "The Undying Uncertainty of the Narrator in Tim O'Brien's *The Things They Carried*" (1993), one of the first scholarly articles on O'Brien's book, Steven Kaplan makes a case for the text's reflexivity and instability as mirroring life itself. Although Kaplan never

[105] Throughout this chapter, I refer to the narrator as Tim and to the author as O'Brien.

[106] See Bates (1996), Chen (1998), Jarraway (1998), Neilson (2001), Carpenter (2003), Haswell (2004), Kaufman (2005), and Silbergleid (2009).

uses the words “meta-fiction” or “postmodernism,” he does state that O’Brien attempts to get at a “full truth” (*Things* 49) that O’Brien knowingly defines as neither certain nor fixed (Kaplan 46). Kaplan notes that “literature is not an explanation of origins; it is a staging of the constant deferment of explanation, which makes the origin explode into its multifariousness” (47); further, literature’s “very multiplicity facilitates an unending mirroring of what man is, because no mirrored manifestation can ever coincide with our actual being” (47). Kaplan’s claims resemble later assertions that clearly identify O’Brien’s book as a postmodern text. For example, in “Tim O’Brien’s ‘True Lies’ (?)” (2000), Tobey Herzog writes that O’Brien’s “narrative tricks,” which “accentuate postmodernist notions that contemporary fiction writers are preoccupied with the fictive nature of their works and the self-exposure of their invention” (895) is “a goal consistent with postmodernist notions of elusive truth and angles of reality” (896). Yet, as Fredric Jameson has observed about postmodernism, “the concept is not merely contested, it is also internally conflicted and contradictory” (xxii). Indeed, *The Bedford Glossary of Critical Terms, Third Edition*, edited by Ross Murfin and Supryia M. Ray, notes that because “postmodernist works frequently combine aspects of diverse genres, they can be difficult to classify” (397).

Perhaps such contest and contradiction is fitting. As Linda Hutcheon writes, in postmodernism’s “extreme formulation, the result is that consensus becomes the illusion of consensus” (7). Even so, while she acknowledges that “postmodernism is a contradictory phenomenon,” “one that uses and abuses, installs and then subverts, the very concepts it challenges” (3), she offers a working “definition” that I find useful here. She writes:

> what I want to call postmodernism is fundamentally contradictory, resolutely historical, and inescapably political. Its contradictions may well be those of late capitalist society, but whatever the cause, these contradictions are certainly manifest in the important postmodern concept of "the presence of the past." (4)

The idea of a "present past" is a compelling paradox. It rings especially true in terms of embodied "memories." I understand embodied memories as a physiological *déjà vu* in which painful sensations associated with a past event are triggered by discrete stimuli, such as certain sounds, smells, images, gestures, or "narrative" patterns. If, as neuroscientific studies have presented, the biochemical structure of the brain is affected by both extreme events and bodily pain, painful past events do indeed live on in the body. Personally, as someone whose childhood was serially and abruptly ruptured by a mentally ill mother who could not care for me, I can experience inexplicable flashes of dread, a sense of unaccountable, imminent harm.[107] During these provisional moments of existential crises and instability, my heart races, I may perspire, feel nauseous and develop a slight fever. In other situations, certain odors, sounds, visuals, and contexts can summon an image and/or sensation that seems to send me back in time. Of course, embodied memories, those both disturbing and delightful, are not an uncommon human experience; they need not be extreme. Yet for the traumatized and mentally ill, embodied memories, which are non-narrative and elude clear and definite conceptualization, the stakes are higher. As noted in my first chapter, trauma and depression can isolate individuals. A desire and accompanying failure to communicate such physiological experiences can amplify feelings of disconnection and despair. The postmodern—as a

[107] See footnote 99 in chapter 2 for studies on children and PTSD.

fractured, unstable, and contradictory ontology—mirrors the physiological experience of trauma and certain forms of mental illness in many ways. As Hutcheon states, the postmodern "perceiving subject is no longer assumed to be a coherent, meaning-generating entity" (11). Consequently, "narrators in [postmodern] fiction become either disconcertingly multiple and hard to locate" (11).

Such narrative multiplicity and elusiveness is evident in *The Things They Carried*, whose protagonist and author share the same name. Further, O'Brien the author plays on this dynamic in interviews, offering a public authorial "self" that is frequently unreliable and fictive. For instance, referring to a conversation that he had with O'Brien, Kaplan notes that O'Brien described *The Things They Carried* as neither a collection of short stories nor a novel but as "a work of fiction" (52). Yet, in an interview with Martin Naparsteck, O'Brien says that the book "is sort of half novel, half group of stories. It's part nonfiction, too: some of the stuff is commentary on the stories, talking about where a particular one came from" (7). He then cites the protagonist of "Speaking of Courage," Norman Bowker, a Vietnam veteran who has trouble re-assimilating as a civilian, and who, we learn in the following piece entitled "Notes," later commits suicide. O'Brien explains that "Speaking of Courage" originated from a letter that he "received from a guy named Norman Bowker, a real guy, who committed suicide" (7). Yet, in the following exchange with Naparsteck, he says: "I blended my own personality with the stories, and I'm writing about the stories, and yet everything is made up, including the commentary. The story about Norman Bowker is made up. There was no Norman Bowker" (8).

In *Metafiction: The Theory and Practice of Self-Conscious Fiction* (1984), Patricia Waugh defines metafiction as "a term given to fictional writing which self-

consciously and systematically draws attention to its status as an artefact in order to pose questions about the relationship between fiction and reality" (2). According to her, metafiction examines "the fundamental structures of narrative fiction" and explores "the possible fictionality of the world outside the literary fictional text" (2). She states that, in the wake of "postmodernism," language can no longer be said to represent "a coherent, meaningful and 'objective' world" and that language's "relationship to the phenomenal world is highly complex, problematic and regulated by convention" (3). With the ability "to 'describe' anything" severely compromised, all literary fiction can do is "represent" discourses (4). Language "becomes a 'prisonhouse' from which the possibility of escape is remote," and metafiction explores this "dilemma" (4). Waugh's definition of metafiction certainly anticipates O'Brien's exploration of that "dilemma" in regards to presenting historical, biographical, and sensational "truth," particularly when that truth is emotionally painful.

As might be expected concerning a term that "is not merely contested" but "is also internally conflicted and contradictory," not everyone embraces, or agrees on, the postmodern aspects ascribed to *The Things They Carried*. In fact, referring to an interview with O'Brien from *Anything Can Happen: Interviews with Contemporary Novelists*, Michael Kaufman construes that O'Brien himself rejects classifying his work as postmodern because the author views such fiction as a cerebral game (341).[108] In a rather postmodern move, Kaufman then quotes the fictional Tim O'Brien, the narrator of the book: "But it's not a game. It's a form" (Kauffman 341). Such rejections of

[108] Of that interview, from a collection edited by Thomas LeClair and Larry McCaffery, Kaufman writes that O'Brien "does not name names but clearly feels uncomfortable with writers such as Coover and DeLillo whom he perceives as being focused more narrowly on language and style" (342). As a result, "O'Brien misunderstands his fellow writers" (341). Kauffman nonetheless notes that O'Brien's "rejection of postmodernism does not bar his work from inclusion in the postmodern" (334).

postmodernism attributed to O'Brien, in whatever manifestation O'Brien assumes—fact, fiction, or hybrid—have not prevented criticism of *The Things They Carried* as a work of postmodernism. In "The Craft of the Short Story in Retelling the Viet Nam War: Tim O'Brien's *The Things They Carried*" (2004), Janis Haswell presents a summary of that criticism. She begins by noting that a "postmodern meta-analysis of how life and fiction are interconnected prompts Mark Heberle to laud O'Brien as the most important novelist to emerge from the Viet Nam War" but that others "see the postmodern cast to O'Brien's stories as debilitating, if not downright irresponsible" (95). She cites the objections of Andrew Martin (1994), Renny Christopher (1995), and Jim Neilson (1998; 2001). Accordingly, Martin worries that a metafictive approach to Viet Nam obscures the war's historical power dynamics and politics; he resists the idea that the war "was a mystery that happened in a place and a time that no one will ever fully understand" (*Receptions* 56). Similarly, Christopher believes that metafiction reduces Viet Nam "to subjective sensation and refashioning reflection" (Haswell 95) "devoid of political content and devoid of sense" (Christopher 6). And Neilson warns that a postmodern representation relieves the reader of "the responsibility of remembering and understanding" (*Warring* 197). For Neilson, and like-minded critics, "an apolitical, postmodern perspective" (Haswell 95) avoids a "serious ideological and materialist critique, while seeming to do the opposite" (Nielson *Warring* 209). In response, Haswell writes:

> The charge that postmodernism is politically and morally crippled certainly is not a new one. Applied to *The Things They Carried*, however, the reasoning is nearly syllogistic: O'Brien's collection is postmodern, postmodern literature rejects claims of truth in political and moral affairs,

therefore the theme of *Things* cannot be political or moral in nature. I will leave the question as to whether O'Brien is politically indifferent for others to argue. To accuse O'Brien of being morally insensitive is to seriously misread the sequence of stories we are examining. (95-96)

Because the definition and implications of postmodernism are contested, any sweeping generalization that postmodernism "rejects claims of truth in political and moral affairs" cannot simply be accepted as "truth." Further, "truth" is obviously not a universally defined concept, although, as the above citations reveal, that fact does not prevent people from employing the term *as if* it is universally understood.

Playing on the ambiguity of "truth," Tim writes that there is "story-truth" and "happening-truth" (203). As he constructs it, a "story-truth" *feels* true, a "happening-truth" is a factual occurrence. The first is the realm of the subjective. Here, I note an immediate paradox: that a subjective, felt "story-truth" is also a factual occurrence. For example, what I believe or physiologically experience *is* real, although such "truth" is shifting, dynamic, and not easily, if at all, conceptually conveyed. As I explain in my first chapter, a subjective, sensational "truth" cannot be objectively represented but that does not make it any less "real." On the other hand, as Tim puts it, a "happening-truth" concerns objective facts. For him, a happening truth is the Viet Nam War, or that he was drafted into military service, or that he wrote a book. For me, happening truths would include: I had a mother Sadie who left me at a foundling hospital (when I was around a year and a half old); I was placed into foster care at age 2; she took me back when I was 7; when I was 10, she left at the me children's psychiatric hospital at Mount Sinai; about six months later, I was transferred to Pleasantville Cottage School for troubled youth.

These are documented facts. But many more details concerning these facts are not documented, nor can I recall them. Further, my subjective feelings at the time of these events remain more difficult to identify. All I have are my memories, which are manifest as a dynamic interplay between sensations and concepts, which in turn only exist in the present. To compound this situation, I admit to not having the best memory for details or "happening truths." I often insist that something occurred, although others may dispute it; I am later proven wrong. When I look back at journal entries (and I am neither a rigorous nor dedicated diarist), I am frequently surprised by the person that I was. *Did that really happen*, I ask myself. *Did I really feel that?* My point is that subjective truth is relative, shifting, and inconsistent, not unlike many conceptualizations of postmodernism, which is why, for me, many conceptualizations of "postmodernism" feel true (i.e., its identification with fracture, instability, relativity, variation, provisionality, etc). At the same time, as someone with a poor grasp on "happening truths," I have a high regard for documented facts and archives. Although such documented facts and archives are compiled by imperfect human beings, they provide a more accurate representation of happening truth (not "story-truth") than human memory or feelings (certainly mine). I offer this with the knowledge that many of my own records from when I was a ward of the state were lost or incorrectly documented. (For example, a few years ago, I called The Jewish Childcare Association for information on my files and I was told they were destroyed in a flood; they did have the month of my birth, recorded as April, although my birth certificate states that I was born in May.) My point is that despite my "postmodern" sensibility, I would never deny the occurrence of the Viet Nam War nor would I interpret

O'Brien as denying it. I have seen the archival footage, photographs, and reporting. I remember seeing the film clips on the evening news while I was a young child.[109]

Nonetheless, I do think that it is problematic to make any totalizing claims about the subjective experience of those involved in the war. But Martin, Christopher, and Nielson are not claiming that the Viet Nam War is being questioned and they do not dispute the subjectivity of experience. Rather, they worry that "postmodern relativity" precludes assigning any moral responsibility for the war, or for how it is shaped as an historical narrative. In an internet article from May 2001, Neilson writes that **"***The Things They Carried* accords with much of the anti-totalizing strains of postmodernism, and . . . it is precisely this tendency in his fiction that makes it incapable of opposing the ongoing reconstruction of the war as an American tragedy" ("The Truth in *Things*").[110] Actually, it would seem to me that such "anti-totalizing strains" would inhibit a univocal perspective, forcing us to acknowledge that there is always another story, another subjectivity, to be revealed. Indeed, postmodernism need not be synonymous with amorality despite (or because of) the fact that it, like any other perspective, *is* informed by politics. Postmodernism is defined (precisely or not) by those who use it. For example,

---

[109] John H. Timmerman notes: "Certainly it is possible to engage the experience of war exclusively on scholarly and academic terms, to configure the experience according to statistics and historical accounts. Every time human experience is rendered as fact, however, the human place in war becomes more abstracted and more simplistic" (100).

[110] Neilson argues that the "weakness of *The Things They Carried* is that O'Brien's imagination is virtually the only reality. O'Brien does not contextualize his experience, does not provide us with any deeper understanding of the causes and consequences of this war, and does not see beyond his individual experience to document the vastly greater suffering of the Vietnamese. In so doing, O'Brien has constructed a text that, despite its radical aesthetic, largely reaffirms the prevailing ethnocentric conception of the war." I would counter-argue that any autobiographical work, not to mention perspective, is checked to varying degrees by the subjectivity of the author/subject. Further, I do not agree that O'Brien "does not contextualize his experience" although that contextualization is limited. The "stories" "On The Rainy River," about the social forces impelling O'Brien not to dodge the war, and "The Man I Killed," about O'Brien's identification with an imagined Vietnamese soldier, reveal both a context and self awareness of the limited aspect of that context.

Haswell writes that she is “accepting” of Neilson’s “characterization of postmodernism in its insistence on multiple rather than single views to capture the ‘reality’ of an event, its rejection of teleological accounts of human life and history, its suspicion of human reason as a reliable behavioral norm, its insistence that no single individual (or ethnic group or nation) holds a monopoly on the fullness of human experience, and its questioning of supposedly ‘accurate’ representation that claims to be devoid of ideology” (107). But she also is mindful of “the warning of Aijaz Ahmad about the militant nature of the postmodern gospel” (107). She then quotes Ahmad’s critique of “postmodernism”: “Any attempt to know the world as a whole, or to hold that it is open to rational comprehension, let alone the desire to change it, was to be dismissed as a contemptible attempt to construct ‘grand narratives’ and ‘totalizing knowledge’” (Ahmad 260). According to Ahmad, “to refuse this model of the late-capitalist market economy” and “to *conclude* a conversation or to advocate strict partisanship in the politics of theory, one would then be guilty of rationalism, empiricism, historicism, and all sorts of other ills” (261). On one hand, Haswell is “accepting” of a “characterization of postmodernism” that “insists” on multiple instead of singular perspectives of an event and that “no single individual” “holds a monopoly on the fullness of human experience.” On the other hand, she is “mindful” of the “militant nature of postmodern gospel.” Similarly, Lucas Carpenter states, concerning the Viet Nam War, that to call that war “postmodern is to impose a hegemonic unity on a set of often radically dissimilar concepts, ideas and experiences, hence contradicting postmodernism’s central logic of diversity and differentiation” (31). By militancy and imposition of “a hegemonic unity,” I assume Haswell and Carpenter respectively mean the “insistence” on “multiple” perspectives and

other provisional aspects associated with postmodernism.[111] This insistent univocal assertion of the poly-vocal can be viewed as one of the contradictions that Jameson indentifies in postmodernism; the univocal and poly-vocal are inextricably imbricated.

For some, like O'Brien, as well as myself, this imbrication is not an untenable paradox but rather a paradigm of our being. As I have pointed out, there *is* no universal concordance concerning what postmodernism is, much less how it is "practiced." Haswell, Ahmed, and Carpenter seem to be responding to specific individuals that either they associate with, or who claim to represent, "postmodernism."[112] This totalizing assignation of postmodern "guilt" by assumed association is what Martin, Christopher, and Neilson ascribe to O'Brien. But as Haswell later notes, the "failure to understand" Viet Nam "is grounded not so much in the horror and violence of war itself, but in the nature of personal experience" (95). She states: "What O'Brien offers (and what critics affirm) is not a report of the war, but a 'rehappening' shaped by memory and imagination, making story-telling or writing itself on par with the war as the subject of the collection" (95). In other words, *The Things They Carried* is not *about* the politics of war (although, certainly, the text is *informed* by politics); rather, it is about O'Brien's subjective, embodied experience and how he formally employs language to convey the sensational.

---

[111] See Robin Silbergleid, who writing after Haswell and Carpenter, unequivocally states that the "narratives and experiences of the Vietnam War, like the postmodern condition, *are* uncertain, ambiguous, multiple" [italics mine] (148).

[112] Similarly, Tin Chen is informed by specific perspectives of postmodernism when she claims: "If the Vietnam War has been figured as a 'disruption' of America's self-narration as nation, its rupturing of 'our story' has *none of the glamour or play that characterizes postmodernism*" [italics added] (78). In another peculiarly influenced yet conflicted take on the term, Christopher Michael McDonough writes that "many literary critics have rightly characterized O'Brien's uncertainty as postmodern, but in fact *The Things They Carried* deals with issues of courage as old as war itself—or at least as old as the oldest literature about war" (24). But, as Haswell concludes: "to assume that postmodern literature renounces moral judgments and themes as naive moralism will lead to a gross misreading of O'Brien's subtle and moral meditation" (107).

Still, I acknowledge that Martin, Christopher, and Nielson are justifiably concerned that a focus on subjectivity, instability, and provisionality overshadows certain facts, or as Tim might put it, "happening truths," such as the socio-economic and political realities that led to and subsequently defined the war. They also appear uneasy—as I definitely am—with any theory that intellectualizes away the feeling, embodied subject.[113] As I discuss in my first chapter, a unified conceptualized subject may no longer be viable but the physiological subject *is* real and locatable, if not fixed. A person in pain exceeds language. And while there are those who may view *The Things They Carried* as a conceptual artefact of "postmodernism," I have never experienced the book in such a strict cerebral context. It *is* a work of intelligence, but it is also a product of profound feeling. It is an aesthetic autobiography in which O'Brien explores the "dilemma" of formally conveying the phenomenal world of embodied suffering.

"Good Form"

The Things They Carried is a work of twenty-two, separately titled "chapters."[114] They alternate between longer "stories" able to stand alone and shorter pieces that comment on and/or connect the lengthier texts.[115] Yet, it is "Good Form," eighteen in the sequence, to which critics often refer when analyzing O'Brien's approach to the form of

[113] Joanna Bourke observes that "to argue that historians can only analyse the emotions discursively does not require a denial that emotions have a physiology. This aspect has always been difficult for historians. . . . a strong tendency within the social sciences has disembodied the emotions, portraying them as trivial by-products of rational, class-based responses to material interests" (121).

[114] Some readers identify the book as a novel and view the titled sections as "chapters"; others label the work as a collection of interrelated "stories." I view the book as a collection of pieces: some can stand alone, yet they all attain greater resonance when read in relation to each other.

[115] In her article, Haswell insists that the 22 texts must be read in relation to each other and in their respective order. She writes "that meaning does not stand autonomously" . . . "but is interwoven into an embedded, interconnected, and self-referential sequence of stories" (97). Nonetheless, many of the pieces were initially published separately, albeit in often different form, as Haswell notes; while other stories, like "The Things They Carried," remain widely anthologized, notably by John Updike in *The Best American Short Stories of the Century* (1999), long after *The Things They Carried* was published.

the entire work.[116] Silbergleid states that "Good Form" is "like a piece of nonfiction, an essay about O'Brien's writing process" that "encourages us to read it as a fairly didactic discussion of how and why Tim O'Brien does what he does" (145). I quote the entire text, which is short:

> It's time to be blunt.
>
> I'm forty-three years old, true, and I'm a writer now, and a long time ago I walked through Quang Ngai Province as a foot soldier.
>
> Almost everything else is invented.
>
> But it's not a game. It's a form. Right here, now, as I invent myself, I'm thinking of all I want to tell you about why this book is written as it is. For instance, I want to tell you this: twenty years ago I watched a man die on a trail near the village of My Khe. I did not kill him. But I was present, you see, and my presence was guilt enough. I remember his face, which was not a pretty face, because his jaw was in his throat, and I remember feeling the burden of responsibility and grief. I blamed myself. And rightly so, because I was present.
>
> But listen. Even *that* story is made up.
>
> I want you to feel what I felt. I want you to know why story-truth is truer sometimes than happening-truth.
>
> Here is the happening-truth. I was once a soldier. There were many bodies, real bodies with real faces, but I was young then and I was afraid

[116] See Calloway, Carpenter, Chen, Kaplan, Kaufman, Timmerman. Silbergleid calls it "one of the book's most frequently discussed metafictional stories" (132).

> to look. And now, twenty years later, I'm left with faceless responsibility and faceless grief.
>
> Here is the story-truth. He was a slim, dead, almost dainty young man of about twenty. He lay in the center of a red clay trail near the village of My Khe. His jaw was in his throat. His one eye was shut, the other eye was a star-shaped hole. I killed him.
>
> What stories can do, I guess, is make things present.
>
> I can look at things I never looked at. I can attach faces to grief and love and pity and God. I can be brave. I can make myself feel again.
>
> "Daddy, tell the truth," Kathleen can say, "did you ever kill anybody?" And I can say, honestly, "Of course not."
>
> Or I can say, honestly, "Yes." (203-4)

"Good Form" is a brief but fair representation of what Maria Bonn, in admiration of the book's complexity, identifies as the "polished" and "manipulative" aspect of *The Things They Carried*, calling O'Brien "far more of a literary trickster than he acknowledges" (12).

