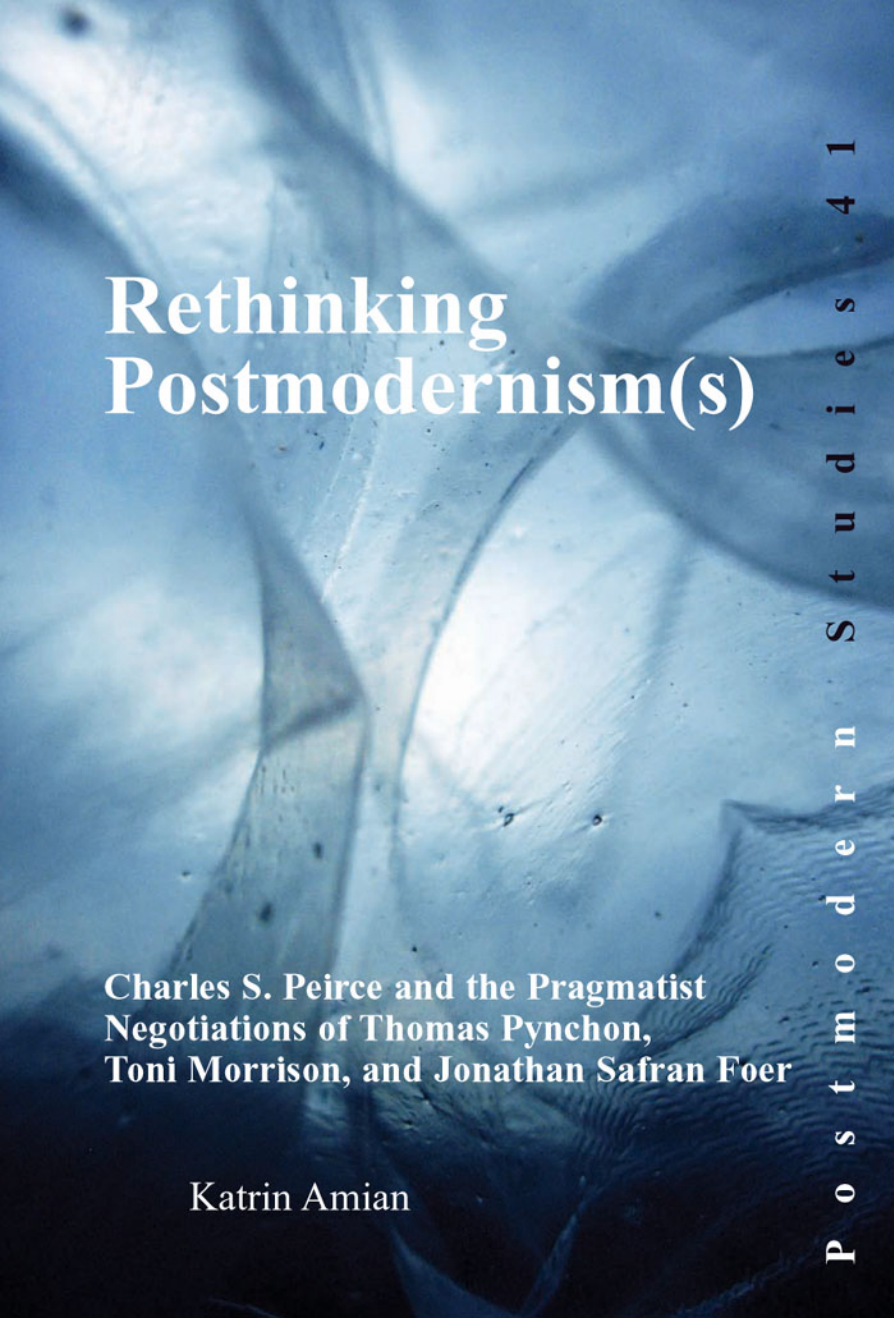
Rethinking
Postmodernism(s)
Charles S. Peirce and the Pragmatist
Negotiations of Thomas Pynchon,
Toni Morrison, and Jonathan Safran Foer
Katrin Amian
Postmodern Studies 41

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Introduction

Postmodernism, it seems, is history. Born as a short-hand for the new contemporary in the 1960s and 1970s, grown to maturity as a lively disputed critical concept in the 1980s, and mainstreamed to the popular appeal of *Dummies'* guides and Pepsi cola ads in the 1990s, the term appears to have exhausted its potential as a means of describing and understanding the shifting alliances of literary and cultural production in the new millennium. In a recent essay written to explore the current fate of postmodernism, Ihab Hassan joins the chorus of elegies sung to its demise, arguing that cultural postmodernism has "mutated" into geopolitical postmodernity and has lost its critical force to "sterile, campy, kitschy, jokey, dead-end games or sheer media stunts" ("From Postmodernism" 5). For Hassan, this development "is no cause to cheer" (11); and yet, he finds hope in a remedy: "postmodern pragmatism" (13). Pragmatism, Hassan argues,

> offers no panacea. But its intellectual generosity, its epistemic or noetic pluralism; its avoidance of stale debates (about mind and matter, for instance, freedom and necessity, nurture and nature); and its affinities with open, liberal, multicultural societies, where issues must be resolved by mediation and compromise rather than dictatorial power or divine decree—all these make it congenial to postmodernism without acceding to the latter's potential for nihilism, its spirit for feckless and joyless 'play.' (10)

I open with this intriguing moment in Hassan's argument as I wish to draw attention to the way in which pragmatism and postmodernism are linked here. As a philosophical theory about knowledge and truth, pragmatism evolved in the late nineteenth century in response to Western metaphysics, attacking modern philosophy for its faith in absolutes and developing a pluralist, fallibilistic, and empiricist view of knowledge in its stead. Postmodernism, on the other hand, is a cultural formation of the late twentieth century; the term has come to designate specific cultural practices as well as a large array of

oppositional critiques aimed at undermining the central assumptions of modernity and its discursive regimes. Hassan brings these diverse strands of thought together by emphasizing their "congenial" ties, stressing their shared pluralist worldview and their "affinities" to "liberal" models of society. Postmodernism, however, is then immediately dismissed on the grounds of its "nihilism" and "play," allowing pragmatism to emerge as the preferred candidate for dealing with the challenges of global postmodernity. The dialogue that might have been possible between pragmatism and postmodernism is thus instantly undercut. Pragmatism is set up as a cure for the deficiencies of postmodernism in a moment of crisis and exhaustion; and since Hassan reduces their similarities to such commonplace ideas as "intellectual generosity," "pluralism," and the "avoidance of stale debates," no space for nuanced encounters emerges.

Hassan's move, I wish to argue, is symptomatic of the "pragmatist revival" that has swept across the field of American literary and cultural studies in recent years (Dickstein, Introduction 12). Since the mid-1980s, a growing number of scholars have turned to the works of William James, John Dewey, Ralph Waldo Emerson, and—to a lesser extent—Charles Sanders Peirce, looking to American pragmatism as a source of critical insight and providing extensive re-readings of the American literary tradition along its lines. Critics like Richard Poirier, Peter Carafiol, and Giles Gunn—to name just a few—have joined Hassan in affirming the promise of pragmatism; and critical volumes like Morris Dickstein's *The Revival of Pragmatism* (1998) and Winfried Fluck's *Pragmatism and Literary Studies* (1999) attest to its influence and widespread appeal.[1] The kind of work pursued under the new pragmatist paradigm varies considerably, but the general motifs for the rediscovery of pragmatist themes and lineages tend to converge, echoing those brought forth in Hassan's argument. Like Hassan, Dickstein and Fluck champion pragmatism as

[1] As Dickstein's volume reveals, the pragmatist revival has reached across disciplinary lines, spurring contemporary debates in philosophy, social thought, and law as well as literary and cultural theory. In the field of literary studies, which I am concerned with here, critical works such as Poirier's *The Renewal of Literature* and *Poetry and Pragmatism*, Gunn's *Thinking Across the American Grain*, and Carafiol's *The American Ideal* are examples of the wide range of mostly U.S.-American scholarship that has turned to pragmatism since the 1980s. Other examples include Ross Posnock's *The Trial of Curiosity*, Steven Mailloux's *Reception Histories*, and Jonathan Levin's *The Poetics of Transition.*

an "escape" from "the abstraction of theory and the abyss of nihilism" (Dickstein, Introduction 16), celebrating its "great potential of renewal and redescription" and acknowledging its "promise of describing central aspects of cultural expression […] in terms that do not have to ignore the constructive and creative dimensions of these acts" (Fluck, Introduction xi, ix). Richard Poirier, on the other hand, turns to Emerson as "an inspiration for a kind of criticism […] that might show literary and cultural studies how it is possible to move ahead of their current tedium, rancor, confusion, and professionalist over-determination" (*Poetry* 6); and Giles Gunn speculates that "pragmatism may well prove to be the most intellectually resilient American response to the quicksands and carapaces of cultural postmodernism" (7).

What much of the new pragmatist scholarship shares is thus a rhetoric of crisis and renewal that is brought forth in harsh opposition to contemporary literary theory and postmodern culture. Paired with a markedly anti-theoretical stance and an inclination to nationalist overtones and prophetic overindulgence, it seeks to provide alternative responses to the challenges of postmodern society, upholding the vision of a new pragmatist humanism rooted in the genuinely American tradition of "Emersonian individualism" (Patell xviii), community-spirit, and "linguistic skepticism" (Poirier, *Poetry* 4).[2] Hassan's refusal to take the dialogue between pragmatism and postmodernism beyond a shallow list of "congenial" ties is thus hardly surprising. For him, as for other critics working under the auspices of the pragmatist turn, postmodernism provides no valuable insights apart from those already provided by American pragmatist philosophers decades ago.[3] Postmodernism is the problem, not the solution, and finds recognition only when it is subsumed under such pragmatist

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[2] For an extensive critique of pragmatist scholarship along these lines, see Sabine Sielke, "Theorizing American Studies" 82-87, and Paul Jay, *Contingency Blues* 149-68.

[3] As Dickstein has noted, the insistence on pragmatism's precursor role in the formulation of pluralist models of knowledge and society is an argumentative move shared by many pragmatist critics. "As postmodern theorists announced the exhaustion of the 'grand narratives,'" he writes, "Americans discovered that pragmatists had been there first, developing a skeptical theory of knowledge and a well-articulated critique of essentialism and foundationalism that did not devolve into nihilism but emphasized the contingencies of language and context" (Introduction 11).

terms as "pluralism" and the endorsement of "open […] societies, where issues must be resolved by mediation and compromise rather than dictatorial power or divine decree." However, we need to ask what is gained by pitting notions of "mediation and compromise" against the rule of "dictatorial power" and "divine decree" rather than engaging the conflicting visions of "open, liberal, multicultural societies" that pragmatism and postmodernism hold out? Here (and elsewhere) Hassan stops short of pursuing the dialogue that might have emerged between the two. Instead, he turns his pragmatist argument against "the hubris of [postmodern] theory" and, in a move just as symptomatic of the current pragmatist revival, reinstates "great literature" as an alternative, superior source of critical guidance and strength ("From" 11).

In the light of such arguments, voiced by one of the leading figures of early postmodern literary criticism, it would be easy to dismiss the pragmatist turn in literary and cultural studies as a conservative backlash, advanced by the old literary establishment in memory of the days when "great literature" mattered and literary voices were heard. The question remains, however, whether this is all pragmatism has to offer. Is its much-celebrated 'promise' really limited to perpetuating what Paul Jay has polemically called "Emersonianism married to a '90s version of '50s liberalism" (160)? Or might there be other paths to pursue, paths that push for new avenues of inquiry rather than rehearsing the familiar positions of self-serving antagonistic debates?

At this point, it is important to note, of course, that pragmatism comes in many guises and that the pragmatist revival has taken many different forms. Ever since the publication of *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* (1979), Richard Rorty, for instance, has confronted pragmatism with the new textual paradigm of the Humanities, developing a brand of postmodern pragmatist philosophy that reaches out to contemporary literary theory and seeks to join forces with the poststructuralist projects of Derrida and Foucault. Cornel West has linked pragmatism with Marxist theory, celebrating its "emancipatory social experimentalism" as the basis for a new political form of cultural criticism (*American* 214) and joining critics like Frank Lentricchia in the formulation of a pragmatist vision of social change. Finally, Stanley Fish, Walter Benn Michaels, and Barbara Herrenstein-Smith have framed the neo-pragmatist enterprise

as a debate over the authority of authors, texts, and readers, taking pragmatism to literary studies in ways that echo developments in reader-response criticism and reception aesthetics.[4] What is striking about this range of approaches, however, is that they provide little guidance for specific textual readings. Rorty's neo-pragmatism and West's "prophetic pragmatism" (*American* 213) address large philosophical and social concerns, and the "new pragmatist" debate remains limited to a reflection on the status of literary texts and the authority of their interpretations. As a philosophical way of thinking, pragmatism provides no ready tools for literary analysis, encouraging philosophical debates and (meta-)theoretical arguments about aesthetics, experience, and the nature of literature and art instead. But how can it fulfill its promise for literary and cultural studies if it fails to reach beyond the abstractions of such encounters? Are Poirier's close readings of Emerson's "movements of language" (*Poetry* 173) and the exploration of ties between pragmatist philosophy and the literature of its time the only alternative?[5]

In his introduction to the collection of essays published in the volume *Pragmatism and Literary Studies*, Fluck expresses his "impatience with the current state of the debate," arguing that it is high time "to leave the 'prophetic stage' in the development of a pragmatist literary and cultural studies behind" and pursue the project "in a more detailed, focused, and systematic fashion" (xi, ix). Pragmatism in literary and cultural studies, he notes, "will go nowhere if it continues to restrict itself to the mere nursing of a classical body

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[4] See Rorty, *Consequences of Pragmatism* and *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*, West, *The American Evasion of Philosophy*, and Lentricchia, *Criticism and Social Change*. W. J. T. Mitchell's volume *Against Theory: Literary Studies and the New Pragmatism* provides an overview over neo-pragmatist scholarship of the latter kind. See also Gerhard Hoffmann, *Making Sense: The Role of the Reader in Contemporary American Fiction*.

