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Articulation as an Act of Futility:  
A Post-Structuralist Exploration of Textual Articulation as it  
Functions within a First-Person Narrative Structure

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A thesis  
presented to  
the faculty of the Department of English  
East Tennessee State University

In partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the degree  
Master of Arts in English

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by  
Wilson W. Onstott  
May 2006

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Dr. Mark Holland, Chair  
Dr. Darryl Haley  
Dr. Thomas Crofts

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Junichiro Tanizaki, Tim O'Brien

## ABSTRACT

### Articulation as an Act of Futility: A Post-Structuralist Exploration of Textual Articulation as it Functions within a First-Person Narrative Structure

by

Wilson W. Onstott

The inability of language to convey complete meaning and truth is a central point of address for much post-structuralist literary theory and criticism. When these theories are applied to a first-person narrative structure, whether it is a work of fiction or non-fiction, certain specific incongruities arise. When a narrative voice seeks to recall certain events, a presupposed reexamination takes place as the narrative unfolds text comes into being. If a narrative is constructed in this way then the intent of the text then is to convey comprehensive meanings or truths of those cataloged experiences. According to Deconstructive Theory, it is language's inherent nature to resist ultimate meaning. This focus on the articulation of truth is futile because meaning, like language, is always already in a state of fragmentation. This project explores five individual works from different literary traditions—ranging from the canonical to the relatively obscure. The works exhibit various approaches to articulation; including varying degrees of self-definition, personal fiction, and narrative movement toward inarticulation.

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CHAPTER 1  
INTRODUCTION

*"It is impossible to say just what I mean!"*

–T.S. Eliot

These words appear near the close of Eliot's *The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock* and are an exclamation of the angst that overcomes the speaker when he realizes that he is unable to fully distinguish his meaning. Try as he may, he can never bring his meaning to actuality and must finally retreat to "the floors of silent seas" (14). In this poem, Eliot touches on a problem that is fundamental to all forms of writing: articulation. With regard to the production of language and subsequently the production of a text, the act of *meaning what one says* is not nearly as cumbersome and problematic as *saying what one means*. Inevitably, there will always be something that is left unsaid or unwritten, and consequently there will always be the capacity for fluctuation of interpretation in any text. The inability of language to achieve a complete meaning and subsequently a complete truth is a central point of address for much post-structuralist literary theory and criticism. When these theories are applied to a first-person narrative structure, whether it is a work of fiction or non-fiction, certain specific incongruities always arise. When the narrative or

narrator seeks to recall certain events, a presupposed reexamination is figured as the text comes into being. The fundamental objective of the text then is to convey the actuality of situation—a complete and comprehensive truth.

According to the Deconstructive Theory of Jacques Derrida and Paul de Man, it is language's inherent nature to resist any one essential meaning. Therefore, the focus on the articulation of truth is futile because "meaning," like language, is *always-already* in a state of "fragmentation." Yet, according to the largely language-based postmodern philosophical explorations of Ludwig Wittgenstein and later Martin Heidegger, language is the entity that defines an individual's conception of reality. Hence, the drive toward a complete articulation of meaning, although ultimately futile, is inherent to all speaking and thinking bodies—all want to conjointly self-define and be understood. Thus, the paradox: in order to comprehend reality to its greatest extent (presupposing that such a level of awareness is within the domain of cognitive possibility), we must first push language to its greatest extent; but language is an imperfect structure and intense exploration of its limits will cause it to deconstruct, ultimately, to the point of meaninglessness; therefore, complete knowledge of reality—the ability of language fully extended—is fundamentally illogical and continuously locked in inarticulation, where the actuality of all lingual and

textual systems exist in a state of schizophrenic flux, or if characterized by its effect on the individual consciousness: madness.

Presented in five sections, this project explores five individual works from different genres and literary traditions—ranging from the canonical to the relatively obscure. These works include Mark Twain’s *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, Tim O’Brien’s partially autobiographical Vietnam narrative *The Things They Carried*, Junichiro Tanizaki’s epistolary novel *The Key*, Marguerite Duras’s experimental anti-novel *L’Amante Anglaise* (which loosely translates to “*The English Lover*”), and Edgar Allen Poe’s well-known short story “The Cask of Amontillado.” Textual articulation is a fundamental issue in all of these works, but the different ways in which this problem is addressed and dealt with is the main point of interest for this investigation.

The investigation moves through five related modes of theoretical analysis that each has a specific scope of interest and focus of exploration. The first, a theoretical reading of *Huckleberry Finn*, explores the main character’s pursuit of self-definition through the creation of language. In addition, the first section discusses the historical characterization of the work as “The Great American Novel” and how Huck’s process of self-definition through language creation is a metaphor for Mark Twain’s definition of “America” via the creation of a quintessentially “American” language within the text. The second

section deals with Tim O'Brien's unique conception of truth in relation to autobiographical writing in *The Things They Carried*. In the work, O'Brien openly admits that many sections of the text are fictional but claims that the truth of his war experiences cannot be articulated through realistic and definitive accounts. Rather, he holds that by fictionalizing certain aspects of his stories, he is able to communicate more comprehensive truths and more complete meaning. The third section focuses on the production of a personal fiction through the act of writing itself, in Junichiro Tanizaki's *The Key*. This section explores how the novel, written in the form of two individually separate journals, exposes how the act of writing vainly seeks to capture the initial vivacity of experience through the documenting of memory. The result of this pursuit is the creation of a personal fiction where new memories do not spawn from experience but rather are a creation of the text. The confusion of existence and essence that appears in *The Key*, as manufactured memories are confused with a textual essence of meaning, is explored more thoroughly in the fourth section, which focuses on the breakdown of articulation in Marguerite Duras's *L'Amante Anglaise*. The novel, written in the form of three transcribed interrogations, seeks to make a connection between the existence—the physical act of murder—and the essence, or motive, for the act. Claire Lannes, a confessed murder, is unable to articulate her motivations for the murder and



mutilation of her cousin. Unable to extract this information, the interrogator resolves that the woman is insane because she is unable to articulate her motive and therefore the murder was an act of madness. The final section, a largely Bakhtinian reading of Poe's "The Cask of Amontillado," explores the causes for the narrator's inability to articulate the cause of his violent actions. In Poe's tale, the atmosphere of the medieval carnival alters the murderous narrator's perception of reality to a point where he can neither feel responsibility nor guilt for his actions. Accordingly, he is able to make reference to his feelings previous to the act, but unable to make a fluid causal connection between his actions inside and outside the collective body of the carnivalesque. For these reasons, the narrator is often understood by readers and critics to be insane; but this is hardly the case. Rather, his acts resist articulation because he undergoes a carnivalesque perceptive shift that does not permit articulation outside of itself. Because the story is told in the past tense, he does not have access to the implications of that altered perception, and therefore, cannot articulate the reasons for his actions.

The sections explore the movement of lingual and textual articulation from the empowering act of self-definition to the bewildering and sometimes terrifying aspect of lingual and textual meaninglessness. Through close reading and application of various Deconstructive veins of thought, each work

displays different levels of textual deconstruction that exist in all narrative structures. Yet often times the works that we find to be the most intriguing and astute have many structural aspects that are similar to those works that we find to be the most inarticulate and inaccessible. The difference is often the level of articulation that the given work is willing to derive, and the difference between a work of genius and a work of madness is many times infinitesimal.

## CHAPTER 2

### DEFINING THE GREAT AMERICAN NOVEL: LITERAL AND METAPHORICAL IMPLICATIONS OF THE DESIRE FOR SELF- IDENTIFICATION IN *HUCKLEBERRY FINN*

Perhaps the best place to begin a discussion of the structure of language and its relation to the production of text is with a novel that is overtly preoccupied with this relationship. Mark Twain's *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* has achieved an esteemed position in the American literary canon. The social and critical weight of the novel led to it famously being dubbed "The Great American Novel," in the January 1869 issue of *The Nation*, in an essay by John William DeForest which consequently bears the same name. Ernest Hemingway adamantly reinforces DeForest's sentiment in *The Green Hills of Africa*. In this work Hemmingway states, "All modern American literature comes from one book by Mark Twain called *Huckleberry Finn*...There was nothing before. There has been nothing as good since" (22). Similar expressions of veneration have been expressed by many important literary figures; some of the most notable among them include William Faulkner, T.S. Eliot, and Toni Morrison. But in the ranks of such literary heavyweights as these (all, including Hemingway, were Nobel Prize Winners), Twain is often singled

out as a true “raging bull”—a formidable and complete master of the craft. And if this is the case, then *Huck Finn* is surely his golden glove.