Not everyone appreciates O'Brien's artful equivocating. In his *Wall Street Journal* review, Bruce Bawer calls the book "overly disingenuous" (qtd. in Herzog 896) criticizes O'Brien for "playing too many such fact-or-fiction games" (914). Similarly, Herzog recounts a reading by O'Brien during the mid-nineties in which the author addressed an audience that included Viet Nam veterans. During that event, he told—"not read," Herzog emphasizes (894)—a detailed story about wanting to flee to Canada soon after receiving a draft notice. At the end of his tale, O'Brien confessed that the story was

"made up" (894): although he had considered running away to Canada and "the thoughts, questions, and fears" (895) of the narrator did mirror his own in 1968, the particulars of the story were fiction. Herzog describes how those veterans who came to bond with O'Brien, to hear their own war experiences validated by the author's actual stories, felt betrayed. "Their trust of him as a person and as an author was undermined" (895). Those indignant veterans, like Bawer, saw "fact" and "fiction" as irreconcilable. The violation of perceived boundaries between the two concepts makes them feel as if they are being "played." O'Brien had, in a sense, breached Philippe Lejeune's "autobiographical pact": he had told a story in which he implied the telling of an autobiographical truth such as it appeared to him (Lejeune 22).

But was O'Brien guilty of violating this autobiographical pact? On one hand, he did not, upfront, "indicate explicitly the field to which this oath applies (the truth about such and such an aspect of my life, not committing myself in any way about some other aspect)" (22). O'Brien convincingly told, not read, a story in the first person by a narrator named Tim O'Brien which begins: "This is one story I've never told before. Not to anyone. Not to my parents, not to my brother or sister, not even to my wife" (O'Brien, *Things* 43). Herzog informs us that many of the veterans who had attended the reading were not familiar with "On the Rainy River," the fourth piece in *The Things They Carried* and which O'Brien was narrating from memory. Others in the audience, like Herzog, recognized the work. Were those veterans who could not identify the tale as fiction duped? Or were they "guilty" of ignorance? After all, O'Brien is a fiction writer and, at the end of his story, he admitted that it was a fabrication, and so contextualized "the field" to which Lejeune's oath might apply. Of course, there is little doubt, as Herzog

reveals, that O'Brien had "led on" the unsuspecting veterans. He had publically performed the cues of a man telling a "true story" and, afterward, felt compelled "to admit" that it was not "fact." But does that mean that it was not "true"? Herzog notes that "literal-minded readers approach O'Brien's stories conditioned to expect either fact or fiction, but not both, in a story" (896).

I believe that what O'Brien is doing is more complex and destabilizing—both in his readings, and, especially in a work such as "Good Form"—then simply mixing fact and fiction. In "Good Form," he does not provide the reader with any stability upon which to "rest," comfortably secure in what is "true" and what is "fiction." He begins several stories with an assertion that what follows is "true": "It's time to be blunt," in "Good Form"; "This is one story I never told anyone" (43), in "On the Rainy River"; and "This is true" (75), in "How to Tell a True War Story." In "Good Form" he then segues into an anecdote and states, "But listen. Even *that* story is made up." I can understand why Bawer might find O'Brien's technique off-putting. I especially understand why the veterans might be dismayed: I too might be distressed to hear a writer who wrote autobiographically about being a foster child tell a story presented as fact conclude with "but that never happened." Yet, at the same time, if I knew that the writer had been a foster child (or maybe even if he had not been), I might recognize whether or not he had "gotten it"; in other words, I might recognize whether the details and tone had *felt* true. So when Tim states, "I want you to feel what I felt. I want you to know why story-truth is truer sometimes than happening-truth," I understand. As I have stated above, and in my first chapter, I know what it feels like to be at a loss for the facts, either because I do not have them (my records were lost) or I have blocked them out because they were painful

or I simply cannot recall them. When Tim states that "There were many bodies, real bodies with real faces, but I was young then and I was afraid to look," I do not need to know if that is factually true. I know what it feels like to be afraid to look at, or see, something horrible. I know how the imagination fills in those gaps of information with fantasies that eventually become "true" and how those fabulations can haunt the body. I know how something painful, now forgotten, finds triggers in other objects, other stories.

This affective connection to a work of art, in which a creator's expression of feeling becomes the embodied testimony of another, is found in Ross Chambers' conceptions of "phantom pain," "orphaned memory," and "foster writing." Chambers draws on the 1995 publication, and subsequent recall three years later, of the "faux" memoir *Fragments*, by a German writer named "Binjamin Wilkomirski." Wilkomirski claimed to be an orphaned Jewish Auschwitz survivor but, it later was revealed, the author was actually a Swiss orphan and foster child named Bruno Doessekker. Chambers writes:

> in experiencing Wilkomirski's pain as his own, Doessekker the man transforms his personal sense of orphanhood into the experience of a "phantom" pain; and that his writing then functions as a mode of transmission for the painful Wilkomirski memories that derive from the collective memory but that he takes as his own, in such a way that they become phantom pain in the minds of his books readers. (101)

Chambers derives his use of the term "phantom pain" from "the neurophysiological phenomenon whereby people who have lost a limb experience a sensation of physical pain in the amputated extremity" (102). He uses it as a metaphor to explain "the capacity

to experience the pain of another, or of others, as wholly or partly indistinguishable from a 'remembered' pain of one's own" (102). Conversely, an "orphaned memory" is a memory without a locus. It is, as Chamber identifies, "a kind of visitation" (102), originating in a collective memory and conveyed through its host, the foster writer. In the *Fragments* case, the persona of Wilkomirski is the orphan memory, a visitation of collective suffering, while Dossekker is the foster writer and his "memoir" an example of foster writing. The stray strands of orphaned memories are rewoven into the social fabric through the phantom pain of the autobiographer, and, subsequently, the audience.

As conceived by Chambers, an orphaned memory is part of a collective unconscious, and, as such, its ontology is problematic. What is the nature of this visitation? And how is it conveyed? Is it a semiotic transmission, tangentially inferred by what cultural and historical signifiers imply but don't directly "say"? Does an orphan memory belong to the "virtual," in the Deleuzian sense that it emerges out of a "modal relation of possibility or potentiality vis-à-vis actuality" (Bonta and Protevi 164)? And what constitutes this orphan memory as energy-matter: is it electrical, chemical, thermodynamic? If neuropsychological, is an orphan memory a form of embodied cognition? Of course, in line with the theoretical perspectives of dynamism and analogue that inform my project, I do not think that any of my proposed ontologies of the orphaned memory are mutually exclusive. In fact, all are feasible, if not empirically verifiable (at least not by me). For Chambers, in the context of *Fragments*, orphaned memories belong to our cultural memory of "the Holocaust that we had forgotten, denied, or ignored" (108). To experience Dossekker's phantom pain as his own, a reader need only possess "the capacity to experience the pain of another, or of others, as wholly or partly

indistinguishable from a 'remembered' pain of one's own" (Chambers 108). Chambers writes: "I need not have 'known' the Holocaust in the sense of having been there, or in the way that a historian might know it; I need only to recognize its reality and *relate it to myself*, which presumably I do on the basis of personal experiences of pain that I remember" (108). In other words, as with aesthetics, this "recognized" pain belongs to a sensational, embodied logic outside of cognitive reasoning and understanding. It is *felt*.

What I like about the concepts of orphaned memories and phantom pain is their collective and relational dynamics. Theoretically and metaphorically, they attempt to explain human interconnectivity and the role that art plays in that connection. As Tim states in "Good Form," what stories, factual or fabricated, "can do, I guess, is make things present." With Allen Ginsberg's "Kaddish," or Joan Didion's "The White Album," or Tim O'Brien's "Lives of the Dead," "I can look at things I never looked at. I can attach faces to grief and love and pity and God. I can be brave. I can make myself feel again."

"Making the Stomach Believe"

> The narrative function is losing its functors, its great hero, its great dangers, its great voyages, its great goal. It is being dispersed in clouds of narrative language elements—narrative, but also denotative, prescriptive, descriptive, and so on. Conveyed within each cloud are pragmatic valencies specific to its kind. Each of us lives at the intersection of many of these. However, we do not necessarily establish stable language combinations, and the properties of the ones we do establish are not necessarily communicable.
>
> – Jean-François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition*

"How to Tell a True War Story" is the seventh "chapter" in *The Things They Carried*, but it is the first and arguably most representative example of O'Brien's "schizoid" approach later described in "Good Form." Within that text, multiplicity extends beyond the

narration, in which "the angles of vision are skewed" (O'Brien, *Things* 78); it is language itself. Through the perpetual assertion and negation of meaning, O'Brien keeps the very definition of his terms in play. For some, like Bruce Bawer, the effect can be frustrating. Yet Tim's insistent assertions ("This is true") and counter-assertions resemble the organic process of memory, which is always reshaping, re-contextualizing, revising. As Tim notes in the third piece, "Spin," "the remembering is turned into a kind of rehappening" (36), "the remembering makes it now" (40). As acts of "remembering," stories are paradoxically for "when you can't remember how you got from where you were to where you are"; they "are for eternity, when memory is erased, when there is nothing to remember except the story" (40). O'Brien simultaneously avows and undermines the act of "remembering": you remember the story when you cannot remember the facts. Stories become our memory and, in turn, our "facts." Of the actual event, on which subsequent stories are based, Tim states:

> The pictures get jumbled; you tend to miss a lot. And then afterward, when you go to tell about it, there is always that surreal seemingness, which makes the story seem untrue, but which in fact represents the hard and exact truth as it seemed. (78)

To some readers, like Bonn, this above passage might be an example of "literary trickery," or what Bawer calls "game playing," but to me it appears to be an accurate representation of memory, particularly in regards to extreme events. What has been "seen," particularly during moments of profound stress, do "get jumbled," a lot is missed, and there is always this "surreal seemingness, which makes the story seem untrue." Tim states that "You can tell a true war story by the way it never seems to end" (83). This

claim seems potentially true of any painful event that haunts a person who subsequently attempts to (re)tell his story. Recounting the incidents keep them alive but it also reframes them. Certain details are left out; others are resurrected, or, it appears, invented. For example, at this point in my life, when I tell a stranger how my mother brought me to a psychiatric hospital when I was ten and left me there, the story always surprises me, as if it is someone else's life. Each instance of retelling re-contextualizes it. And each re-contextualization makes the story appear surreal and untrue, simultaneously familiar and strange. I can imagine how, for those with more extreme stories, the disjuncture between the event and the retelling would seem even greater.

"How to Tell A True War Story" is a series of anecdotal fragments interrupted by self-reflexive commentary and narrative theorizing. It begins with a soldier, "Rat" Kiley, writing a letter to the sister of a recently killed fellow soldier. Pained by the loss, Kiley needs to tell her what his friend means to him. Yet the sister—or what the Tim calls "the dumb cooze" (76)—never writes back. The next anecdote involves Tim attempting to describe the death of a soldier Curt Lemon in which he finds it "hard to tell you what happened next" (78). That is followed by the story of Mitchell Sanders, who struggles to explain the "aural mirage" of a six-man crew on a mission in the mountains; he recounts how the mysterious, unseen sounds of this potentially dangerous operation are transformed from "weird" "whacked out music" (80) into a cocktail party and then into chamber music. The whole jungle begins to talk. And yet, even after dawn, when everything becomes quiet, "they can still *hear* it" (82). Later, their colonel demands an account of "what the hell happened there. What did they hear?" (82) Sanders narrates:

> "They just look at him for a while, sort of funny like, sort of amazed, and the whole war is right there in that stare. It says everything you can't ever say. It says, man, you got wax in your ears. It says, poor bastard, you'll never know — wrong frequency — you don't even want to hear this. Then they salute the fucker and walk away, because certain stories you don't ever tell." (82-83)

Stories you cannot tell become stories you "don't ever tell." But, of course, O'Brien *is* telling the story that Sanders attempts to narrate. Later, O'Brien writes: "'I got a confession to make,' Sanders said. 'Last night, man, I had to make up a few things'" (83). In this Chinese box of tales, the point of origin recedes, the stories proliferate, and, like the "music" in the jungle, "the sounds carry forever" (80). The idea of a frequency that cannot be shared, and the need to keep telling stories, culminates in that chapter's final, oft-cited anecdote: the senseless, brutal killing of a baby buffalo in retribution for the death of a fellow soldier. Tim begins: "This one does it for me. I've told it before — many times, many versions — but here's what actually happened" (85). Graphic and visceral, this lyrically violent account of death and vengeance is O'Brien's attempt to get at a "truth" that "makes the stomach believe" (84). As he states in "Good Form," Tim wants the reader, or audience member, to feel what he felt—not necessarily visualize, and certainly not understand (for he does not even "understand" it), but to *feel* it, in the body. Yet, in the end, like all the other stories within this story, its "frequency"—its energy as a vibration felt within the body—cannot be conveyed. It ends with Tim explaining how:

> Now and then, when I tell this story, someone will come up to me afterward and say she liked it. It's always a woman. Usually it's an older

> woman of kindly temperament and humane politics. She'll explain that as a rule she hates war stories; she can't understand why people want to wallow in all the blood and gore. But this one she liked. The poor baby buffalo, it made her sad. Sometimes, even, there are little tears. What I should do, she'll say, is put it all behind me. Find new stories to tell.
>
> I won't say it but I'll think it.
>
> I'll picture Rat Kiley's face, his grief, and I'll think, *You dumb cooze*. (90)

The gender politics aside (why "always a woman"?), "How to Tell a True War Story" is about experiences that cannot be conceptually articulated and the consequent alienation of their embodied subjectivity. Any connection, if there is one, is *through* the telling and the energetic connections that storytelling invites. So "All you can do is tell it one more time, patiently, adding and subtracting, making up a few things to get at the real truth" (91). As O'Brien writes, "you just keep on telling it," because "in the end, of course, a true war story is never about war" but "about love and memory," "sorrow," and "sisters who never write back and people who never listen" (91). Storytelling—whether read or told—is an active presence containing multitudes. The course of time moves in infinite directions. There is always another story about to unfold.

Imagined Lives, Real Pain

> When I'm pacing around the house and that's not working or I'm counting to ten and that's not working or I have [my dog] sitting next to me and that's not working, I hop in my car, in my car peace. That's when I get far more hopeless, and don't see a purpose for living and don't understand why I'm hear and it's just too hard—that's crisis mode.
>
> —Keris Myrick, "Find a Life That Fits," *The New York Times*.

If "How to Tell a True War Story" is about the compulsion to tell what cannot be told, what felt connection, if there is one, manifests through the telling? For some, perhaps, it is the emotional recognition of the pathos of struggle. Yet an emotional connection does not translate into a conceptual understanding between bonded parties, either because the experience exceeds language or because the parties have different conceptual frames of reference. For example, the protagonist of "How to Tell a True War Story" is angry with the "older woman of kindly temperament and humane politics" because she does not "get" his story. She approaches it literally, and she urges him to "put it all behind" him and "find new stories to tell." But for Tim, his remembered stories are not past, they belong to the present, as a "rehappening." The pain of such a "rehappening" is embodied but, as the events associated with that pain become increasingly surreal, unreal, and estranged, the pain appears to have no clear locus. It is "orphaned." Storytelling temporally grounds such "orphan pain," objectifies it, and possibly alleviates it. Orphan pain is distinct from Chambers' respective concepts of orphan memories, which are free-floating narratives that have detached from a subject, and phantom pain, which is a kind of visitation. Orphan pain is a fairly steady, if intermittent, presence in the body that looses its narrative grounding because the narratives associated with it either have become exhausted or forgotten. New narratives are constructed and must constantly be revised to justify the pain. The fifth and sixth OED definitions of "justify" are particularly salient here, "to confirm or support by attestation or evidence; to corroborate, prove, verify" and "[t]o make exact; to fit or arrange exactly; to adjust to exact shape, size, or position." Narrative and pain are in constant (re)negotiation. Through attestation and positioning, stories can alleviate pain as well as intensify its stranglehold on the

body. As a relational act, stories are a medium of affective linkage and flow between energetic bodies. For example, although the "older woman" does not conceptually, or even emotionally, "get" Tim, she is moved. The story made her "sad," and her appeal to "tell new stories" need not be read as dismissive but as an attempt to comfort in the face of her own helplessness. "How to Tell a True War Story" is about alienation but it is also about affective transmission and connection, however imperfect and partial.

The story that powerfully portrays how a representation of alienation can be a means of potential identification and connection is "Speaking of Courage," more than halfway through the book. In this piece, set during July 4, a soldier named Norman Bowker suffers from post-traumatic stress disorder and has trouble re-assimilating to civilian life. Remembering the night in a Viet Nam "shit field," when he "failed" to save the life of a friend hit by mortar, he drives around the town lake in an incessant loop. In response to these flashbacks, he attempts to justify his courage through imagined conversations with his deceased childhood friend Max Arnold, his former sweetheart Sally, and his emotionally distant father. Unable to connect with anyone beyond the phantoms in his head, Bowker first recalls Max, who drowned in the lake, which kept "him out of the war entirely" (158). Bowker remembers his conversations with Max about existential matters like the existence of God.

> "No, I'm not saying *that*," [Max would] argue against the drone of the engine. "I'm saying it's possible as an *idea*, even necessary as an idea, a final cause in the whole structure of causation." (158)

But, as Bowker realizes, “now Max was just an idea” (158), alive only in his mind. He then spots two boys on the road, “hiking with knapsacks and toy rifles and canteens,” “kicking stones in front of them.” Bowker honks but neither look up.

> Already he had passed them six times, forty-two miles, nearly three hours without stop. He watched the boys recede in his rearview mirror. They turned a soft grayish color, like sand, before finally disappearing. (159)

A recollection of two young men merges with the present vision of two boys. Bowker tries to make contact, to reconnect, but he cannot. Both the memory and its ghostly projection—two possible but necessary ideas—recede, “before finally disappearing.” Bowker can imagine no “final cause in the whole structure of causation,” so he lives in a state of hypothesis: “If Sally had not been married, or if his father were not such a baseball fan, it would have been a good time to talk” (160). The familiar has become fantastic. “Invisible in the soft twilight” (169), Bowker looks to strangers, like the female carhop at a fast-food drive-in. But when the girl brings his tray, he eats quickly, without looking up (170). “Dark was pressing in tight now, and he wished there were somewhere to go” (170). But there isn’t. Bowker continues to drive around the lake and gets out of the car after his “twelfth revolution” as the sky goes “crazy with color”; he dips his head in the water, suggesting a baptism, a cleansing, and the promise of hope.

As Milton Bates has stated, “Speaking of Courage” “is a literary exhibit, a model of the well-wrought short story typically found in classroom anthologies. Students would be cajoled or impressed into admiring the symmetries of the piece”; in the next “chapter,” however, “the symmetry comes undone” (250). That section, entitled “Notes,” as Silbergleid has observed, “reads like a piece of nonfiction, even on the level of tone and

diction" (139). "Notes" begins: "'Speaking of Courage' was written in 1975 at the suggestion of Norman Bowker, who three years later hanged himself in the locker room of a YMCA in his hometown in central Iowa" (177). Silbergleid states how "Notes" "isn't actually nonfiction but adopts the rhetorical devices of essay writing," yet "while both naïve and cynical readers might wonder if the story of Norman Bowker is true, in the end, it doesn't matter if Bowker's story actually happened; what matters is that, within the context of *The Things They Carried*, Bowker's story needs to be understood as 'true'" (139). While I mostly agree with Silbergleid, I do not believe that a reader need be either naïve or cynical to *wonder* if the story is true. I had first read "Notes" in preparation for an interview I did with O'Brien. I believed his gloss on "Speaking of Courage" as a statement of fact, yet, during our conversation, the issue of what was fact and fiction came up.[117] At the time, it mattered to me what was historically true and what was made up. My memory may be mistaken, which in the context here would be ironically appropriate, but I seem to recall him stating that the entire book was fabricated except for the suicide of an army buddy, which had prompted him to write "Speaking of Courage" and "Notes."[118] Yet while doing research for this chapter, I read, in another interview cited above, that O'Brien stated that "Notes" was also a fiction; I felt betrayed, not unlike those veterans who felt duped by learning that a story presented as fact was actually fiction. In any event, I have come to realize that whether Bowker's story actually happened *is* irrelevant. The story remains emotionally true. Certainly, many soldiers have committed suicide under similar circumstances as recounted by the narrator of "Notes," which continues as follows:

[117] See the appendix for the full interview.
[118] Regrettably, I recorded over my taped conversation with O'Brien.

> In the spring of 1975, near the time of Saigon's final collapse, I received a long, disjointed letter in which Bowker described the problem of finding a meaningful use for his life after the war. He had worked briefly as an automotive parts salesman, a janitor, a car wash attendant, and a short order cook at the local A&W fast food franchise. None of these jobs, he said, had lasted more than ten weeks. He lived with his parents, who supported him, and who treated him with kindness and obvious love. At one point he had enrolled in the junior college in his hometown, but the course work, he said, seemed too abstract, too distant, with nothing real or tangible at stake, certainly not the stakes of a war. He dropped out after eight months. He spent his mornings in bed. In the afternoons he played pickup basketball at the Y, and then at night he drove around town in his father's car, mostly alone, or with a six-pack of beer, cruising. (177)

Fact or fiction, Bowker's post-war biography in "Notes" can be read as an account of many depressed returning soldiers rather than as a anecdote representing the particular events of one man's life. The described aimlessness and alienation is strategically general enough to be identifiable. Surely readers—not just traumatized soldiers—can recognize the problem "of finding a meaningful use" for one's life, of doing what is socially expected and logical (enrolling in college) but achieving no traction, of spending "mornings in bed," and finding oneself "mostly alone." O'Brien's words summon images from my own encounters with despair, albeit less severe than Bowker's, but which nonetheless trigger sensations that affectively connect me to him, Tim, and O'Brien. In other words, the experience of reading "Speaking of Courage" and "Notes" *feels* true to

me regardless of whether the depicted events *are* true. In the end, they "speak" to a "capacity to experience the pain of another, or of others, as wholly or partly indistinguishable from a 'remembered' pain of one's own." For me, and I would contend O'Brien, they are works of phantom pain.