[5] At this point, I wish to acknowledge the body of work that has drawn connections between pragmatism and literature without necessarily framing its findings as contributions to the new pragmatist scholarship. Herwig Friedl has published extensively on pragmatism and literary modernism—see his "Art and Culture" and "Thinking in Search of a Language," for instance—and Sämi Ludwig has explored the interconnections between philosophical pragmatism and American realist texts in *Pragmatist Realism*. This kind of criticism relies on the temporal-historical convergence of specific philosophical and literary modes of thinking and expression, leaving the question of how pragmatism might generally enable textual readings open to debate.

of thought, or the renewed affirmation of the prophetic vision of Emerson" (xi). It will also go nowhere, I contend, if it continues to evade serious encounters with postmodern literary theory and culture, drawing bleak and highly simplistic pictures of postmodern 'nihilism' and 'feckless play' while refusing to acknowledge the wide range of theoretical insights and critical approaches postmodern theories have provided. What is needed, I claim, is thus not so much the systematic formulation of "a pragmatist approach to art and culture" that Fluck has in mind (xi), but a much more general probing of pragmatist propositions in literary contexts. We need to ask, for example, whether pragmatism can actually speak to texts that do not share its philosophical heritage. How might such an encounter be staged and what insights may it provide? Can pragmatism engage the textual paradigm of postmodern literary theory and culture and move beyond the modernist notions of 'self' and 'art' pragmatist readings tend to perpetuate? What might such an engagement yield and how may it address the challenges and concerns of contemporary literary and cultural theory?

My study provides answers to these general questions by staging a specific encounter between a specific brand of pragmatism and a specific set of postmodern texts. The pragmatism I (re-)turn to is that of the American philosopher and semiotician Charles Sanders Peirce (1839–1914); and the three postmodern texts are Thomas Pynchon's *V.* (1961), Toni Morrison's *Beloved* (1987), and Jonathan Safran Foer's *Everything Is Illuminated* (2002). My aim is to explore the specific sites of convergence and critique that emerge once we confront Peirce's pragmatism with the textual practices of literary texts written under the auspices of a shifting postmodern paradigm. This, I hold, will put the promise of pragmatism to the test and help us determine its future place in literary and cultural studies. At the same time, however, I am interested in the three literary texts themselves. How might Pynchon's *V.*, Morrison's *Beloved*, and Foer's *Everything Is Illuminated* profit from a Peircean re-reading? And how might their encounter with Peirce shift our perspective on literary postmodernism? The dialogue I stage thus cuts across conceptual lines, affecting our understanding of literary postmodernism just as much as it unsettles the claims of much recent pragmatist scholarship. By confronting Peirce, Pynchon, Morrison, and Foer with each other, I ask not only how pragmatism might fare in a nuanced, engaging

dialogue with postmodern literary texts but also how our conception of literary postmodernism might change in the process. If contemporary pragmatism needs a serious encounter with postmodernism to offset its simplistic anti-theoretical stance, as I contend, why would postmodern literature and postmodern theory need pragmatism?

For Hassan, the answer is easy. Postmodernism needs pragmatism, he argues, because its "play and provocations" cannot provide adequate responses to "our changing needs" ("Beyond?" 326-27). Faced with "the horrendous facts of postmodernity," with "diasporas, migrations, the killing fields, [and] a crisis of personal and cultural values seemingly without parallel in history," he notes, "we need to discover […] a new, pragmatic and planetary civility," one that takes "truth" seriously again and moves "beyond" postmodern suspicion "toward" a new "aesthetic of trust" ("Beyond" 203-04).[6] Hassan's appeal to "civility" and his call for a new "aesthetic" are striking in this context, as they lay out the terms under which pragmatism has commonly contributed to contemporary debates over postmodern theory and culture: ethics and aesthetics. Hassan's answer to the question of what postmodernism can learn from pragmatism thus not only rehearses the redemptive rhetoric typical of new pragmatist arguments but reveals how these arguments relate to the wide range of scholarship that has worked to refocus the postmodern theoretical enterprise since the late 1980s.

The pragmatist turn, Hassan reminds us, is part and parcel of the various ethical, political, moral, and aesthetic 'turns' of the 1980s and 1990s, turns that sought to (re-)commit what was variously perceived as postmodernism's "obsessive and politically harmful textual orientation" (Bertens 2) to a new "vision of local ethico-political possibilities" (Palmeri §5).[7] Ranging from new modes of cultural

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[6] Hassan develops this argument in two essays with strikingly similar titles: "Beyond Postmodernism? Theory, Sense, and Pragmatism," published in 1989, and "Beyond Postmodernism: Toward an Aesthetic of Trust," published in 2003. Note the intriguing shift in Hassan's use of the question mark.

[7] Inspired by Rorty's famous dictum of the 'linguistic turn,' the language of 'turns' has been used to mark shifts in modes of thinking and theorizing that are considered to be groundbreaking. Numerous such 'turns' were proclaimed in the early 1990s. See Richard Shusterman, "Postmodernism and the Aesthetic Turn," Vernon Gras, "The Recent Ethical Turn in Literary Studies," Gerhard Hoffmann und Alfred Hornung, *Ethics and Aesthetics: The Moral Turn of Postmodernism*, and Fluck, *The Historical and Political Turn in Literary Studies.*

production to new departures in literary and cultural theory, these reassessments took many different forms, diversifying postmodernism's literary, cultural, and political agenda but also revolting against it. The new interest in ethics redirected poststructuralist thinking to the realm of what has become widely theorized as the 'ethics of deconstruction,' but it also marked the revival of (neo-)humanist criticism and moral philosophy.[8] Likewise, efforts to re-politicize the field were brought forth in harsh opposition to postmodernist critiques of identity, agency, and power, uniting critics in the attempt to 'reclaim' activist models of social interaction "in the service of progressive politics" (Moya, "Reclaiming" 3).[9] They also allowed these critiques to migrate into gender, sexuality, and race studies, pushing for their reformulation, rather than abandonment, within the markedly political framework of feminist, queer, and postcolonial theories.[10] The 'aesthetic turn,' finally, heightened our understanding of postmodernism as an aesthetic enterprise, exploring its move beyond traditional aesthetic notions of autonomy, presence, and originality and providing extensive readings of the 'postmodern sublime.' It also revived arguments about the 'singularity' of art and literature, turning against the textualist paradigm of postmodern theories and reinstating aesthetics as "a distinct mode of communication and experience without which we would have no objects in literary and cultural studies" (Fluck, "Pragmatism" 228).[11]

Hassan's vision of an "aesthetic of trust" links pragmatism to such seminal work on ethics and aesthetics. It also reveals, however, that pragmatism has tended to side with traditional conceptions of both, positioning itself in opposition to postmodern theory and culture

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[8] See Simon Critchley, *The Ethics of Deconstruction*. For an overview of the diverse approaches grouped under the label 'ethical turn' see Lawrence Buell, "In Pursuit of Ethics."

[9] The essays collected in Paula Moya and Michael Hames-García's volume *Reclaiming Identity*, for instance, present the work of a group of scholars who collectively oppose "the excesses of the widespread skepticism and constructivism in literary theory and cultural studies" and advance a "postpositivist realist theory of identity" in its stead (Moya, "Reclaiming" 3). For an extensive account of this project see Satya Mohanty, *Literary Theory and the Claims of History*.

[10] See Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble*, and Homi Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, for instance.

[11] For an overview of both strands of work see Herbert Grabes, *Aesthetics and Contemporary Discourse*.

rather than seeking to enhance the postmodern enterprise or rework its agenda from within. Why, then, should literary postmodernism need pragmatism? The answer, I wish to argue, lies in the extensive revisionary gesture that is slowly beginning to infuse the postmodern critical enterprise. The turns of the 1990s have given way to substantial re-readings that no longer chart historical shifts in the theory and practice of postmodern literature and culture but aim at much more far-reaching critical revisions, renegotiating the terms under which postmodernism has been extensively theorized and reaching for new critical perspectives. The change in tone that this revisionary impulse involves is perhaps best conveyed by the titles of two books on postmodernism and ethics. Published in 1996, Gerhard Hoffmann and Alfred Hornung's *Ethics and Aesthetics: The Moral Turn of Postmodernism* remains indebted to the language of 'turns,' measuring the field along historical lines and exploring ethics as "a new direction in literature and the arts" and "a new form of reading" specific to "the 1980s" (Preface v). Eleven years later, Barbara Schwerdtfeger's *Ethics in Postmodern Fiction: Donald Barthelme and William Gass* strikes a markedly different tone. Published in 2005, the book extends the range of postmodernism's ethical appeal to the fiction of Donald Barthelme and William Gass, unsettling the tale of progression from "nonfunctional and playful practices" to a "renewed interest in the outside world" that Hoffmann and Hornung set up (Preface v) and replacing it with a nuanced "re-reading" of older postmodern texts along ethical lines (3). The example not only reveals how far postmodern literary criticism has traveled, it also demonstrates that current re-readings of postmodernism tend to break the temporal ties between specific forms of literary and cultural production and their respective theoretical frameworks (in this case the ethical turns of postmodern fiction and theory), taking theories to areas in which they have not yet been put to work and drawing on the refreshing insights such new combinations provide.

Pragmatism, I wish to argue, has much to contribute to such a project. As more and more critics join Hassan in asking "what was postmodernism, [...] what is it still," and "what lies beyond" it ("From" 1, 11), pragmatism promises to open further the postmodern enterprise to re-evaluative work, work that picks up the revisionary gesture of much recent scholarship on ethics but brings a different set of concepts and tools into play. Pragmatism, I contend, may very well

expand the scope of current re-readings of postmodernism, if the "great potential of renewal and redescription" that Fluck ascribes to it (Introduction xi) is geared toward such a cause and if it ceases to be used as a vehicle for simplistic, reactionary attacks on postmodern theory and culture.

This study, therefore, brings Peirce's pragmatist philosophy to bear upon Thomas Pynchon's *V.*, Toni Morrison's *Beloved*, and Jonathan Safran Foer's *Everything Is Illuminated* in the attempt to shift the terms of the debate through which these novels have been—and continue to be—read and theorized. In choosing these three texts, it deliberately (re-)turns to three historical sites of postmodern literary production, acknowledging the wide range of work that has come to be read as 'postmodern' in differing ways and allowing its pragmatist re-readings to reach across historical lines: from the early postmodernism of young Thomas Pynchon, to the emancipatory postmodernism of Toni Morrison, and the late or post-postmodernism of Jonathan Safran Foer that has only just begun to draw critical attention. In distinguishing these three postmodernisms I draw on a mix of temporal and conceptual terms that have gained acceptance as literary-historical markers. The term 'early postmodernism' refers to the early texts of canonical postmodern authors like Pynchon, John Barth, and Donald Barthelme, who confronted the legacy of literary modernism in the early 1960s and sought to push beyond it. The term 'emancipatory postmodernism,' on the other hand, goes back to Salman Rushdie and designates the postmodern agenda advanced by postcolonial and minority literatures since the 1980s (Hoffmann and Hornung, Preface v). Drawing on Hans Bertens, I will also refer to this version of postmodernism as the 'postmodernism of difference' (11).[12] Finally, 'late' or 'post-postmodernism' refers to the fiction of our day. I will privilege the term 'post-postmodernism' as it speaks to current attempts to push beyond the all-too-familiar schemes of postmodern textual critique and arrive at a mode of thought and representation that is 'post-postmodern' in the sense that it brings new degrees of irony and self-reflection to the postmodern strategies it employs. For Frank

[12] Many other terms have been brought into play for the postmodernism of this time. Andreas Huyssen has proposed to speak of a "postmodernism of resistance" (149), for instance, Theo D'haen uses the term "counter-postmodernism" (54), and Klaus Milich has underlined the 'political' and 'multicultural' dimension of this phase in the history of American postmodernism (226).

Palmeri, such modes of cultural expression must be distinguished from 'late postmodern' art and culture which—in a stance reminiscent of many pragmatist arguments—attempt "to recuperate an autonomous individual subject that has been dissolved in many ways by earlier versions of postmodernism" (§3).[13]

By proposing to re-read these sites of postmodern literary production with a Peircean framework in mind, I may—at least to a certain extent—be seen to follow Jeremy Green's dictum that "existing definitions of postmodernism are in need of modification" (1). The aim, however, is not to provide new definitions, as Green would have it, but to offer new ways of reading postmodernism(s) that might transcend the static language of classification and periodization altogether and push for dynamic interactions and new dialogues instead. My study heeds Fluck's call to realize pragmatism's potential for "redescription and renewal" (Introduction xi), that is, taking Peirce to postmodernism in ways that might best be conceptualized as a 'redescription' in the Rortyan sense of the term. For Richard Rorty, "describing the ways of describing" and finding new ways of describing the "descriptions the [human] race has come up with so far" is the chief task of the philosopher in a "post-Philosophical culture" (*Consequences* xl). "The method" of "this sort of philosophy," Rorty specifies in *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*,

> is to redescribe lots and lots of things in new ways […]. It does not propose to have a better candidate for doing the same old things which we did when we spoke in the old way. Rather, it suggests that we might want to stop doing those things and do something else. But it does not argue for this suggestion on the basis of antecedent criteria common to the old and the new language games. For just insofar as the new language really is new, there will be no such criteria. (9)

The gesture involved in Rorty's 'redescription' is thus humble and ambitious at the same time. Committed to language as the contingent vehicle of conceptual change, it promises to explore "new ways" of

[13] As Jeremy Green has noted, the new compound '*post*-postmodernism' opens up "the preposterous and dizzying prospect of an infinite series." However, he acknowledges the usefulness of the gesture, "if it signals that we are no longer postmodern quite the same way as when the concept was set loose" (1). It is in this sense that I use the term: to mark a new form of postmodern self-awareness and indicate that moving 'beyond' postmodernism need not imply that it must be over or has already come to an end.

speaking about "old things" without ever supposing that a position outside the "old and new language games" could be achieved. The mode, in other words, is experimental, pressing for a shift in "language games" with no "antecedent criteria" to guide it and no ostensibly "better candidate for doing the same old things" at hand. The aim of the enterprise, however, remains far-reaching, aspiring to translate the initial urge to "do something else" into the probing of a language that "really is new."[14]

In what follows, I take up the gesture of Rorty's redescriptive "method" by exploring "new ways" of speaking about the postmodernisms I seek to revisit. I turn to Peirce not in search of the kind of "pragmatist approach to art and culture" Fluck has in mind (Introduction xi) but for a language of analysis that may speak to postmodern texts in new ways. For many years now, the lens through which postmodern fiction has been extensively viewed has—to varying degrees and with changing agendas—relied on the critical idioms of poststructuralist, new Marxist, feminist, and postcolonial theories, whose emergence and academic breakthrough have historically coincided with postmodernism's success story.[15] The privileged language of analysis, in other words, has been the language

[14] Rorty's view of philosophy and his championing of the method of redescription have been widely criticized for their reliance on such a rhetoric of newness. As Richard Shusterman has argued, Rorty's "view of language as a tool for constant change and novelty" perpetuates notions of "individual, original creation" and reduces philosophical thinking to "the expression of private individuality" (615). Therefore, I wish to stress that I adopt Rorty's language of redescription for its humble analytic purposes, not for grand ambitions and broad philosophical claims. None of the concepts and terms I bring into play "really is new" in a philosophical sense and much of my work relies on acts of remembering rather than attempts to "make things new" (Rorty, *Contingency* 13).