But what sets *Huck Finn* apart from other “great” works of American fiction? The story itself is a fairly true-to-form *bildungsroman* novel that chronicles the worldly education and personal growth of the young Huckleberry Finn. Yes, the novel casts a critical eye on issues of racism in America and the moral deficiencies of organized religion, but Twain was certainly not the first American writer to openly address these controversial topics. Harriet Beecher Stowe’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, which was published more than thirty years before *Huckleberry Finn*, addresses many of the same issues—why is this work not critically and publicly heralded as “The Great American Novel”? Conversely, the image of Huck and Jim’s raft floating down the Mississippi River may very well invoke a unique visceral understanding of freedom and escape that is perfectly and quintessentially “American.” If this is the case, then why have works such as Henry David Thoreau’s *Walden* or even Jack Kerouac’s *On The Road* not received the widespread acclaim and emphatic critical praise of *Huck Finn*? Do these works not also conjure a distinctly, if not definitively, “American” brand of freedom? What then sets *Huckleberry Finn* apart from these other great works of “American” literature and elevates it to the status of “The Great American Novel”?

The answer is complexly simple: where the aforementioned literary works fall short (and I do not mean to downplay their literary or social importance for they are all extraordinary artistic achievements in their own right) is that at their very best they only describe that which is "American" by exploring various preexisting aspects of American life and thought. The fallacy that these works commit is that the term "American" is assumed to be a self-defining concept. It is not. A literary investigation and/or exploration of the attributes of that which is "American," however eloquent and artfully crafted, only serves to make the concept that much more elusive and amorphous. The characteristic that sets Twain apart, and earns *Huckleberry Finn* its label of distinction, is that Twain does not want to *describe* what is "American" but rather he sets out to *define* "America," and *Huckleberry Finn* is his definition. Consequently, the novel is a deconstruction America as an idea, in the form of a metaphorical search-narrative that aims to uncover deeper truth and meaning with respect to that idea.

*Huck Finn* is a novel that is preoccupied with language, and with good reason. In order to render a definition, Twain must first establish a vocabulary that is capable of the task. His approach to this linguistic dilemma is primarily achieved through interlingual innovation. Not only does he explore a variety of conventional veins of articulation by carefully crafting an individualized and

succinct system of phraseology that is often purposely laden with underlying meaning and generally character-specific, but he also reproduces regional dialects and vernacular forms of speech within the text. By incorporating vernacular speech into the text, Twain is able to further the underlying implications of each character's specific lexicon. Twain even specifically comments on his incorporation of dialect in the final section of *Huck Finn's* introduction entitled EXPLANATORY. This short passage reads:

In this book a number of dialects are used, to wit [...] The shadings have not been done in a haphazard fashion, or by guess-work; but pains-takingly, and with the trustworthy guidance an support of personal familiarity with these several forms of speech. I would make this explanation for the reason that without it many readers would suppose that all these characters were trying to talk alike and not succeeding. (xxxiii)

This introductory note, when coupled with a detailed examination of the text, exposes how the different ways that the characters speak is far too systematic and formulaic to be accidental (Carkeet 316). The purpose of this stylistic explanation is just the opposite of Twain's implicitly stated intention to shift the reader's focus away from the vernacular discrepancies of his characters' speech but rather to alert the existence of these inconsistencies to his readers

directly. Although Twain implies in the EXPLANATORY that dialect is an important aspect of the novel, he never elaborates on the exact nature of that importance. The meticulous attention to lexical and linguistic detail in *Huck Finn* is evidence of Twain's desire to articulate certain meanings and truths that conventional forms of language tend to obscure.

It is no surprise that inside the scope of the novel, Twain's preoccupation with language is characterized most strongly by its narrator and namesake. The novel's fundamental driving force is Huck's ardent pursuit of self-definition. Yet, like Twain, in order to ascribe a definition Huck must first create a capable vocabulary. Essentially, Huck's personal growth over the course of the novel results from his ever-increasing ability to create a language with which to define himself. Self-definition is primarily brought about by Huck's ever-developing comprehension of his own differences from other characters in the novel. Through the recognition of moral flaws in certain key characters—imperfections that fundamentally proceed from some form of linguistic inability, confusion, or inarticulation—Huck is able to reconcile ambiguous aspects of his own morality.

The forms of language and dialect used by other characters in the novel, most significantly those of the Widow Douglas and Miss Watson, Pap Finn, Tom Sawyer, and the slave Jim, expose the specific limitations of each

character's perception of reality. Perhaps the language that is most prominently imposed on Huck throughout the novel is that of the Widow Douglas and Miss Watson. Their language not only has the strongest moral agenda, but it also carries with it the most direct deterrent to opposition. That ever-present threat of punishment, of course, is going to Hell, or as Huck often says, "the bad place" (3). Douglas and Watson's language is the formalized discourse of organized religion, and it is subsequently characterized as the language of education. The perception of reality fostered by this form strongly discourages questioning the validity of its own articulation. Huck's opposition to his caretakers' prescribed religious vernacular is often signaled by his recitation of their language as a subtle form of mockery. He says that he does not desire to be "cramped up and sivilized, as they called it" (31). Huck's use of the word "sivilized" (civilized) functionally subverts the authority of their language through redefinition. Yet this subversion culminates with a complete rejection in Chapter 31 when Huck resolves to help free Jim. Huck is struck with an overwhelming moral dilemma because he believes that this actions sharply conflict with the tenets of the predefined moral structure. The final decision to help free Jim, despite the perceived extreme immorality of the action, signals an opposition by redefinition where "good" and "bad" find new meanings. Huck's famously voices this decision by saying, "Alright then,



I'll go to hell," effectively marking a complete divergence of his conception of morality from that held by Miss Watson and the Widow Douglas.

Another form of language that seeks to impose its will on Huck is the language of his father, Pap Finn. Pap is arguably bound by the limits of his language more than any other character in the novel. The unbridled rage that often consumes him stems from his limited perception of reality, which is brought on by his limited grasp of language. He is able comprehend the characteristics of his anger and rage through the concrete acts of violence that they produce, but he lacks the necessary language to define the essence of his anger. The irony of Pap's situation is that if he had the ability to articulate the cause of his anger, he would no longer have reason to be angry. Pap exemplifies an idea that is central to Ludwig Wittgenstein's *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*—the proposition that "The limits of my language mean the limits of my world" (68: 5.6). Thus, Pap's disapproval of Huck's formal education by the Widow Douglas is driven by internalized envy and subconscious feelings of inadequacy. Pap also makes frequent references to the language of others in an often harsh or critical way that is designed to disguise his jealousy. Perhaps the most interesting example of this is the fairly infamous "call this a government" speech where he drunkenly babbles on about voting rights that were granted to a Black college professor in the North. He makes a specific

connection between language and knowledge during the speech when he remarks that the professor "could talk all kinds of languages, and knowed everything" (34). Here, Pap makes a corresponding connection between language and knowledge that is very explicit. His argument is not fundamentally the product of racial bigotry; rather his disgust arises out of his own insecurity and ignorance. The fact that man in question is Black only serves to illustrate the power that language holds. The Black college professor, undoubtedly a former slave, is able to elevate his marginalized social status through the acquisition of language and education. The angst-ridden language of Pap has a great effect on Huck and is arguably the cause of his predisposed tendency to reject the language of Miss Watson and the Widow Douglas. Yet Huck is able to observe the devastating results of inadequate language through the abuse he endures at the hands of an enraged Pap. There is little doubt that Huck's view of Pap, as a pathetic and broken man, is the fundamental motivation for his rejection of Pap's language and also the resulting fragmented and incomplete conception of reality that his language produces.

Another form of language that exists in the novel is one that is consumed with notions of romantic fantasy. This form is manifested in the character of Tom Sawyer. His form of language creates, in many ways, a false and somewhat delusional sense of reality. He is consumed by romantic ideas of

wild adventures that are hardly every complete without some element of pulp fiction or dime novel sensationalism, such as gangs, robbers, or pirates. Through his use of language, Tom is able to create highly realistic web of fictional fantasy. The high sense of adventure that this form creates is the main reason for its attractiveness to Huck. The language of Tom provides the possibility to escape the confines of civilized society. Initially Huck is a fan of Tom's language and the altered state of romantic reality that it creates. Huck makes reference to this when he is considering boarding an abandoned steamboat wreckage. During this scene Huck says to Jim:

Do you reckon Tom Sawyer would ever go by this thing? Not for pie he wouldn't. He'd call it an adventure—that's what he'd call it; and he'd land on that wreck as if it was his last act. And wouldn't he throw style into it? (81)

Although Huck is initially entranced by this false reality, by the end of the novel is it obvious that Huck no longer sees Tom's language as fanciful and romantic, but rather a web of lies. This is evident to reader when the elaborate plot to free Jim is exposed as a ploy orchestrated by Tom Sawyer—selfishly manufactured for his own entertainment. His prior knowledge of Jim's freedom was obscured in order to live out a fantasy. This is the main problem with Tom's form of language, it not only obscures the truth but it also inhibits his

ability to make decisions from a moral standpoint. In a sense, his language is just as dogmatic as that of Miss Watson and The Widow Douglas; but rather than being governed by the religious conventions, Tom is governed by the rules and images of fictional romance and fanciful notions of adventure.