The potential sensations fostered by these stories derive not only from the information being conveyed but also from the author's style. For example, in "Speaking of Courage," O'Brien frequently composes sentences with extended clauses that create a sense of recursive movement, of almost suspended animation. I mentioned above that Tim's insistent assertions and counter-assertions resemble the organic process of memory. I also stated in my chapter on Joan Didion how fragmented narratives feel emotionally true: they not only resemble the memory process, particularly in regards to trauma, but also the mundane, "event-driven" experience of being. Yet, I am now focusing on the sensation conveyed through what might be called lyricism. The OED defines the term as "[l]yric character or style; the pursuit or eulogy of the same; (with *pl.*), a lyrical expression or characteristic. . . . affectation of high-flown sentiment or poetic enthusiasm." Lyricism, as lyric in character or style, derives from "lyric" as a post-Aristotelian concept: a short work of verse, "usually divided into stanzas or strophes, and directly expressing the poet's own thoughts and sentiments" (OED). Lyricism, in its more general sense, as a lyrical expression or characteristic, extends its poetic connotations to non-verse, as in Merriam-Webster's definition: "an intense personal quality expressive of feeling or emotion in an art (as poetry or music)." Of course, in its early Greek context, "*λυρικός*" and "*λύρα*," lyric pertains "to the lyre; adapted to the lyre, meant to be sung; pertaining to or characteristic of song" (OED). It is lyricism's sense of musicality, its

rhythm and tone, that interests me here, particularly when employed to convey the pain of despair. All language is musical: it may be dissonant or euphonic, percussive or legato, among other qualities. Yet the music of language is integral to the sensational experience of writing and reading. While lyricism has its negative associations—affectation of high-flown sentiment or poetic enthusiasm—its harmonious qualities can foster a feeling of congruity and connection (as dissonance may evoke discord and separation). In O'Brien's case, the rhythm of his prose endows the stark, otherwise isolated experience of suicidal despair with a sense of movement and poignant harmony.[119]

The opening paragraph of "Speaking of Courage" establishes a psychological and topographical setting.

> The war was over and there was no place in particular to go. Norman Bowker followed the tar road on its seven-mile loop around the lake, then he started all over again, driving slowly, feeling safe inside his father's big Chevy, now and then looking out on the lake to watch the boats and water-skiers and scenery. It was Sunday and it was summer, and the town seemed pretty much the same. The lake lay flat and silvery against the sun. Along the road the houses were all low-slung and split-level and modern,

[119] Suzanne Keen summarizes the research on the connection between a writer's "technique" and a reader's identification and/or empathy with literary characters. She writes that such "qualities have not been investigated in a comprehensive fashion. Marisa Bortolussi and Peter Dixon emphasize aesthetic qualities of narrative that open the way to personal involvement. In contrast, Jemeljan Hakemulder suggests that readers experiencing strong admiration of an author's writing style may engage less readily with the fictional world and its inhabitants" (93). She also notes that "David S. Miall and Don Kuiken argue that emotional experiences of literature depend upon the engagement of the literary text with the reader's experiences, but they emphasize foregrounding effects at the level of literary style that shake up conventions, slow the pace, and invite more active reading that opens the way for empathy" (94). I, on the other hand, am not arguing that specific literary techniques, or styles, produce certain emotional responses. I am only claiming that a writer's style affects our emotional responses and that the composition and reception of a text have a sensational component. O'Brien's "lyricism" obviously affects me in very distinct physical ways that may or may not resonate with other readers.

> with big porches and picture windows facing the water. The lawns were spacious. On the lake side of the road, where real estate was most valuable, the houses were handsome and set deep in, well kept and brightly painted, with docks jutting out into the lake, and boats moored and covered with canvas, and neat gardens, and sometimes even gardeners, and stone patios with barbecue spits and grills, and wooden shingles saying who lived where. (157)

There may be "no place in particular to go" but O'Brien takes Bowker and the reader on a slow, lulling tour through a somnolent town. The "houses were all low-slung," "the lawns were spacious," and the "lake lay flat and silvery against the sun." This is a realm of capacious stillness, "calm and smooth, a good audience for silence" (158). The language is simple; O'Brien paints his pictures in primary colors. He has an affinity for lists; the syntax rolls fluently along with nouns and phrases joined by the conjunction "and." The use of alliteration and diphthongs suggest an aural lullaby.

> He drove slowly. No hurry, nowhere to go. Inside the Chevy the air was cool and oily-smelling, and he took pleasure in the steady sounds of the engine and air conditioning. A tour bus feeling, in a way, except the town he was touring seemed dead. Through the windows, as if in a stop-motion photograph, the place looked as if it had been hit by nerve gas, everything still and lifeless, even the people. (162-63)

The writing conveys introspective musing; it is the language of a daydreamer adrift in melancholy but beyond the grip of claustrophobic despair. A fellow fantasist, I have a

strong affective connection to O'Brien's prose. In a piece I published on my own childhood, I wrote:

> [My foster mother] believed that healthy boys played outside while their mothers cleaned and cooked and ran the house. I spent much of my early youth on the front lawn dissecting bugs and examining leaves. I was fascinated by nature's pulse. I liked to lie on the ground and stare up at clouds, morphing caravans in the shape of dogs, cats, and Disney characters. When my foster parents got a kiddie pool, I'd lie in the water for hours, ears submerged, sound muted, and I'd watch rays of sunlight as they passed through white poodles and disappeared into darkening space. (Bahr, "No Matter" 71)

I cannot say that O'Brien was on my mind as I wrote the above passage, with its conjunctive "ands," dependent clauses, long vowels, and alliterative phrasing. Yet I had already read his books and interviewed him and I was attracted to his style. I had taught *The Things They Carried* and read passages aloud, emotionally enlivened by the rhythm of the prose. In my own work, I read aloud as I write, striving for a certain cadence, an affective tempo that captures the sensations within my body. Although I cannot make the same claim as Allen Ginsberg, who stated that "I write best when I weep, I wrote a lot of ['Kaddish'] weeping . . . but I got a get a rhythm up to cry" (*Kerouac Letters* 369), I have wept while writing. I have laughed and shuddered and caught my breath. For me, reading and writing are sensational acts, rhythmically body-bound.

In musical compositions, the score and lyrics have a reciprocal impact; the notes, tempo, and arrangement can affectively amplify, dampen, or reconfigure verbal imagery.

The same is the case for prose. In "Speaking of Courage," the rhythmic descriptions dominate the piece; when active dialogue intervenes, it is a dissonant rupture in the music of O'Brien's flowing narration. Toward the end, Bowker has an encounter a fast-food attendant, which, along with his brief and disconnected exchange with the female carhop, are his first conversations with people that are not imagined.

> The intercom squeaked and said, "Order."
>
> "Mama Burger and fries," Norman Bowker said.
>
> "Affirmative, copy clear. No rootie-tootie?"
>
> "Rootie-tootie?"
>
> "You know, man—root beer."
>
> "A small one."
>
> "Roger-dodger. Repeat: one Mama, one fries, one small beer. Fire for effect. Stand by."
>
> The intercom squeaked and went dead.
>
> "Out," said Norman Bowker.
>
> When the girl brought his tray, he ate quickly, without looking up. The tired radio announcer in Des Moines gave the time, almost eight-thirty. Dark was pressing in tight now, and he wished there were somewhere to go. (O'Brien 170)

The dialogue's sharp, staccato rhythm contrasts with the mostly euphonic narration, amplifying Bowker's awkward and uneasy interaction with the world beyond his poetic imagination. When O'Brien writes that "he ate quickly, without looking up," it is a poignant moment of isolation, of a man feeling unwanted and expendable. The poignancy

is intensified with the return to lyricism: “Dark was pressing in tight now, and he wished there were somewhere to go.” The story ends with Bowker’s last few orbits around the lake.

> On his tenth turn around the lake he passed the hiking boys for the last time. The man in the stalled motorboat was gone; the mud hens were gone. Beyond the lake, over Sally Gustafson’s house, the sun had left a smudge of purple on the horizon. The band shell was deserted, and the woman in pedal pushers quietly reeled in her line, and Dr. Mason’s sprinkler went round and round. (171)

After his twelfth orbit is when Bowker stops the car “in the shadow of a picnic shelter” (173) and O’Brien brings this story to a close.

> After a time he got out, walked down to the beach, and waded into the lake without undressing. The water felt warm against his skin. He put his head under. He opened his lips, very slightly, for the taste, then he stood up and folded his arms and watched the fireworks. For a small town, he decided, it was a pretty good show. (173)

There is an aspect of sentimental romance to “Speaking of Courage,” culminating in an ending that suggests temporary purchase. The redemption is slight and ephemeral, located in water and fleeting fireworks.

Yet “Notes” dispels any promise of sustained salvation. The harder, less lyrical syntax resembles the blunt “truths” of someone who cannot find a redemptive solution to his pain except through the decisive action of suicide. Alone, “Speaking of Courage” possesses a lyrical wistfulness buoyed by fragile optimism. In relation to “Notes,” that

sentiment attains a darker pathos, as if showcasing the limits of poetic language. "Speaking of Courage" gains further poignancy as a creative act: it is an attempt at reconciliation, which the story temporarily achieves, if only for the time that O'Brien composed it, or when a receptive individual, such as myself, reads it.

In "Notes," O'Brien/Tim states:

> I did not look on my work as therapy, and still don't. Yet when I received Norman Bowker's letter, it occurred to me that the act of writing had led me through a swirl of memories that might otherwise have ended in paralysis or worse. By telling stories, you objectify your own experience. You separate it from yourself. You pin down certain truths. You make up others. (179)

Even if a writer does not view his or her work as therapeutic, the process of creating can still have a therapeutic effect.[120] Nonetheless, my concern is not with writing as therapy. I am interested in the process of writing and reading as a means of affective connection. I realize that many may view the body's role in the production and reception of art as obvious. But my interest (in fact, my sense of urgency) is a response to certain theorists and scholars who lose sight of the body—particularly the suffering body—within their conceptualizations of the constructed self. To take a recent example, Silbergleid writes that trauma theorists "focus on the expressive and therapeutic need to tell, and postmodern writers such as O'Brien play on these tendencies, incorporating the personal

[120] Milton Bates writes: "One hesitates to apply a therapeutic model to storytelling, even in the case of war stories and even when trying to specify their most intimate purpose. To do so is to suggest that a war story is the pathological symptom of a victim rather than the consciously crafted work of an artist. . . . The narrator of *The Things They Carried* insists that therapy is not one of his motives, even though he has been talking 'virtually nonstop' about the war for twenty years. Rather, he regards his writing as a way to 'objectify' his experience. This may, of course, amount to the same thing" (256).

even as they overtly acknowledge the personal to be nothing more than a construct" (152). But the personal *is* more than a construct. It is also embodied, individually and collectively. In the case of trauma for example, Eldra Solomon, a psychologist and biologist, and Kathleen Heide, a professor of criminology, write in "The Biology of Trauma: Implications for Treatment":

> Traumatic events overwhelm the brain's capacity to process information. The episodic memory of the experience may be dysfunctionally stored in the right limbic system indefinitely and may generate vivid images of the traumatic experience, terrifying thoughts, feelings, body sensations, sounds, and smells. Such unprocessed traumatic memories can cause cognitive and emotional looping, anxiety, PTSD, maladaptive coping strategies, depression, and many other psychological symptoms of distress. Because the episodic memory is not processed, a relevant semantic memory is not stored and the individual has difficulty using knowledge from the experience to guide future action. (54)

For a traumatized, or depressed, person, an aesthetic autobiography may offer the possibility of a non-rational, affective connection by unlocking an unsustainable and illusory closed system—i.e., the self or individual—and opening it up to the larger system in which it participates—the collective. This interconnected system is energetic, affective, virtual—what Massumi calls the "felt reality of relation" (19). As Jeff Loeb writes concerning the politicizing of Viet Nam narratives: "Critical accounts . . . too often explore [these narratives] from a point of . . . politically inspired cerebration, one that seems to search for a use for them and to celebrate this usefulness only as long as they

reinforce their political or ideological position" (96). Loeb notes that this does not mean that "such critics are always incorrect in their observations but rather that in using the narratives in this way they lose or dismiss an important component—perhaps the important component—of the narrative project: the human being behind the story" (96). Loeb's observation can extend to all ideologically informed critiques of autobiographical literature.

The human being behind "Speaking of Courage" and "Notes" is Tim O'Brien, who also is the author of the autobiographical essay "The Vietnam in Me," which opened this chapter. In that *New York Times* piece, O'Brien confesses to suicidal thoughts and tells of having spent between eight and nine thousand dollars in treatment for depression ("Vietnam" 51-52). As a result, Bowker is more than a conceptual representation of the suicidal soldier; he has some affective genesis in O'Brien himself. Although, as Chen states, *The Things They Carried* "questions the nature of truth" (79) and what O'Brien terms any "sense of the definite" (*Things* 88), Chen also emphasizes that his "war stories are not about recovering from trauma or resolving the conflicts contributing to or created by the war in any permanent way; they are about accepting indeterminacy and learning to live not through Vietnam but with it" (80). It is important to clarify that the indeterminate self is not synonymous with the constructed self. The indeterminate self is overdetermined and in flux, yet it does not negate an energetic core, which may or may not be conceptually formed. And it is the indeterminate self, not the constructed self, that I see as O'Brien's project. Mark Heberle states that "identity itself is a construct, a fabrication that trauma survivors are forced to recognize and reassemble through narratives" (xxii). But, as a close reading of *The Things They Carried* reveals, O'Brien is

perpetually undermining his identity. The text is not about re-assemblage, it is about the writing process as a mode of living. For O'Brien, left with his embodied memories and orphaned pain, writing is how he lives. I also want to be clear that writing as a means of living is not the same as writing to heal or survive, although writing may aid in these processes. As a writer, O'Brien lives in his imagination, not unlike his creations Tim, and Bowker. It is his way of *dealing* with the world, and by "deal," I mean "to act in regard to . . . handle . . . (OED 16a), although its connotation "to cope with" is not excluded.[121] As O'Brien has made clear:

> one's imagination and daydreams are real. Things actually happen in daydreams. There's a reality you can't deny. It's not happening in the physical world, but it's certainly happening in the sense data of the brain. . . . We live in our heads a lot, but especially during situations of stress and great peril. It's a means of escape in part, but it's also a means of dealing with the real world—not just escaping it, but dealing with it. (Schroeder, "Two Interviews" 138)

It is writing as action that concerns me here: movement, engagement, living.

"Like a Blade, Tracing Loops on Ice"

> I think our lives are largely, maybe totally, determined by what we remember and by what we imagine.
>
> Tim O'Brien (Schroeder, "Two Interviews" 143-144)

Writing as a mode of living is made explicit in O'Brien's final piece, "The Lives of the Dead." An episodic narrative, frequently photographic in its effect, "The Lives of

[121] Cope: To manage, deal (competently) with, a situation or problem (OED 4a).

The Dead" shifts between scenes of war, childhood, and the present. Stylistically, it combines the metafictive play and narrative theorizing of "How to Tell a True War Story" with the lyrical sentiment of "Speaking of Courage." Once again, O'Brien begins with "truth": "But this too is true: stories can save us" (*Things* 255). Indeed, stories *can* "save us"—although who and what they save us from is open to interpretation. But stories do not *necessarily* save us, and salvation is not what "The Lives of the Dead" is finally about. Rather, the piece is about the living process of writing. It is about, what Elaine Scarry has called, "the objectifying power of the imagination" (164). As O'Brien/Tim state in "Notes": "By telling stories, you objectify your own experience. . . .You separate it from yourself" (179).

In the first paragraph of "The Lives of the Dead," it is 1990 and Tim is "forty-three years, and a writer now," "dreaming" through storytelling (255). In the second paragraph, Tim returns to his memories of the Viet Nam War: the date is 1969 and he recalls his first encounter with a dead body, and how, through language, the other, more seasoned soldiers keep death at a distance by talking to the dead as if they were alive. (Page 256: "Rat Kiley bent over the corpse. 'Gimme five,' he said. 'A real honor.'") This memory of death transports Tim back further, to 1956, and his first childhood sweetheart, a girl named Linda, who, we quickly learn, has cancer. Linda lives through that summer and is dead by early September. Throughout "The Lives of The Dead," O'Brien shifts between these three periods of Tim's life, playing the memories against each other. He explains how the writing of stories, an act of dreaming, keeps the people he knew that are now dead "alive." An idealized representation of childhood innocence, Linda is the

embodiment of the idealizing tendency of memory itself. “And as a writer now, I want to save Linda’s life,” Tim says. “Not her body—her life” (265). Tim continues:

> in a story I can steal her soul. I can revive, at least briefly, that which is absolute and unchanging. It’s not the surface that matters, it’s the identity that lives inside. (265)

The paradox is that throughout *The Things They Carried*, O’Brien has been undermining any notion of a stable identity. If there is any “absolute and unchanging” identity, it is not conceptual but, rather, sensational, through the feeling of being alive.

In my first chapter, I wrote how depression is an isolating experience of disengagement with life that can feel deadening. To write, which involves memory and the imagination, is to reengage with life. In “The Vietnam in Me,” O’Brien records his return to Viet Nam in February of 1994, accompanied by his much younger girlfriend, Kate. It is his first visit to the country since serving in the war. Like “The Lives of the Dead,” the essay moves back and forth in time. O’Brien recounts his return, the earlier memories it awakens, and his later attempt to write the essay that June, as he battles depression soon after his break-up with Kate. The essay is a chronicle of his struggle with despair.

> It’s 5:25 in the morning, June 7. I have just taken my first drug of the day, a prescription drug, Oxazepam, which files the edge off anxiety. Thing is, I’m not anxious. I’m slop. This is despair. This is a valence of horror that Vietnam never approximated. If war is hell, what do we call hopelessness?
>
> I have not killed myself. That day, this day, maybe tomorrow. Like Nam, it goes. (51)

O'Brien writes of staying busy to keep depression at bay. He goes for walks, works out, composes lists, calls friends, visits lawyers, buys furniture, "discharge[s] promises," and keeps his "eyes off the sleeping pills" (53). He concludes that that "days are all right" but

> Now the clock shows 3:55 A.M. I call NERVOUS and listen to an automated female voice confirm it. The nights are not all right. (53)

He documents writing "these few words, which seem useless," then gets up and peruses a photo album, given to him by Kate, of their trip to Viet Nam. On the cover is

> a snapshot that's hard to look at but harder still to avoid. We stand on China Beach near Danang. Side by side, happy as happy will ever be, our fingers laced in a fitted, comfortable, half-conscious way that makes me feel a gust of hope. It's a gust, though, here and gone. (53)

His recursive struggle with depression is ongoing. "Numerous times over the past several days, at least a dozen, this piece has come close to hyperspace," O'Brien writes. "Twice it lay at the bottom of a wastebasket" (53). He makes a mixed tape for his estranged Kate, which is followed by "another gust of hope, then a whole lot of stillness" (53). The reference to hyperspace—which in non-Euclidean geometry and science fiction indicates a relativist space-time continuum—is compelling. Writing can make the past come alive, serving as a kind of time travel, but the effect is double-edged. As revealed in "How To Tell a True War Story," the need to anchor orphan pain, which haunts the body because its locus is forgotten, exhausted, or not locatable, can result in a repetition compulsion that does not end the pain. Writing, as O'Brien has stated, is not about "escaping" but "dealing." For a depressed individual, writing can be a means of moving from a state of disengaged numbness to reengagement with the world. For a traumatized person, writing

about pain can be a way of integrating traumatic memories, which, as psychiatrist Judith Lewis Herman states, "lack verbal narrative and context" because "they are encoded in the form of vivid sensations and images" (qtd. in Bates 256). Yet, in both cases, revived memories can resurrect pain. The potential amelioration of emotional suffering in no way guarantees the cessation of such pain.

In O'Brien's case, painful memories have a physiological stranglehold on him. His only recourse is to "move or die."

> The hardest part, by far, is to make the bad pictures go away. On war time, the world is one long horror movie, image after image, and if it's anything like Vietnam, I'm in for a lifetime of wee-hour creeps.
>
> Meanwhile, I try to plug up the leaks and carry through on some personal resolutions. For too many years I've lived in paralysis—guilt, depression, terror, shame—and now it's either move or die.
>
> There's a point here: Vietnam, Cambridge, Paris, Neptune—these are states of mind. Minds change. (O'Brien, "Vietnam" 56)

Writing, which is active, is a form of movement, as well as a kind of time travel. In "The Lives of the Dead," O'Brien reveals how, as Ulrich Baer notes in his book, *Spectral Evidence: The Photography of Trauma*, "the impression of timelessness coincides with a strange temporality and contradictory sense of the present surrounding the experiences depicted" (11). Mental photographs function like their material counterparts. The past and present coexist within a temporal relativity; loss and change become a felt presence. In "The Lives of the Dead," the sensational Tim, not the historical Linda, is resurrected. Throughout *The Things They Carried*, O'Brien uses language to reconnect sensationally

with a pre-verbal self. Of his recollected yet idealized love for Linda, Tim states that "[i]t had all the shadings and complexities of mature adult love, and maybe more, because there were not yet words for it, and because it was not yet fixed to comparisons or chronologies or the ways by which adults measure things" (258). Tim's capacity to feel, what he identifies as "love," is absolute and unchanging because the sensational body can never be "fixed to comparisons or chronologies." An unavoidable paradox of being alive is how the sensation of memories are so keenly present. It is why writing, as an act of memory and imagination, can feel so temporally unbound. Toward the end of "The Vietnam in Me," O'Brien, immersed within a sensational time-space continuum, hopes that Kate's body remembers what words cannot convey.