[15] As Andreas Huyssen has noted, the "conflation of poststructuralism with the postmodern" is an academic phenomenon specific to the reception of poststructuralism and the history of postmodernism in the United States. Poststructuralism, he argues, is "primarily a discourse of and about modernism" and it is "paradox[ical] that a body of theories of modernism and modernity, developed in France since the 1960s, has come to be viewed, in the U.S., as the embodiment of the postmodern in theory" (135, 142). While I am thus very much aware of "the fundamental non-identity of the two phenomena" (142), my focus on U.S.-American readings of literary postmodernism forces me to acknowledge the nationally specific history of their fusion. However, to avoid misunderstandings, I will use the term 'postmodern theory' when referring to the peculiar American appropriation of poststructuralism in postmodern contexts.

of 'multiplicity,' 'difference,' 'heterogeneity,' and 'play,' strategically devised to contest liberal-humanist notions of language, identity, authorship, and literature, and to expose the powerful ideologies and discursive regimes on which they rely. Translated into the broader terms of a postmodern cultural condition, this is the language of paranoia or "agency panic," recently conceptualized by Timothy Melley as "intense anxiety about an apparent loss of autonomy" and "the conviction that […] one has been 'constructed' by powerful, external agents" (vii), be they discourses, texts, or the KGB. The 'new language game' that Peirce's pragmatist philosophy allows us to play operates within the premises of a different vocabulary. As Susanne Rohr has shown, 'creativity' and 'consensus' are two key terms within the Peircean world of meaning-making and reality-constitution, and they will figure centrally in my readings of the pragmatist negotiations which Pynchon's *V.*, Morrison's *Beloved,* and Foer's *Everything Is Illuminated* engage.[16]

On the surface, the (re-)turn to Peirce thus involves (re-)introducing a critical idiom that has not been favored over the past decades and has in fact been rejected in many theoretical circles. As Rob Pope argues, 'creativity' has lived a life in the shadows of postmodern literary theories "as a 'traditional,' rather old-fashioned concept to be demystified and dismissed" (7). Likewise, 'consensus' has been both fervently contested and rigorously discarded across the field as "an outmoded and suspect" (Lyotard 66) model of human interaction and concept of critical inquiry. Historically speaking, the aversion to the two terms has its reasons, of course. It was necessary to dismiss the old critical paradigm for its complicity with traditional notions of authorship and human agency—as in the case of 'creativity'—and its perpetuation of the hegemonic power structures guarded by white male society—as in the case of 'consensus.' Their replacement with terms like '(re-)construction' or 'paranoia' (that deliberately de-center the creative subject and ascribe agency to language, discourses, or other 'external forces') and 'difference' or 'dissensus' (that openly privilege the postmodern oppositional politics of multiplicity, heterogeneity, and radical pluralism) powerfully speaks to this fact. "[I]n retrospect," Pope contends, "the rejection of 'creativity'" can therefore be seen "as one of the founding acts" of the "array of

[16] See Rohr, *Über die Schönheit des Findens* and *Die Wahrheit der Täuschung*.

oppositional critiques" that gave postmodernism its critical edge (6), and this certainly applies to the rejection of 'consensus' as well, perhaps to an even greater extent. The present moment, however, has its own markedly different set of interests, agendas, and concerns. As Pope suggests, the time has come to "revisit" the "founding moments" of postmodernism's "oppositional critiques" and "weigh what may have been lost or misrepresented" (7).

The question that needs to be asked, then, is how such highly contested terms as creativity and consensus may be brought back into the debate. How might they acquire meanings that do not 'disremember' the history of their decenterings and yet open up new perspectives on postmodernism? How might they speak to postmodern fiction? And how might *V.*, *Beloved*, and *Everything Is Illuminated* speak to them? Charles Sanders Peirce, I argue, turns out to be an exceptionally good candidate for addressing these concerns—though, in keeping with Rorty, I certainly would not present him as a 'better candidate' for reading postmodern texts. His philosophy acknowledges the pragmatist-humanist history of the language of creativity and consensus I (re-)turn to and yet holds the potential for transcending it, allowing us simultaneously to 'remember' concepts like creativity and consensus and to push the terms of their critical engagement beyond the contexts in which they have traditionally been put to work. Unlike William James and John Dewey, whose work has largely influenced the recent pragmatist revival, Peirce grounded his pragmatist philosophy in an elaborate semiotic theory, allowing for an understanding of creativity and consensus that proves highly valuable in returning to this pragmatist language after the linguistic turn. Peirce not only gave pragmatism its name, but developed a peculiar brand of pragmatist theory, "pragmaticism" as he eventually came to call it (*CP* 5.414).[17] Devised as "a method of reflexion having the purpose to render our ideas clear" (*CP* 5.13 n1), this Peircean pragmaticism is first and foremost a theory of meaning. It remains embedded, however, in a complex system of epistemological thought that turns to both logic and 'semeiotic' as a key for understanding the workings of cognition and revising the theories of knowledge advanced by Continental

[17] The abbreviation *CP* 5.414 refers to *The Collected Papers of Charles Sanders Peirce*, volume 5, paragraph 414.

philosophers of his time.[18] Peirce's pragmatism, in other words, does not lend itself easily to the anti-theoretical rhetoric of much recent pragmatist scholarship. Instead, it continues to hold out a nuanced and highly distinct language that, as I hope to show, proves to be productive in rethinking the familiar—or even clichéd—terms I wish to re-introduce.

It is thus hardly surprising that Peirce's reputation as an innovative thinker who may be of help in addressing some of the key concerns of contemporary literary theory has mainly continued to grow outside the neo-pragmatist frameworks of leading U.S.-American scholars. Dismissed by Richard Rorty as "just another whacked-out triadomaniac" ("Pragmatist's Progress" 93) whose "contribution to pragmatism was merely to have given it its name" (*Consequences* 161) and simply ignored by most neo-pragmatist literary critics, Peirce has become the cornerstone of much innovative work published within the intersecting fields of philosophy and literary theory in both North America and Europe. In the year 2000, Uwe Wirth, editor of a four-hundred-page interdisciplinary volume on Peirce, was bold enough to proclaim a "Peircean Turn" in such diverse fields as literary and cultural studies, linguistics, sociology, philosophy, and cognitive science (Vorwort 8). One of the driving forces behind the growing interest in Peirce has been the ongoing step-by-step release of a chronological edition of his work. The prestigious Peirce Edition Project has made valuable manuscripts accessible to a wider public for the first time.[19] It has provided the grounds for appreciating the work of a philosopher who had many books in the making but published only a few philosophical essays, who remained caught in an endless

[18] As Max Fisch points out, Peirce used the term *semeiotic* to refer to his general theory of signs, distinguishing it from *semiosis*, the functioning of a particular sign or sign-interpretation ("Peirce's General Theory of Signs" 321-22). It has become widespread practice among Peirce scholars to use Peirce's term, instead of the more common *semiotics*, to mark its distinctiveness and set it apart from a Saussurean theory of signs and signification.

[19] Six (of a projected thirty) volumes of *The Writings of Charles Sanders Peirce* have so far been published by Indiana University Press. The Peirce Edition Project has also edited a two-volume collection of essential writings, *The Essential Peirce*, covering important essays, lectures, and manuscripts from 1867 to 1913. References to Peirce's work are slowly beginning to shift from the randomly assorted *Collected Papers* to the new chronological editions. For the time being, however, the editorial situation remains difficult and in a state of flux.

process of revising his materials, and who eventually left his complex system of thought incomplete. While previous generations of scholars lamented the fragmentary character of Peirce's work, this no longer appears to discredit his ambitious philosophy. On the contrary: The Peirce Edition Project has enabled philosophers to further historicize his thought and map its complex evolution in growing detail. Literary critics, on the other hand, have been increasingly attracted by the varying degrees of indecision that govern Peirce's thinking, turning to his fragmentary and changing views as a storehouse of concepts and ideas that speak to the contemporary moment.

Even as a more nuanced and comprehensive understanding of Peirce's philosophy continues to evolve, the insights conveyed and readings provided of his work must remain markedly pluralistic. There have been and continue to be many different Peirces to which philosophers and literary critics may turn: The Peirce characterized by Cheryl Misak as "a hard-headed epistemologist/philosopher of science," for instance, who saw himself primarily as a logician committed to devising a grand system of philosophy that would explain how we come to know the world (2); or Peirce, the evolutionary cosmologist, whose theory of the origin of the cosmos rests on the doctrines of evolution by chance (tychism), generalization (synechism), and creative love (agapism); or, finally, the semiotic Peirce, whose theory of signs found its way into the work of leading structuralist and poststructuralist theorists and continues to provide exciting points of departure from the Saussurean model on which they heavily rely.

This semiotic side to Peirce's philosophy accordingly looks to an impressive history of pluralistic readings and appropriations.[20] In *Of Grammatology*, for instance, Jacques Derrida values Peirce as a precursor of his own critique of the "metaphysics of presence," arguing that "Peirce goes very far in the direction that I have called the de-construction of the transcendental signified" as he postulates a dynamic of infinite semiosis that refuses to "place a reassuring end to the reference from sign to sign" and, according to Derrida, "un-ceasingly" defers meaning instead (49). Umberto Eco, on the other hand, has strongly opposed such poststructuralist appropriations of Peirce, pointing to the epistemologically 'realist' impulse of his theory

[20] For an overview of this history see Ludwig Nagl, *Charles Sanders Peirce* 136-50.

of signification and such Peircean concepts as the 'dynamic object' and the 'final logical interpretant' to which it remains tied ("Unlimited" 216-20). For Eco, Peirce's semeiotic functions as an alternative to rather than a precursor of Saussurean semiotics and allows for a different range of contextualizations and inquiries that much of the recent work published on Peirce has set out to explore. Since Peirce's theory of signs does not limit itself to linguistics but aspires to theorize all modes of signification, his semeiotic has also influenced much recent work in film, media, and image theory, reaching beyond Gilles Deleuze's seminal *Cinema* to new inquiries into film aesthetics and theorizations of the so-called 'pictorial turn' (Mitchell, "Pictorial").[21] Likewise, Peirce's insistence on grounding his semiotic theory in an ambitious epistemological project has pushed semiotics beyond the recursiveness of its strict formalism into the realm of the philosophical. Within the strong German tradition of Peirce scholarship, for instance, Uwe Wirth has recently turned to Peirce's 'semio-pragmatism' to theorize and critique contemporary notions of performativity and embodiment, and Nicola Erny has outlined the contours of a Peircean ethics.[22] Both have powerfully attested to the critical relevance of Peirce's pragmatist thought for contemporary debates and have opened up intriguing new paths that Peircean-inspired philosophers and critics may take in the future.[23]

Though there are thus indeed many Peirces and even more Peircean approaches to which this study could turn, the starting point of the dialogue between Peirce and the postmodern fiction of Pynchon, Morrison, and Foer I set out to pursue is in fact quite specific. For the most part, I owe my Peircean language to Susanne Rohr, whose innovative readings of Peirce have played a decisive role in making his thought relevant to the study of literature.[24] In *Über die*

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[21] New work in this context includes Johannes Ehrat, *Cinema and Semiotic*, and Alexander Roesler, *Illusion und Relativismus*.

[22] See Wirth, "Der Performanzbegriff im Spannungsfeld von Illokution, Iteration und Indexikalität," and Erny, *Konkrete Vernünftigkeit: Zur Konzeption einer pragmatistischen Ethik bei Charles S. Peirce.*

[23] At the same time, Peirce continues to guide formalist accounts. See John Sheriff, *The Fate of Meaning*, and Jørgen Dines Johansen, *Literary Discourse*.

[24] Rohr has provided answers to the question of how pragmatism may be put to work in concrete readings of literary texts. My turn to Peirce owes much to this step, since it opens up and enables the kind of concrete textual dialogues I think pragmatist scholarship should further engage.

Schönheit des Findens (1993) and *Die Wahrheit der Täuschung* (2004), Rohr offers a detailed account of Peirce's pragmatist-semiotic theory, focusing on the significance Peirce ascribes to the workings of creativity as the *conditio sine qua non* of human understanding, and putting his philosophy to work within the grounds of a "new" epistemological "approach" to the study of literary texts that she both develops and applies ("Pragmaticism").[25] The readings of Peirce that Rohr proposes in these contexts are certainly not indisputable. They are extremely valuable for my purposes, however, in that they provide an innovative set of concepts and tools that allow me to confront Peirce with contemporary literary texts in ways that need not culminate in the practice of either structuralist-semiotic or (neo-)pragmatist criticism. Rohr provides the vocabulary needed for the Peircean language of literary analysis my redescriptive gesture relies on, even as the dialogue my study stages unavoidably pushes her concepts beyond the 'semiotic-epistemological approach' on which she bases her own systematic readings of literary texts—among them William Dean Howells' *A Hazard of New Fortunes*, Gertrude Stein's *Blood on the Dining-Room Floor*, Thomas Pynchon's *Gravity's Rainbow*, and Paul Auster's *Moon Palace*.

Peirce's pragmatist-semiotic epistemology enables Rohr to both theorize and assess "a particular functional aspect of literature." From an epistemological perspective, she argues, "literature generally […] participates in and stages a culture's process of reflection upon the contours of its reality" ("Mimesis" 110). Consequently, her readings focus on how "*processes of reality constitution* are represented in works of art" ("Pragmaticism" 303), discerning the particular "moments of frailty" ("World" 97) that are prominently reflected at a given time, and building on a range of canonical texts "from classical American realism to the neo-realism of our time" ("Mimesis" 109) to propose an extensive epistemological re-reading of the American literary tradition. As I will argue in more detail, Rohr's model of a Peirce-inspired 'approach' to literary texts provides valuable incentives for the unexpected dialogue among Peirce, Pynchon, Morrison, and Foer. It has its weaknesses, however, one of them being that Rohr's own readings risk becoming too static and—

[25] Rohr has published a series of essays in English which summarize and explicate the arguments of her book-length German studies. I will turn to these essays for her own translations of the German terminology she develops.

above all—too predictable in their attempt to bind literary texts to a particular historical moment in American culture's process of reality constitution. What is gained, one might ask, by 'generally' (and Rohr's own critical language frequently draws on such generalizing and unifying terms) committing postmodernist texts to the reflection of a particular 'moment of frailty'? The move appears to be rewarding only within the broad historical framework Rohr chooses to place her readings in, and even then it risks perpetuating the kind of linear—even teleological—gesture that underlies most categories of literary periodization.[26]

My study departs from Rohr's approach, then, in that it eventually moves beyond the notion of 'reflection' that Rohr uses to mark the epistemological work which literature historically performs. Rather than binding literary texts to their 'function' as participants in and vehicles of a culture's 'reflection' on the 'processes of reality constitution,' I seek to engage critically the 'pragmatist negotiations' these texts stage. The question that informs my readings of *V.*, *Beloved*, and *Everything Is Illuminated*, in other words, is not how these texts reflect the 'moments of frailty' Peirce's pragmatist epistemology allows for but how they negotiate the concepts of creativity and consensus Peirce holds out. What role does 'creativity' play in Pynchon's *V.*? How is the (im)possibility of 'consensus' negotiated in Morrison's *Beloved*? How does Foer's *Everything Is Illuminated* stage both 'creativity' and 'consensus'? And where do all these responses take the language of Peirce's pragmatism? As these questions reveal, the step from Rohr's model of 'reflection' to the pragmatist negotiations which I see the novels perform adds an additional level of critical engagement to current literary appropriations of Peirce. It opens Peirce's pragmatism to postmodern modes of critique, allowing pragmatism and postmodernism to speak to each other across historical and disciplinary lines.