Finally, the greatest influence on Huck's language and his conception of reality is the slave Jim. Like Huck, Jim is confined by an oppressive society. His language was not born out of an affluent atmosphere, but rather one of racial oppression and bigotry, of which he is the target. Jim's grasp of language supplies him with a limited understanding of the world, but this allows him to make eloquently poetic observations about the world. However, the weight and breadth of these observations is often lost on Jim himself, and as a result, he is largely ignorant of his own deft insight. This phenomenon can be observed in the conversation that he has with Huck concerning King Solomon.

Jim says:

En Mine you, de real pint is down funder—it's down deeper. It lays in de way Sollermun was raised. You take a man dat's got on'y one er two chillen? Is dat gwyne be to wasefu o' chillen? No, he ain't [...] But you take a man dat's got 'bout five million chillen runnin' roun' de house, en it's diffunt. He as soon chop a chile in two as a cat. Dey's plenty mo'. (96)

This interpretation is a legitimate charge against Huck's "conventional" interpretation. Yet only Huck is able to gain from Jim's insight. Jim's somewhat primitive grasp of language allows him to ask fundamental questions and make fundamental observations, but it does not allow him to translate these musings into a larger holistic understanding of the world. The major point of division between the Jim and Huck is that Jim is gullible, via superstition and folk beliefs, and Huck is naïve because he lacks in world experience. Thus, Jim's language provides Huck a worldly perspective and serves as the primary catalyst for his own self-definition. Jim's language is purely fundamental—it represents a basic level of understanding—and this is represented in his phonetic pronunciations and fragmented form of dialect. However, the purity of Jim's language is also its primary flaw. It can only hint at truth and meaning, yet it is incapable of articulating higher-level relationships between meaning and truth and therefore is stagnant. Hence, Huck is able to learn a great deal about the world from Jim and his language, but he must also break away from it in order to fully articulate unique thoughts and ideas.

At the novel's conclusion, Huck is able to establish self-definition by moving away from the symbolic forms of language that seek to confine him. This metamorphosis is symbolized by the death of both Pap and Mrs. Watson,

the exposing of Tom's lies, and the freedom of Jim. Also, at the end of the novel Huck relates that he would like to go West in order to avoid Aunt Sally's desire to "sivilize" him. It is entirely possible that Twain is using the idea of the untamed American West to symbolize a freedom of body and thought that is nearly impossible in the conservative civilized South. Thus, Huck's desire to go West is symbolic of his desire to further his process of self-definition on his own terms—to further the creation of his own vocabulary of understanding.

Thus, the *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* is able to define "America" through the character of Huck by creating a new vocabulary. Twain rejects those language forms that foster oppression and bigotry. In essence, the language that Twain produces is the language of the individual—one that is able to voice internalized understandings of morality and truth. For these reasons, the characterization of *Huckleberry Finn* as "The Great American Novel" is a largely accurate description. With this work Twain not only creates a voice that is purely "American" but also a vocabulary that is capable of defining that voice.

## CHAPTER 3

### TAKING LIES AND MAKING THEM TRUE: THE COLLISION

#### AND INTERSECTION OF FACT AND FICTION IN TIM

#### O'BRIEN'S *THE THINGS THEY CARRIED*

The production of an autobiographical text is fundamentally dependant on the author's inner thoughts, memories of past events, and the emotional content of those memories. Reliance on the author's memory, because of its inherent fallibility, makes the autobiography a problematic endeavor in and of itself. The act of translating memory into written text requires a reexamination of past personal experiences, and thus the text often manifests itself, like memory, in fragmentation. The inherent quality of autobiography to be always-already in a state of fragmentation prompts the question, how can fiction be delineated from non-fiction when the articulation of complete truth, complete meaning, are impossible?

Paul de Man explores the problematic nature of autobiography in his essay "Autobiography as De-facement" asserting that:

Autobiography seems to depend on actual and potentially verifiable events in a less ambivalent way than fiction does. It seems to belong to a simpler mode of referentiality, of

representation, and of diegesis. It may contain lots of phantasms and dreams, but these deviations from reality remain rooted in a subject whose identity is defined by the uncontested readability of his proper name. (920)

Thus, the assumption is that life produces autobiography and the “proper name” of the author—the designation that he, as author, is not a fictional manifestation—creates a work that is decidedly divorced from the genre of fiction. But is this really the case? Is language at all capable of producing anything other than fiction or, at the full extent of its capacities, a work of near-truth? De Man makes the speculation that “the autobiographical project may itself produce and determine the life and that whatever the writer *does* is in fact governed by the technical demands of self-portraiture and thus determined, in all its aspects, by the resources of his medium” (920). De Man’s conjecture is quite to the point—the author’s production of a literary self-portrait is an act of self-creation (or recreation) wherein the divide between author and narrator is bridged. Also, the assumption is that the literary subject/figure’s referent, the author, fundamentally and accurately determines the character of the subject/figure. Yet the figure itself is a manifestation of the author, separated from a purely fictional character only by its originary point of reference. Thus, the subject of any autobiography emerges in fragmented form, as a manifested



persona rather than a breathing individual. The subject produced in autobiography is a fictional construction of the author's internalized self-image, and the resulting figure is a manifestation of singular self-definition. In essence, the author is only capable of creating a persona; the problem being that the person of the author and the manufactured persona are misunderstood to be synonymous terms.

De Man proposes that the author's desire to portray himself or herself in a certain way allows for the *possibility* of the subject (the author's textual self-exposition) defining the referent (author), but I see this as an unavoidable characteristic of the text itself. The autobiography claims something far greater than a work of fiction—an accurate depiction of literal historical situations and subsequently literal truths that proceed from them. Herein lies the fundamental problem. Not only is this truth filtered and adjusted through the lens of the helplessly biased author/narrator, but also the intent of the author is to produce a text that proclaims *to simultaneously live life and understand life*.

De Man's theories about the nature of autobiography can be applied to virtually all texts in the genre (although de Man rejects this conventional label of classification). But, an autobiographical text that openly acknowledges these theoretical issues is a rare thing to say the least, and it is quite easy to understand why the majority of autobiographies never question the validity of

their accounts. When an author produces an autobiographical text he is granted complete control over his personal history—an inherent relationship is formed between the two in which the author “declares himself the subject of his own understanding” (de Man 921). To negate this declaration is to negate the assumed credibility of the author. If the author loses credibility then the content of the text, as a work of nonfiction, does also. And without credibility how can any text be read as anything other than fiction? Thus, by acknowledging the inherent fiction that language produces, a challenge comes not only to the validity of the text, but also to the validity of the individualized psychic self, the referent of the transcribed subject, the proper name: the author. Furthermore, a subsequent realization surfaces that the autobiography does not reveal reliable self-knowledge as it is generally intended to do, but rather it reveals the impossibility of closure (de Man 922). Simply put, the power that autobiography instills in the author, however illusory it may be, is much more appealing than the abysmal possibility that the autobiographical work, even when completed, will always be fragmented, fictive, and ultimately incomplete.

While few autobiographical texts deal with the impossibility of closure brought on by the conflict of differentiation between fiction and nonfiction, Tim O’Brien’s *The Things They Carried* confronts it directly. The autobiographical novel recounts O’Brien’s experiences as an American soldier in the Vietnam

War. O'Brien is virtually obsessed with articulating the "truth" of his experiences, but, as Tina Chen observes, the "truth" of these experiences does not lie in realistic depictions or definitive accounts. Rather, his stories are designed to provoke a precise emotional response (Chen 77). Elaborating on this point, Chen writes:

The [text's] emphasis on the body's visceral response to fiction aptly encapsulates O'Brien's investigation of the literal and metaphoric relationships between stories and bodies, particularly as such affiliations are forged by a psychology of exile and displacement. (Chen 77)

This metaphoric relationship between stories and bodies that Chen discusses can also be explained as a relationship between physical or historical happenings and the internalized comprehension of those happenings. The relationship occurs when the gap between literal history and internalized interpretation is bridged with the lingual articulation of the latter, manifesting itself as a communicative act of interpretation: the story. The problem, of course, is language. O'Brien openly recognizes how language tends to obscure truth rather than reveal it. Unlike many other autobiographers who combat this problem by decisively intermingling external historical information with personal accounts, O'Brien moves away from the rigidly historical, opting

instead to embrace the metaphorical by exploring internalized interpretations of historical events. In this way, the text openly questions conventional ideas about language's ability to articulate truth and meaning. O'Brien himself writes, "absolute occurrence is irrelevant" because "a true war story does not depend on that kind of truth" (89). Thus, the text and the author seek to redefine conventional notions of truth and subsequently question what makes a text autobiographical. As a result, O'Brien openly acknowledges that his autobiography has fictional aspects, but the "fictional" facets of the novel are rarely delineated clearly from the "non-fictional" aspects and as a result the differentiation between the two often remains ambiguous. But according to O'Brien, this is the point.