> I doubt Kate remembers a word. Maybe she shouldn't. But I do hope she remembers the sunlight striking that field of rice. I hope she remembers the feel of our fingers. I hope she remembers how I fell silent after a time, just looking out at the golds and yellows, joining the peace, and how in those fine sunlit moments, which were ours, Vietnam took a little Vietnam out of me. (57)

It is not language but sensation that constitutes the living body, and it is the sensational body to which O'Brien makes his appeal. He hopes that Kate physically remembers their relationship but he also hopes that he continues to physically remember it. Writing, through its rhythm, images, and narrative structures, is one way to revive and stimulate embodied memories, be it pleasure or pain.

Writing can animate and reconnect a writer with his body. But writing also connects the writer with readers' bodies. To write is to objectify Bowker's poetic

daydreams and transform them, as O'Brien does, into an artifact that lives in the world. "The thing about a story is that you dream it as you tell it, hoping that others might then dream along with you, and in this way memory and imagination and language combine to make spirits in the head," Tim says. "There is the illusion of aliveness" (259-260). But: "All you can do is wait. Just hope somebody'll pick it up and start reading" (273). Personally, I did not pick up *The Things They Carried* until I was assigned to interview O'Brien. I had categorized the work as a "war book," and did not think it could possibly speak to me. But the writing and images not only spoke to me, they physically moved me. And right now, as I write these words, it is 2011, and I am close enough in age to O'Brien when he composed the following passage, which I have read numerous times, quietly and aloud, to myself and students.

> It's now 1990. I'm forty-three years old, which would've seemed impossible to a fourth grader, and yet when I look at photographs of myself as I was in 1956, I realize that in the important ways I haven't changed at all. I was Timmy then; now I'm Tim. But the essence remains the same. I'm not fooled by the baggy pants or the crewcut or the happy smile—I know my own eyes—and there is no doubt that the Timmy smiling at the camera is the Tim I am now. Inside the body, or beyond the body, there is something absolute and unchanging. The human life is all one thing, like a blade tracing loops on ice: a little kid, a twenty-three-year-old infantry sergeant, a middle-aged writer knowing guilt and sorrow. (264-65)

Tim writes that "I realize that in the important ways I haven't changed at all," that "the essence remains the same" because "[i]nside the body, or beyond the body, there is something absolute and unchanging"; "The human life is all one thing." Considering O'Brien's consistent deconstruction of "truth" and his refusal—both on and off the page—to establish a stable narrative persona, what is the "essence" to which Tim refers? It is worth emphasizing that the narrator Tim is not O'Brien. Tim may believe in an essential self, but that essential self is neither conceptual nor located through referential language. For example, Linda, a mixture of memory and imagination—i.e., a product of writing—exists for Tim as a model of preverbal perfection and innocence. At forty three, Tim is

> still dreaming Linda alive in exactly the same way. She's not the embodied Linda; she's mostly made up, with a new identity and a new name, like the man who never was. Her real name doesn't matter. She was nine years old. I loved her and then she died. And yet right here, in the spell of memory and imagination, I can still see her as if through ice, as if I'm gazing into some other world. (273)

Linda is not "embodied" as Linda; rather, she is embodied within Tim, as a sensational memory that affectively resurrects Timmy. Looking at the author photo of O'Brien on the back of my book, I cannot help but imagine a fourth-grade Tim, inexorably conflating author and protagonist as O'Brien has slyly encouraged the reader to do throughout the book. But, of course, the picture that I ultimately see is not a fourth-grade O'Brien. It is a first-grade picture of myself, when, at age seven, I was taken from my foster family, and their suburban home, and brought to urban Brooklyn by my emotionally unstable mother.

This photo of myself, as Tim's photo of Timmy, captures a crucial emotional moment in my life. The photo lives more in my memory than as a material artifact, and the moment that it represents lives, as if in hyperspace, through affective cues—in the images limned by O'Brien, in the snapshot as it lives in my head, and the actual photograph of my childhood self.

Like Tim's relationship to the photograph of Timmy, my emotional connection to the childhood photo of myself is not about salvation or healing. It is about something absolute and unchanging within me, not a conceptual or referential self, but the feeling self, the absolute and unchanging sense of being alive. The photo is a reflection of who I *am*, not who I was. If there is such a thing as a postmodern novel or autobiography, I embrace what I identified in the beginning of this chapters as its intentionally unstable, fractured, and affectively "schizophrenic" character. I embrace its "polyphonic" perspectives and conspicuous contradictions that keep the text in play and resembles the shifting dynamics of an organic system (biological, ecological, cosmic). If anything, this dynamic seems truer to me than any conceptual or referential "truth." Yet I think that this suspension of self, and the often recursive nature of emotional pain, is unsettling for many. There is a desire for progress, and salvation. For example, Janis Haswell, reads "The Lives of the Dead," as a move toward healing.

> Critics who argue that O'Brien's narrator does not grow in self knowledge are correct—but only until this point. "The human life is all one thing." The narrator might feel fragmented, alienated from his youth, his innocence, that pure love of adolescence. But stories "make things present" (204), things carried in and beyond the war, like Timmy who

> loved and grieved. This person is whole. Timmy is Tim; they share "that same pinprick of absolute lasting light" (267). The tale of Timmy is a consolatory one, although this moment of reconciliation seems fragile and precarious. But isn't that because the starting point of healing is the end point of the book? (101)

If the "tale of Timmy" is any way consolatory to me, it is because it is a story about a man struggling, through the process of writing, to remain connected to his feeling self. It is because I recognize, and *feel* less alone in, that same struggle. Although *The Things They Carried*, as a whole, is not necessarily cohering—it is about process not progress—it does have a beautiful formal symmetry. It begins with a soldier trying to acclimate to war ("The Things They Carried") and ends with a former solider trying to live with his memories of war. As for whether "The Lives of the Dead" is "the starting point of healing," I am not inclined to imagine life for Tim beyond the text: the book is what O'Brien gave us. As for O'Brien himself, I can only look at the text and what he has written about himself or stated in interviews. Certainly, almost five years after writing *The Things They Carried*, O'Brien continued to battle despair, as "The Vietnam in Me" testifies. Yet, even from a literary standpoint, it is simply less interesting and convincing to see *The Things They Carried* as a move toward "healing," however the term is understood. The emotional "payoff" is Tim's realization that writing is a means of managing events and emotions, and that to write *is* to live; in that way, perhaps, writing has kept him alive. This, for me, is sufficient self-knowledge. Recursive and process-oriented, to write is to return, if never quite arrive. As Chen states: "Return is figured as

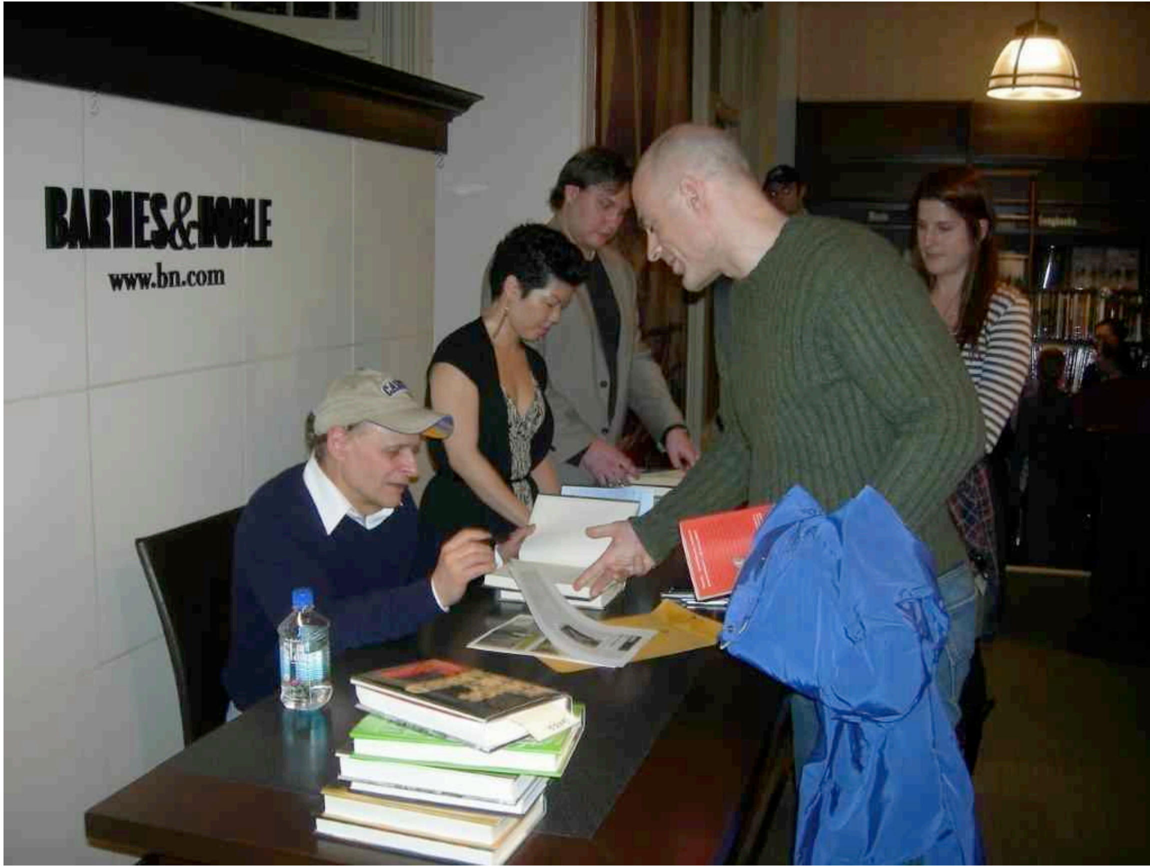
momentarily possible, a juncture of time, space, and desire that never offers a definitive resting place" (81-82).

And so another school year begins. I am twelve months older and, in my own act of repetition, I again teach *The Things They Carried*. I look forward to reading passages aloud, to finding the rhythm, and to feeling the sounds of the words as they pass through my body. As always, I especially look forward to the final three sentences: "I'm young and happy," I say, practically singing. "I'll never die." I pause, anticipating the meter, wanting to get it "right," so that I get that rush, that shiver, as my voice glides up and down and back again, twirling, whirling, light as breath: "I'm skimming across the surface of my own history, moving fast, riding the melt beneath the blades, doing loops and spins, and when I take a high leap into the dark and come down thirty years later, I realize it is as Tim trying to save Timmy's life with a story" (273).

Timmy and David: "Absolute and unchanging."

Autobiographical Postscript

March 22, 2010. O'Brien marks the twentieth anniversary of *The Things They Carried* with a reading to a packed audience at Barnes & Nobles on Broadway and 17th Street, in New York City. He reads from "The Man I Killed," in which an unnamed narrator, whose life closely resembles O'Brien, imagines the life of the young Vietnamese man he murders. As O'Brien reads, his voice cracks. It is the sound of a man still struggling. Afterward, he tells of a letter he received from a young woman who read *The Things They Carried* and how it moved her. She described her father, a Vietnam vet, as silent and somber throughout her life, physically shut down and removed. She wrote how reading *The Things They Carried* made her see, and more important, experience, her father anew. She reconnected with him, she explained, and she is now closer to him than she ever was. She thanked O'Brien, thanked him for his powerful, feeling book. O'Brien finishes the letter, puts it down, and reflects on the physiological experience that prompted his writing process. "In Vietnam, inside an irrigation ditch, *The Things They Carried* was conceived somewhere inside me. The smell of that ditch, the algae and decay, is the source of that book, and I carry that with me. Writing it, I never intended it to bring a daughter and father together but stories can do things, they can affect hearts and stomachs." O'Brien's voice cracks again, and he now presses his forefinger and thumb against his eyes. I have no idea if the story is "true," and I don't care. I look around. The audience is silent, a woman's head is in her hand; she is shaking. Next to me, as my skin tingles, a man in his forties, leans forward, and wipes his eyes.



March 22, 2010: I am handing O'Brien a copy of a the *Time Out* profile I did on him and the *GQ* essay about my depressed mother. He is looking at the exact photo of Sadie included in my chapter on Ginsberg.

Chapter 5. Labile Lines: The Comics of Mental Illness in Art Spiegelman's "Prisoner on The Hell Planet" and Darryl Cunningham's *Psychiatric Tales*

> "Perhaps the way one tells how alive a particular art form is, is by the latitude it gives for making mistakes in it, and still being good."
>
> Susan Sontag "Against Interpretation"

That *Maus* was a watershed for comics is well established.[122] Often noted are its serious historical subject matter, its popular and critical success, its destabilization of genre, and, of course, its winning the Pulitzer Prize—the first, and so far only, work in its medium to do so.[123] Yet Art Spiegelman's autobiographical *Maus* is also a ground-breaking text about mental illness, something that has not been addressed by critics. It appears to be the first graphic memoir not only to feature a mentally ill character—Spiegelman's mother Anja—but also to refer to the psychological breakdown of its protagonist/author. Since *Maus*, there have been other autographics[124] that have featured characters with mood disorders, notably the short work "My Mom Was a Schizophrenic" by Chester Brown, *Fun Home* by Alison Bechdel, and *Persepolis* by Marjane Satrapi.[125] But no cartoonist, including Spiegelman, has made mental illness the primary focus of book, until Darryl Cunningham.

---

[122] See Roger Sabin, p 187-88 (1996); Deborah Geis, p. 1, 6 (2003); Randy Duncan and Matthew J. Smith, p. 1, 16 (2009); Charles Hatfield, p. xi (2005); Stephen Wiener, p. 40 (2005); Douglas Wolk, p. 343 (2007); Hilary Chute, "Comics as Literature?," p. 456-57 (2008); Bart Beaty calls it "widely regarded as the most important 'serious' comic book ever published" ("Autobiography as Authenticity" 230) (2009).

[123] *Maus* was awarded a "special" Pulitzer Prize in 1992. According *The New York Times*, "The Pulitzer board members, like book reviewers and book store owners before them, found the cartoonist's depiction of Nazi Germany hard to classify" (Stanley).

[124] Drawing on Leigh Gilmore's term "autobiographics," Gillian Whitlock coined "autographics" to bring "attention to the specific conjunction of visual and verbal text in this genre of autobiography" and "introduces a way of thinking about life narrative that focuses on the changing discourses of truth and identity that feature in autobiographical representations of selfhood" (966).

[125] *Fun Home: A Family Tragicomic* concerns Bechdel's coming of age as a lesbian and her relationship with her closeted father who may have committed suicide; in *Persepolis 2: The Story of a Return*, Satrapi recounts in several frames her depression and attempted suicide.

Psychiatric Tales: Eleven Graphic Stories about Mental Illness is a memoir about Cunningham's experience working in a psychiatric hospital as well as his own struggle with "severe anxiety and depression" (124). The book recounts the not unfamiliar story of a breakdown. What makes it fresh and poignant is its form. Comics is certainly not the only art form capable of representing the affect of depression, anxiety and other mind-body disturbances.[126] Prose, poetry, music, dance, sculpture, painting, film, and theater all have their specific affective strengths and capacities. But comics remains a particularly powerful, largely untapped medium for conveying such sensational states, which it can relay with a singular emotional immediacy.

Image based and sequential,[127] comics has been logically compared to film, which, along with photography and other pictorial arts, bear obvious symmetries. In *Considering Maus: Approaches to Art Spiegelman's "Survivor's Tale" of the Holocaust*, the anthology's editor Deborah Geis notes in her introduction that "Spiegelman, like

---

[126] As Hilary Chute notes, it "has become standard" to refer to comics, "like the term for any medium," with a singular verb ("Comics as Literature?" 452).

[127] In his landmark *Comics and Sequential Art*, cartoonist Will Eisner defined comics and sequential art as synonymous. Similarly, in *Understanding Comics*, McCloud defines comics as "Juxtaposed pictorial and other images in deliberate sequence, intended to convey information and/or produce an aesthetic response in the viewer" (9). On the other hand, in his essay "Comedy at the Junction of Word and Image," Robert C. Harvey argues "that the essential characteristic of 'comics'—the thing that distinguishes it from other kinds of pictorial narratives—is the incorporation of verbal content," and, therefore, includes single-panel cartoons such as Bill Keane's *Family Circus* and those popularized by *The New Yorker*. Chute distinguishes between single-panel "cartoons" and sequential comics as an interpretative strategy because comics typically involve the "unfolding over multiple frames" and therefore carry "a different narrative push than a cartoon" ("Comics as Literature?" 454). She also notes that "McCloud's and Harvey's positions are not so contradictory" because "comics always hinges on the way temporality can be traced in complex, often nonlinear paths across the space of the page; largely this registers in both words and images, although it doesn't always have to" (454). I share Chute's position. Many wordless graphic novels, like those by Giacomo Patri, Lynd Ward, and Frans Masereel, possess clear visual symmetries with comics like "Prisoner on The Hell Planet" by Art Spiegelman, which I examine here. Ultimately, Thierry Groensteen's understanding of comics as a dynamic system, despite his structuralist emphasis, seems most apt: "At the end of the day, what makes comics a language that cannot be confused with any other is, on the one hand, the simultaneous mobilization of the entirety of codes (visual and discursive) that constitute it, and, at the same time, the fact that none of these codes probably belongs purely to it" (6).

many other comix[128] artists . . . deploys what is in some ways a cinematic style to play against the linear/sequential: he changes motion from horizontal to vertical; he changes the sizes of frames; he uses close-ups and other 'filmic' techniques" (2).[129] In "Necessary Stains: Spiegelman's *Maus* and the Bleeding of History," under the subheading "Cartoon Narrative as (Slow-)Motion Picture," Michael Levine identifies *Maus* "as a kind of silent film" (72). Hilary Chute, however, was among the first critics to elaborate on claims by the pioneering theorists (and cartoonists) Will Eisner and Scott McCloud concerning what comics specifically can do as an art form. In "'The Shadow of a Past Time': History and Graphic Representation in *Maus*," Chute attends to "the specificities of reading graphically, of taking individual pages as crucial units of comics grammar" (200). Responding to Geis and Levine in a footnote, she writes that "*Maus* does make cultural references to film" but that "its form is best understood as specific to comics" (221). In reference to McCloud, she cites "the crucial space of the gutter," which functions as the form's "structural element of absence" (221); she then quotes him: "what's between the panels is the only element of comics that is not duplicated in any other medium" (221). McCloud views the gutter—that space between panels—as *the* "grammar" unique to comics, where "human imagination takes two separate images and transforms them into a single idea" (*Understanding* 66). He calls that process "closure": "Comic panels fracture both time and space offering a jagged staccato rhythm of unconnected moments but closure allows us to connect those moments and mentally construct a continuous unified reality" (67). The gutter may foster "closure," but as a site of ongoing imaginative play and interpretation, it is anything but closed. While the contents inside the frame are

[128] "Comix" refers to the American underground comix movement of the late sixties. See Sabin, chapter five, "Going Underground." I discuss the influence of comix later in this chapter.
[129] Critics use frame and panel interchangeable.

optically conveyed, "between panels, none of our senses are required at all," McCloud observes. "Which is why all of our senses are engaged" (89). Sensationally generative, the gutter is perpetually alive.

Yet it isn't only the gutter that distinguishes comics from film. In sequential comics, a series of frames are concurrently visible. Photography can also be presented in a series, but, like film, its representational style is arguably less elastic and its image more temporally bound than comics, a point to which I will return later in the chapter.[130] Cartoonists structure panels to foster a theme, develop a rhythm, and produce visual symmetries or cues. Although in comics we are conditioned, and may choose, to read panels in chronological order, multiple frames always remain simultaneously on view. As Thierry Groensteen notes:

> framed, isolated by empty space (a redoubling of the frame), and generally of small dimensions, the panel is easily contained by and takes part in the sequential continuum. This signifies that at the perceptive and cognitive levels the panel exists longer for the comics reader than the shot exists for a film spectator. (26)

Groensteen cites film theorist Christian Metz, who points out that film does not present "the sensation of being placed in front of a multitude of narrative utterances" (qtd. by Groensteen 26). On the other hand, the reader of comics "experiences precisely a

[130] In photography, the light and tone can be altered but the photographic referent remains the point of origin. Acknowledging the primacy of an external photographic subject—there needs to be an object to photograph—does not discount the referent as material to be manipulated by the photographer, in the same way that ink is manipulated by the cartoonist. I would argue, however, that the cartoonist, working from his imagination, has greater creative latitude. Digital technology, including programs such as Photoshop, has extended the bounds of "play" within photography. This increased photographic "elasticity" of the subject has given the photographer, and graphic artist, more to manipulate. Ultimately, digital technology may dismantle the distinctions I propose. At the time of my writing this chapter, digital art, still a relatively young form, has not, in practice, displaced the photographic subject. (People still take pictures of something that they want to "capture.") In time, this primacy might be irrelevant.

sensation of this type" (26). That aesthetic effect invites an atemporal or pantemporal encounter that differs from a diachronic medium like film.[131]

A third differentiating feature of comics to which I will closely attend, because I believe it is the least examined, is its compositional style, which encompasses how the cartoonist fills the frame and draws the line. Groensteen points out that comics involve creative choices about what to include, whereas film, like photography, is a medium of exclusion: "The frame of a comics panel does not remove anything . . . It delimits an area offered to the inscription of a drawing and, if need be, to verbal statements" (40). The cartoonist "is essentially preoccupied by what he wants to put in his image (that is, in his frame), not by what he must exclude" (41). In other words, the filmmaker and photographer are concerned with editing the field of vision, of deciding what to leave off-screen. The cartoonist, on the other hand, working from a more expansive imaginative field, fills in blank space. How the cartoonist fills in that space—his manner of drawing—establishes a signature compositional style. Although comics is usually discussed as a language, it is, foremost, a visual medium. The cartoonist, filmmaker, and photographer all generate meaning and affect through the interplay of the visible and implied, i.e., what is in and outside the frame. But each arrives at that production through a different methodology. The compositional style of the cartoonist, as with other fine artists, varies greatly. The hand-drawn line is not only the cartoonist's unique signature, it *is* comics.