The dialogue this study stages between the fiction of Pynchon, Morrison, and Foer, on the one hand, and the specific language of Peircean pragmatism, on the other, draws on and exploits such a two-

[26] Rohr herself is very much aware of this problem. She acknowledges, for instance, that "other texts, published at the same time, might investigate other aspects of the epistemological process" ("Mimesis" 109). However, the argument she puts forth in *Die Wahrheit der Täuschung* rests on the language of periodization and does not allow for this kind of synchronic deviation.

way dynamic of critical exchange. Chapter one provides a detailed account of the Peircean framework I (re-)turn to, grounding the Peircean vocabulary of 'creativity' and 'consensus' in Peirce's complex system of thought and carefully building on those elements of his philosophical thinking that prove particularly responsive to—and productive for—the kind of redescriptive project I seek to engage. Rohr's innovative readings of Peirce remain an important source of inspiration throughout this endeavor. As I will show, the peculiar language of analysis Rohr develops allows us to conceptualize 'creativity' and 'consensus' as Peircean "moments of frailty" within an in/stable "process of reality constitution" that is constantly underway ("Pragmaticism" 300). Such a move helps clear the grounds on which these concepts can be both 'remembered' and recontextualized within a distinctly Peircean language of inquiry. At the same time, Rohr's "epistemological approach" ("Mimesis" 108) to the study of literary texts provides a valuable starting point for the Peircean dialogue I wish to stage. Chapter one will discuss this approach and its peculiar Rohrian framework of analysis in detail, pointing to its strengths and weaknesses, and laying out the theoretical grounds on which I argue for the step from Rohr's model of 'reflection' to the 'pragmatist negotiations' of *V.*, *Beloved*, and *Everything Is Illuminated*. The chapter ends with a final note on the pragmatist language of 'creativity' and 'consensus,' summarizing and historicizing the distinctly Peircean rendering of its key terms and explicating how they might be conceptualized as the chief locus of the textual negotiations I see the novels perform.

Chapter two moves beyond these theoretical considerations as it turns to Thomas Pynchon's *V.* (1961) and puts the new language of analysis to work. As the first chapter to stage the Peircean dialogue my study pursues, it undertakes the step from Rohr's 'epistemological approach' to dialogic acts of a mutual re-reading, taking Rohr's concern with the 'process of reality constitution' as a starting point, but carrying the pragmatist negotiations *V.* performs to different grounds. The sense of flux and uncertainty that *V.* so powerfully exudes, I argue, stems largely from its laying bare and reveling in the space of creative possibility that two specific Peircean 'moments of frailty' hold out: the moment of abductive inference and the moment of object formation. The novel uncovers and exploits these 'moments of frailty' as it confronts its readers with the destabilizing effects of guesswork

gone wild and reveals what happens if the subject's creative efforts to produce reality are no longer counterbalanced and socially limited by intersubjective exchange. At the same time, however, the novel goes beyond mere delight in these moments of creative play. Focusing especially on *V.*'s chapter three and its intriguing intertext, Pynchon's short story "Under the Rose," I argue that the novel powerfully lays bare the workings of power in each and every act of creation, pushing the Peircean dialogue beyond the exposure of particular 'moments of frailty' to a powerful and at times disquieting political statement on what it means to be creative. *V.* thus resolutely confronts what Thomas Claviez has referred to as "pragmatism's naïve neglect of the problem of power—especially as it inheres in the subject/object relation" (359) and challenges the celebratory appraisal of 'man's' creative capacity that remains built into Peirce's very own pragmatist language. However, as I finally wish to show, once subjected to *V.*'s radical critique, Peirce's conception of creativity provides intriguing incentives for rethinking the interconnectedness of creative free play and shocking mechanisms of control. The chapter therefore ends with a sketch of possible new departures for the project of re-reading early postmodern fiction, explaining how the frequent combination of radical 'free play' and drastic demonstrations of the workings of power might be newly assessed.

Chapter three turns to Toni Morrison's *Beloved* (1987), shifting the focus of the Peircean dialogue from 'creativity' to 'consensus' and moving beyond Rohr's concept of 'reality constitution' from the start. In *Beloved*'s world of difference, of decentered subjects and proliferating meanings, I argue, the possibility of reaching moments of a frail and limited consensus that might give way to action and bring about social change emerges as an important site of negotiation. Central to this negotiation is the frail and ephemeral coalition-building process that is powerfully depicted in the scene of the women's gathering. Here, a group of women—limited in numbers, diverse in its makeup, and unsure about its precise agenda—moves to action, leaving aside their many differences and disagreements for the time being to face whatever it is that haunts Sethe and her daughter in their house. As *Beloved* stages the temporary realization of this frail, provisional, and highly unstable consensus, it powerfully envisions how moments of intersubjective understanding might be possible and how meanings might be

temporarily arrested in a world marked by difference and uncertainty. The novel thus compellingly *reworks* Peirce's notion of consensus, confronting his late nineteenth-century model of rational agreement with a late twentieth-century understanding of language, difference, and power, and yet endorsing the pragmatist vision of a temporary arrest of meaning that might cut through the disabling thrust of a radical uncertainty to give way to a future that is at least partially open to change. Though especially palpable in the scene of the women's gathering, this complex probing and far-reaching reworking of the Peircean language of consensus is at work throughout the novel. The first part of the chapter therefore traces the novel's concern with the (im)possibility of consensus amidst the (de-)constructions of intersubjectively configured reading positions that the novel's highly manipulative narrative texture persistently performs. Here, I will argue, *Beloved*'s insistence on the politics of difference culminates in a vigorous attack on the homogenizing impulse of sentimental conventions of reading that remain central to the slave narrative tradition, forcing the novel to tie its reworking of this generic tradition to alternative ways of imagining the possibility of meaningful intersubjective exchange. The second part of the chapter returns to the scene of the women's gathering, shedding light on the process of community creation it stages and tying the pragmatist negotiations it powerfully displays to the novel's larger commitment to revealing what Morrison herself has called "a kind of truth" ("Site" 115) about the history of slavery and its victims. The pragmatist politics that *Beloved* both reflects and reworks, I argue, eventually locates the possibility of discerning such 'a truth' not in the referential power of language but in the provisional consensus of a community that may be reached with the need for action impending. Such a Peircean reading, I will finally contend, opens up new ways of conceptualizing the supposedly 'realist' or 'moral' turn of the postmodernism of difference that gained prominence in the 1980s, and sheds new light on the language of 'difference' and 'community' that has accompanied its rise.

The fourth and final chapter turns to Jonathan Safran Foer's *Everything Is Illuminated* (2002), reworking the language of creativity and consensus once again and extending the Peircean dialogue to current debates over the 'end of postmodernism.' Foer's novel, I will argue, combines the dazzling creative excess of Pynchon's *V.* with

Beloved's deep yearning for moments of social empowerment as it persistently infuses its protagonists' attempts to reconstruct their families' histories and relate the events of their summer journey with a compelling sense of urgency and commitment. As the first part of the chapter will show, *Everything Is Illuminated* delights in the destabilizing workings of postmodernist play and metafictional subversion, celebrating the inventiveness of its fiction-writing protagonists and spinning ever-more dazzling tales of imaginative excess. However, the letter-writing enterprise takes on an increasingly urgent tone, pressing for moments of a 'meaningful' textual engagement as it veers towards action, death, and the break-up of a family. The key to this remarkable move from postmodernist play to a new sense of engagement, I will argue in the chapter's second part, lies in the novel's appropriation of the epistolary form and the performative (re-)enactment of 'meaningful' (inter)subjectivities that this generic intertext allows for. The epistolary genre and the discourses of subject formation that remain deeply ingrained in its tradition allow the novel to hold out the vision of an ethically meaningful intersubjective exchange, while at the same time exposing the discursive formations that go into the construction of such a vision. *Everything Is Illuminated* thus takes an intriguing performative turn, grounding its claims to 'make sense' after all in a compelling interplay of oscillating textual in/stability, and gesturing towards a consensus that is always already mediated and enacted. The third and final part of chapter four will turn to this remarkable fusion of a strikingly pragmatist dynamic with contemporary notions of performativity as the most innovative contribution which *Everything Is Illuminated* makes to the Peircean dialogue I set out to pursue. Like *Beloved*, Foer's novel substantially reworks the Peircean notion of 'consensus,' pushing it far beyond Peirce's 'doubt-and-belief-model' of rational agreement. Unlike *Beloved*, however, it subjects Peirce's model to a performative turn as well, reworking 'consensus' along the lines of a communal self-fashioning that willfully engages the world's constructedness in bold demonstrations of a strong 'will to believe anyway.' Indebted to the contemporary project of rethinking and reworking the legacy of postmodernism, *Everything Is Illuminated* thus establishes the grounds on which (inter)subjectivities might be re-enacted and creativity might be collectively performed in a post-postmodern world.

As this overview reveals, the pragmatist negotiations staged by Thomas Pynchon, Toni Morrison, and Jonathan Safran Foer are far-reaching. They not only invite us to rethink conventional readings of postmodernism but also challenge familiar conceptions of pragmatism, opening up new ways of engaging the dialogue between pragmatism and postmodernism in the present and future. The conclusion picks up the various threads of such a dialogue as they emerge from my Peircean readings, asking where the pragmatist rereadings of postmodernism and the postmodernist critiques of pragmatism they entail might take us. What insights do they hold out for contemporary criticism and theory? What kind of critical work do they enable? And where do they locate pragmatism's future place in literary and cultural theory? In the end, I thus return to the questions my introduction has raised, drawing on the insights my readings of *V.*, *Beloved*, and *Everything Is Illuminated* yield to reflect on and assess the much-proclaimed 'promise' of pragmatism for literary and cultural studies. Pragmatism, I will argue, provides concepts and tools for much innovative critical work. But the kind of "postmodern pragmatism" that Ihab Hassan envisions, and that much recent pragmatist scholarship has tended to celebrate is hardly convincing. Instead of perpetuating the pragmatist rhetoric of redemption and lamenting postmodernism's "potential for nihilism" and "feckless play" (Hassan, "From" 13), we must historicize and differentiate, acknowledging the theoretical underpinnings and complex histories of the concepts and terms we use and insisting on important differences. Only then, my study reveals, will the dialogue between pragmatism and postmodernism fulfill its promise and move beyond easy antagonisms and fusions.

Chapter One

Toward a New Postmodern Language Game: C. S. Peirce and the Pragmatist Language of Creativity and Consensus

In two essays written to refine, defend, and prove his pragmatist doctrine in 1905, Charles Sanders Peirce expresses his disdain for the popularization of his "word 'pragmatism'" in ways that prove highly revealing for the kind of Peircean language work I set out to pursue (*CP* 5.414). In "What Pragmatism Is" Peirce attacks "the literary journals" of his time, blaming them for "abus[ing]" his "word" in "merciless" ways and claiming—not without a certain degree of ironic bravado—that such an abuse is of course to be "expect[ed]" of the "literary" trade: "The word begins to be met with occasionally in the literary journals, where it gets abused in the merciless way words have to expect when they fall into literary clutches" (*CP* 5.414). The same scornful yet markedly self-mocking posture against all things "literary" comes to the fore in "Issues of Pragmaticism." Here Peirce expresses his stance against literature metaphorically, speaking of the need "to rescue the good ship Philosophy for the service of Science from the hands of lawless rovers of the sea of literature" (*CP* 5.449).

I open my chapter with these snapshots of Peirce's writing to underline the inescapable tensions and deep ironies involved in bringing Peirce to bear on literary texts and attuning his philosophy to the critical agenda of literary postmodernism. As both comments reveal, literature appears not to have interested Peirce in the least. In fact, it seems to have served mainly as an antithesis to all that Peirce desired his philosophy to be: systematic in style, comprehensive in scope, and committed to "the service of Science" and reason. Trained as a chemist, Peirce worked for the U.S. Coast and Geodetic Survey for much of his life and only held a short tenure as a lecturer in logic at Johns Hopkins University (1879–1884). Forced to leave under

obscure circumstances, he retreated to Milford, Pennsylvania, where he continued to expand and revise his philosophical thinking, struggling with severe health problems and financial pressures until his death in 1914.[1] Peirce's failure to achieve public attention and academic recognition, however, contrasts starkly with his philosophical ambitions. In the remaining fragments of an introduction to "A Guess at the Riddle," for example, one of the many books he aspired to write but never managed to complete, Peirce notes that his aim is to devise "a theory so comprehensive that, for a long time to come, the entire work of human reason, in philosophy of every school and kind, in mathematics, in psychology, in physical science, in history, in sociology, and in whatever other department there may be, shall appear as the filling up of its details" (*CP* 1.1). Such statements suggest that Peirce certainly would not approve the workings to which I put his philosophy in this study. His writings are infused by such grand gestures and bear the traces of such a strong and unique personality that one can almost hear Peirce shout "abuse" at those "lawless rovers of the sea of literature" who have once again set out to dilute, misread, and disrespect his ambitious philosophical undertaking. It is safe to assume that most of his contemporary followers in philosophy departments would follow suit, joining Susan Haack, for instance, in attacking the "airy literary dilettantism" that has led to the "further distortion of the message of the classical pragmatist tradition" in recent years (4, 32).