Perhaps the most glaring example of this blurry dichotomy appears midway through the book in seventh chapter "How to Tell a True War Story." The first declaration in the chapter, "This [story] is true" (67) draws all of the previous accounts into question. Has the entire book, up to this point, been a work of fiction? However, there is an insistence in the initial declaration that this story is, in fact, a work of non-fiction; it is the truth. The story begins with the death of Curt Lemon, a man in O'Brien's platoon. After his death, Rat Kiley, another soldier, writes a letter to Lemon's sister telling her what a brave and courageous soldier Lemon was and what a good friend he had been to

Kiley. Kiley never receives any response to the heartfelt message from Lemon's sister. O'Brien, acting as narrator, relays how Lemon and Kiley were playing a game that involved tossing a smoke grenade back and forth, and Lemon stepped into a sunlit area during the game and landed on a booby-trapped mortar round—which killed him instantly (67-70). After this account, O'Brien presents another story that he gained from a different member of the platoon, Mitchell Sanders. Sanders tells of a particular night when his platoon hears music echoing through the hills, and the fear and madness that it imparts on the soldiers. As a result, the hills are firebombed unmercifully. When the soldiers are later questioned about the reasons for their actions, they are unable to explain their reasons for the attack. After Sanders concludes his story, he admits to O'Brien that parts of his story were fabricated, explaining that the moral truth of the story can only be found in silence—it cannot be transmitted in words (70-85). Just as Sanders is ultimately unable to resolve the inconsistencies in his story, O'Brien has trouble separating fact from fiction in his own account. He writes:

In any war story, but especially a true one, it's difficult to separate what happened from what seemed to happen. What seems to happen becomes its own happening and has to be told that way. The angles of vision are skewed... The pictures get

jumbled; you tend to miss a lot. And then afterward, when you go to tell about it, this is always that surreal seemingness, which makes the story seem untrue, but which in fact represents the hard and exact truth as it seemed. (71)

For O'Brien, the literal truth of the situation must be found outside of the written word or the literally recounted experience. He finds that the incorporation of fiction into his war account provides the reader with a visceral response that would be lost without the fictional embellishment of certain events. Thus, O'Brien's story in this chapter is elaborated in order to communicate greater meaning. He pays special attention to detail—describing the bright warmth of the midday sun and light playfulness of both Lemon and Kiley. As a result, the mortar blast not only claims Lemon's life, but it creates a stark contrast between natural beauty and human destruction. Likewise, the "music" in Sanders's story may have been nothing more than the manifested fear and anxiety of the platoon; but the point of the story is not the "music," but the idea that war is insanity.

In the same chapter, "How to Tell a True War Story," O'Brien writes that "absolute occurrence is irrelevant...a thing may happen and be a total lie; another thing may not happen and be truer than truth" (83). Yet again he is explaining the intent of his writing, his war stories, is not to recreate events

literally, but rather to create a visceral experience in his readers that mirrors his own emotional store. He gives an this example of a war story that is fictional, but at the same time it is “truer than truth”:

Four guys go down a trail, A grenade sails out. One guy jumps on it and takes the blast, but it’s a killer grenade and everybody dies anyway. Before they die, though, one of the dead guys says, ‘The fuck you do *that* for?’ and the jumper says, ‘Story of my life, man,’ and the other guy starts to smile but he’s dead.

That’s a true story that never happened.(84-5)

With this admittedly fictional scenario O’Brien is able to distill both his writing style and writing philosophy. His experiences, like the accounts contained in the novel, are fragmented and disconnected. Only through fiction he is able to defragment his experiences and communicate a web of meaning—what he believes to be a more fundamental and complete truth. He discusses this in the short chapter “Good Form” saying, “I want you [the reader] to feel what I felt. I want you to know why story-truth is sometimes truer than happening-truth” (179). For O’Brien, like de Man, autobiography does not reveal reliable self-knowledge. The truth that O’Brien seeks to convey is the impossibility of closure, which in turn illustrates de Man’s idea that autobiography reveals the

impossibility of “totalization (that is the impossibility of coming into being) of all textual systems made up of tropological substitutions” (922).

The most relevant of these de Manian tropological substitutions, as previously touched on, is the substitution of the author for the manifested character of the subject, where the two determine each other by mutually reflexive substitution. *The Things They Carried* finds a unique application of this theory because another dimension of substitution is added. O’Brien writes about himself as author and as historical subject. Thus, O’Brien manifests an authorial character to accompany his own historically manifested self-subject. The product of this additional layer of substitution is a metafictional manifestation that is separate from both the subject and the physical referent. As a result, O’Brien creates a work of fiction, metafiction, and autobiography. Only through this third separation of narrative voice is O’Brien able to acknowledge and, in many ways, override many of the problems that de Man touches on. Throughout the novel O’Brien implicitly contends that he is *not* the subject of his own understanding and finds that his war experiences elude even his comprehension. In essence, he only has impressions of experience—the visceral and emotional aftermath of unexplainable happenings.

The autobiographical text that emerges from O’Brien’s presentation of self in triptych and his insistence on the dichotomy between “happening-truth”



and “story-truth” is a work of personal fiction brought on by the act of writing—the actuality of physically bringing the text into being. His use of “story-truth” or admittedly fictionalized situations is produced by the condition of having to translate experience into words and text. As a result, the act of writing, by way of reexamination and fictionalization, creates new memories that are distinguishable from their original catalysts in name only. Which is to say that O’Brien is able to distinguish the “fictional” accounts from the “non-fictional” accounts, but both forms contain the same emotional content and stir the same emotional response. Whether an account is “fictional” or “non-fictional” has little bearing on whether or not an account is “true.” By telling and retelling his stories, O’Brien is able to add new meaning to them by adding to his own personal fiction. And for O’Brien, truth often resides in fiction and repetition of the story only serves to further the fiction, and perhaps the truth. O’Brien writes how a true war story “never seems to end,” because inevitably there is always more to say (83).

## CHAPTER 4

### FORGETTING TO REMEMBER: THE CREATION OF PERSONAL FICTION AND FALSE MEMORIES IN JUNICHIRO TANIZAKI'S

#### *THE KEY*

The invention of a personal fiction through the act of writing is often limited theoretically to works of non-fiction, but the idea can be applied to virtually any narrative text. It is intrinsic to the interrelationship between memory and language. Yet, the problem lies less with memory, and almost exclusively with language, or rather language's inability to articulate memory. Ludwig Wittgenstein's *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* explores the limits of language and its correlation with the limits of reality, famously concluding with the proposition, "What we cannot speak about we must pass over in silence" (89). This work of post-Nietzschean philosophy seeks to explain how reality is a product of language—how truth, morality, desire, and every other facet of perception are fundamentally designated and dictated by language. Thus, following with Wittgenstein's closing statement, language is an imperfect vehicle for conveying ultimate meaning. As a result, language instills an innate drive toward articulation, which is an ultimately futile pursuit because aspects of experience and understanding are always already lost in translation. The

attempt to translate the essence of experience into words, spoken or written, is primarily an attempt to capture or rather relive an experience with all of its initial vitality. These attempts at articulation result in the creation of a personal fiction constructed from a fragmented memory born out of the fragmentary nature of language.

This drive toward articulation and the resulting creation of a personal fiction are explored to a great degree in Tanizaki's *The Key*. The novel is presented in an epistolary format via the separate but chronologically parallel journals of a Professor and his wife Ikuko. The construction of the novel as a dual narrative creates a deminsion of realism and objectivism that is a singular narrative voice is largely incapable of achieveing. Through these two accounts the reader assumes the role of voyeur and is given an unfettered view into the thoughts and minds of both characters. The reader is able to forgo the filter that an unseen narrator creates, and the result is a narrative account that is not aware of the reader and therefore not self-conscious. In the case of *The Key*, the two journal accounts expose the creation of a personal fiction in an attempt to ascribe meaning and justification to each narrator's thoughts, actions, and desires.