These three aspects of comics—the gutter, frame, and compositional style—can be utilized in very specific and unparalleled ways in the representation of mood disorders.

[131] Even a film that discards linear narrative or plot unfolds through the past, present, and future movement of single frames, making the medium inescapably diachronic.

And it is these three components, particularly the third, on which I will concentrate in my analysis of Cunningham's *Tales*. But before I look at the strengths and unexplored potential of that work, it is useful to begin with how Spiegelman employs these formal elements to convey the affect of mental illness.

Madness, Trauma and "Prisoner on the Hell Planet"

<u>The Gutter</u>

Cathy Caruth has identified trauma as "the *structure of its experience* or reception: the event is not assimilated or experienced fully at the time, but only belatedly" ("Trauma and Experience" 4; emphasis in original). As an experience of discontinuity, to be traumatized is "to be possessed by an image or event" (5) that eludes narration and is marked by gaps. In "Collateral Damage," Marianne Hirsch notes that *Maus* "performs an aesthetics of trauma: it is fragmentary, composed of small boxes that cannot contain the material, which exceeds their frames and the structure of the page" (1213). Spiegelman's autobiographical comic "Prisoner on the Hell Planet: A Case History" exemplifies such "aesthetics of trauma." Originally published in the 1973 comic book *Short Order Comix #1*, "Prisoner" recounts Spiegelman's emotionally strangled response to his mother's suicide three months after his release from "the state mental hospital" (102). Four tightly packed pages consisting of 36 panels, the comic reappears on page 101 of *Maus I: My Father Bleeds History* as the artifact that it is: Artie holds the comic after having been handed a copy by his stepmother who explains that his father Vladek has just seen it for the first time.[132] We then get a close-up of each of the comic's pages, the bottom and sides framed by what Spiegelman calls a "funereal border" (qtd. in

[132] All page references refer to *The Complete Maus*.

Chute "Shadow" 207). As Chute notes, "Prisoner" does "not seamlessly become part of the fabric of the larger narrative but rather maintains its alterity" ("Shadow" 207). Rendered in the stark, dense style evocative of a woodcut print by Lynd Ward, the strip and its human figures rupture the "rough and utilitarian" (Wolk 343) felt-pen aesthetic of Artie's already unfolding, animal-populated narrative.[133] Chute states that the "heavy German Expressionist style [of "Prisoner"] is an unsubtle analog to the angry emotional content of the strip" ("Shadow" 207). Yet, aside from its representational style, the comic makes extensive use of what is not drawn, what is outside the frame—the gutter.

The strip opens with a hand holding a 1958 photograph of a robust Anja and smiling ten-year-old Spiegelman. It mirrors the lower-left illustration: emerging from the "funereal border," Artie's hand holds the original zine page, where the snapshot appears. This doubling emphasizes the photo and comic book as historical artifacts, one a record of elusive happiness, the other of enduring pain. The strip's second panel, pushed into the page's fold, shows a broadly "realistic" rendering of Artie dressed in a prison uniform (an image echoed later in *Maus* by a photograph of Vladek in his prison camp attire). The word balloon states: "In 1968, when I was 20, my mother killed herself. She left no note" (102). Lacking any representative testimony from Anja, Artie provides his own in the form of "Prisoner." Above the fourth panel is the suspended narration: "I was living with my parents as I agreed to do on my release from the state mental hospital 3 months before." Also suspended, to the realm of the gutter, are the details of that breakdown. Artie's silence echoes his mother's. Such silence might be interpreted as an act of withholding, as Artie does concerning Anja. ("She left no note!") The strip "concludes" with Artie in lockdown, imprisoned within a narrative vacuum and the accretion of

[133] I use Spiegelman to refer to the living author and Artie to refer to his illustrated protagonist.

accusations leveled at him by others and himself before he turns on his mother: “You **murdered** me, mommy, and you left me here to take the rap!!!” (105; bold in original). Nancy K. Miller writes that “if the outrageousness of comic book truth is any guide, and what you see is what you get, then we should understand the question of Anja as that which will forever escape representation and at the same time requires it: the silence of the victims” (52). Silence is not synonymous with secrecy. And so what is not disclosed need not be interpreted as an act of withholding. *Maus* informs us that Anja had been in a sanitarium prior to being in Auschwitz; she lived with mental illness for much of her adulthood. How much Artie knows about his mother’s early psychological struggles is not clear. What is evident: for Artie, events that have occurred before and after his birth are experienced as part of a dynamic that seem to have neither a beginning nor end. In the context of trauma, and the often overlapping, equally embodied condition of depression and anxiety, both Anja and Artie’s silence can be read as reflecting experiences that are outside of language and representation.

Although Artie did not live through the Holocaust, he inherits its effects. This intergenerational trauma—what Hirsch terms “postmemory”—is part of the ongoing present that Artie embodies.[134] At the same time, perhaps because he did not personally witness the Holocaust, he can objectify it. One manifestation of such objectification is his preoccupation with dates and diagrams, notably represented by the Auschwitz timeline (Spiegelman 228). As the first critic to closely attend to the timeline, Chute writes how

[134] In “Family Pictures: Maus, Mourning and Post-Memory,” Hirsch coins the term “post-memory,” which she defines as concerning “the child of the survivor whose life is dominated by memories of what preceded his/her birth” (8). Later, in “Projected Memory: Holocaust Photographs in Personal and Public Fantasy,” Hirsch refines the definition to describe the traumatic events that children of trauma survivors “‘remember’ only as the stories and images with which they grew up, but that are so powerful, so monumental, as to constitute memories in their own right” (quoted from Chute, “Shadow,” 223).

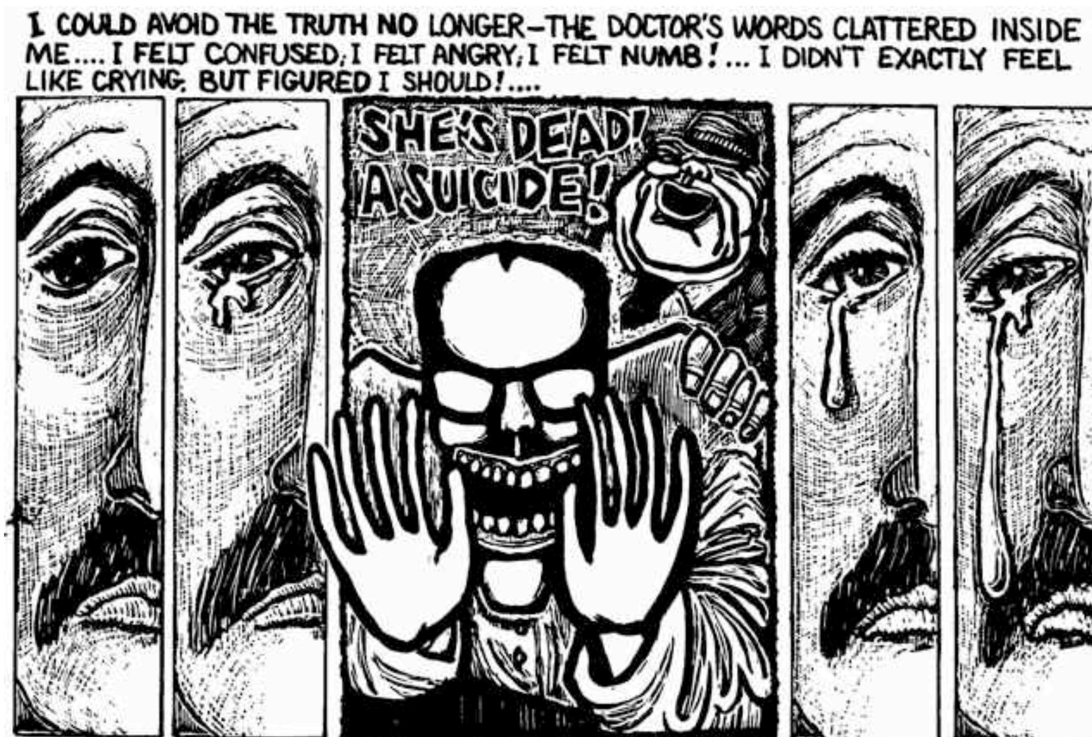
"Artie emphasizes Vladek's *time* there" while "Vladek insists on the *space* of his Auschwitz experience" ("Shadow" 210; emphasis in original). The "diagram represents a disagreement; the son is 'imposing order' while the survivor, caught up in his testimony, resists that historiographic impulse" (210). Unlike the Holocaust, however, Artie lived through the events of Anja's suicide and his own breakdown. Any historiographic impulse Spiegelman may have regarding his mother's death is limited to one photograph and two dates, and he provides no historical data regarding his own hospitalization. Like Vladek, he insists on, or rather, he is confined to, the "space" of his own painful experience. That affective space, always in excess, cannot be contained by signifiers but instead contains them; it belongs to the realm of the gutter.

The Frame

In "Prisoner," Spiegelman utilizes what Groensteen terms the "expressive function" of the frame (53). Groensteen writes that "the ultimate signification" of the panel depends on its relationship to other panels, and, when used expressively, the panel "acts upon the layout" "to draw attention to a rupture . . . of enunciation regarding the status of the image" (53). In other words, the frame's shape and size can amplify or dampen the significance of a panel's image and its relationship to surrounding visuals. Strongly influenced by structuralism and semiotics, Groensteen views the frame as a conceptual tool, belonging to the grammar of comics that communicates meaning. But, as McCloud notes, "the panel shape can actually make a **difference** in our **perception** of time" and that "a wider panel has the **feeling** of greater length" (101; bold in original). The shape and size of frames influence not only how we read but also how we

emotionally register comics. Spiegelman makes particularly effective use of frame size in panels ten through fourteen, in which Artie is informed of his mother's suicide. The narration straddling the five panels states: "I could avoid the truth no longer—the doctor's words clattered inside me. . . . I felt confused; I felt angry; I felt numb! . . . I didn't exactly feel like crying. But I figured I should! . . ." (103). The third and center panel transforms the already cartoonish face of the doctor delivering the news into a ghostly skull, lurid and frightening, his open palms out (the right hand bleeding into adjacent panel), as if unveiling a magic trick. Inside the center frame, above the spectral doctor, appear the boldface graphics, a searing abracadabra to accompany this sleight of hand: "She's dead! A suicide!" Bookending this ghastly image are two pairs of panels: four fairly realistic portraits of Artie's hangdog face. (See Figure 1.) His right hand extended beyond the border, the doctor appears to reach out toward the reader; he pushes

Figure 1. "She's Dead!"



the frames of Artie aside like vertical window blinds. Artie is compressed, as if his skull is being squeezed for whatever tears can be bled, conveying the claustrophobia of emotional overload. This five-panel sequence of "Prisoner" aesthetically represents—albeit indirectly—Andrew Solomon's description of depression in his autobiographically informed study of the illness in *Noonday Demon*:

> Because this thing had drained all fluid from me, I could not even cry. My mouth was parched as well. I had thought that when you feel your worst your tears flood, but the very worst pain is the arid pain of total violation that comes after the tears are all used up, the pain that stops up every space through which you once metered the world, or the world, you. This is the presence of major depression. (19)

Although Artie cries at his mother's funeral, the tears are a self-conscious "performance." He does not "feel like crying" but believes that he should. His outward display of "emotion" is in contrast to his "parched" and paralyzed interiority. Viewed as an aesthetic autobiography, the panel sequence juxtaposes two distinct visual genres—the realistic and horror comic—and in the tension between those two styles produces, within me, the sensation of displacement. To clarify: there have been times in my life when a distrubing embodied memory is triggered, jarring me from a given moment. My perception not only shifts or is "colored" but I have the awareness of existing in more than one heightened perceptual state. I may feel inexplicably threatened or vulnerable in the middle of some otherwise mundane event: for example, walking down the street or talking with a familiar person. The disjuncture between these competing ontological states can be well expressed

as two distinct “genres.” Spiegelman’s use of differing visual genres feels sensationally true in regards to the competing perceptual vantage points of trauma and/or depression.

In “Prisoner,” Artie never states that he is depressed.[135] Yet considering his mother’s psychiatric history, her suicide, both parents’ experience in Auschwitz, and Artie’s stay in a state mental hospital, it is not unreasonable to supposition. More significantly, and for me personally, the affect conveyed by the visuals of “Prisoner” is depressive, rather than, as Chute experiences it, “angry.” The rage articulated within the word balloons is secondary to, and in tension with, the anxiety and grief depicted by the visuals; it is an anger born out of hurt and frustration. In his analysis of “Prisoner,” Hamida Bosmajian identifies Artie’s psychology as “the orphaned self’s existential isolation” (38) in relation to familial trauma—and, I would add, familial depression. Having grown up with a mother who was mentally ill, I inherited a certain degree of emotional disequilibrium at birth.[136] I recognize in “Prisoner” what Bosmajian terms “the orphaned self’s existential isolation.” I also have known, as a witness to both my own and my mother’s emotional states, what Solomon describes as depression’s “vacuum of feeling, of connection, of purpose” (45). One way that Spiegelman affectively communicates the depressive’s lack of will is through synchronous frames that deemphasize movement and amplify stasis. Not including the boy in the photograph, whom I identify as Spiegelman, Artie visually appears in 14 of the 18 panels in the first two pages and in 16 of the 18 panels in the final two pages. Throughout the strip, Artie’s mostly frozen expression and stiff body suggest a zombie. Only in the fifth panel, as

---

[135] In *Maus II*, however, his wife Francoise asks him, “depressed again?” (174), and, later, after reflecting on the success of *Maus I*, Artie states, “Lately, I’ve been feeling depressed” (201).

[136] I have written about my relationship with my mother, and my experiences in foster care, in “Mothered” and “No Matter What Happens.”

Artie heads home, prior to learning of his mother's suicide, does he express a full range of motion. Elsewhere, he moves with stilted gestures, he collapses into a distressed crouch, or he lies in bed. McCloud notes that the "closure" produced by panel sequence "is the agent of change, time and motion" (65).[137] In "Prisoner," however, the strip's constitutive parts suggest a larger emotional "reality" that is outside any temporality. The multiple panels of the mostly weary, glass-eyed Artie convey the moribund realm of depression and trauma. The paralytic feeling of the "unassimilated and unassimilable" (Hirsch 16) as well as an "existence devoid of conation" (Solomon 45) are particularly acute in panels thirty through thirty-two, in which Anja walks into the room of her bedridden son. (Figure 2.) She appears slightly hunched, her clenched fist pressed against her chest. Portrayed as a series of memory shots, with serrated borders that mirror the opening photograph of mother and son, the four-panel scene is the last time Artie will see Anja before her suicide. In the first of these panels, she fills almost the entire frame, with Artie in the lower left, hunkering down into a fetal position and visually pressed against her womb. In the following sequence, panel thirty-one, she has shrunk within the perspective of the "lens," becoming a stark white specter. By panel thirty-two, her hollow eye sockets morph into a pair of black holes; she bears the ghastly mask of a walking corpse. Her void cannot be filled: "Artie . . . you . . . still . . . love . . . me . . . don't . . . you?" she stammers to her debilitated son. She has moved beyond what Bosmajian describes as "a profoundly needy person" (39) to that of a cipher, a mortal black hole. Throughout "Prisoner," the frames contain its human figures like a succession

---

[137] McCloud notes an East/West distinction concerning how panels and closure function in regard to time and motion, citing the "timeless space" (103) evoked by Japanese Manga. On the other hand, Groensteen, in line with his semiotic perspective, views comics as inescapably interpretative and that "all the processes . . . implemented within a strip . . . contribute to the syntagmatic cohesion of the strip" (64). For him, meaning, not movement, is the point.

Figure 2. "You . . . still . . . love . . . me" (frame thirty-one and thirty-two)[138]

of coffins, and the gutters come to resemble the penitentiary bars of the final panels. Artie is physically and emotionally locked—framed—"left to take the rap!!!" (Spiegelman 105). Spiegelman demonstrates how, for the depressed and traumatized, the experience of time may find a potential analog in the synchronous panels of comics: past, present, and future can coexist as a relatively fixed, never wholly integrated, presence.[139]

<u>Compositional Style</u>

In "Prisoner," the synchronic encounter of emotional overload is most succinctly represented through the compositional style of panels twenty-seven and twenty-nine. In

---

[138] Anja's words not only evoke my mother but the illustration of her also *resembles* Sadie, or at least how I remember her. My sole photograph of Sadie is presented in my chapter on Ginsberg.

[139] McCloud writes that comics readers may be "conditioned by other media and the 'real time' of everyday life to expect a linear progression" (106) but also that "eyes like storms can change direction!" (104). Groensteen states that "the eye's movements on the surface of the page are relatively erratic and do not respect any precise protocol" (47).

the first, Artie walks through the street after leaving Anja's funeral. Repeated images of funeral signs and the Star of David saturate the frame in one claustrophobic moment. Artie begins to collapse under the weight of emotion, leading to perhaps the most visually arresting panel in the work, number twenty-nine. (Figure 3.) Like the frame in which Artie leaves the funereal, panel twenty-nine is optically jam-packed. Yet unlike the earlier panel, twenty-nine communicates five distinct moments simultaneously, four of which, as Chute notes in her close and excellent analysis, are "criss-crossed by text that alternates sentiments corresponding with the frame's accreted temporalities" ("Shadow" 207-8). In the lower right, we see the seated Artie further buckling beneath the other represented "scenes." To his left is Anja's tattooed arm slashing her wrist, essentially

Figure 3. Panel 29: "Mommy . . . Bitch"

captioned by the bold black image of “Bitch.” Above that, we see Anja reading to Artie as a young boy, accompanied by “Mommy!” To the right of that, we see a pile of dead corpses in front of a wall with a Swastika underscored by the phrase “Hitler Did It!” And, finally, suspended above it all is an image of Anja’s dead, naked body in a bathtub of blood, with the bold lettering “Menopausal Depression.” This congested panel conveys not only a sense of emotional suffocation but also the experienced pantemporality of his mother’s suicide. Her self-inflicted death is all-pervasive. As Chute notes: “Approaching the past and the present together is typical for someone considering narratives of causality, but here Spiegelman obsessively layers several temporalities in one tiny frame, understood by the conventions of the comics medium to represent one moment in time” (208).

While a fair amount of attention has been paid to the frame of comics, less consideration has been given to the drawn style—the line—what I identify as the artist’s signature. Of all the elements of comics, it is what initially attracts me to a particular author and work. It is also the aspect that I most remember. As has been noted, “Prisoner” is rendered in an expressionist manner that differs significantly from the more “cartoonish,” animal-inhabited universe of *Maus*. Do the dissimilar techniques result in different affective experiences for the reader? I believe so. The problem with examining visual style as an emotional encounter is that it cannot easily be “read,” and comics has been almost exclusively been examined as a language. In their introduction to the recent *A Comics Study Reader*, its editors Jeet Heer and Kent Worchester ask: “Are comics primarily a literary medium (to be read), a visual medium (to be viewed), or a hybrid

medium that requires distinctive reading strategies on the part of the reader?" (xiii). Even in posing the question, Heer and Worchester bias their query toward "reading" with the ostensible compromise that comics is "hybrid medium that requires distinctive *reading* strategies on the part of the *reader*." Similarly, Jeanne C. Ewert, one of the first critics to focus on "the visual register of narrative," has stated "that literary critics, trained to read for textual devices, must retrain themselves to see these textual devices" (87). In "Reading Visual Narrative," Ewert persuasively examines *Maus* as "a visual narrative," a "graphic arrangement of narrative layers and frames," "exemplified by uses of visual metaphor and metonymy" (87). Finally, in her groundbreaking work on comics, Chute acknowledges the influence of W.J.T. Mitchell, perhaps the foremost visual critic who approaches pictures as a language to be read. Still, these and most critics acknowledge that comics presents, as Frank Cioffi notes, a "word-image gestalt" (100) that demands visual and literary "skills," often referring to the first as visual "literacy." Even Groensteen, quite committed to discussing comics as a semiotic system that is read, notes:

> The imprisonment of verbal expression in the visual system—to use Annie Renonciat's words—constitutes a symbolic revolution, a complete reversal of the commonly accepted hierarchy between semiotic systems. The champions of a culture which postulates the supremacy of the written word over all other forms of expression could only take this inversion as an attack. (6-7)

Of course, I do not disagree that comics are read—word balloons require it and the medium's use of images *do* function as part of a semiotic system. But they are not *only*

read. They are also sensationally experienced. Groensteen comes close to acknowledging the affective dimension of comics when he states that there “also exists, in my opinion, a medium-related pleasure” that “is related to the rhythmic organization in space and time of a multiplicity of small images” (10). As McCloud proposed early on, everything “that we experience in life can separated into two realms, the realm of the concept and the realm of the senses” (39). In *Understanding Comics*, he asserts that “our identities belong permanently to the conceptual world” (40); yet, later, in the chapter entitled “Living in Line,” he mentions how the visuals of comics can stimulate our senses. He connects the synesthetic potential of comics with the expressionist movement in the fine arts, specifically painters Edvard Munch, Vincent Van Gogh, and Wassily Kandinsky. He notes how Kandinsky “took great interest in the power of the line, shape and color to suggest the inner state of the artist and provoke the five senses” (123). Here, McCloud invites us to think about comics as an embodied encounter. Similarly, Cioffi argues that the “word-image gestalt” in works such as *Maus*

> make readers reflect on their own emotional mechanism—on the way that they can internalize, naturalize, and be seduced by a vision of the world. They awaken readers to how images can be used to create a world both believable and fantastic, linked to actual historicity but at the same time part of another realm or dimension altogether. (121)

That other “realm,” the one that exceeds concepts, has been explored recently by philosophers of cognitive psychology as well as affect theorists. In his book *The Emotional Construction of Morals*, Jesse Prinz presents data from neuroimaging studies and notes that “there is strong evidence that cognition is not necessary for emotion” (61).