The irony of willfully resisting such charges has its pleasures, however, especially since it creates tensions that prove highly productive once Peirce's philosophy takes on the work of "challenging and reorienting thinking" in a field to which it apparently does not belong. As Jonathan Culler has argued, this is what generally defines the work of theory (3), and it is to this work that Peirce's thinking is put throughout this study. My aim is not to provide an accurate account of Peirce's philosophy, but to work *with* his philosophical writings, using them to develop a critical language of creativity and consensus that opens up new ways of thinking about postmodernism

[1] For a detailed account of Peirce's professional, intellectual, and personal life, see Joseph Brent, *Charles Sanders Peirce: A Life*.

and the concerns of contemporary literary theory.[2] Peirce's writings, I contend, invite such a shift from philosophy to theory since his thought presents itself to us today as what Kenneth Laine Ketner has called a "regrettable," though highly "interesting failure" (Preface xi). Notwithstanding Peirce's claims to consistency, it is virtually impossible to draw a consistent philosophy from his writings without ignoring the many contradictions they harbor.[3] His thought is accessible to us only through a large array of unpublished manuscripts which, as Johannes Ehrat has noted, "comprise traces of a work in progress rather than the final word of a thinker" and remain extremely difficult to sort out (13). Peirce simply failed to "erect" the grand "philosophical edifice" he had in mind (*CP* 1.1), and while this discredited his philosophy in the past, it now provides us with an impressive range of conflicting theories. Ketner has referred to these theories as "nuggets […] which can be brought out of the mud and shined up to some purpose" (Preface xi). The allusion to the gold rush may be somewhat misleading, but I find his metaphor highly intriguing as it encapsulates what the work of theory involves. Rather than asking what Peirce aspired to achieve, it relies on the act of sifting through Peirce's writings for "nuggets" that may be "shined up to some purpose." This purpose, in my case, is defined by the project of reading *V.*, *Beloved*, and *Everything Is Illuminated* under the auspices of a new postmodern language game, one that adopts Peirce's pragmatist language of creativity and consensus but updates it for the twenty-first century, renewing and revising its appeal.

I find it important to stress the discrepancy that is bound to remain between Peirce's ambitious philosophical project and the work of theory to which it is put here, as the tensions that arise from it infuse my argument with moments of resistance that keep the dialogue between pragmatism and postmodernism in motion, preventing it from

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[2] Slavoj Žižek points to this fundamental difference between philosophy and theory in *The Fright of Real Tears*: "[I]n philosophy, it is one thing to talk about, to report on, say, the history of the notion of subject (accompanied by all the proper bibliographical footnotes), even to supplement it with comparative critical remarks; it is quite another thing to work in theory, to elaborate the notion of 'subject' itself." Žižek goes on to state that he turns to the work of the Polish director Krzysztof Kieślowski "not to talk *about* his work, but to refer to his work in order to accomplish the *work* of Theory" (9).

[3] Nathan Houser points to this difficulty in his introduction to the first volume of *The Essential Peirce*. See *EP* 1: xxii-xxiii.

becoming too smooth and close-fitted and forcing it to encounter frictions and profound contradictions as well as unexpected links, powerful conversations, and remarkable convergences. Peirce, in other words, need not be twisted into shape for the dialogue to yield productive results, but may contribute to it precisely through the tensions his philosophical system of thought reveals between science and literature, philosophy and theory, rational thought and textual negotiations. Were the dialogue to be reduced to these discrepancies, however, it would remain largely unrevealing. The aim of reading literary texts with Peirce must be to have his philosophy open up fruitful conversations and productive encounters. A considerable amount of conceptual work is needed to realize such an enterprise, and it is such work that this chapter seeks to perform. It does so by turning to Rohr's readings of Peirce as a valuable source of conceptual insight and guidance before moving beyond Rohr's approach, spelling out the language of creativity and consensus that may be derived from Peirce's philosophy and conceptualizing how this language may speak to literary texts and may draw out the pragmatist negotiations staged by Pynchon, Morrison, and Foer.

Productive In/Stabilities: Susanne Rohr's Peircean Theory of Reality Constitution

Among the growing number of studies devoted to Peircean readings of literature and culture, Rohr's work stands out as an especially innovative and far-reaching contribution to the project of advancing a fruitful dialogue between literary criticism and pragmatist theory. Rohr's two book-length studies, *Über die Schönheit des Findens* (1993) and *Die Wahrheit der Täuschung* (2004), offer accounts of Peirce's thought and develop sets of concepts and tools that resist the more common impulse of either formalist-semiotic or neo-pragmatist accounts, instead attuning Peirce to the critical agenda of a post-post-structuralist literary criticism. Rohr's reading of Peirce evolves in close dialogue with the theoretical insights and critical achievements of poststructuralist scholarship, facilitating the shift from philosophy to theory that I force Peirce's thought to undergo and opening up potential ways of negotiating the tensions between Peirce's philosophical ambitions and the cultural politics of postmodernism.

Rohr herself, however, tends to frame this dialogue as a hostile encounter. Echoing typical arguments advanced in the wake of the pragmatist revival, she presents Peirce's pragmatist-semiotic philosophy as an "alternative[]" to "post-structuralist, deconstructivist, New Historicist, race, class and gender theories" ("Pragmaticism" 293).[4] Such an alternative is needed, she claims, since the "semiotic premises" that these theoretical approaches to literature and culture rest on are "exhausted" and since their implications have become "entirely predictable." By turning to Peirce, Rohr attempts to counter what she perceives as the deplorable "dead ends" of poststructuralist theory (293). The *cul-de-sac* of poststructuralism and its various theoretical disguises, she argues, lies in the "loss of universal and historical perspectives resulting from emptying the position of the subject" and in the theoretical compulsion to sidestep issues of referentiality and representation and to bracket the sign's relation to the world (294). Rohr thus tunes in with the familiar critique brought forth against postmodernism from Frederic Jameson to Ihab Hassan and Richard Poirier, but her line of attack on contemporary literary theory is actually quite specific. For Rohr, the root cause of its deficiencies lies in the dyadic sign model of Saussurean semiotics on which poststructuralist theories rely, a model that "cannot but force all arguments into figures of binary opposition" and cannot "by definition" conceptualize the relationship between sign and world or "fictional and non-fictional realities" (293). This is of course a sweeping argument; and its generalizing gesture is certainly problematic, if not flawed and unbefitting. Rohr's harsh critique fails to acknowledge the multifaceted history and complex evolution of poststructuralist thought and its various appropriations, for instance, and by pitting Peirce against poststructuralism she eventually perpetuates the binary logic she seeks to contest. As Sabine Sielke has argued, Rohr also "misread[s] poststructuralism's renegotiations of established notions of subjectivity," ignoring the fact that the subject has figured centrally in much poststructuralist theorizing from Lacanian psychoanalysis to race, class, and gender theories, and that "protagonists of the poststructuralist debate" like Judith Butler and

[4] Published in 2003, Rohr's essay "Pragmaticism: A New Approach to Literary and Cultural Analysis" presents her argument as it is summarized in the introduction to *Die Wahrheit der Täuschung*. I will therefore quote from it extensively.

Slavoj Žižek "have interrogated preconditions of an ethically and politically responsible agency" in great length and detail (85).

Despite these apparent misconceptions and problematic exaggerations that shape Rohr's argument, I contend that there is much to be gained from the Peircean model of analysis she advances. The interesting dialogue that Rohr's readings actually do open up between Peirce's pragmatist-semiotic theory and the insights of poststructuralism suggests that her antagonistic remarks are largely rhetorical in nature. The fact that Peirce's pragmatist philosophy does not call into question but rather endorses "essential deconstructivist insights concerning the openness, decenteredness and infinity of discourse, the cultural constructedness of the self, and the plurality of sign processes" ("Pragmaticism" 294) remains a central premise of Rohr's work, even as she proposes a Peirce-inspired pragmatist-semiotic theory of the subject and a dynamic, subject-oriented conception of referentiality. Within Rohr's theoretical framework, Peirce becomes inscribed in the language of poststructuralism at the very moment that he is summoned to correct its flaws. Stretched between the poles of nineteenth-century pragmatism and twentieth-century poststructuralist semiotics, Peirce thus emerges as a master of "reconciling the irreconcilable" (298). Rohr presents Peirce to us as a champion of paradoxical moves, emphasizing the dynamic quality of the concepts he advances and highlighting the shifting in/stabilities that characterize them. Peirce's semeiotic, she argues, "embraces the moments of fragility, instability, and delay that are so cherished by poststructuralist theories" but vests them with "counterbalancing, stabilizing powers" at the same time, deriving these balancing forces from a pragmatist framework that takes the relation between sign, subject, and world to be continuous and productive ("Pragmaticism" 298). As Rohr suggests, "neither the world nor the subject" can therefore "ever get lost" in Peirce's pragmatist theory of signification ("Mimesis" 101). Instead, they remain caught up in a dynamic relationship that is both inseparable and creative.

Rohr's emphasis on the productive dynamic of oscillating in/stabilities is perhaps one of the most innovative and promising moves she makes in reading Peirce 'after' poststructuralism. The figure of stabilizing and destabilizing forces that remain inextricably engaged in a dynamic interplay is indeed highly appealing and opens up intriguing contexts for the language of creativity and consensus to

take on productive new meanings. However, Rohr's aim is not to spell out the scope and potential of such a newly invigorated pragmatist language, but to develop a systematic approach to the study of literature based on a re-reading of the concept of mimesis along Peircean lines. For this purpose, she turns to the theory of "reality constitution" that can be derived from Peirce's writings, arguing that such a theory opens up promising new ways of conceptualizing "the interrelationship between reality and fictional reality" that has traditionally kept alive debates over the concept of mimesis ("Pragmaticism" 299, 301). Defining reality as the fragile "result of acts of interpretation" (299) that must be continually negotiated and reconsidered, Rohr's Peircean theory of reality constitution postulates an intricate relationship between text worlds and world texts, highlighting the "constitutive moments" (300) that mark the processes of their making and celebrating literature's role as a "privileged locus" for reflecting on the "frailty" of these moments and the "precariousness" of the interpretive results they yield ("World" 97).

As this glimpse of Rohr's extended Peircean framework reveals, the argument Rohr advances is extremely dense and bears unmistakable traces of Peirce's commitment to complex systems of thought. It is nevertheless revealing to take a closer look at the theoretical insights of Rohr's work and unravel the premises and implications of her Peircean approach to literature in more detail. Since the concept of reality constitution plays a pivotal role in both contexts and emerges as a distinct feature of Rohr's argument, I will use it as a hinge to draw together the most promising elements of her work in the following discussion.

The 'Constitutive Moments' of Rohr's Peircean 'Process of Reality Constitution'

For Rohr, the frail, ubiquitous, and genuinely creative process of reality constitution that Peirce's work on semiotics, logic, and pragmatism allows us to theorize offers one of the most promising conceptual frameworks Peirce provides. It is here that the epistemological outreach of Peirce's semeiotic becomes apparent, opening up avenues of inquiry that differ markedly from the linguistic contexts (post-)structuralism relies on. As Rohr emphasizes, Peirce developed his theory of signs as a formal logic concerned with the

question of cognition and committed to the project of establishing the formal conditions under which true knowledge of the world can be achieved. As a result, Peirce's semeiotic cannot be disentangled from the complex design of his pragmatist epistemology, but remains intricately bound to its objectives, playing an integral part in the theory of knowledge and cognition Peirce sought to devise to explain how we can come to know the world.[5] It is thus hardly surprising that the concept of reality and the process by which it may interact with the realm of thought and human perception features centrally in Peirce's thought and decisively shapes the workings to which his semeiotic is put.

As many Peirce scholars have noted, Peirce's concept of reality shifted over time, oscillating between the philosophical positions of realism and idealism and finally settling on a unique blend that might best be defined along the lines of the "ideal-realism" Peirce attributed to his father.[6] According to this view, reality is genuinely cognizable but can be known only through signs; it exists independently of human cognition, as realists would claim, but cannot be known outside thought, as idealists have argued. Reality and the process of its cognition are thus interdependent from the start, allowing reality to assume a paradoxical position as both the *trigger* and the *result* of semiotic processes of reality constitution. Peirce himself defined the doctrine of "ideal-realism" as "the opinion that nature and the mind have such a community as to impart to our guesses a tendency toward the truth, while at the same time they require the confirmation of empirical science."[7] This definition emphasizes the fact that reality is cognizable *in* thought but is not the

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[5] See James Jakób Liszka's definition of Peirce's semeiotic as "a formal, normative science that is specifically concerned with the question of truth as it can be expressed and known through the medium of signs, and serves to establish leading principles for any other science which is concerned with signs in some capacity" (14).

[6] See Nathan Houser's introduction to the first volume of *The Essential Peirce*, *EP* 1: xxiv-xxv and xxxv. The development of Peirce's thought along these lines has also been discussed by Max Fisch in "Peirce's Progress from Nominalism Toward Realism" and Klaus Oehler in "Die Grundlegung des Pragmatismus durch Peirce."

[7] The quotation is taken from Peirce's entries to the *Century Dictionary*, which Houser cites in his introduction to *The Essential Peirce*. In the same context, Peirce defines idealism as "the metaphysical doctrine that the real is of the nature of thought," and the realist as "a philosopher who believes in the real existence of the external world as independent of all thought about it" (*EP* 1: xxiv-xxv).

nature *of* thought, as a strong idealism would have it. Instead, it stimulates our efforts to find out and know by confronting us with a never-ending series of "surprising facts" (*CP* 7.218) and forcing us to question, probe, and correct our findings—with the methods of empirical science, for instance. At the same time, Peirce conceptualizes reality "as the normal product of mental action, and not as the incognizable cause of it" (*CP* 8.15). Since reality is generally accessible to the realm of thought, where it remains subject to continuous scrutiny and correction, it presents itself to us as the *result* of a collective process of interpretation. "The real," Peirce states, "is that which, sooner or later, information and reasoning would finally result in" and "involves the notion of a COMMUNITY, without definite limits and capable of a definite increase in knowledge" (*CP* 5.311). It is thus, as Rohr notes, "not *relative* but *consensual* in a strictly pragmatist understanding" ("World" 96).

Within the epistemological framework Peirce advances, reality is constantly in the making, allowing the process of its cognition to emerge as a genuinely creative act of constitution. The pragmatist notion of consensus remains tied to this "open and unfinished Peircean world," a world that is continually engaged by "knowing, experiencing, cooperating subject[s]" who, as David Depew notes, are capable of feeding the products of their creative sense-making acts into collective processes of scrutiny and exchange (7, 14). As a result, truth, meaning, and reality are redefined as social products that may be continually approximated to attain true knowledge of the world and function as regulative principles of public communication along the way. Peirce's pragmatist concept of reality is "founded on epistemological optimism rather than skepticism," as Rohr argues, but it remains inscribed in the workings of an "insurmountable insecurity" at the same time. As the interpretive outcome of creative sense-making acts, reality is marked by the profound in/stabilities that distinguish all signifying processes; it retains an "elusive status that demands continuous reinterpretation" ("Pragmaticism" 299-300).