Starting with the Professor, his journal serves as a medium through which he can voice his wants and desires free from public or private

speculation and ridicule. The main content of these inner desires is sexual, and evidence of this can be found as early as the second sentence of his first entry: "I have always avoided commenting on my sexual relations with Ikuko, for fear that she might surreptitiously read my diary and be offended"(3). This sentence can be read as an introduction to both accounts, for they are both a catalog of sexual desires and experiences that violate social taboos. Yet, in the case of the Professor, the first instance of the journal as an extension of memory comes in the January 29<sup>th</sup> entry. In this particular entry, Ikuko is incapacitated due to her excess drinking a few nights before. The Professor takes advantage of her unconsciousness and uses it to view her in the nude. He goes to great lengths to observe every aspect of his wife's naked body—removing all of the bed linens from her body and making use of bright fluorescent lamps. He comments, "I suppose the average husband is familiar with all the details of his wife's body, down to the very wrinkles on the soles of her feet. But Ikuko has never let me examine her in that way"(28). The Professor is driven to the point of titillation by the forbidden nature of this inspection and the subsequent account in the journal allows the event to exist in a static sphere—retaining all of its original vivacity. The Professor goes on to say, "Now I can love her with twice the passion I used to have," and "I steeped myself in the pleasure of looking at her" (30). Thus, the journal not

only serves to recount the experience but also to strengthen the emotional content of the memory through the composition of the text.

The creation of the Professor's personal fiction begins immediately with the act of writing. Through language he is able to identify his desires and subsequently provide his desires with a false essence. The act of seeing his wife naked and closely inspecting her body creates false memories of intimacy, and these false memories conjure a false emotional response. Freud explains the delusional satisfaction of desire in *The Interpretation of Dreams*, stating that the individual invents a first experience of satisfaction, and this is a nostalgic first experience that never existed in actuality. Thus, this fiction, this myth, constructs itself as a past that never was a present (87-96). The excitement that the Professor feels is a product of his self-manufactured myth of satisfaction. In actuality he and Ikuko have never shared moments of deep intimacy, but through his journal he is able to create a fiction that satisfies this desire.

By conjuring memories of satisfaction The Professor is able to give proper names to his desires, and in this way language places him as the subject and Ikuko as the object in a power relationship. Jacques Derrida explores the act and implications of naming in his work *On Grammatology* stating, "To name, to give names that it will on occasion be forbidden to pronounce, such is the originary violence of language which consists in

inscribing within a difference, in classifying, in suspending the vocative absolute" (112). Thus, the system of naming that language provides is indicative of the power relationship that it creates. Naming gives meaning, which in turn furthers knowledge, and knowledge provides the capacity for power and the opportunity for control. Yet the desire for control is not always malicious; neither is it always conscious; rather it is inherent to the formation and structure of language. The formation of language is rooted in desire: Jacques Lacan theorized that the fundamental desire for reunification of child with mother spawns all other desires, and the means to acquire these objects of desire is language (Lacan 1-7). Hence, advances toward objects of desire are all designed to either place one or keep one in the role of the subject. By creating a fiction—a new language—the Professor is able to gain symbolic power over Ikuko.

The establishment of a subject/object relationship between the Professor and Ikuko is also furthered by the Professor's obsession with visual images of his wife's body. In the February 24<sup>th</sup> entry he begins photographing while she is unconscious and in the nude, in addition to writing about his experiences. During this episode an interesting problem arises—all of the pictures are slightly out of focus. He writes, "Unfortunately, this camera has a rather slow lens, and no range finder; since I'm not very good at estimating distances, my pictures

are often out of focus" (53). This can be read as evidence of the futile nature of the Professor's documentation. His journal does not suffice as a living substitute for experience, and as a result of this he turns to photography for compensation. However, he finds that photographs are also incapable of capturing the essence of his experiences—symbolized by the poor quality of the pictures.

The camera then is functioning as Lacan's mirror—where the infant is allowed to see itself for the first time as the other (Lacan 1-7). Just as the mirror image of the child is at once the child and something separate from the child, the photographs of Ikuko are both her and something separate from her. The act of photographing Ikuko, like Lacan's mirror, creates an additional self—a double that can be inspected to a greater degree than the original. However, the photographs produce the opposite of the desired effect; they only serve to alienate the Professor. The blurry images only serve to remind him that his manufactured myth of satisfaction is, in actuality, a delusion. For this reason, the images are fragmented and incomplete. Lacan explains that an encounter of this nature is both an encounter with the self and with history, and it moves the activity of viewing from a transparent relationship of meaning and expression to a level in which meaning seems to exist without the presence of subjectivity (Lacan 45-56). The aim of the photograph, in relation to the

Professor, is to be both the object and the representation of the object. The realization of this impossibility results in a challenge to the Professor's status as the subject in the power relationship that his personal fiction provides for him.

As the novel progresses, the Professor becomes consumed by the idea of sustaining memories, or rather sustaining his personal fiction. This becomes evident when his actual memory becomes increasingly fallible. The March 10<sup>th</sup> entry exposes this fear when he relates the trouble he is having remembering names and locations. With respect to this problem he states, "A terrible anxiety gripped me" (70), and as a result his obsession with memory is furthered. In the same entry he writes that, "I have at last found something to live for" (72). The definition of the word "something" in the previous passage is not simply the content of his sexual desires but also the ability to document them in an attempt to relive them via photographs and journal entries. At this point in the novel, the journal overrides the Professor's ability to recall experiences and thus becomes an invaluable aid to his own failing memory. Also, this scene signals the point where his self-manufactured personal fiction overrides his perception of reality.

With respect to the Professor's wife, Ikuko, the journal serves a similar purpose—a medium to display forbidden thoughts and taboo desires, but her journal serves a slightly different purpose, or rather, it is taken in a slightly



different direction. Initially the Professor's journal serves as a catalyst for her own journal, and to some extent her writing continues to be responsive in nature throughout the novel. Yet, she has no desire to gain more knowledge about her husband by reading his journal, and evidence of this is contained in her first entry: "Whatever he thinks, I shall never read it. I haven't the faintest desire to penetrate his psychology" (10). This statement is notable because her journal, in many ways, is an attempt to penetrate *her* psychology. This desired penetration, like the Professor, results in the creation of a personal fiction that can be molded and rearranged to accommodate the nature of the desire and also to justify the means of acquisition.

With respect to memory, Ikuko's journal functions in the same way as the Professor's journal. Yet the subject of her memory is not the Professor but Kimura, a family friend and her lover. She pours over the sight of his nude body in the same way that the Professor responds to the sight of her nude form. Yet she combines both men saying, "He (the Professor) is identified with you (Kimura), you are part of him, the two of you really are one"(93). This idea displays both her need for justification of her actions and also the lack of definition in her own memory, which results in a Lacanian misrecognized melding of images. At another point in Ikuko's narrative, the mental rift

between the Professor and Kimura grows deeper, and as result she retracts her previous statement:

Now that his (Kimura's) image has unmistakably come alive, I can separate him completely from my husband. Once and for all, I hereby strike out the words "you are part of him, the two of you are really one." (104)

With this statement Ikuko solidifies her feelings toward both her husband and Kimura, and this realization serves to clarify her memories of both men. Thus, the journal documents her clouded psyche and her subsequent reinterpretation of the text creates new meaning for previous memories. In this way, the text forces her to reassess previous thoughts and actions from an entirely new vantage point and, in essence, create new memories without new experience.

Ikuko's memory synthesis is one of the main points of separation between her narrative and that of her husband. The Professor is never able to achieve a synthesis through his writing and accordingly add new meaning to his experiences. By the end of the novel, the Professor is using his journal as a substitute for memory in order to recreate experience. Conversely for Ikuko, the act of writing coupled with the act of remembering creates experience. As a result, Ikuko's understanding of herself is furthered, where the Professor's remains stagnant.

The two parallel narratives in *The Key* expose how the act of remembering, or rather the articulation of memory through language, can foster a specific type of delusional neurosis. For the Professor, his journal both exposes his sexual desires and serves to further them to the point of obsessive fetishism. The memories of his wife are incomplete, and through the journal he seeks to piece together the fractured mental image of his wife. Ultimately this proves to be an unsuccessful venture because he finds that his experiences and his writing create an image similar to his photographs—blurry and amorphous. Ikuko's journal exposes her sexual desires, but also allows her to reassess the meaning of those desires. The mental dichotomy between her husband and Kimura, which progresses from indistinguishable to clearly defined, presents her with a mental paradox about the meaning of love and desire. This is resolved by the emergence of antisocial behavior marked by the desire for her husband's death. Ikuko is only able to comprehend the content of her memories by killing her husband and replacing him with Kimura. This obsession with remembering pushes both the Professor and Ikuko into the realm of psychosis—which could have been avoided if either character had allowed themselves to forget. Had Ikuko been able to forget the Professor, perhaps she would have not killed him. And had the Professor allowed himself to forget the

shortcomings of his relationship with Ikuko, his desires would not have reached the point of fetishism—resulting in the molestation of his wife.