He persuasively argues that emotions are “meaningful” in that they “represent” but there is “equally good evidence that they do not require the deployment of concepts” (61). In affect studies, Teresa Brennan presents the historical link between sight and conceptualization, and how “by the nineteenth century sight was the first of the senses, and to this day the only sense, to attain objective status” (17). It “is perceived as the sense that separates, where the other senses do not” (10-11). As a result,

> the concept of the transmission of affect does not sit well with an emphasis on individualism, on sight, and cognition. These things are all associated with the subject/object distinction, with thinking in terms of subject and object. This thinking, while it long precedes mechanism, gives rise to a particular understanding of objectivity that is coincident with it, based on the notion that the objective is in some way free of affect. (18-19)

In affect studies, affect is understood to signify the forces that connect and have an effect on bodies (organic and inorganic); such forces emerge out of “relatedness and not in some dialectical reconciliation of cleanly oppositional elements or primary units” and, as a result, “easy compartmentalisms give way to thresholds and tensions, blends and blurs” (Seigworth and Gregg 4).

I bring in these perspectives to acknowledge the sensational aspect of comics and to shift the focus away from conceptual language, particularly when considering a cartoonist’s signature style. I believe that affect, particularly in regards to the “virtual,” as I examine in the first chapter, and the sensational capacities of the gutter, as examined in this chapter, have clear correspondences. Both are understood as relationally produced, in

the competing and complementary simultaneities outside, or tangential to, consciousness, which are experienced as singular. Further, the drawn line is certainly an encounter with what Seigworth and Gregg identify as “thresholds and tensions, blends and blurs.” Admittedly, the problem facing a critic engaged with the affective dimension of the visual, not unlike that confronting an individual suffering from depression and trauma, is how to “talk” about it as an embodied experience. But the difficulty of articulating sensation, as I explored in detail in chapter one, doesn’t make it unreal. The extra-lingual, sensational response to an artist’s style, to the emotional pain that informs the visuals of “Prisoner” or *Psychiatric Tales* by Darryl Cunningham, is individually variable. But although that response remains irreducibly subjective, as with all affective encounters, it is transmittable.

Art Spiegelman and Darryl Cunningham’s Signature Affect

The stark, heavy style of Spiegelman’s “Prisoner” resembles the gouged, ragged illustrations of a woodcut print, a style that McCloud associates with fear, anxiety, madness, instability (124-25).[140] It is a style that I categorize as labile, which, according to the OED, is defined as “unstable.”[141] A labile line is broken, jagged, unpredictable, and

---

[140] The use of woodcut graphics to portray the bleak experiences of poverty, incarceration, alcoholism, class oppression are notable in the woodcut novels of the 1920s and 30s. For a discussion of these works, along with four powerful examples of such novels by Frans Masereel, Lynd Ward, Giacomo Patri, and Laurence Hyde, see *Graphic Witness: Four Wordless Graphic Novels*, selected and introduced by George A. Walker.

[141] Labile derives from the Latin “*lābil-is*, < *lābī* to slip, fall” (OED), which accounts for its theological meaning, now obsolete, “to fall into error or sin.” The term’s use in psychology is linked to physics and chemistry: “Prone to undergo displacement in position or change in nature, form, chemical composition, etc.; unstable” (OED). John M. Grohol, of *Psych Central: Encyclopedia of Psychology*, defines “labile affect” as: “Pathological emotional expression, generally due to neurological degeneration or other complications; may or may not be mood-congruent. In other words, the patient might sob uncontrollably in an only moderately sad situation (an excessive but mood-congruent reaction), or he or she might also cry when upset or angry (a mood-incongruent reaction).” He defines “labile mood,” however, as simply the “Marked fluctuation of mood.”

impressionistic. A hand-drawn line is often labile (as opposed to the “lines” of computer graphics, which are smooth, orderly, and mathematical in their precision). The labile line is used for particular effect when representing Artie’s most volatile moments—learning of his mother’s suicide, attending her funeral, remembering her final words to him. The depictions of the father’s emaciated skull face following his wife’s death, and Anja’s last ghostly appearance, are equally rough and unsettled. McCloud writes that Spiegelman’s “deliberately expressionistic lines depict a true-life horror story” (126) and that expressionism is inherently synaesthetic. He refers to *The Scream*, by Edvard Munch, one of the most popular examples of expressionism. Like perhaps many people, I first encountered *The Scream* through Munch’s black and white 1895 lithograph.[142] (I only recently discovered the earlier oil, tempera, and pastel versions; I find myself disturbed by those color versions as well, but the emotional affect is of a fiery, more comforting terror. The black and white lithograph, however, is colder, and never ceases to produce a faint chill in my chest.) The relative ubiquity of the lithograph is likely because a black and white image is easier and cheaper to reproduce than a color painting. But black and white images also tend to be more indelible—the shadings and hues of colors seem harder to retain—for me, at least. In his introduction to *Graphic Witness*, George Walker attributes “our attraction to black and white” images to “the science of how we see”:

> The human eye consists of rods and cones that process the reflected light of our world. These signals are then translated into color and form for processing by our brain. The rods, which are sensitive only to black and

[142] Munch produced several versions of the work: the first painting in oil, tempera, and pastel (1893), the lithographic, a pastel print (1895), and a second painting in tempera on cardboard (1910).

> white, are the first components activated in a baby's eyes. That's why infants readily respond to high-contrast black-and-white images. (13)

As a college undergraduate, I remember initially looking at the Munch lithograph and thinking that it best captured, more than any other image I had seen, the *feeling* of my own periodic experiences with anxiety and depression. The first time that I saw Spiegelman's "Prisoner," I thought of Munch's lithograph; I also thought of my mother. Like Anja, my mother Sadie was of European Jewish ancestry. In addition, many of her older relatives were killed in the Second World War. Never married, she was lonely, needy, and battled mental illness. After giving up a previous daughter for adoption, she tried to raise me but failed. Something about her unreachable despondency reminded me of Anja's vacant "face" in that panel. I have stared at it for hours, as if trying to solve the mystery of Sadie—and trying, yes, to read it.

Disability theorist Tobin Siebers writes that "the preference for reading is only a metaphor, I understand, but it is a metaphor with a reason because it undergirds the linguistic prejudices defining our favorite critical methods" (1316). As a writer and academic, I share Siebers' observation. Yet, he also states:

> When no language is manifest, readers are obliged to invent one; otherwise, the translation between the "language" of reading and the "language" of the object does not take place, and the object remains unreadable. Perhaps the impulse to read an image is a measure of the desire to control it. Images too complex to be read refuse this control, and they challenge the authority of reading as a privileged activity because

> they demonstrate a surplus of meaning untranslatable into linguistic terms. (1316)

Concerning my mother's depression, and the subsequent effects of her repeated abandonment of me, I can tell you what happened (and not, I admit, wholly or reliably). But I have few words to describe the feeling of those events. This verbal vacuum frustrates me, especially because the experiences remain embodied. Certain works of art and others' affective energies—i.e., the physiological experience of interaction—can rouse the sensations of embodied memories within me, but, often, not the language. Certain images, like embodied memories, leave a sensational imprint. Jill Bennett writes that to see certain "images is to be moved by them—-not in the sense that one is touched by the plight of a character in a fictional narrative, but in the more literal sense being affected, stricken with affect" (29). For me, the ghostly Anja remains physically striking.

Bennett is referring to photographs but she could easily be commenting on any visual medium, such as illustrations, which have their own visceral power. As mentioned earlier, illustrations are arguably more plastic, and less temporally bound than photography. The photograph involves the effects of light (electromagnetic radiation), lens, and developing processes; it edits a precise field of vision, and documents subjects at a specific time and place. An illustration, however, is the product of a cartoonist's self-guided hand: it marks blank space and is starkly graphic; it does not require a specific spatial-temporal referent. McCloud states that the more abstract and "iconic" a drawing, the more universal our identification and our ability to "inhabit" it and "see ourselves" (36). According to him, the "photographic" illustration is too specific to be so easily

inhabitable; it fosters distance.[143] Following this logic, the cartoon, the most “empty” of images, provides the most potential for projection: it is “a vacuum into which our identity and awareness are pulled” (36). The spareness of the cartoon requires that the spectator do more creative “work” and allows for greater associative play. The emptied image, like the gutter, invites conceptual attributions, in the form of imaginative connections and constructed narratives. But abstract and iconic drawings—cartoons—also invite a sensational response. McCloud believes that our ability to see ourselves in cartoons is “the primary cause of our childhood fascination” with them “though other factors such as universal identification, simplicity, and the childlike features of many cartoon characters also play a part” (36). Similarly, Groensteen, in “Why Are Comics Still in Search of Cultural Legitimization?”—which was originally presented at a comics’ conference—closes with: “Yes, why not admit it? All of us here in Copenhagen, delivering our clever papers, are probably doing nothing more than holding out our hands to the kids we used to be” (11). In her response to the published essay, Chute finds Groensteen’s final emphasis “disappointing” (“Decoding” 1021), perhaps because of its conclusive reductiveness on the heels of an otherwise subtle analysis. Yet the connection of comics with childhood seems true to me, although I think it has less to do with postlapsarian fantasies of how childhood may be conceptualized, i.e., as innocent, simple, and pure. Rather, there is a welcome friendliness generated by the lines of comics, particularly cartoons. I can recall how, as a child, I was seduced by cartoon icons: amid the turmoil of my own early life, cartoons were safe and comforting. Cartoon drawings continue to beckon me with their inviting openness. I find them especially alluring when employed in

[143] Nonetheless, as Roland Barthes notes, photographs (and all visual imagery, I would argue) can personally affect us through its details, or what Barthes refers to as the “punctum.” I will return to this idea later in the chapter.

the service of disturbing subject matter, such as war (i.e., *Persepolis*, by Satrapi, and *Palestine*, by Joe Sacco) and, here, mental illness. The most "frightening" image can be transformed into an approachable "friend." Through the cartoon, darkness can acquire light; suffering can be made more visible. Cartoons are optical Pied Pipers who lure me into other worlds and slyly expose me to their horrors.

In *Psychiatric Tales*, Darryl Cunningham renders his suffering souls in a visual style that captures the medium's friendliness. The autographic opens, in its "Introduction," with a sweeping vista of an unidentified city and its surrounding landscape. The perspective is skillfully drawn, while the simple lines and icons evoke the first page of a children's picture book. The panel fills an entire page. There is no border. The image conveys physical and emotional expansiveness; the winding road entices me to enter. The second page is split into two frames: the first is of a city thoroughfare; the second shows us an immobile man standing on a similar street, its wavering terrain announcing that a perspectival shift has begun. It reads: "Somewhere in England." (See Figure 4.) The exact time and place are indistinct; we are suspended within a temporal freeze reminiscent of "Prisoner." These opening pages reflect a deft use of expressive framing and panel rhythm in contradistinction to the otherwise uniform grid pattern employed throughout the rest of the book.

The most intriguing aspect of this panel is how Cunningham depicts himself. There are no defining physical characteristics. Except for his two legs, which look like two fangs planted in the sidewalk, the body is all angles and ovals. The face is a rectangle with two zeros for eyes (which in the next frame, we learn are glasses), a half moon for an ear, and four finger bumps of hair. (His actual hands are a square with two lines

denoting three fingers.) Except for Darryl, who is surrounded by cars, buildings, and trash, the panel is unpopulated, which is in contrast to the previous frames that show a number of angular humans. In a manner notably different than *The Scream*,

Figure 4. "Somewhere in England"[144]

Cunningham's third frame conveys the isolation and self-estrangement of psychological otherness. At first glance, the drawn Darryl makes very little impression. He is even more of a cipher than the ghostly Anja of "Prisoner." I initially wondered: Who is this man? Yet in retrospect, after experiencing the entire graphic memoir, most notably the tenth

[144] I have become preoccupied with this frame, specifically the image of Cunningham. It evokes that abject, lost, and helpless. I notice the garbage surrounding him: the seeming fungibility of the objects within the frame. I think: value is perception.

strip, in which Cunningham finally tells his own story, the self-effacing cartoon attains greater power and validity as a self portrait. It is an absorbing image, and, by the book's end, quite sad.

Psychiatric Tales unfolds in twelve sections (which includes the introduction and eleven "tales"). Each tale explains a different aspect of mental illness. Their titles, in order, are: "Dementia"; "Cut" (on the phenomenon of cutting, in which sufferers, usually women, slice, or cut off, pieces of their own skin); "It Could Be You" (about the social stigma facing the mentally ill); "Darkness" (about depression); "Anti-Social Personality Disorder"; "People with Mental Illness Enrich Our Lives"; "Blood" (about self-harmers distinct from cutters); "Bipolar disorder"; "Schizophrenia"; "Suicide"; and, finally, Cunningham's most self-revealing strip "How I Lived Again." According to the introduction, the goal of the project is to help eliminate the stigma of mental illness, but, as Cunningham writes: "most of all, this book is for the patients. The millions who are affected daily by this most mysterious group of illnesses" (ix). For those battling mental illness, the book might offer the comfort of confirming that they are not alone in their struggle. But as a work that is more expository than narrative, *Psychiatric Tales* seems particularly geared to those who do not suffer from mood disorders. It is autobiography as educational tool. Still, Cunningham wants to reassure his fellow travelers, and he ends many of the chapters on a note of hope and personal reclamation. ("You can survive"; "I am worthy of love.") But Cunningham is most inspiring as a role model, through his empathetic testimony as a "health care assistant on an acute psychiatric ward" (vii) and his ability to transform his pain into an aesthetic artifact.

For me, however, the most compelling facet of *Psychiatric Tales* is its visuals. Cunningham's graphic style, as his initial self-portrait eventually reveals, is deceptively uncomplicated. The artless illustrations suggest the "unfiltered" and "nonjudgmental" drawings of a very young child. The men in the comic often resemble Mr. Potato Head, the women frequently evoke Raggedy Ann. The effect of this welcoming and unthreatening aesthetic does not infantilize the book's human subjects; rather, the pictorial style reflects an authorial perspective, one that is artless, open, and accommodating. It is a style that seems unhampered by either ego (no flashy artwork here) or defensiveness (there is a surprising absence of rage, self-pity, or sentimentality). The affect transmitted through Cunningham's style is not only a product of his hand-drawn lines but also his compositional strategy. For example, frames eight through ten introduce an effect that he uses often throughout the book: to render a panel as the illustrated equivalent of a photographic negative, in which light and dark are reversed. The phenomenological implications of this tactic are fairly clear: the experience of mental illness inverts everything; life is turned topsy-turvy. Mental illness disables and differentiates the sufferer; she becomes a pariah. She does not see the world in the same way as those who are not ill, and, as a result, those who are not ill, see her differently. The effect that this graphic strategy produces in the reader is to see the mentally ill person differently, but also to envision the world from her perspective.

In several strips, Cunningham also employs photo-graphics,[145] actual photos transposed into an ink print. He uses this technique in chapter six, "People with Mental Illness Enrich Our Lives." Cunningham approaches this section with wit, whimsy, and compositional shrewdness. After announcing the title of the section in the first panel, the

[145] I employ the hyphenated term "photo-graphic" to denote a graphically reproduced photograph.

second frame offers a conventional-appearing Winston Churchill shrouded by a black background. The next panel explains that “Churchill suffered severe bouts of depression” (53). The fourth panel continues, “which he referred to as his black dog” (53), and it features the photo-graphic is of a charcoal dog suspended in a vacuum of white space. In panels five and six, Cunningham states that Churchill possessed “many of the traits we now associate with bipolar disorder”: “belligerence, abnormal energy, lack of inhibition, and grandiosity” (53). In frames six and seven, Cunningham notes that these are the “perfect traits necessary for a leader in wartime” “without which it is doubtful he could have inspired a nation at its darkest hour” (54). (See Figure 5.) The images of Churchill

Figure 5. Winston Churchill: National Inspiration (frames six and seven).

in these two panels imply a rather “crazed” person. In the panel six, the hunched and smirking prime minister suggests the comical cartoon Mr. Magoo. In panel seven, the prime minster now sports a maniacal gleam, which, for me, evokes another cultural figure of abnormal energy, lack of inhibition, and grandiosity: Charles Manson. Still, the overall cumulative effect is playful rather than haunting. Other talented notables with mental

illness included in this chapter are Judy Garland, Brian Wilson, British comic Spike Mulligan, and Nick Drake. In his representations of all these figures, Cunningham mixes photographic realism and teasing graphics. As with his illustration of Churchill, Cunningham draws on the affect of facial expressivity, and amplified visual contrasts, to convey mental illness. As someone living with mental illness, Cunningham demonstrates, in this chapter and throughout the memoir, an ability to distance himself from his own suffering without diminishing the seriousness of the condition. In fact, Cunningham's lively and mischievous approach throughout this section is reminiscent of Spiegelman and other's work from the underground comix movement. An "American phenomenon" that flourished in the late sixties, underground comix ushered in "a new wave of humorous, hippie-inspired comic books that were as politically radical as they were artistically innovative" (Sabin). Comix artists were transgressive. They worked in a medium that, since the 1930s, had increasingly become associated with children's entertainment to address topics such as politics, drugs, sex, and, in Spiegelman's case, mental illness.[146] These comix were frequently autobiographical and employed photography to whimsical effect. In this context, Cunningham's decision to begin chapter six with a notable political figure, along with his extensive use of photo-graphics and a ludic sensibility to confront a "taboo" topic, *Psychiatric Tales* draws on the destabilizing strategies of the "underground."

The photo-graphic approach is also effectively employed in the book's final tale, "How I Learned to Live Again," which I examine a bit later. In the seventh tale, however,

[146] See *Breakdowns: Portrait of the Artist as a Young %@&*!*, by Spiegelman, for other similarly "transgressive" comix produced the artist during that era. The book also includes "Prisoner on The Hell Planet."

Cunningham returns to his cartoon illustrations of the patients he has known while a health care assistant. These images dominate the memoir, both in quantity and emotional force. The use of such deceptively artless drawings to convey the book's dark, disturbing themes is keenly felt. The physical reality of these people's lives is harsh. They self-mutilate. They defecate in their own clothes and in public. They pay little attention to hygiene. Their psychological states have undeniable embodied consequences. For them and those engaged in their care, none of the five senses escapes the scarring effects of mental illness. Referring to art and literature from antiquity to the present, Siebers notes the connection between scars and the detail as a source of individualization, discrimination, and sensational impact (1317). Similarly, in the context of cartoons, the drawn line is not unlike a scar, a detail that marks, individuates, and punctures. The cartoon pares down its representation of a subject and invites us. In turn, the few revealing details potentially obtain a greater power to pierce and prick. Drawing on Naomi Schor's *Reading in Detail*, Siebers states that the detail has functioned in the history of aesthetics as a "useful" tool "in discriminating between the nondisabled and disabled body" (1317-18). He writes that all "images picture bodies, but the most compelling images often summon visions of the human body, and of these the ones that picture wounds or markers of physical or mental difference are the most potent for the imagination" (1318). In *Psychiatric Tales*, Cunningham's seemingly scribbled cartoons serve as a potent tool for representing, and sensationally conveying, the "wounds" and "markers" of mental illness. We are invited in and implicated; we are made to feel the pressing connection between us and "them." If, as McCloud claims, cartoons allow an

audience to project themselves into the "picture," the broad illustrations in *Psychiatric Tales* reinforce Cunningham's preemptive warning: "the next sufferer could be you" (27).