This need to ever renegotiate the contours of reality and reflect on the process of its creation is central to Rohr's reading of Peirce, as it allows her to conceptualize the constitutive moments of the process of reality constitution as 'moments of frailty' that are continuously reflected on in acts of endless cultural self-fashioning

and that become especially palpable in literary texts. The main gist of her argument is that reality, as it is perceived by a given culture at a given time, has always "inherited all the moments of frailty that accompany the process of its creation" ("Pragmaticism" 300). Among these moments Rohr identifies (1) the process of signification as it is brought about by the dynamic interaction of the three correlates of Peirce's sign triad, (2) the moment of object formation that forms an integral part of it, (3) the flow of infinite semiosis that results from it, (4) the creative act of guessing the world into being that Peirce conceptualizes as the moment of abductive inference, and (5) the processes of scrutiny and exchange that seek to tame and regulate what creative excess the products of subjective sense-making acts might bear by committing them to the regulative principles of logical reasoning and intersubjective exchange. As Rohr argues, each of these constitutive elements of the process of reality constitution "oscillates between the poles of stability and instability, creativity and conventionality" ("Mimesis" 107), allowing reality to emerge both as a "subjective proposal" that bears the precarious traces of subjective needs of differentiation and as a "cultural product" that "echoes habits of interpretation within a given culture at a given time" ("Pragmaticism" 300).

Peirce's definition of the sign as a *genuine triadic relation* that irreducibly binds its three constitutive correlates—sign, object and interpretant—to the dynamic interplay of grounding, representation, and interpretation is certainly one of the most innovative and far-reaching conceptual moves his semeiotic has to offer.[8] Developed in close proximity to his doctrine of categories and his logic of relations and thus in a markedly philosophical context rather than a linguistic environment, it lays the groundwork for a theory of representation and cognition that accounts for the profound frailty and indeterminacy of all signifying processes and yet conceives of the relationship among sign, subject, and world as inextricable and highly productive at the same time. The key to this genuine in/stability, Rohr argues, lies in the fact that Peirce's triadic conception of the sign remains bound to the workings of an "interpreting mind" (*CP* 8.177) which generates meaning by drawing the three sign correlates together in the act of

[8] For detailed accounts of Peirce's theory of signs, see Rohr, *Über die Schönheit* 32-85, Oehler, "An Outline of Peirce's Semiotics," and Liszka's *General Introduction to the Semeiotic of Charles Sanders Peirce.*

interpretation. As Kaja Silverman has noted, one of the valuable insights Peirce's semeiotic thus provides is that "the connections which are productive of meaning can only be made in the mind of the subject" (*Subject* 19). This mind, however, cannot stand outside the process of signification but is itself an integral part of it, even remains constituted by it. "[E]very thought is a sign," Peirce argues in "Some Consequences of Four Incapacities," and then asserts that "man is an external sign" (*CP* 5.314).

While Peirce, in other words, anticipates the semiotic decentering of the subject that poststructuralist critics sought to accomplish, he simultaneously places "man" (his nineteenth-century gendered term for the human subject) at the center of his semiotic theory, conceptualizing the process of signification as an ongoing, productive, and genuinely creative act of re/cognition by which the subject establishes and negotiates its conceptual relationship with the world.[9] Of the many definitions Peirce offers of the triadic sign relation, the following attests to this "subject-oriented" (Rohr, "Pragmaticism" 293) approach to the theory of signification particularly well, and provides intriguing points of departure for a more detailed discussion of its complex design. "A sign, or *representamen*," Peirce states in an unidentified fragment dated 1897,

> is something which stands to somebody for something in some respect or capacity. It addresses somebody, that is, creates in the mind of that person an equivalent sign, or perhaps a more developed sign. That sign which it creates I call the *interpretant* of the first sign. The sign stands for something, its *object*. It stands for that object, not in all respects, but in reference to a sort of idea, which I have sometimes called the *ground* of the representamen. (*CP* 2.228)

For a sign to be a sign, in other words, it must "address[] somebody" and "create[] in the mind of that person" a subsequent sign, the interpretant. It must be genuinely interpretable and must fulfill what James Liszka calls an "*interpretative* condition" with respect to some

[9] I owe the graphically modified term "re/cognition" to Winfried Siemerling, who introduces it as a marker for the doubled process of recognition and re-cognition, of remembering the familiar and re-conceptualizing it to arrive at something new, that marks the history of North American cultural transformation (2-4). I use it in a Peircean context to refer to the pragmatist grounding of every process of cognition in habits and beliefs, a grounding, which makes every creative act an act of re/cognition.

"sign-interpreting agency" (19, 25). At the same time, it must "stand for something," an object, and must hence fulfill a "*representative* condition" (Liszka 18). This object, however, is represented by the sign only "in some respect or capacity." The mode of its representation is always partial and open to possibility; it cannot be reduced to a static dyadic relation between sign-vehicle and object but remains inextricably bound to the interpretive process that the sign's triadic relation keeps in motion.[10] Within the semeiotic framework Peirce advances, interpretation, representation, and grounding thus remain interdependent. As James Liszka has argued, "the ability of the sign to represent also requires, inherently, its power to be interpreted as a sign of that object in some respect; the ability of the sign to be interpreted can only work if it is interpreted as representing an object in some respect; and it can only be understood as representing an object in some respect if it is interpreted as representing an object as such." This, he claims, is the "*triadic condition*" of the sign (19).

Conceptualized as a 'constitutive moment' within the process of 'reality constitution' Rohr is concerned with, the sign relation thus already harbors much of the profound in/stability that the product of this process, reality, will come to inherit. As Rohr argues, "a certain dynamics and fluidity [are] involved in the formation of this triadic sign relation" ("Patterns" 41), grounding the process of signification in a considerable degree of openness and frailty while committing it to a steady generation of meaning at the same time. As genuine triadic relations, signs cannot—by definition—be devoid of meaning but remain inextricably bound to acts of interpretation that continually translate one sign into the next. This implies, however, that every sign is an interpretation of another sign and must be translated into a subsequent sign to fulfill the sign's interpretative condition. "The meaning of the sign," Peirce explains, "is the sign it has to be translated into" (*CP* 4.132). The sign's genuine interpretability thus not only stabilizes the process of signification by guaranteeing its

[10] At this point, Rohr's reading of Peirce differs from Liszka's in that she consequently ties the sign's *grounding* to the interpreting subject from the start, claiming that it is determined by the subject's need to differentiate and compose the sign's representative function from a specific interpretive angle—Rohr speaks of the "Perspektivierungsleistung des Erkenntnis-Subjekts" and its "Differenzierungsbedürfnis" (*Wahrheit* 23). For Liszka, the sign's *grounding* simply marks its "*presentative* condition," its ability to present "certain features, characters, or qualities of the object […] *in the sign* in an abstract form" (18, 20).

meaningfulness, it also has substantially destabilizing effects. The source of this in/stability, Rohr argues, lies in the "paradoxical, double position" the interpretant assumes both "inside and outside the sign triad" ("Pragmaticism" 297). Inside the sign relation it functions as the sign's "mental effect" (*CP* 1.564), its interpretation; as it translates one sign into the next, however, it takes on the status of a new sign and, hence, induces or rather becomes another sign triad. The interpretant, Rohr argues, thus remains "inextricably bound to two signs at once"; as an "indispensable element of both, but neither fully the one or the other," it keeps the process of signification in motion, allowing a sign's meaning to "come to itself" only through a belated series of (re-)interpretations ("Mimesis" 101).

For Rohr, a very similar interplay of stabilizing and destabilizing forces is inherent in the sign's relation to its object. Peirce's definition of the sign requires that it must stand "for something." It must, in Liszka's words, fulfill a representational condition and may thus stabilize the potentially endless process of signification by maintaining its meaningful relation to the world.[11] The sign's object, however, is always an "object[] *of thought*" which, as Rohr stresses, "share[s] the same mode of being" as the sign since it remains bound to its status as "a logical correlate within a triadic relation" ("Patterns" 41). The sign's directedness toward an object may thus indeed establish a meaningful relationship between sign and world, but this relationship is never stable, nor referential in any conventional, i.e. dyadic, sense of the term. Instead, it remains open to the endless triadic workings of interpretative thought, which generate the sign-object in the process of signification, composing it as a mental stand-in for a peculiar aspect of that which the sign represents. Every act of signification, Rohr argues, thus involves a generative process of "object formation" by which the interpreting subject "constitutes reality by realizing its objects" in signs (40). As such, this process remains inherently in/stable and marks a central 'moment of frailty' within the Peircean process of reality constitution.

The generative quality of the sign's relation to the world becomes palpable in Peirce's technical distinction between "immediate" and "dynamic" objects. For Peirce, the immediate object is "the

[11] See Liszka's note 2 on page 18 for an extended discussion of the problems that arise with this definition.

Object as the Sign itself represents it"; the dynamic object, on the other hand, is "the Reality which by some means contrives to determine the Sign to its Representation" (*CP* 4.536). The immediate object thus participates in the sign triad and is, as Rohr stresses, "immediately present and evoked" as an idea in the interpreting mind ("Patterns" 41). The dynamic object, in contrast, elicits the sign but remains independent of any representation. Peirce also defines it as that which "the Sign *cannot* express, which it can only *indicate* and leave the interpreter to find out by *collateral experience*" (*CP* 8.314). This reveals that the notion of "Reality" on which the concept of the dynamic object draws operates within the pragmatist framework of Peirce's epistemology. Though independent of representation, the dynamic object is not incognizable. It is, as Peirce notes, "the Object that Dynamical Science […] can investigate" (*CP* 8.183) and that endless "collateral experience" might finally designate as real. Dynamic objects are thus open to change as well and may, as Peirce acknowledges, even turn out to be "altogether fictive" (*CP* 8.314). The relationship between a sign's immediate and dynamic objects, then, involves a process of mutual interaction. The sign, Peirce states, must indicate the dynamic object by means of "a hint" which "is the Immediate Object" (*EP* 2:480).[12] This sign object, however, remains determined not only by the dynamic object it represents "in some respect or capacity" but by the triadic workings of the interpretant and thus—in extension—by an interpreting subject who, as Rohr notes, "interprets the external, dynamic object by composing the internal [immediate] object according to an interpretive perspective" ("Pragmaticism" 297). In the "process of interpreting the world of dynamic objects," Rohr argues, "a world of immediate objects is created by a subject's interweaving with a multi-layered tissue of signs" ("Patterns" 46).

For Rohr, the process of object formation thus systematically grounds the process of reality constitution in a "marge [sic!] of openness and creativity" ("Patterns" 42) that remains tied to the subject's ongoing creative involvement with a world that is "endlessly comprehensible in thought" (45). What binds the sign to the world is not primarily the sign's relation to a dynamic object but the creative

[12] The quotation is taken from Peirce's correspondence with Victoria Lady Welby, previously published in *Semiotic and Significs*. See Rohr, *Über die Schönheit* 57.

capacities of the interpreting mind that allows the sign triad to realize itself. As a result, Rohr argues, "the semiotic-epistemological process whereby the sign objects of our reality are generated" systematically incorporates "individual" as well as "culturally pre-given" habits of interpretation, allowing each sign object to figure as "a *mixtum compositum* that is highly significant of degrees of individual creativity in a specific cultural context" (34). Within the pragmatist framework of Peirce's philosophy, a framework that conceptualizes dynamic objects as "objects of consensus," the immediate object thus takes on the role of a "common object of communication" (42, 43). It provides a particular perspective on the real that may serve as the basis for a process of intersubjective exchange once it is successfully identified. As Rohr argues, "a significant part of every communicative exchange" will therefore be devoted "implicitly or explicitly to this mutual interpretation of the other's object formation" (43).

In addition to the already in/stable workings of the sign triad and the process of object formation, the third 'moment of frailty' Rohr identifies within the Peircean process of reality constitution is the "infinite series" (*CP* 1.339) of one sign translating itself into "another system of signs" (*CP* 4.127) that she refers to as the flow of "infinite semiosis" ("Pragmaticism" 296). This flow is grounded in the sign's triadic realization of its meaning in a subsequent sign which *is* the interpretant and thus in the paradoxical position the interpretant assumes as both inside and outside the sign triad, and it takes on additional significance in the pragmatist context of Peirce's concept of reality. In analogy to his classification of objects, Peirce distinguishes between immediate, dynamic, and final interpretants. The immediate interpretant, he states, is "the Interpretant represented or signified in the sign" (*CP* 8.343); it indicates the sign's "peculiar Interpretability before it gets any Interpreter" (Peirce, *Semiotic* 111). The dynamic interpretant, on the other hand, is the "effect actually produced by the Sign on the mind" (*CP* 8.343), that "which is experienced in each act of Interpretation and is different in each from that of any other" (*Semiotic* 111). The final interpretant, then, is the "effect that would be produced on the mind by the Sign after sufficient developments of thought" (*CP* 8.343); it is "the one Interpretative result to which every Interpreter is destined to come if the Sign is sufficiently considered" (*Semiotic* 111). Though the process of reality constitution remains caught up in an endless succession of signs, this endless succession is

never arbitrary. In theory, Peirce argues, the interpretant is "another representation to which the torch of truth is handed along" (*CP* 1.339); and the process of infinite semiosis, as Rohr stresses, "brings a sign asymptotically closer to its final interpretant" ("Patterns" 41).

The in/stability that is ingrained in the semiotic process of reality constitution thus evolves out of the peculiar interplay of semiotic and pragmatist concepts that is characteristic of Peirce's thought. The semiotic world of "inexhaustible" meanings (*CP* 1.343) and "infinite regression" (*CP* 1.339) envisioned by Peirce remains infused with a firm pragmatist belief in the progress of human knowledge and the social situatedness of the subject as experiencing agent. This allows for the fact that the flow of infinite semiosis remains committed to the process of realizing a sign's 'true' meaning in the distant future; but it also means that this process can be arrested by meaning-making agents pressed for action in the social world. Though endless in principle, that is, the process of infinite semiosis can be interrupted anytime and *is* in fact interrupted on a regular basis. The pragmatist framework in which Peirce's concept of infinite semiosis remains inscribed explicitly acknowledges the fact that everyday actions rely on what Klaus Oehler has called "abbreviated procedures." This does not mean that the signifying process will have ever come to a halt, but simply that a provisional fixation of meaning may be induced "by the necessity of action." This action, Oehler notes, "then testifies to the necessarily interrupted interpretation of a situation" ("Outline" 8).[13]

The peculiar fusion of pragmatist and semiotic principles of thought that Peirce's conception of the process of infinite semiosis brings to the fore provides an important backdrop for the pragmatist-semiotic theory of meaning that Peirce formulates with the help of his famous pragmatic maxim. In its initial version, published in 1878 in the paper "How to Make Our Ideas Clear," this maxim reads:

> Consider what effects, that might conceivably have practical bearings, we conceive the object of our conception to have. Then, our conception of these effects is the whole of our conception of the object. (*CP* 5.402)

As many Peirce scholars have noted, Peirce later refuted the implicit claim to the primacy of individual sense experiences he makes here

[13] See also Helmut Pape, *Charles S. Peirce* 133-34.

and reformulated his maxim to go by "general modes of rational conduct" instead (*CP* 5.438).[14] Driven in part by shifts in his own thought, this change was also a reaction against William James, who took Peirce's maxim to delineate a theory of truth rather than meaning and replaced Peirce's concern with the effects of the *meaning* of a proposition with a consideration of the effects that would follow from *believing* it.[15] However, Peirce's early formulation of the maxim remains appealing, as it stresses what the provisional fixation of meaning involves on the part of the pragmatist subject. He or she must continually engage the world in a series of mental thought-experiments, anticipating the "effects" that "the object" of his or her "conception" will "have," and generating hypotheses that may or may not be confirmed by experience. The meanings of a proposition are thus always provisional, even as they are temporarily fixed and agreed upon. They are hypotheses, as Peirce notes, "explanations of phenomena held as hopeful suggestions" (*CP* 5.196), and may be overhauled, enhanced, or discarded any time.