Thus, the struggle to articulate experience and assign meaning to memory is Tanizaki's fundamental conflict. The character of the Professor is ultimately absorbed by his own fiction to the point that reality and fiction become indistinguishable. Yet, the manufactured fiction, like the photograph, holds no natural essence and resists meaning. Ikuko is able to reconcile her manufactured myth eliminating the only obstacle between reality and fiction: her husband. Both see language as the key to gaining true meaning, but language is ultimately incapable of this task. Thus, referencing back to Wittgenstein, those things that the Professor and Ikuko cannot speak or write about must inevitably remain in silence.

CHAPTER 5  
LANGUAGE, LIES, AND AUDIOTAPE: DECONSTRUCTING  
MARGUERITE DURAS'S QUINTESSENTIAL ANTI-NOVEL,  
*L'AMANTE ANGLAISE*

Since its inception, the anti-novel has been a source of intrigue in various critical circles. Jean-Paul Sartre first coined the term in 1947 in response to Nathalie Sarraute's novel *Portrait d'un Inconnu* (*Portrait of a Man Unknown*) and it has since become associated with the Nouvelle Roman literary movement of the 1950s. Characteristically anti-novels challenge conventional ideas about the structure of the novel—often relying on distortion and fragmentation of the narrative structure. The concept of the anti-novel, along with the subsequent creation of the anti-hero, still retains the popular label of “experimental” in fiction of the late 20<sup>th</sup> and early 21<sup>st</sup> century. Authors such as Irvine Welsh (*Trainspotting* and *The Acid House*) and Chuck Palahnuik (*Fight Club* and *Choke*) wholly embrace the anti-novel and extend it to the point of literary nihilism. Although these writers address topics of hard drug use, ultra-violence, anarchy, and sexual deviance, the basis for all of these indictments of authority and conventional morality can be read as a direct challenge to the nature of

the text itself. Palahnuik's novel *Choke* begins with the narrator issuing an explicit warning to the reader:

If you're going to read this, don't bother.

After a couple of pages, you won't be here. So forget it. Go away. Get out while you're still in one piece.

Save yourself. (Palahnuik 1)

This sentiment is also echoed in the opening monologue of the film adaptation of Welsh's novel *Trainspotting*:

Choose your future. Choose life... But why would I want to do a thing like that? I chose not to choose life. I chose somethin' else.

And the reasons? There are no reasons. Who needs reasons when you've got heroin? (*Trainspotting*)

Both passages serve to outline the nihilistic nature of the story that follows them, but the underlying message is ultimately one of textual meaninglessness.

The words "Save yourself" and "There are no reasons" are not simply statements about counter culture or illegal drug use—they are actually indictments of the medium through which meaning and truth are conveyed: language. Despite the cultural and social climates that influenced the works of Palahnuik and Welsh, their fiction is firmly rooted in the base concept of the anti-novel. The works of these two writers are the evolutionary product of this

literary form, and their work owes a great deal to a handful of mid-century French writers who are undoubtedly responsible for its inception. Arguably, one of the earliest and most influential proponents of the anti-novel is French writer Marguerite Duras. Although she is considered a minor literary figure in some critical circles, I will argue that her experimentation with literary form produced one of the purest examples of the anti-novel; one that remains “experimental” even by the standards of present day fiction.

The forty-nine year span (1943-1992) of Marguerite Duras’s literary career yielded over forty novels and nearly a dozen plays. With regard to the anti-novel, perhaps her most remarkable work was published in the middle of her career (1967). *L’Amante Anglaise*, upon initial inspection, is a detective novel. The story takes place in the small rural town of Viorne, France. Claire Lannes, a cleaning lady at a local elementary school, has just confessed to the murder and mutilation of her deaf-mute cousin Marie-Thérèse Bousquet—having cut the body into pieces and disposed of them on train cars headed out of town. Police have recovered all of the body parts with the exception of the head. The entire novel is presented in a question and answer form of police interrogation after both the murder and Claire’s subsequent confession have taken place. The story is composed of three sections, or rather three transcribed interviews with individual characters: Robert Lamy, the proprietor

of a local bistro; Pierre Lannes, Claire's husband; and finally Claire Lannes, the confessed murderer. The anonymous interrogator instructs each of the individuals that he is recording and compiling these interviews for a book that is to be written about the crime. Yet, because Claire has already confessed to the murder, the aim of the interrogator is not to uncover guilt, but rather to uncover Claire's motives.

At the center of *L'Amante Anglaise* is the desire for knowledge—the desire for truth. Yet the novel exposes how language, the fundamental medium through which truth is rendered, not only obscures the truth, but resists coherence altogether. The first two interrogations with Robert Lamy and Pierre Lannes initially serve to cement the known factual information about the events leading up to the murder and the subsequent confession. Pure speculation by both parties is the only insight that the interrogator is able to gain about Claire's motive for the murder. I am inclined to agree with Erica Eisinger's observation that although different witnesses' versions conflict, it is not because they are lying or forgetful but because their individual stories, like the separate parts of the body, cannot reveal the total mystery. Eisinger goes on to say that the investigation cannot be a formulated recreation of the past but it must be an invention, a creation itself (Eisinger 517). In this way, the truth about



Claire's motives for murdering Marie-Thérèse cannot be discovered, and as a consequence the truth must be constructed.

Truth as a construct is not only a central problem in this novel but also a defining element of the anti-novel genre. What sets *L'Amante Anglaise* apart from Duras's other works, and from other works in the genre, is the remarkable precision with which this problematic structure is exposed. The third and final section of the novel, Claire's interrogation, both exposes the construction of truth and seeks to deconstruct it to the point of meaninglessness. The content of the third interrogation shifts the novel from a detective story to a stark character study of a mad woman. The desire of the interrogator is to understand Claire's madness and in doing so, comprehend her reasons for committing murder. This desire to identify, to name, is the desire to impose a hierarchical subject/object relationship—it is the desire on the part of the interrogator to establish a joint identity as a means of control. Claire's inability to articulate her motives, by way of cryptic and at times incomprehensible language, prevents the establishment of a power relationship and as a result the reasons for her actions resist lingual articulation.

Jacques Derrida explores the act and implications of naming in his work *On Grammatology* stating, "To name, to give names that it will on occasion be forbidden to pronounce, such is the originary violence of language which

consists in inscribing within a difference, in classifying, in suspending the vocative absolute" (112). Thus, the system of naming that language provides is indicative of the power relationship that it creates. Naming gives meaning, which in turn furthers knowledge, and knowledge provides the capacity for power and the opportunity for control. Yet, the desire for control is not always malicious, neither is it always conscious, rather it is inherent to the formation and structure of language. The formation of language is rooted in desire— Jacques Lacan theorized that the fundamental desire for reunification with the mother spawns all other desires, and the means to acquire these objects of desire is language (Lacan 1-7). Hence, advances toward objects of desire are all designed to either place one or keep one in the role of the subject. Thus, if the interrogator is able to penetrate Claire's language, he will secure his identity as the subject in a power relationship. Claire's resistance to his questioning, or rather inability to respond, is evidence of her reluctance, on an unconscious level, to assume the role of the object in that power relationship. Derrida discusses this resistance to control, explaining that the refusal to disclose the proper name results in the reassuring seal of self-identity, the secret (112). Claire's secret is then an act of self-defense and self-identity preservation. Derrida furthers this point stating that, "Violence appears only at the moment when the intimacy of proper names can be opened by forced

entry," and "The mere presence of the spectator, then, is a violation" (113).

The dialogic form of the novel, where the interrogator assumes the role of Derrida's spectator, dictates Claire's defensive response against the inherent violence caused by the spectator's desire to discern identity and meaning through language.

Although much of the conflict in the novel arises from the Derridian struggle to assign a proper name to Claire's motive, the desire of the interrogator to penetrate her language is ultimately a futile endeavor. Claire's secret, the location of the missing head, is a masterfully crafted metaphor on the part of Duras. Without the head, Marie-Thérèse's body is fragmented and incomplete, her form and identity are vaguely discernible but not concrete. The fragmented state of Marie-Thérèse's body mirrors the fragmented nature of Claire's responses to the interrogator's questions. When asked about the location of the head, the two share this exchange:

–I can't make out why they want the head. The rest  
is quite sufficient.