In his discussion of the detail as scar, Siebers refers to our "premier theorist of absorption in painting," Michael Fried. Siebers modifies Fried's theory of art and applies it to literature. But Siebers' approach could also be applied to comics, as when he writes that it is "by concentrating on specific properties of texts and images that make them more visible and compelling to the eye of the beholder" (1319). Not surprisingly, Siebers cites Roland Barthes and his notion of the "punctum," drawn from the Latin term, "to designate this wound, this prick, this mark made by a pointed instrument" (Barthes; qtd. in Siebers 1320). Although used by Barthes in relation to photography, the punctum has particular relevance to comics, a product of "pointed instruments" such as pens, markers and pencils. In Cunningham's work, the punctum—"this element which rises from the scene, shoots out of it like an arrow, and pierces" (Barthes 26)—is a recurrent affect. A salient example appears in the first chapter, entitled "Dementia." Cunningham writes that "a return to childhood is not uncommon amongst dementia suffers" (4). The distorted yet childlike expressions of that section's sufferer—a bemused and self-lacerating female dementia patient named Jill—are indelible. (See Figure 6.) Jill is described as "quite young" "only sixty," but, as illustrated by Cunningham, she resembles a girl barely out of adolescence. Helping the befuddled Jill down the ward, Cunningham narrates: "She had low self-esteem and was highly dependent on others. In mirrors she would report seeing a little girl" (8). When Cunningham first meets Jill, she is standing by the ward's entrance, waiting to leave. Unaware of why she is in the hospital, she cries "please let me go

Figure 6. Dementia Patient: "Stupid Stupid Girl" Jill.[147]

home" (6). Later, unable to complete a simple task, Jill berates herself as a "stupid stupid girl" (7). Her suspended, chubby hands are my punctum. Feeble little balloons, her joint-less fingers seem incapable of movement; they are as lacking in agency as she appears to be. Cunningham's gift for identification and transposing his empathy into an inviting icon extends to those one would expect to find less sympathetic. Through Cunningham's pen, even bullies and tormentors are transposed into hapless, misguided children. In the chapter entitled "Darkness," the belligerent husband of a depressed woman states: "She

[147] In the final frame pictured here, Jill's tears resemble eyes. Sight is lost, distorted.

should pull herself together and come home" (32). In response, Cunningham notes that "sometimes you only have to look at the patient's partner to see where the problem really is" (32). Yet the image of the offender husband's head—a square with circles and uncomprehending slits for eyes—evokes nothing mean or threatening, just dim. My initial anger toward this man is tempered with compassion because of Cunningham's rendering of this simple-minded Potato Head.

Cunningham's forgiving pen attains further force in his fifth tale, "Anti-social Personality Disorder." The protagonist of this strip is described as a "hard case" "skinhead" with "tattoos" (41). (See Figure 7.) Cunningham recalls him as "a frightening

Figure 7. Anti-Social Personality Skinhead.

character who scared me more than any patient I ever met" (43). Still, the only alarming image within this tale involves a series of four panels containing the cinematic zoom shot of a single eye; the eye is cold and impassive, resembling the cropped photographed stare of the murderer Perry Smith on the back cover of the 1993 Vintage paperback of Truman

Capote's *In Cold Blood*.[148] Elsewhere, the illustrations of this skinhead suggest a trapped and tragic wastrel not unscathed by visual burps and blisters. His round and otherwise uncomplicated features are peppered with scars and cuts and a sprinkling of dotted spots—piercing, poignant scars. The skinhead's eye slits could be a man either squinting in pain or dazed in a dislocated stupor; he is a creature as equally helpless as Jill. His bloated hands and arms, weapons of potential violence, are depicted as impotent sausages, not only incapable of harm but in need of care. My antipathy for such an aggressive archetype is ameliorated by Cunningham's flat and bare illustration of this exposed solitary sufferer.

In the first ten tales, Cunningham is a quiet, unobtrusive presence. His focus is on others struggling with mental illness; he recedes into the background. It is not with an unwelcome start that Cunningham returns as the subject of his memoir in the eleventh and last tale. In this chapter, Cunningham's effacing self-portrait from "Somewhere in England" acquires a retroactive resonance. He writes that "my life during the writing of this book has been something of a struggle" (123). The phrase "something of" is illustrative of how Cunningham downplays his own difficulties. He explains that between the chapter on "Anti-social Personality Disorder" and "People with Mental Illness Enrich Our Lives," four years passed in which he suffered "severe anxiety and depression" (124). We learn that he grew up as a "painfully shy" person, "highly self-conscious with severe low self-esteem" (not unlike "Jill") and "social anxiety disorder" (126-27). A "silent, skinny kid, hopeless at games and below average in class," he had "no self-insight" and saw himself "as pathetic and simple-minded" (128). He took to art and cartooning, but he lacked the ability for self-promotion and faltered professionally.

[148] Truman Capote, *In Cold Blood* (New York: Vintage International, 1965, 1993)

After years of unemployment and “feeling worthless, incapable, and hopeless” (129), he found himself drawn to the mental health profession because he was naturally empathetic and sought to understand his own problems (132). While working as an untrained healthcare assistant, he decided to pursue a career as a mental health nurse. A supervisor cautioned him that he might be too fragile to complete the training, which involved close work with severely troubled individuals. It proved to be an accurate prediction. In the years that followed, his sense of failure grew as did his debts and thoughts of suicide (133-35). As he tells it, he was saved by Prozac and the human connection that he discovered by posting his work online, including many of the strips from *Psychiatric Tales.* Gradually, he accumulated an audience and acquired a sense of community. By applying the knowledge he earned while working in an acute psychiatric ward, an experience he had viewed as a defeat, he redeemed himself in his own eyes (136). (See Figure 8.) “My time as a student nurse no longer seemed wasted,” he writes. “Feelings of failure began to lift” (136). He finds “another way of putting all that hard-

Figure 8. “Redeemed . . . in my own eyes.”

earned knowledge to good use, fusing my interest in mental health with my passion for drawing and storytelling" (137). The "word-image gestalt" of this rendered redemption is notable as it includes the first photo-graphic of himself. Three pages earlier, Cunningham presents a panel filled with the photo-graphic image of shattered glass to symbolize his broken self; a bit later, he employs a slow eight-frame zoom shot of his own face. The fractured glass of that earlier panel has been replaced by a pair of clear and smooth lenses that shields Cunningham's eyes. Sight has been restored. In contrast to his self-effacing illustration at the beginning of the book, this photo-graphic introduces a more tactile Cunningham, a man in his thirties or forties with a bulbous nose and full lips and fleshy cheeks. Still, it is not a vision of verisimilitude but of emotional affect. This high-contrast representation of the author is similar to graphic portraits of Churchill and other notable figures in chapter six. Yet this final "photo" series of Cunningham refrains from the comix-inflected whimsy of that previous chapter. Cunningham looks up toward a beam of light in an act of self-salvation; he has found himself, and a sense of purpose, through the act of becoming a cartoonist. As one of the book's gestures toward triumphalism, the image is persuasive. The hybrid form of the photo-graphic affectively transmits the sensation of a dual consciousness. As Spiegelman does in "Prisoner on the Hell Planet," Cunningham pictorially conveys a subjectivity existing on multiple but intersecting planes. Not exactly a photograph, and not quite an illustration, the image complicates categorization. The light emanates from an unseen source, outside the frame. Shadows dominate. Hope is dawning but it feels contingent and uneasy. In that sense, it is a moment of visual realism.

In the seven frames that follow this photo-graphic sequence, and which conclude the memoir, Cunningham encourages others battling mental illness to take medication and seek the support of family and friends. He states:

> A sufferer of depression should not feel shame or believe they are worthless. Look deep within yourself for the qualities you need to survive. Your talents, hopes, dreams, and desires. Because these are the things that will save you. (138-39)

The final full-page frame contains a cartoon Cunningham; he sits at his desk and illustrates a happy picture of smiling beings. On the surrounding walls are other framed and buoyant comic drawings. Yet the complicating photo-graphic of Cunningham, only a few panels earlier, cannot be so quickly forgotten. Suspended in the gutter is a man still living with a profound sensitivity that has been both his burden and gift. Cunningham urges others struggling with mental illness to cultivate their own talents and passions, because "these are the things that will save you." Comics, long considered an outsider art, has been a refuge for outsiders. Bart Beaty notes that cartoonists have historically "occupied an aesthetically marginal space in much the same way that certain social groups were—and are—marginalized politically"; "because their chosen métier has so long been regarded as a devalued subculture intended for children, the adoption of an autobiographical tone can be seen as empowering" (143-44). The final panel of *Psychiatric Tales* reveals a meta-comic testament to such "empowerment." It offers the sketch of man drawing, which has been illustrated by the represented figure in the frame. Transform your pain into a creative artifact, the visual encourages us; the imagination is essential to survival.

Post-script self portrait.

Figure 9. David/Sadie: An Act of Imagination.

Works Cited

Adams, Fred. “Embodied Cognition,” *Phenomenology and the Cognitive Sciences.* 9.4 (Dec. 2010): 619-28.

Ahmad, Aijaz. “From *In Theory: Classes, Nations, Literatures*.” *Postcolonial Criticism*. Eds. Dart Moore-Gilbert, Gareth Stanton, and Willy Maley. New York: Longman, 1997.

Als, Hilton, “Joan Didion: The Art of Nonfiction.” *The Paris Review Interviews*, Vol. 1. NewYork: Picador, 2006. 473-500.

Altieri, Charles. *The Particulars of Rapture: An Aesthetics of the Affects*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2004.

Anderson, Chris. *Style as Argument: Contemporary American Nonfiction*. Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1987.

Arnold, Magda B. *Emotion and Personality*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1960.

Baer, Ulrich. *Spectral Evidence: The Photography of Trauma*. London: The MIT Press, 2002.

Bal, Mieke. *Narratology: Introduction to the Theory of Narrative, Third Edition*. University of Toronto Press, Toronto, 2009.

Bahktin, Mikhail. *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays. Michael Holquist,* ed. Caryl Emerson R and Michael Holquist, trans. Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981.

Bahr, David. “Can You Believe My Luck.” *Prairie Schooner.* Summer 2010: 131-38.

—. “No Matter What Happens,” *Boys to Men: Gay Men Write about Growing Up*. Eds. Rob Williams and Ted Gideonse. New York: Caroll & Graf, 2006.

—. “Mothered.” *GQ*. 4 Aug. 2004: 180-93.

—. “Book of Illusions.” *Time Out* New York. 24 Oct. 2002. NP.

Barthes, Roland. *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*. Richard Howard, trans. New York: Hill & Wang, 1981.

Bates, Milton J. *The Wars We Took to Vietnam: Cultural Conflict and Storytelling.* Berkeley: U of California P, 1996.

Baudrillard, Jean. *Simulacra and Simulation*. Sheila Faria Glaser, trans. Ann Arbor:

University of Michigan Press, 1995.

Baumgarten, Alexander Gottlieb. *Metaphysica*. Editio 7. [Reprografischer Nachdruck der Ausg. Halle 1779]. ed. Hildesheim: G. Olms, 1963.

Beaty, Bart. “Autobiography as Authenticity,” *A Comics Studies Reader,* Jeet Heer and Kent Worcester, eds. (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2009), 226-35.

—. *Unpopular Culture: Transforming the European Comic Book in the 1990s*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2007.

Bechdel, Alison. *Fun Home*: *A Family Tragicomic.* Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2006.

Bennett, Jill. *Empathic Vision: Affect, Trauma, and Contemporary Art.* Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2005.

Bly, Robin. “O’Brien’s The Things They Carried,” *The Explicator* 61.3 Spring 2003. 189-91

Block, Ned. “What Was I Thinking.” *The New York Times*. 26 Nov 2010. Web. March 15, 2012.

Bonn, Maria S. “Can Stories Save Us? Tim O’Brien and the Efficacy of the Text.” *Critique* 36 (1994): 2–16.

Bonta, Mark and John Protevi. *Deleuze and Geophilosophy: A Guide and Glossary.* Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2004.

Bosmajian, Hamida. “The Orphaned Voice in Art Spiegelman’s *Maus*.” *Considering Maus Approaches to Art Spiegelman’s “Survivor Tale” of the Holocaust.* Deborah R. Geis, ed. Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2003.

Bourriaud, Nicolas. *Relational Aesthetics*. Dijon: Les Presses du Réel, 2002.

Bourke, Joanna. “Fear and Anxiety: Writing About Emotion in Modern History.” *History Workshop Journal* 55, (Spring 2003): 111-133.

Bourtchouladze, Rusiko. *Memories Are Made of This. How Memory Works in Humans and Animals* New York: Columbia University Press, 2002.

Brennan, Teresa. *The Transmission of Affect*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2004.

Breslin, Paul. *The Psycho-Political Muse: American Poetry Since the Fifties*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1987.

—. “The Origins of ‘Howl’ and ‘Kaddish.’” *The Iowa Review*. 8.2 (Spring 1977): 82-108.

Brown, Chester. *I Never Liked You*. Montreal: Drawn & Quarterly, 1994.

Bruckner, D.J.R. "A Storyteller for The War That Wont End." *The New York Times*. 3 Apr 1990. Web. March 15, 2012.

Butler, Judith. *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of Sex.* New York: Routledge, 1993.

—. "Performing Identities: Imitation and Gender Insubordination," *Inside/Out: Lesbian Theories, Gay Theories*. Ed. Diana Fuss. New York: Routledge, 1991.

Calloway, Catherine. " 'How to Tell a True War Story': Metafiction in *The Things They Carried*." *Critique* 36 (1995): 249–58.

Carpenter, Lucas. "'It Don't Mean Nothin': Vietnam War Fiction and Postmodernism." *College Literature* 30.2 (2003): 30–50.

Caruth, Cathy. *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative and History.* Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996.

—. "Trauma and Experience: Introduction." *Trauma: Explorations in Memory.* Ed. Cathy Caruth. Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995.

Casale, Frank D.. "Madness, Speech, and Prophecy in Allen Ginsberg's *Howl*." *Spectale* 1.2 (1998): 101-112.

Chambers, Ross. "Orphaned Memories, Foster-Writing, Phantom Pain: The *Fragments*Affair." *Extremities: Trauma, Testimony, and Community*. Eds. Nancy K. Miller and Jason Tougaw. Urbana: University of Illinois, 2002.

Chen, Tina. "'Unraveling the Deeper Meaning': Exile and the Embodied Poetics of Displacement in Tim O'Brien's *The Things They Carried*." *Contemporary Literature* 39.1 (Spring 1998): 77–98.

Chute, Hillary. "Comics as Literature? Reading Graphic Narrative." *PMLA* 123.2 (March 2008): 452-465.

—. "Decoding Comics." *Modern Fiction Studies* 52.4 (Winter 2006): 1014-1027.

—. "'The Shadow of a Past Time': History and Graphic Representation in *Maus*." *Twentieth-Century Literature* 52.2 (Summer 2006): 199-230.

Cioffi, Frank L. "Disturbing Comics: The Disjunction of Word and Image in the Comics of Andrzej Mleczko, Ben Katchor, R. Crumb, and Art Spiegelman." *The Language of Comics: Word and Image.* Eds. Robin Varnum and Christina

Gibbons. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2001. 97-122.

Clough, Patricia. T. "The Affective Turn: Political Economy, Biomedia and Bodies." *Theory Culture Society* 25:1 (2008): 1-22.

Coale, Samuel. "Didion's Disorder: An American Romancer's Art." *Critique* 25.4 (Spring 1984): 160-70.

Cunningham, Darryl. *Psychiatric Tales: Eleven Graphic Stories About Mental Illness*. New York: Bloomsbury, 2011.

Dabney, Lewis M. "The Critic Who Made Us: Edmund Wilson and The Wound and The Bow," *The Sewanee Review*. Vol. 91, No. 1. Winter 1983. 155-165.

—. *Edmund Wilson: A Life in Literature.* Farrar, Straus and Giroux: New York, 2005.

Damasio, Antonio R. *Self Comes to Mind: Constructing the Conscious Mind*. New York: Pantheon Books, 2010.

Davidson, Sara. "A Visit with Joan Didion." Friedman 13-21.

De Gelder, B., J. et al.. "Non-Conscious Recognition of Affect in the Absence of Striate Cortex." *Neuroreport* 10 (1999): 3759-63.

Deleuze, Gilles. *The Deleuze Reader*. Constantine V. Boundas, trans. New York: Columbia University Press, 1993.

—. *Repetition and Difference.* Paul Patton, trans. New York: Columbia University Press, 1994.

—. *Negotiations: 1972-1990*. Martin Joughin, trans. New York: Columbia University Press, 1995.

—. *Pure immanence: Essays on a Life*. Anne Boyman, trans. New York: Zone Books, 2001

Deleuze, Gilles and Félix Guattari. *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*. Robert Hurley, Mark Seem, and Helen R. Lane, trans. Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press, 1983.

—. *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia.* Brian Massumi, trans. Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press, 1987.

Derrida, Jacques. "Structure, Sign, and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences." *Writing and Difference*. Trans. Alan Bass. Chicago: University Of Chicago Press, 1980.

Didion, Joan. *Blue Nights*. New York: Knopf, 2011.

—. *The Year of Magical Thinking*. New York: Knopf. 2001.

—. *Slouching Toward Bethlehem*. Modern Library Edition. Random House: New York, 2000.

—. "Why I Write." Friedman 5-10.

—. *The White Album*. New York, NY: Simon & Schuster, 1979.

Direnç, Dilek. "Didion's 'On Going Home': The Rhetoric of Fragmentation." *Journal of American Studies of Turkey* 6 (1997): 35-42.

Doty, Mark. "Human Seraphim: 'Howl,' Sex, and Holiness." Shinder 11-18.

Duncan, Randy and Matthew J. Smith. *The Power of Comics: History, Form and Culture*. New York: Continuum, 2009.

Eagleton, Terry. *Literary Theory: An Introduction.* Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996.

Eakin, Paul John. *How Our Lives Become Stories: Making Selves.* Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1999.

Eberhart, Richard. "West Coast Rhythms." *The New York Times*. 2 Sep 1956: BR4. Web. March 14, 2012.

Ehrenberg, Alain. *The Weariness of the Self: Diagnosing the History of Depression in the Contemporary Age.* Enrico Caouatte, Jacob Homel, and Don Winkler, trans. McGill-Queen's University Press, 2010.

Eisner, Will. *Comics and Sequential Art: Principles and Practices from the Legendary Cartoonist*. New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1985, revised ed., 2004.

Elbert, Thomas and Maggie Schauer. "Burnt in to Memory," *Nature*. 31 Oct. 2002. Vol 419. 883.

Edelman, Gerald M. *Wider than the Sky: The Phenomenal Gift of Consciousness*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004.

Ernst, Jutta. "Slouching Towards Bethlehem: Joan Didion's Cultural Narratives," *The Sixties Revisited: Culture, Society, Politics (American studies)*. Eds. Jürgen Heideking, et al. Heidelberg: C. Winter, 2001. 303-316.

Ewert, Jeanne C. “Reading Visual Narrative: Art Spiegelman’s ‘Maus’.” *Narrative* Vol. 8, No. 1 (January 2000), 87-103.

Felski, Rita. “Suspicious Minds.” Unpublished paper. University of Virginia. 2010.

Flaherty, Alice Weaver. *The Midnight Disease: The Drive to Write, Writer’s Block, and the Creative Brain.* New York: Mariner Books, 2005.

Flatley, Jonathan. *Affective Mapping: Melancholia and the Politics of Modernism*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2008.

Foucault, Michel. *The Foucault Reader*. Paul Rabinow. New York: Pantheon, 1984.

Friedman, Ellen G.. Ed. *Joan Didion: Essays and Conversations*. Princeton: Ontario Review, 1984.

—. “The Didion Sensibility: An Analysis.” Friedman 81-90.

Geis, Deborah R.. Ed. *Considering Maus Approaches to Art Spiegelman’s “Survivor Tale” of the Holocaust.* Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2003

Ginsberg, Allen. *The Letters of Allen Ginsberg*. Ed. Bill Morgan. Cambridge: Da Capo Press, 2008.

—. *The Book of Martyrdom and Artifice: First Journals and Poems, 1937-52*. Cambridge: Da Capo Press, 2006.

—. *Deliberate Prose: Selected Essays, 1952-1995*. New York: Harper Collins Publishers, 2000.

—. *Beat Writers at Work: The Paris Review*. Ed. George Plimpton. New York: The Modern Library, 1999.

—. *Journals Mid-Fifties 1954-1958*. Ed. Gordon Ball. New York: HarperCollins, 1995.

—. *Collected Poems, 1947-1980*. New York: Harper & Row, 1984.

—. *Journals Early Fifties Early Sixties*. Ed. Gordon Ball. New York: Grove Press, 1977.

—. *To Eberhart from Ginsberg: A Letter About Howl 1956*. Massachusetts: The Penmen Press, 1976.

—. *Allen Verbatim: Lectures on Poetry, Politics, Consciousness*. Gordon Ball, ed. New York: McGraw-Hill Book Company, 1974.

—. “How Howl Happened.” *Poetics of The New American Poetry*. Eds. Donald Allen

and Warrant Tallman. New York: Grove Press, 1973. 344-347.

—. *The Gates of Wrath: Rhymed Poems: 1948-1952*. Berkeley: Gray Fox Press, 1972.

—. *Kaddish and Other Poems, 1958-1960.* San Francisco: City Lights Books, 1961.

—. *Empty Mirror: Early Poems*. New York: Totem Press, 1961.

—. "Notes Written on Finally Recording *Howl*." *Evergreen Review* 3.10 (November/December 1959): 135-135

Ginsberg, Allen and Jack Kerouac. *Jack Kerouac and Allen Ginsberg: The Letters*. Eds. Bill Morgan and David Stanford. New York: Viking, 2010.

Ginsberg, Allen, Barry Miles, and Carl Solomon. *Howl: Original Draft Facsimile, Transcript & Variant Versions, Fully Annotated by Author, with Contemporaneous Correspondence, Account of First Public Reading, Legal Skirmishes, Precursor Texts & Bibliography.* New York: Harper & Row, 1986.

Gendlin, Eugene T. "How Philosophy Cannot Appeal to Experience and How It Can." *Language Beyond Postermoderism*, David Michael Levin, ed. Chicago: Northwestern University Press, 1997. 3-41.

—. "The Wider Role o f Bodily Sense in Thought and Language." *Giving the Body its Due*, M. Sheets-Johnstone, ed. New York: SUNY Press, 1992. 192-207.

—. "Thinking Beyond Patterns: Body, Language and Situations" *The Presence of Feeling in Thought*, B. den Ouden and M. Moen, eds, 192-207. New York: Peter Lang, 1991.

Glannon, Walter. "Depression and Mind-Body Problem." *Philosophy, Psychiatry, & Psychology*. Volume 9, Number 3. September 2002. 243-254.