The interesting ties that Peirce's pragmatist maxim thus opens up, between the interweaving of subject and world in the experimental process of determining the meanings of a proposition, on the one hand, and, on the other, the process of infinite semiosis whereby, as Rohr metaphorically puts it, "the subject weaves itself into the world while constituting it in signs as reality" ("Mimesis" 101), these ties are central to Rohr's reading of Peirce and enable a decisive move in her argument. Drawing on Peirce's conception of "man" as "sign" (*CP* 5.314), Rohr highlights the convergence of processes of thought and processes of signification within the pragmatist-semiotic framework of his philosophy. For Peirce, "the mind is a sign developing according to the laws of inference" (*CP* 5.313). This implies, she argues, that the process of infinite semiosis, which *is* this developing sign, operates "according to the laws of inference" as well; processes of thought and processes of signification, Rohr stresses, unfold according to the *same* laws, the laws of inferential reasoning or rather, as she specifies, the laws of generating and building hypotheses that

[14] In this revised version the maxim reads: "The entire intellectual purport of any symbol consists in the total of all general modes of rational conduct which, conditionally upon all the possible different circumstances and desires, would ensue upon the acceptance of the symbol." (*CP* 5.438)

[15] See H. O. Mounce, *The Two Pragmatisms* 36-52.

Peirce refers to as the laws of abductive inference (*Wahrheit* 38-43). For Rohr, this convergence has far-reaching implications. On the one hand, she argues, it is here that the semiotic subject position provided within Peirce's theory of signs fuses with the *agens* of his pragmatist philosophy, allowing for a peculiar, doubled conception of the subject as a semiotic function within a system of signs and as a social agent, capable of realizing his or her "interpretive results in the habits of action to which these could give rise" ("Pragmaticism" 297). It may be noted that the "significant promise" Rohr draws from this, the promise of "finally" speaking of "real *subject*[s]" "again" who are "able to *act* on meaningful *objects*" ("Promises" 381), is overstated if not altogether flawed, as the price paid for its fulfilment is a questionable emphasis on conscious, even rational "train[s] of thought" (*CP* 5.314) that poststructuralist notions of the subject have shown to be an insufficient ingredient in conceptualizing the intricate workings of agency.[16] Within the Peircean framework, however, the convergence of pragmatist and semiotic subject positions that occurs in the process of the subject's mental (re-)construction of the world in a series of sign hypotheses highlights the importance of the logic of abduction for the process of reality constitution Rohr seeks to lay out. It is through the unfolding of this logic that the frail interpretive products of sign processes enter the social realm, where they are translated into habits of thought and action and are submitted to a continual process of scrutiny and exchange.[17]

As the fourth moment of frailty within Rohr's Peircean model, the moment of the subject's abductive generation of "hopeful suggestions" (*CP* 5.196) about the world introduces an additional

[16] In *The Psychic Life of Power*, Judith Butler advances a highly complex theory of agency, for instance, exploring the consequences of the fact that "the subject, defended by some as a presupposition of agency, is also understood to be an *effect* of subjection" (11), and providing a nuanced account of agency as "the assumption of a purpose unintended by power, one […] that operates in a relation of contingency and reversal to the power that makes it possible, to which it nevertheless belongs" (15).

[17] See *Die Wahrheit* 38-43. Rohr's summary of this interplay reads "nur als irreduzierbarer Teil der Zeichentriade, als Subjektfunktion eines Zeichensystems ist einem Subjekt die Realität greifbar, doch nur als pragmatistisches Subjekt kann es seine Interpretationen der Realität durch die mentale Antizipation ihres Ausdrucks in seinen Überzeugungen und Handlungsgewohnheiten reflektieren und sich deren Bedeutung vergewissern" (43).

margin of creative openness to the already highly in/stable process of reality constitution. Conceptualized as truly creative acts of guessing the world into being, abductions establish the subject's cognitive relation to the world, defining how it is to be provisionally perceived through a significant blend of new proposals and old habits of interpretation. Rohr grounds this reading in Peirce's later work, in which he turns away from the highly technical treatment of abduction as a distinct mode of logical inference, and adopts a more general epistemological perspective, binding the process of abductive inference to his interest in the growth of knowledge and "the power of the human mind to *originate* ideas that are true" (*CP* 5.50). Peirce generally defines abduction as "the process of forming an explanatory hypothesis," claiming that it is vital to the advancement of human knowledge as "it is the only logical operation which introduces any new idea" (*CP* 5.171). While "Deduction proves that something *must* be" and "Induction shows that something *actually is* operative," "Abduction merely suggests that something *may* be" (*CP* 5.171) and thus serves as the central source of "originality in logic" (Rohr, "Pragmaticism" 299). As a result, every act of cognition relies on "mere guesses," forcing Peirce to trace 'man's' ability to develop "correct theories about nature" to 'his' "power of guessing right" (*CP* 5.589-91, and 2.86).

The appeal to an instinctive essence of human nature that is implied in this argument is highly problematic and has been controversially debated among Peirce scholars.[18] Rohr sidesteps its pitfalls, however, by abstracting from what would be Peirce's contribution to a logic of discovery or economics of research and considering the function of abductive inferences within the pragmatist-semiotic framework of Peirce's epistemology instead. In this context, Rohr suggests, abductions may be conceptualized more generally as those transitory moments in which percepts are transformed into perceptual judgments. She supports this thesis by pointing to a passage in which Peirce insists on the fact that a sentence such as "I see an azalea in full bloom" constitutes an abduction:

> I perform an abduction when I so much as express in a sentence anything I see. The truth is that the whole fabric of our knowledge is one matted felt of

[18] See Rohr, *Über die Schönheit* 100-05, and Anderson, *Creativity and the Philosophy of C. S. Peirce* 32-40.

> pure hypothesis confirmed and refined by induction. Not the smallest advance can be made in knowledge beyond the stage of vacant staring without making an abduction at every step. (*Peirce Papers* MS 692)[19]

Focusing on this ubiquitous quality of abductive inference allows Rohr to link it to the general process of reality constitution. As a moment of frailty, that is, abductive inference points to the Peircean "felt of pure hypothesis" that constitutes the "fabric of our knowledge," a fabric that the interpreting subject weaves, as Rohr puts it, by guessing the world into being. This fabric is "matted" with old threads that may nevertheless yield surprising new results, as Peirce's account of the process stresses:

> The abductive suggestion comes to us like a flash. It is an act of *insight*, although of extremely fallible insight. It is true that the different elements of the hypothesis were in our mind before; but it is the idea of putting together what we had never before dreamed of putting together which flashes the new suggestion before our contemplation. (*CP* 5.181)

Like the sign-objects that drive the process of signification, Rohr argues, the hypotheses that are generated in the process of abductive inference thus remain frail interpretive proposals, marked both by the workings of creativity and by culturally mediated habits of interpretation. Their instability keeps the process of reality constitution in constant motion, since "the world," as Rohr argues, "claims to be guessed forever" and demands to be endlessly engaged in hypothetical acts of reasoning ("Mimesis" 103).

Like the other moments of frailty Rohr identifies, then, the moment of abductive inference infuses the process of reality constitution with a considerable degree of openness and insecurity that cannot be overcome. As the creative act of translating percepts into perceptual judgments allows the sense-making process to enter the communicative realm of language, however, subsequent deductive and inductive inferences and processes of intersubjective exchange can act as stabilizing forces leading toward instances of 'confirmation' and 'refinement,' as Peirce suggests in the azalea passage quoted

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[19] Manuscript 692 of *The Charles S. Peirce Papers* is a preliminary chapter on "The Proper Treatment of Hypotheses" that Peirce wrote for a study on "Hume's Argument Against Miracles" that was never published. Rohr quotes this passage in *Über die Schönheit des Findens* 105.

above. Seeking to tame and regulate what creative excess the products of subjective sense-making acts may have accrued, these processes of scrutiny and exchange commit the continual construction of reality to endless revisions and reinterpretations, driving its movement toward the formulation of "correct theories" (*CP* 5.591) about the world but stressing its provisional quality and unstable nature for the time being. The "intra- and intersubjective practices of exchange and reflection" that Rohr identifies as the fifth constitutive moment within the process of reality constitution may have stabilizing effects but remain inextricably bound to the endless process of interpretation in which they are inscribed. As a consequence, Rohr argues, "they reproduce the very problem they set out to overcome and extend the whole problem *ad infinitum*," reinforcing the need to reflect on the contours of reality and underlining the profound insecurity that marks and drives it ("Pragmaticism" 300).

For the purpose of extracting a pragmatist language of creativity and consensus from Rohr's reading of Peirce, the Peircean notion of consensus that is evoked in this context is especially revealing. For Peirce, consensus is first of all a regulative principle through which knowledge becomes differentiated from the jarring mass of utterly subjective beliefs, allowing a community of interpreters to move continually towards a 'true' account of the world they live in.[20] At the same time, it is an ideal state of rational agreement that will—in the distant future and under ideal conditions—*be* the "correct" (*CP* 5.591) theory of reality and thus reality itself. As Peirce himself states in "How to Make Our Ideas Clear," "[t]he opinion which is fated to be ultimately agreed to by all who investigate is what we mean by the truth, and the object represented in this opinion is the real. This is the way I would explain reality" (*CP* 5.407). In the light of this pragmatist consensus theory of truth and reality, the process of reaching an agreement over what is 'true' and what is 'real' becomes located in the realm of social and communicative relations. In this realm, knowledge is subject to constant change; it is never objective, but always intersubjective, drawing its validity from the fleeting power of consensus and never quite losing its hypothetical ground. Likewise, each moment of consensus is frail and temporary; it is, as Peirce stresses, nothing but a

[20] See Oehler, "Outline" 11-18.

"belief" or "opinion" that has been "fixed" or "settled" for the time being and may be subject to "the irritation of doubt" as soon as it has been reached (*CP* 5.375), giving way to new constellations of intersubjective agreement and keeping the process of intersubjective scrutiny and exchange in constant motion. While the Peircean world is thus clearly "open" and "unfinished," as Depew notes ("Pragmatists" 7), the normative idea of a universal, larger-than-life "COMMUNITY, without definite limits, and capable of a definite increase of knowledge" (*CP* 5.311), reminds us of the fact that, for Peirce, truth cannot simply be equated with belief, as William James was to argue later, but remains bound to "some external permanency" that a community of researchers can only determine in the long run and that only the "method of science" will successfully reveal (*CP* 5.384).[21] Peirce's consensus theory of truth thus harbors the same peculiar tension of idealist and realist elements that makes his concept of reality so valuable to Rohr's project, allowing truth to emerge as the frail *product* of a process of interpretation while reinscribing its status as a quality that remains "independent of the vagaries of me and you" (*CP* 5.311).

For Rohr, the Peircean notion of consensus thus hinges on the same interplay of stabilizing and destabilizing forces that marks the entire process of reality constitution, underscoring the precarious nature of all sign-products and provisional reality-proposals but allowing for their potential direction toward a 'true' collective knowledge of the world at the same time. Most importantly, however, it reflects the continual need to re-examine the contours of reality, a need that, as Rohr argues, necessarily arises out of the frailty of the constituent moments that go into its making: the in/stability of the sign triad that drives and enables the very process of signification, the margin of creative openness that marks the moment of object formation, the endless deferral of meaning through the process of infinite semiosis, and the genuinely creative moment of abductive inference through which the subject weaves the 'matted felt of pure hypothesis' that constitutes our knowledge of the world at any given time. The profound in/stability that marks these constitutive moments of the process of reality constitution, in other words, makes it necessary to continuously reflect and revise the individual and

[21] For William James's treatment of truth and belief see *The Will to Believe* (1896).

consensual reality-proposals it yields. As Rohr argues, Peirce's notion of consensus thus involves—or rather induces—a process of "endless cultural self-fashioning" ("Mimesis" 104) through which a given culture continuously "re-interpret[s] and re-negotiate[s] what constitutes reality" at a given time ("World" 96). This process finally provides the key to Rohr's Peircean approach to literature, as it allows her to read literary texts as privileged sites of a culture's reflection on the contours of reality.

Rethinking Mimesis: Susanne Rohr's 'Epistemological Approach' to Literature

Within the Peircean framework of literary analysis Rohr advances, literature assumes the role of "an important *participant* in the ongoing process whereby a culture interprets and refocuses itself" and functions as a "*medium* that painstakingly reveals the very necessity of doing so" at the same time ("Mimesis" 105). Conceptualized as fictional realities that are produced by "the same semiotic operations" as nonfictional realities ("Pragmaticism" 301), literary texts open the world's factitiousness—or constructedness—to reflection, exposing and exploring the moments of frailty that go into its making and shedding light on the process of cultural self-assessment of which they are part. For Rohr, literary systems are privileged sites of this reflection on the process of reality constitution as they assume a special phenomenological status within Peirce's classification of signs. Unlike nonfictional realities, Rohr argues, fictional realities "are constructed solely of […] symbolic legisigns"; these are signs that rely on laws, habits, and conventions in determining their presentative and representative functions.[22] As a consequence, Rohr asserts, literary sign systems offer "a unique space of experience and exploration" (301) that allows them to expand the semiotic constructedness of the world and to self-reflexively expose its frailty.