*–I told you, a confession has to be complete.*

–I don't understand. (87)

The content of this dialogue is revisited many times throughout the interrogation, and it always arrives at the same end. For the interrogator, to

uncover the head is to uncover the motive—to distill the act to its essence.

Herein lies the problem. Should the head be discovered, Claire’s motivation for committing the act would still remain shrouded in mystery. Thus, the fragmented body and the missing head are symbolic of the fragmented nature of language, which makes complete meaning, complete comprehension, and complete truth all impossibilities. The mistake made by the interrogator is the confusing of the existence of the head and the essence of the crime. This confusion is the reason that Claire is unable to understand his request for a “complete confession.” In the way that the head constitutes a complete body, the motive constitutes a complete and coherent crime. Yet, just as Claire is unable to understand the desire for the head, she cannot comprehend why the articulation of her motive will aid in understanding the act. The confusing of existence and essence is a central point of inspection in Paul de Man’s work *The Rhetoric of Romanticism*. De Man uses the example of Hölderlin’s simile “...wie Blumen entstehn” (the word originates like the flower) stating the simile “is in fact a paradox, since origination is inconceivable on the ontological level, the ease with which we nevertheless accept it is indicative of our desire to forget...but this combination is made possible only by a deliberate forgetting of the transcendental nature of the source” (5). Thus, Hölderlin’s simile commits a logical fallacy—with the flower, existence and essence coincide at all times;

unlike words, which always originate like something else. Flowers originate like themselves, without the aid of metaphor or simile; and although words strive to free themselves from metaphor and simile, this is an impossibility because language can never achieve the absolute identity of natural objects (de Man 4-7). Therefore, problems with diction arise when the existence of language is confused with the essence of language—when a word is viewed as a self-defining entity to which a singular meaning is attached. When a word is analyzed in this cyclical manner, the deconstructive nature of the text quickly becomes apparent as the presumed meaning virtually implodes from the ever-growing weight of textual possibility and variation.

Thus, this confusing of existence and essence is the driving force behind the interrogator's line of questioning, yet the examination and subsequent reexaminations of the same information only serve to obscure and deconstruct the apparent truth of Claire's motives to a greater degree. Perhaps the word that best exemplifies de Man's concept in relation to the text is the word "mad" or "madness." Claire is described as mad by both Robert Lamy and Pierre Lannes during their interviews, yet when the interrogator submits their usage of the term to closer inspection neither Robert nor Pierre is able to accurately define the meaning that he intends to convey. After referring to Claire as a "lunatic" and speculating that she had "gone out of her mind completely,"

Lamy himself confesses, "if you ask me to say outright once and for all whether it was madness or not, I can't tell you" (33). When questioned about Claire's day-to-day interactions with Marie-Thérèse prior to the murder, Pierre states, "She could be very funny. She and Marie-Thérèse used to lark about sometimes pretending that they were mad" (53). Yet, when Pierre is later questioned about his initial attraction to Claire, he conveys that there was a strong physical attraction, which allowed him to overlook "the strangeness of her character...her madness" (57). But, the most glaring example of this textual deconstruction is presented in Claire's interrogation:

–*Supposing there was a motive, a reason, but one that's unknown.*

–Unknown to whom?

–*Everyone. You. Me.*

–And where is this unknown reason?

–*In you?*

–Why in me? Why not in her (Marie-Thérèse), or in the house, or in the knife? Or in death? Yes, in death.

Is madness a reason?

–*Perhaps.*

–When they get tired of looking and not finding anything,  
they'll say its madness. I know.

Oh well. If it's madness I've got, if that's my illness, I'm not  
sorry. (105-6)

Claire's definition of madness at the end of this selected passage is actually the most concise definition of the three. She implies that when the search for both the head of Marie-Thérèse and the motive for her murder have been thoroughly exhausted, the resulting proper name applied to the act and its motive will be incomprehensibility or madness.

*L'Amante Anglaise* concludes without resolve. Having exhausted the efforts of the interrogator with her seemingly irrelevant stream of consciousness, Claire at the end of the interview begins another daft musing that has little or nothing to do with the murder. The irony of the novel is not that the mystery remains unsolved but rather that truth cannot be attained in terms of itself. Likewise, language cannot be defined in terms of itself; rather multiple meanings exist within any given text, and *L'Amante Anglaise* illustrates the madness that results from the desire to attain complete and fixed meaning from a text. Marguerite Duras has created a pure and unadulterated example of the anti-novel that does not concern itself with meaning in terms of morality, society, or culture. Rather, it challenges much deeper ideas about how truth

and meaning are conveyed, and how language is an imperfect medium for conveying either of the two. I still find the book to be highly “experimental” even when compared with more recent evolutions of the genre. I do feel that Irvine Welsh’s question to his reader, “And (what are) the reasons?,” exists as the quintessential question that the anti-novel asks. Welsh also produces the quintessential answer: “There are no reasons.”



## CHAPTER 6

### THE CARNIVAL AND THE CASK: CONNECTIONS BETWEEN THE LANGUAGE OF BAKHTIN'S CARNIVAL AND THE CLAIM OF MADNESS IN "THE CASK OF AMONTILLADO"

The essence of fear is that which is unknown. That which cannot be explained or understood cannot be controlled and henceforth cannot be prematurely prevented. The end of lingual articulation where explanation and comprehension are always already in a state of elusivity fundamentally marks the end of hierarchical control. Edgar Allen Poe's "The Cask of Amontillado" weaves a foreboding tale of horror and suspense that relies primarily on this innate fear of inarticulation, or rather of hierarchical paralysis that results from lingual inarticulation, for story construction. The tale itself is the confession of a man who committed a heinous murder nearly fifty years prior. Montresor, the narrator, lures Fortunato, his victim, into the ancecestral burial vaults of the Montresor family, under the pretense that he needs Fortunato's opinion on a recently purchased cask of Amontillado wine. Once the two have reached a remote section of the catacombs, Montresor shackles Fortunato to the crypt's back wall and seals him in. The most bemusing and unsettling aspect of the story is the seeming lack of motive for the crime. As a result, many readers

and critics have come to the conclusion that Montresor is simply insane, and thus characterize his aggression singularly as an act of madness. However, Poe constructs a complex literary framework where the relatively straightforward claim of madness as motive would render many of the intricate details of the story arbitrary and meaningless. It is my conjecture that the details of the narrative, primarily the atmosphere of carnival that frames the story, are fundamentally responsible for the surface appearance of a motiveless crime and the subsequent popular notion that Montresor is insane. Also, the milieu of medieval carnival, while not exposing the motive itself, is primarily responsible for Montresor's inability to articulate the cause of his actions.

In order to understand the reasons for the elusivity of the motive, we must first understand the nature and implications of the atmosphere of carnival. In his seminal work on the subject, *Rabelais and His World*, Mikhail Bakhtin describes the carnivalesque as an atmosphere of inversion where standard themes of social makeup are extravagantly juxtaposed with the "temporary suspension of all hierarchic distinctions and barriers among men...and all the prohibitions of usual life" (7-9). During carnival, a unique conception of existence causes the individual to feel he is a part of the collective, at which point he ceases to be himself and is absorbed into the holistic body of carnival

(Clark and Holquist 302). Thus, the body of carnival does not concern itself with the act of social redefinition; rather it thrives on the *absence* of social classification and behavior. Bakhtin elaborates on this idea stating:

In fact, carnival does not know footlights, in the sense that it does not acknowledge and distinction between actors and spectators...Carnival is not a spectacle seen by people; they live in it, and everyone participates because its very idea embraces all people. While carnival lasts, there is no other life outside it. During carnival time life is subject only to its laws, that is, the laws of its own freedom. (7-8)

Thus, carnival not only inverts social order but also social laws of conduct. Rules of law, or rather accepted rules or morality, are not redefined—they are suspended.

The atmosphere of carnival, with its social and moral inversions, is of vital importance to Poe's story. The story implies that both Montresor and Fortunato are men of relatively high social status. Elena Baraban notes that "A number of onomastic and semantic characteristics of the text indicate that 'The Cask of Amontillado' is a story about the characters' power relations and their social status" (51). Clues to their social status include Montresor's large home and extensive store of wine, and also Fortunato's apparent distinction as a

renowned wine aficionado. Thus, the opening line of Poe's story, "The thousand injuries of Fortunato I had borne the best I could, but when he ventured on insult, I vowed revenge" (13), hints at a socially dictated declaration of intent to exact cruel retribution. The first paragraph of the story is evidence enough that the action involves premeditation, and the relevant question is not an inquiry into the nature of the "insults" that Montresor has suffered at the hands of Fortunato but rather why he has chosen carnival as the backdrop for his actions. Why is the arena of carnival more favorable to Montresor than any other time? There must be some advantage to his selection of this specific date when all other details of the Fortunato's execution have been so diligently devised. The answer again, lies with Bakhtin.