Gooch, Brad. *City Poet: The Life and Times of Frank O'Hara*. New York: Knopf, 1993.

Gregg, Melissa and Gregory J. Seigworth. *The Affect Theory Reader.* Durham: Duke University Press, 2010.

Groensteen, Thierry. "Why Are Comics Still in Search of Cultural Legitimization." *A Comics Studies Reader*. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2009. 3-11.

—. *The System of Comics*. Trans. Bart Beaty and Nick Nguyen. University Press of Mississippi, 2007.

Grohol, John M. *Psych Central: Encyclopedia of Psychology*. 22 Oct 2008. Web. 23 Mar 2012.

Hadda, Janet. “Ginsberg in Hospital.” *American Imago: Psychoanalysis and the Human Sciences*: 65.2. 2008 Summer. 229-259.

Harrison, Barbara Grizzutti. *Off Center: Essays*. New York: Dial, 1980.

Harvey, Robert. “Comedy at the Juncture of Word and Image: The Emergence of the Modern Magazine Gag Cartoon Reveals the Vital Blend.” *The Language of Comics: Word and Image*, Robin Varnum and Christina Gibbons, eds. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2001.

Haswell, Janis E. “The Craft of the Short Story in Retelling the Viet Nam War: Tim O’Brien’s *The Things They Carried*.” *South Carolina Review* 37.1 (2004): 94–109.

Hatfield, Charles. *Alternative Comics: An Emerging Literature*. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2005.

Heberle, Mark A.. *A Trauma Artist: Tim O’Brien and The Fiction of Vietnam*. Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2001.

Heinämaa, et al.. *Consciousness: From Perception to Reflection in the History of Philosophy*. Studies in the History of Philosophy Volume 4. Netherlands: Springer, 2007. Web.

Heer, Jeet and Kent Worcester, eds. *A Comics Studies Reader*. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2009.

Henderson, Katherine Usher. *Joan Didion*. New York: Frederick Ungar Publishing, 1981.

Herzog, Tobey C. “Tim O’Brien’s ‘True Lies’ (?)” *Modern Fiction Studies* 46.4 (Winter 2000): 893–916.

Hirsch, Marianne. “Editors Column: Collateral Damage.” *PMLA* 119.5 (October 2004): 1209-1215.

—. “Projected Memory: Holocaust Photographs in Personal and Public Fantasy.” *Acts of Memory: Cultural Recall in the Present.* Eds. Mieke Bal, Jonathan Crewe, and Leo Spitzer. Hanover: UP of New England, 1999, 3-23.

—. “Family Pictures: Maus, Mourning and Post-Memory,” *Discourse* 15.2 (1992), 3-29.

Hirsch, Marianne and Leo Spitzer. “Testimonial Objects: Memory, Gender, and Transmission.” *Poetics Today*.27:2 (summer 2006).

Hult, Carol. “Metonymy and Metaphor in Joan Didion: A Personal Grammar of Style”

The Peirce Seminar Papers: Essays in Semiotic Analysis, Volume 3. Ed. Michael Shapiro. New York: Peter Lang, 1998. 59-73.

Hume, David. *A Treatise of Human Nature*. Ed. P. H. Nidditch. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1739/1978.

Hutcheon, Linda. *A Poetics of Postmodernism: History, Theory, Fiction*. New York: Routledge, 1988.

Huxley, Aldous. *Heaven and Hell*. New York: Harper, 1956.

Jack, Peter Monroe. "Dickens, Hemingway, Kipling, and Joyce." *The New York Times*. 24 Aug. 1941: 77.

Jakobson, Roman. "Closing Statement: Linguistics and Poetics." *Style in Language*. Ed. Thomas Sebeok. Cambridge: MIT Press, 1960.

James, William. "What is an Emotion?" *Mind* 9 (1884): 188-205.

Jameson, Fredric. *The Prison-House of Language; A Critical Account of Structuralism and Russian formalism*. Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1972.

—. *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*. Durham: Duke University Press, 1991.

Jamison, Kay Redfield. *Touched with Fire: Manic-Depressive Illness and the Artistic Temperament*. Free Press, 1996.

Jarraway, David R. " 'Excremental Assault' in Tim O'Brien: Trauma and Recovery in Vietnam War Literature." *Modern Fiction Studies* 44.3 (1998): 695–711.

Kachka, Boris. "'I Was No Longer Afraid to Die. I Was Now Afraid Not to Die.'" *New York Magazine*. 24 Oct 2001: 34-39, 96.

Kakutani, Michiko, "Joan Didion: Staking Out California." Friedman 29-42.

Kant, Immanuel. *Critique of Judgement*. J.H. Bernard, trans. Macmillan and Co. Limited: London, 1914. Web.

Kaplan, Steven. *Understanding Tim O'Brien*. Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1995.

—. "The Undying Uncertainty of the Narrator in Tim O'Brien's *The Things They Carried*." *Critique* 35.1 (Fall 1993): 43-52.

Karp, David A. *Speaking of Sadness: Depression, Disconnection, and the Meanings of*

Illness. New York: Oxford University Press, 1994.

Kaufmann, Michael. "The Solace of Bad Form: Tim O'Brien's Postmodernist Revisions of Vietnam in 'Speaking of Courage." *Critique* 46.4 (Summer 2005): 333–43.

Keen, Suzanne. *Empathy and the Novel.* New York: Oxford University Press, 2007.

Koestenbaum, Wayne. "The Pink Hotel." *London Review of Books* 19.7 (3 April 2007): 20-21.

Kerby, Paul. *Narrative and the Self.* Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991.

Konstan, David. *Pity Transformed*. London: Duckworth, 2001.

Kramer, Jane. *Allen Ginsberg in America*. New York: Random House, 1969.

Kuehl, Linda. "Interview with Joan Didion." *The Paris Review* 20 (1978): 142-63. Web. http://www.theparisreview.org/interviews/3439/the-art-of-fiction-no-71-joan-didion

Kulka, Richard A., et al. *Trauma and the Vietnam War Generation: Report of Findings from the National Vietnam Veterans Readjustment Study*. New York: Brunner/Mazel, 1990.

LaDoux, Joseph E. *The Emotion Brain.* New York: Simon & Schuster, 1996.

Laub**,** Dori. "Bearing Witness, or the Vicissitudes of Listening" and "An Event Without Witness: Truth, Testimony and Survival." *Testimony*: *Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis, and History*, Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub, eds. New York: Routledge, 1991.

Lange, Carl. G. *The Emotions*, Carl G. Lange and William James, eds. I. A. Haupt, trans. Baltimore: Williams & Wilkins Company, 1922.

Lazarus, Richard S. *Emotion and Adaptation*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1991.

LeClair, Tom and Larry McCaffery. *Anything Can Happen: Interviews with Contemporary American Novelists*. Illinois: University of Illinois, 1983.

Lejeune, Philippe. *On Autobiography*, Paul John Eakin, ed. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1989.

Loeb, Jeff. "Childhood's End: Self Recovery in the Autobiography of the Vietnam War *American Studies* 37.1 (Spring 1996): 95-116.

Leonard, John. "Introduction." *We Tell Ourselves Stories to Live*. By Joan Didion. New York: Everyman's Library Knopf, 2006. xi-xiii.

Logan, John. *Red*. London: Oberon Books, 2009.

Lyotard, Jean-François. *The Lyotard Reader*, Andrew Benjamin, ed. Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, Incorporated, 1989.

Magnussen, Anne and Hans-Christian Christiansen, eds. *Comics and Culture: Analytical and Theoretical Approaches.* Copenhagen: Museum Tusculanum Press, 2000.

Manu, Peter. *The Psychopathology of Functional Somatic Syndromes: Neurobiology and Illness Behavior in Chronic Fatigue Syndrome, Fibromyalgia, Gulf War Illness, Irritable Bowel, and Premenstrual Dysphoria*. New York: Routledge, 2004.

Martin, Andrew. *Receptions of War: Viet Nam in American Culture*. Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1993.

Martin, Emily. *Bipolar Expeditions: Mania and Depression in American Culture.* Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007.

Massumi, Brian. *Parables of the* Virtual: Movement, Affect, Sensation. Durham: Duke University Press, 2002.

McCloud, Scott. *Understanding Comics: The Invisible Art*. New York: Kitchen Sink, 1993.

McDonough, Christopher Michael. " 'Afraid to Admit We Are Not Achilles': Facing Hector's Dilemma in Tim O'Brien's The Things They Carried. *Classical and Modern Literature* 20.3 (Spring 2000): 23-32.

McNamee, Gregory. *Philoktetes*. Port Townsend, Wash.: Copper Canyon Press, 1986.

Merleau-Ponty. *The Primacy of Perception: And Other Essays on Phenomenological Psychology, the Philosophy of Art, History and Politics* (SPEP). Ed. James M. Edie. William Cobb, trans. Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1964.

Miles, Barry. *Ginsberg: A Biograhy*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 1989.

Miller, Nancy K. "Cartoons of the Self." Geis 44-59.

—. *Bequest and Betrayal: Memoirs of a Parent's Death*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2000.

Miller, Nancy K. and Jason Tougaw. "Introduction: Extremities." *Extremities: Trauma, Testimony, and Community*. Eds. Nancy K. Miller and Jason Tougaw. Urbana: University of Illinois, 2002.

Morgan, Bill. *The Typewriter Is Holy: The Complete, Uncensored History of the Beat Generation*. New York: Free Press, 2010.

—. *I Celebrate Myself: The Somewhat Private Life of Allen Ginsberg*. New York: Viking, 2006.

Morris, J.S., et al.. "A Subcortical Pathway to the Right Amygdala Mediating 'Unseen' Fear." *Proceedings of National Academy of Science*, 96 (1999): 1680-5.

Mosley, Merrit. "Joan Didion's Symbolic Landscape." South Carolina Review. 21:2 (Spring 1989): 55-64.

Muggli, Mark Z. "The Poetics of Joan Didion's Journalism." *American Literature* 59.3 (1987): 402-21.

Mukarovsky, Jan. *Aesthetic Function, Norm and Value as Social Facts.* Trans. M.E. Suino, Ann Arbor: Michigan University Press, 1970.

Murfin, Ross and Supryia M. Ray. *The Bedford Guide of Critical and Literary Terms*. Bedford Books: Boston New York, 1997.

Myrick, Keris. "Finding a Life That Fits," *The New York Times*. Reported by Benedict Carey. October 22, 2011. Video. http://www.nytimes.com/2011/10/23/health/23lives.html?_r=1&hp=&adxnnl=1&adxnnlx=1319382537-RNeIOjEyPNcrZRb0bBP84A&pagewanted=all

Nance, Kevin. "The Light at Dusk." *Poets & Writers* Nov/Dec 2011: 50-56.

Naparsteck, Martin and Tim O'Brien "An Interview with Tim O'Brien." *Contemporary Literature* 32.1 (Spring 1991): 1-11.

Natoli, Joseph P. "Phenomenological Psychology and Literary interpretation," *Psychological Perspectives on Literature: Freudian Dissidents and Non-Freudians: A Casebook*. Hamden, Conn.: Archon, 1984. 198-224.

Neilson, Jim. Jim Neilson, *Warring Fictions: American Literary Culture and the Vietnam War Narrative*. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1998.

—. "The Truth in *Things*: Personal Trauma As Historical Amnesia in *The Things They Carried*." 21 May 2001. Web. 14 Mar. 2012.

Nietzsche, Friedrich. *The Portable Nietzsche*. Walter Kaufmann, trans. New York: Viking Press, 1954, 1968.

—. *The Will to Power.* Walter Kaufmann and R. J, Hollindale, trans. New York: Random House, 1967.

Nussbaum, Martha. *Upheavals of Thought: The Intelligence of the Emotions*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001.

O'Brien, Tim. "The Vietnam in Me." *The New York Times Magazine*. 2 Oct 1994: 48-57.

—. *The Things They Carried*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1990.

—. *Going After Cacciato*. New York: Delacorte Press/Seymour Lawrence, 1978.

—. *Northern Lights*. New York: Delacorte Press/Seymour Lawrence, 1975.

—. *If I Die in a Combat Zone Box Me Up & Ship Me Home*. New York: Delta/Seymour Lawrence, 1969.

Perl, Sondra. *Felt Sense: Writing with the Body*. Portsmouth: Boynton/Cook, 2004.

Perloff, Marjorie. "Holy, holy, holy, hyperbole." *Times Literary Supplement*. 18 Feb 2011: 17-18.

—. "'A Lost Battalion of Platonic Conversationalists': 'Howl' and the Language of Modernism." Shinder 24-43.

Phelan, James. "The Implied Author, Deficient Narration, and Nonfiction Narrative: Or, What's Off-Kilter in The Year of Magical Thinking and The Diving Bell and the Butterfly?" *Style* 45.1 (Spring 2011): 119-129.

Pooper, Karl R and John C. Eccles. *The Self and Its Brain: An Argument for Interactionism.* London New York: Routledge, 1983 (reprinted 1986, 1998).

Portugés, Paul. "Allen Ginsberg's Paul Cézanne and the Pater Omnipotens Aeterna Deus." *Contemporary Literature* 21.3 (Summer, 1980): 435- 449.

—. *The Visionary Poetics of Allen Ginsberg*. Santa Barbara: Ross-Erikson, 1978.

Prinz, Jesse. *Furnishing the Mind: Concepts and Their Perceptual Basis*. Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2002.

—. "The Emotional Basis of Moral Judgments," *Philosophical Explorations*, Vol 9, No. 1, March 2006.

—. *The Emotional Construction of Morals.* New York: Oxford University Press, 2007.

Terada, Rei. *Feeling in Theory: Emotion after The "Death of The Subject.* Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2001.

Reddy, William M.. *The Navigation of Feeling: A Framework for The History of Emotions*. Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge University Press, 2001.

Regan-Gavin, Rosemary. ”Style Is Character: The Writing Style of Joan Didion.” *Hawaii Review*: 16.35 (1992 Spring):149-53.

Rorty, Richard*.* *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*. New York: Cambridge University Press,1989.

Rosenfield, Israel. *The Invention of Memory: A New View from the Brain.* New York: Basic, 1988.

Rothberg, Michael. “Between the Extreme and the Everyday: Ruth Kluger’s Traumatic Realism.” *Extremities: Trauma, Testimony, and Community*, Nancy K. Miller and Jason Tougaw, eds. Urbana: University of Illinois, 2002.

Sabin, Roger. *Comics, Comix & Graphic Novels: A History of Comic Art.* New York: Phaidon Press. 1996.

Sacco, Joe, and Edward W. Said. *Palestine*. Seattle, WA: Fantagraphic Books, 2001.

Sacks, Oliver. “Making up the Mind.” *New York Review of Books*, 8 Apr 1993: 42-49.

Sapolsky, Robert. *Biology and Human Behavior: The Neurological Origins of Individuality*, 2nd Edition. Parts I & II. Virginia: The Teaching Company, 2005.

Satrapi, Marjane. *Persepolis 2: The Story of a Return.* Trans. Anjali Singh. New York: Pantheon, 2004.

Scarry, Elaine. *The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World.* London: Oxford University Press, 1987.

Scherer, Klaus R. “Studying the Emotion Antecedent Appraisal Process: An Expert System Approach.” *Cognition and Emotion* 7 (1993): 325-55.

Schow, H. Wayne. “Out of Africa, The White Album, and the Possibility of Tragic Affirmation.” *English Studies*. 67.1 (1986): 35-50.

Schroeder, Eric James. “The Past and the Possible: Tim O’Brien’s Dialectic of Memory and Imagination.” *Search and Clear: Critical Responses to Selected Literature and Films of the Vietnam War.* Bowling Green: Ohio, 1988.

—. “Two Interviews: Talks with Tim O'Brien and Robert Stone.” *Modern Fiction Studies* 30. 1 (Spring 1984): 136-163.

Schumacher, Michael. *Dharma Lion: A Critical Biography of Allen Ginsberg*. New York:

Viking, 1992.

Seaton, James. “Americas Critic; Edmund Wilson, Mandarin in Chief,” *The Weekly Standard*. December 19, 2005.

Shinder, Jason, ed. *The Poem That Changed America: Howl Fifty Years Later*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2006.

Shklovsky, Viktor. “Art as Technique.” *Russian Formalist Criticism: Four Essays.* Eds. and trans. Lemon, Lee T. and Marion J. Reis. Lincoln: Nebraska University Press, 1965.

Siebers, Tobin. “Words Stare like a Glass Eye: From Literary to Visual to Disability Studies and Back Again.” *PMLA* 119.5 (October 2004), 1315-1324.

Silbergleid, Robin. “Making Things Present: Tim O’Brien’s Autobiographical Metafiction.” *Contemporary Literature* 50.1 (Spring 2009): 129-155.

Simard, Rodney. “The Dissociation of Self in Joan Didion’s Play It As It Lays.” *Narcissism and the Text: Studies in Literature and the Psychology of Self.* Ed. Lynne Layton and Barbara Ann Schapiro. 1986. 273-287.

Simeon, Daphne, and Jeffrey Abugel. *Feeling Unreal: Depersonalization Disorder and the Loss of the Self.* Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006.

Smith, Sidonie, and Julia Watson. *Reading Autobiography: Interpreting Life Narratives, Second Edition*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2010.

Solomon, Andrew. *Noonday Demon: An Atlas of Depression*. New York: Scribner, 2001.

Solomon, Robert C. *The Passions.* New York: Doubleday, 1976.

Sontag, Susan. “Against Interpretation.” *Against Interpretation, and Other Essays.* New York: Picador, 2001.

Spiegelman, Art. *Breakdowns: Portrait of the Artist as a Young %@&*!* New York: Pantheon Books, 2008.

—. *The Complete Maus*. New York: Pantheon, 1997.

Sprinkler, Michael. “Fictions of the Self: The End of Autobiography.” *Autobiography: Essays Theoretical and Critical.* Ed. James Olney. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980.

Stamberg, Susan. “Cautionary Tales.” Friedman 22-28.

Timmerman, John H. “Tim O’Brien and the Art of the True War Story: ‘Night March’ and ‘Speaking of Courage.’ *Twentieth-Century Literature* 46.1 (2000): 100–114.

Toombs, S. Kay. *The Meaning of Illness: A Phenomenological Account of the Different Perspectives of Physician and Patient (Philosophy and Medicine).* New York: Springer, 2007.

Tomkins, Silvan. *Shame and Its Sisters: A Silvan Tomkins Reader*, Irving Alexander, Eve Sedgwick, and Adam Frank, eds. London: Duke University Press, 1995.

Tran, Jonathan. “Emplotting Foregiveness: Narrative Forgetting and Memory.” *Literature and Theology* 23.2 (June 2009): 220-233.

Trigilio, Tony. “‘Strange Prophecies Anew’: Rethinking the Politics of Matter and Spirit in Ginsberg’s *Kaddish*.” *American Literature*. 71.4 (December 1999): 773-795

Trilling, Lionel. *The Liberal Imagination: Essays on Literature and Society*. New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1950.

Ulin, David L. “What Happened Here?” *Columbia Journalism Review*. 48.6 (March/April 2010): 50-54.

Vernon, Alex. “Salvation, Storytelling, and Pilgrimage in Tim O’Brien’s *The Things The Carried*.” Mosaic 34.4 (December 2003): 171-189.

Vinz, Ruth. “The Things We Carry: Working ‘In Relation’ to the Past. English Education 33.1 (October 2000): 73-85.

Volkmer, Jon. “Telling the ‘Truth’ about Vietnam: Episteme and Narrative Structure in The Green Berets and The Things They Carried.” *War, Literature, and the Arts* 11 (1999): 240–55.

Walker, George A.. Ed. *Graphic Witness: Four Wordless Graphic Novels. Frans Masereel. Lyn Ward. Giacomo Patri. Laurence Hyde*. Buffalo, New York: Firefly Books, 2007.

Waugh, Patricia. *Metafiction : The Theory and Practice of Self-Conscious.* London: Routledge, 1984.

Weiner, Stephen. *The 101 Best Graphic Novels*. New York: Nantier Beall Minoustchine, 2005.

Weingarten, Marc. *The Gang that Wouldn’t Write Straight: Wolf, Thompson, Didion, and the New Journalism Revolution*. Crown: New York, 2006.

Wesley, Marilyn. “Truth and Fiction in Tim O’Brien’s *If I Die in a Combat Zone* and *The Things They Carried*.” *College Literature* 29.2 (2002): 1–18.

Whitlock, Gillian. “Autographics: The Seeing ‘I’ of Comics,” *Modern Fiction Studies*. 52.4 (Winter 2006): 965-79.

Wierzbicka, Anna. *Emotion across Language and Cultures: Diversity and Universals.* New York: Cambridge University Press, 1999.

Wilkomirski, Binjamin. *Fragments: memories of a wartime childhood.* New York: Schocken Books, 1996.

Williams, William Carlos. “Introduction.” *Empty Mirror: Early Poems*. New York: Totem Press, 1961. 5-6.

Wilson, Edmund. “Philoctetes: The Wound and the Bow.” *Literary Essays and Reviews of The 1930s & 40s*, Lewis M. Dabney, eds. New York: Library of America, 2007.

Winchell, Mark Royden. *Joan Didion*. Rev. ed. Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1989.

Winters, Yvors. *Primitivism and Decadence. A Study of American Experimental Poetry.* New York: Haskell House Publishers Ltd, 1969.

Wittreich, Joseph Anthony. *Milton and the Line of Vision*. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1975.

Wolk, Douglas. *Reading Comics: How Graphic Novels Work and What They Mean*. Cambridge: Da Capo Press, 2007.

Zajonc, Robert B. “On the Primacy of Affect.” American Psychologist. 39. (1984): 117-23.