The carnival reveals an underlying concept of human society—Martin Heidegger's conjecture about the true nature of humanity where "Everyone is the other, and no one is himself" (165) is not only fully actualized during carnival, but also fully realized. Carnival negates the self-subject "I" and the disassociated-collective "They;" inside the sphere of carnival only the inclusive-collective "We" exists. Thus, by actualizing his revenge inside the sphere of carnival, Montresor is able to free himself from a moral dilemma that would be exacted on the "I" in a normal social sphere. Also, the social and moral juxtapositions of the carnivalesque are quite evident in the text. Montresor

recalls, "It was about dusk, one evening during the supreme madness of the carnival season, that I encountered my friend" (13). His use of the word "friend" in this context is enigmatic considering that story is presumably a free-willed confession told in the past tense. Why does he use the identifier "friend" as opposed to "enemy" when he has already divulged his murderous intentions to his unnamed listener? According to Bakhtin, within the sphere of carnival these distinctions lose their definition—just as diametric oppositions such as "good" and "evil," and "moral" and "immoral" dissolve. The grotesque body of carnival, as previously stated, is a collective: the individual is lost and a collective humanity comes into being and as a result internalized conceptions of morality deplete as the mentality of the individualized self fades away. Thus, the "supreme madness" of carnival that Montresor describes is also his madness, for he is a part of that collective carnival body.

To further the idea of negated personal identity, the act of wearing costumes and masks is very important to the carnivalesque and to "The Cask of Amontillado." Of Fortunato, Montresor says, "He had on a tight-fitting parti-striped dress and his head was surmounted by the conical cap and bells" (14) which contrasts his own garb of a black roquelaire or cloak and a black silk mask (14-15). Aside from the obvious foreshadowing of their contrasting apparel—Fortunato as the harlequin clad fool and Montresor's darkly ominous

resemblance to an executioner—their costumes also reinforce the loss of self that carnival fosters. The mask is of particular importance to both Poe and Bakhtin:

Even more important is the theme of the mask, the most complex theme of folk culture. The mask is connected with the joy of change and reincarnation, with gay relativity and with the merry negation of uniformity and similarity; it rejects conformity to oneself. The mask is related to transition, metamorphoses, the violation of natural boundaries...(Bakhtin 40)

Through the guise of the executioner's black mask, Montresor undergoes a metamorphosis and is able to violate his natural boundaries of morality. Only through the mask of carnival is he able to carry out the murder of Fortunato and separate himself from the grim nature of his actions. Also, Poe states explicitly that Montresor places the mask on his face, but never makes any reference, explicit or implicit, to it being removed. As a result, an implicit metaphorical assumption can be made—Montresor wears the concealing mask of carnival throughout the remainder of the story.

The act of laughter and its functions, in relation to Bakhtin's theories of the carnivalesque and "The Cask of Amontillado," is a vital point of inspection. Laughter is an indispensable facet of the medieval carnival because it too

fosters an inversion of binary opposition. Carnavalesque laughter is an expression of freedom because it was all but eliminated from official spheres of society including the religious, the governmental, the ceremonial, and the formal etiquette of social hierarchy. This language of laughter “builds its own world, its own church, its own state versus the official state” (Bakhtin 73,88). Thus, the laughter of carnival characterizes the language of carnival as one of joyous and celebratory opposition—making light of societal norms by making a satire of formal language. Laughter functions to complete the illusion that carnival casts over the individual, and this is apparent in the case of “The Cask of Amontillado.” As Montresor and Fortunato trek from the street to the depths of Montresor’s familial catacombs, the two are constantly engaged in lively banter—Fortunato’s tone is intoxicated and often on the fringes of lewdness, while Montresor’s demeanor is accommodating and barbiturately collected as he offers up left-handed responses to Fortunato’s musings. This informal banter is important because it identifies both (to the reader and each character to the other) as creatures of the carnival—their social rank is suspended, as is their implicit social history. This carnivalesque banter even persists after Fortunato has been chained to the wall of the crypt and only comes to an end just before Montresor positions the final brick into place. Through this language of

laughter and farce, Montresor is able stabilize the illusion of carnival and carry out the murder.

All of the aspects of carnival—collective atmosphere, binary inversions, masks and costumes, and laughter—have created a space where Montresor can actualize his murder-fantasy. Yet, it is imperative that all of these aspects of carnival remain intact or the illusion of the inclusive-collective “We” dissolves and the self-subject “I” reemerges with its individualized guilt and singular accountability. The threat of unveiling the self-subject is evident in at least two instances during the story and evidence of this can be seen in swift changes in Montresor’s otherwise consistently calm demeanor. The first comes halfway through the process of sealing the crypt:

A succession of loud and shrill screams, bursting suddenly from the throat of the chained form, seemed to thrust me violently back. For a brief moment I hesitated—I trembled. Unsheathing my rapier, I began to grope with it about the recess; but the thought of an instant reassured me. (17)

Fortunato’s screams of desperation are the first break from the carnivalesque language in the dialogue between the two, and this alone threatens to take Montresor out of the sphere of carnival. He renders the situation by screaming louder than Fortunato, which is a rather obvious and unintelligible fear



response. The relevant question is not why he responded in this irrational and enigmatic manner, but rather, what is the source of the fear that produced his response? He stated earlier that he had sent all of his servants away for the evening and, therefore, his house is empty, not to mention that he is deep in the recesses of an underground vault. His fear is not of discovery but one of identification outside of the sphere of carnival. However, Fortunato's laughter returns before the illusion completely dissolves. The second time that Montresor's carnivalesque perception is threatened is just before the last stone is set into place. Fortunato pleads to Montresor to let him out because of the late hour—as if the entire ordeal has been an elaborate practical joke. Montresor issues calm replies that mockingly suit Fortunato's requests. Finally the conversation ends with Fortunato being reduced to silence, and to this Montresor reacts in a way that again contrasts with his demeanor: he becomes impatient. He begins yelling Fortunato's name to no avail, and finally concludes both the conversation and the story by shouting "In pace requiescat!" (translates as 'May you rest in peace'). His apparent unease is the product of the dissolving perception of carnival, which is in turn brought on by a condition of the completed act: he is left alone. Carnival is not a condition of the individual; it is dependant on a group's formation of a collectively inclusive identity. Together, Montresor and Fortunato were able to

constitute that collective body of consciousness, but in Fortunato's absence the illusion of carnival is broken and Montresor's outwardly shown agitation and verbal aggression signal his shift out of collective consciousness.

The story, along with Montresor's deathbed confession, ends without any further elaboration on the motive for the crime, other than the vague reference to "the thousand injuries" that Fortunato had previously inflicted on Montresor. Yet even if Poe had elaborated on the finer points of Montresor's motive, the act would undoubtedly still defy articulate comprehension. The murder of Fortunato is contained within a sphere of carnival where hierarchies are inverted and subverted because the language that creates them is fundamentally deconstructed. Thus, carnival cannot be articulated, it can only be experienced—in this same way, Montresor can relate *how* the crime was carried out, but he is unable to communicate *why* the murder was committed. Fortunato's murder exists as a supreme act of carnival—an inversion of death and renewal. As a result, the crime does not exist outside the sphere of carnival, or rather in cannot be understood or articulated outside of that collective body. Once divorced from the inclusive-collective, Montresor is incapable of comprehending the act singularly. Therefore, his murder of Fortunato is not diffitive proof of clinical psychosis, or even an elaborate fit of temporary insanity. Although the claim of madness cannot be completely

justified, it is possible to deduce that at the time of the murder, Montresor was certainly not himself. He was the carnival—completely immersed in its “supreme madness” where laws do not exist because there is no “other,” no governing body nor separate defining entity. Within the sphere of carnival, there is only carnival and carnival alone. With this in mind, then perhaps madness *is* the most suitable explanation for Montresor’s actions, but this is not to say that madness *is* a characteristic of the carnivalesque. It is not. Rather, the word “madness,” along with a variety of other synonymous terms, fundamentally characterizes carnival’s inability to render itself outside of itself.

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VITA

WILSON W. ONSTOTT

Personal Data:      Date of Birth: August 2, 1980

Place of Birth: Nashville, Tennessee

Marital Status: Single

Education:            Public Schools, Springfield, Tennessee

Furman University, Greenville, South Carolina;

English & Philosophy (double), B.A., 2003

East Tennessee State University, Johnson City, Tennessee;

English, M.A., 2006

Professional  
Experience:

Graduate Assistant, East Tennessee State University,

College of Arts and Sciences, 2004-2006