Despite the difference in phenomenological status that distinguishes fictional from nonfictional realities, however, Rohr's Peircean approach to literature builds on the striking similarities and

[22] For Peirce, a "symbol is connected with its object by virtue of the idea of the symbol-using mind" only (*CP* 2.299); and a legisign "is a law" that is "established by men" with respect to the sign's presentative function (2.247). See Rohr, *Über die Schönheit* 72-85 and Liszka 34-40.

close ties between the two. Pointing to the "universalistic claims" of Peirce's epistemology, Rohr argues that "it is fair to bring reality and fictional reality into a direct dialogue" since both are "worlds of triadic relations" that are "induced by the same logical operations" and "shar[e] vital characteristics" ("Pragmaticism" 301). With a Peircean concept of reality in place, that is, nonfictional realities appear just as creatively produced through processes of signification as do fictional realities. "[T]he world as semiotic texture and the semiotic world of a text are analogous to each other in their constructedness" ("Mimesis" 104), Rohr argues, and she uses Peirce to challenge theoretical approaches that would pit literary sign systems against a world that stands 'outside' the realm of signification. As a consequence, she contends, both fictional and nonfictional realities bear the traces of the frail semiotic processes that produced them. In Rohr's own words, they transport the "parameters" of their creation in "a kind of epistemological subtext" that allows "the structures of creativity and the particular historical profile of the operations of interpretation" to become "visible" and to "open themselves up to analysis" ("Pragmaticism" 301). According to Rohr, it is through this epistemological subtext or profile that fictional and nonfictional realities may be seen to correspond directly to each other, entering a productive interrelationship that Rohr—in one of the central moves of her argument—proposes to define as "mimetic" (301).

The concept of reality constitution that figures centrally in Rohr's reading of Peirce thus finally leads her to re-introduce the concept of mimesis to the study of literary texts, shifting the terms of century-old debates over the interrelation of art and world but grounding her Peircean approach to literature in this traditional field of inquiry at the same time. For Rohr, a Peircean-inspired model of "literary analysis" reformulates the "exhausted question" of mimesis by asking "how not reality but the *processes of reality constitution* are represented in works of art" ("Pragmaticism" 303). It restores the concept of mimesis as a critical tool, in other words, by shifting the "analytical level[] of comparison" under which it becomes operative from a supposed general correspondence between art and world to the interrelationship between the epistemological subtexts that both fictional and nonfictional realities have necessarily inherited as the frail results of processes of interpretation (301). A Peircean perspective on the constructedness of both art and world, Rohr argues,

thus opens up a promising way of "speak[ing] of mimesis in the new millennium" (293); it provides the necessary conceptual tools for discerning *how* fictional and nonfictional realities are related and offers a framework of literary analysis that explores this interrelation in concrete settings, recommitting texts to their historical contexts and re-enabling the practice of literary history. Stepping back from Rohr's argument, we may of course ask whether the concept of mimesis is actually needed for such an analysis. The "New Historicist, race, class and gender theories" that Rohr attacks have advanced highly elaborate models of interaction between historically specific forms of literary, cultural, and world texts, after all, and have hardly questioned the fact that "fictional realities have something to do with their historical contexts," as Rohr seems to suggest (293). Before I turn to an extended critique of Rohr's approach and discuss its implications, however, I first wish to expand on its theoretical assumptions and lay out where they take Rohr's re-reading of American literary history.

One of the central assumptions that the historical turn of Rohr's argument relies on is that a culture's self-reflection on the contours of its reality shifts over time. "[P]articular elements in the process of reality constitution are reflected upon more intensely at certain historical moments," Rohr argues, allowing literary texts of the time to display and reveal an epistemological profile that is time-specific and may be seen generally to reflect what Rohr calls "the epistemological profile of a particular decade" ("Pragmaticism" 302). The goal of her Peircean approach to literature is thus to discern "which moments in the process of reality constitution receive particular attention in a given historical context" and to delineate how they are represented in literary texts. The key to unraveling the axis of mimetic correspondence between the processes of self-reflection that are at work in both fictional and nonfictional realities at a given time thus lies in the "classical question" of "how the means of representation relate to the object of representation," though the object of representation is re-defined in this framework as "the epistemological profile of a fictional reality." What points to the epistemological profile of a certain text, in other words, is the text's "aesthetic profile," which, as Rohr argues, may best be approached "through the particular reader position that it creates." Rohr's approach to literary texts, then, seeks to "correlate" these various levels of analysis, unraveling the systematic interplay of a text's

aesthetic profile and reader position to discern its epistemological subtext and reveal how it "correspond[s] mimetically" to the subtext ingrained in the delicate texture of the nonfictional reality that is simultaneously explored in cultural processes of self-reflection ("Pragmaticism" 302).

Paired with claims to the general applicability of her model to "literature *per se*" ("Mimesis" 108), the emphasis that Rohr lays on the historical specificity of the process of epistemological self-reflection serves as a theoretical backdrop to her own ambitious project of re-reading American literary history along the lines of the shifting moments of reflection that the epistemological profiles of particular decades reveal. Focusing on the years 1889 to 1989, Rohr turns to six novels that allow her to trace the development of American literature's epistemological profile from nineteenth-century realism to modernism, postmodernism, and twentieth-century neo-realism: William Dean Howells' *A Hazard of New Fortunes* (1889), Henry James' *The Golden Bowl* (1909), Gertrude Stein's *Blood on the Dining-Room Floor* (1933/48), Vladimir Nabokov's *Lolita* (1955), Thomas Pynchon's *Gravity's Rainbow* (1973), and Paul Auster's *Moon Palace* (1989). As this list reveals, Rohr firmly grounds her readings in canonized assumptions about American literary history, taking each canonical text either to represent a canonized phase of American literary production or to mark a phase of transition in-between.[23] Rohr herself stresses that her aim is not to "contradict" these assumptions but to "play with them, and create new connections" by approaching them with a Peircean perspective in mind ("Mimesis" 109).

In the case of Howells' *A Hazard of New Fortunes*, Rohr adopts canonized readings of the novel's obsession with dialogues and processes of communicational exchange and recontextualizes them.[24] What the novel's endless dialogues stage, she argues, is the process through which a consensus about the contours of reality is negotiated. The novel, in other words, highlights the frail moment of inter-

[23] Heinz Ickstadt's *Der amerikanische Roman im 20. Jahrhundert* and Fluck's *Inszenierte Wirklichkeit* serve as important intertexts throughout her study, for instance.

[24] Rohr especially draws on Fluck's reading of realist fiction as a heuristic response to the interpretive and communicational challenges presented by the social transformation of the Gilded Age.

subjective exchange over the status of subjective reality-proposals, recording the many "moments of bewilderment" this process yields and dramatizing its protagonists' continuous struggle to "cop[e] with the general obscurity of a reality that is constructed through delicate sign processes" ("World" 99). *The Golden Bowl* then marks the transition from realism to modernism as it begins to shift the epistemological focus from processes of discursive interaction to the cognitive processes involved in the subject's mental engagement with the "riddles of reality" ("Mimesis" 110). James' novel, Rohr argues, carefully stages the moments of surprise and bewilderment this process holds out, stressing its protagonists' need to readjust and rework continuously their frail perceptual judgments in the face of a world that remains puzzling and mysterious. In Stein's *Blood on the Dining-Room Floor*, this modernist concern with the fundamentals of perception and the cognitive structures of reality constitution is radicalized to reveal the profound insecurity and creative potential of the moment in which "the world becomes text" ("Everybody" 597). Drawing on central generic features of the detective novel yet stubbornly withholding a resolution, Stein's novel "reads as a panoramic unfolding" of the moment of abductive inference, Rohr asserts, aestheticizing the flow of creative guesswork before and as it becomes discursive and revealing how it opens the world to an endless variety of interpretations (599).

Within the framework of Rohr's analysis, Nabokov's *Lolita* hails the shift from modernism to postmodernism as it turns to reflect on the genuinely semiotic status of reality. The novel, Rohr argues, no longer displays reality as a "riddle waiting to be solved" but sees it as "an invitation to creative play" ("Patterns" 48), exploring the malleability of its borders and revealing the extravagant—and dangerous—margin of creative openness involved in Humbert Humbert's mental framing of his object of desire, Lolita. Like *Blood on the Dining-Room Floor*, Nabokov's novel highlights the creative interpretability of reality, shifting the focus from the structures of consciousness to the semiotic process of object formation, however, and revealing that, due to its semiotic status, no object can ever be fully possessed. Pynchon's *Gravity's Rainbow* finally pushes this playful destabilization of reality and the process of its semiotic creation to an extreme, dramatizing the bewildering moments of suspension and endless deferral that mark the process of infinite semiosis and staging

the wild abductive workings of mad creative minds that continually seek to press their proliferating reality-proposals into paranoid structures of interpretation. As Rohr argues, Pynchon's novel thus exposes an entire range of epistemological instabilities, reflecting on the profound insecurity of all elements involved in the process of reality constitution and joyfully situating itself in the abyss. For Rohr, *Gravity's Rainbow* consequently marks an "extreme point that could not possibly be surpassed" ("Mimesis" 112). This makes *Moon Palace*'s reconsideration of the moment of intersubjective exchange that figured centrally in classical realist texts appear as "a somewhat resigned return to the social aspect" (108). However, Rohr argues, the realist concern with intersubjectivity, consensus, and truthful interpretation returns in a new guise in Auster's novel, as these concepts are altered considerably "through the semiotic turn of the text—and the linguistic turn of the century" ("World" 107). Though the novel carefully explores the process of negotiating a frail consensus over the contours of reality, we are, as Rohr notes, continually "reminded that it is, after all, frail signs which subtly constitute a fleeting reality for us" (107). *Moon Palace*'s return to intersubjectivity, in other words, does not deny or challenge the semiotic constructedness of the world but reconsiders processes of exchange as social acts that are "necessary and possible" again, "if only momentarily" (104).

Beyond Rohr's Model: Creativity, Consensus, and the Language of 'Negotiations'

This brief sketch of Rohr's argument cannot do justice to the extensive close readings Rohr offers in *Die Wahrheit der Täuschung*, although it does give an impression of the scope and depth of the dialogues she stages among the six novels and provides a glimpse of the nuanced textual work she eventually allows her Peircean framework to yield. I wish to underline this quality of Rohr's work as it is her achievement to have brought Peirce to literary studies in ways that enable innovative close readings and open up rewarding new perspectives on an entire century of American literary production. The theoretical framework of her Peirce-inspired approach to literature has its weaknesses, however, and cannot simply be adapted to the kind of Peircean re-readings I set out to pursue. As I have already indicated, the apparatus of technical terms Rohr builds up with the sole aim of

recommitting texts to their historical context appears strangely redundant as hardly anyone—at least not the critics Rohr argues against—would challenge the fact that "fictional realities have something to do with their historical contexts" ("Pragmaticism" 293). We should ask, however, whether they should be *reduced* to these contexts and bound *mimetically* to the particular moment in American culture's process of reality constitution that marked the decade of their publication. Who is the reader who plays such an important role in Rohr's mimetic framework? Must he or she be bound historically as well? Do realist texts only speak to late nineteenth-century readers? Does all literature of a particular historical moment display the *same* epistemological subtext and construct the *same* reader position? All of these questions challenge the generalizing and unifying claims Rohr makes in her theoretical argument, underlining the fact that her framework indeed only works if operating with a host of "canonized assumptions" about the texts and readers of a traditional white and—with one exception—male American literary canon ("Mimesis" 109). It is hardly surprising that a Peircean approach to literature lends itself to such a canon, as it is here that Peirce's belief in the cognitive and, above all, rational capacities of *man*—and this gendering is indeed significant—encounters the least resistance and is challenged on a basis that acknowledges its rootedness in the history of modernity. The question remains, however, whether Peirce may also be of help in re-reading a different kind of canon and approaching a novel like *Beloved*, which lays claim to a markedly different set of assumptions from the start, highlighting the subject's inscription in the psychic language of subconscious desires and traumatic wounds, for instance, and revealing the inevitable power structures at work in the language of white masculinity.

My study reveals that it is indeed possible, even highly illuminating, to confront Peirce with a novel like *Beloved*. However, this cannot be done by following the lines of Rohr's argument and adopting her epistemological approach. A different kind of dialogic reading is necessary, one that does not operate on the grounds of a systematic model of literary analysis that claims to be "generally" applicable to "literature *per se*" ("Mimesis" 108) but one that explores the highly specific manifestations of a frail, reciprocal dialogue from the start, acknowledging the tensions that are bound to remain and providing nuanced re-readings of both the text and the Peircean theory

that it confronts and challenges. The shift in critical practice that becomes necessary once Rohr's literary canon is extended to include a greater variety of texts is thus a shift from the language of reflection to the language of negotiation. It involves freeing literary texts from the impulse to read them as 'reflections' of Peirce's theory and draws attention instead to the complex negotiations they provide of its central concepts, insights, and claims. Rohr's reliance on highly specific 'canonized assumptions' about American literary history is not the only cause for such a shift. The grounding of her argument in large historical time-frames makes it difficult to adapt her model to other texts without merely producing highly predictable results. What will be left to explore once we have discerned the epistemological profile of a literary decade? one might ask. And if, as Rohr acknowledges, "other texts, published at the same time, might investigate other aspects of the epistemological process" ("Mimesis" 109), wouldn't her argument about the mimetic relation between fictional and nonfictional realities lose its cutting edge just the same? The shift to the language of negotiation provides a way out of this dilemma, as it opens a text's reflection on the Peircean moments of frailty to manifold negotiations of the concepts involved. Two texts may reflect on the same moment of frailty but are apt to provide different negotiations of the concepts involved; and since these concepts are most likely to center on notions of creativity and consensus, it is this peculiar language that I will bring to bear upon the texts and have them engage.

Creativity and Consensus: Revisiting Contested Grounds

As Rohr's extensive reading of Peirce reveals, the language of creativity and consensus that Peirce's philosophical writings hold out is highly specific and remains tied to the key concepts of his pragmatist-semiotic epistemology. However, it cannot speak to us today without evoking the complicated history of its terms and recalling the ideological struggles that led to its decentering more than four decades ago. Both creativity and consensus share a discursive grounding in humanist conceptions of modernity that celebrate the creative individual and cherish progressive models of rational society. Translated into the theory and practice of literary criticism, they once complied with and perpetuated the modernist belief in the author as

the creator of autonomous works of art and supported the view that these works of art yield a meaning that critics can discern and agree on through critical analysis and rational discourse. Historically speaking, it is thus hardly surprising that both concepts were rejected and vigorously attacked by the proponents of a new literary and cultural critique in the 1960s and 1970s, who not only challenged the New Criticism and its assumptions about literature but sought to radically decenter the grand narratives of modernity and modern Western society.[25] As specific as Peirce's pragmatist rendering of the language of creativity and consensus may be, it cannot escape this critique as it remains firmly tied to the modernist conceptions of 'man' and 'rational society' that Peirce himself remained committed to and worked to establish about a century ago.[26] At the same time, however, it opens up promising ways of revisiting this critique and returning to creativity and consensus *after* postmodernism. Peirce's pragmatist language reaches beyond modern notions of creativity as an exceptional, godlike power, and beyond progressive notions of consensus as the regulative principle of rational societies. Both conceptions certainly infuse Peirce's thought, but they are paired with a pragmatist conception of creativity as an ordinary process of continued *re*-creation and a pragmatist-semiotic model of consensus as a frail, provisional moment, in which the flow of infinite semiosis is arrested with the need for action impending. As I wish to argue in the remaining part of the chapter, it is on these grounds that Peirce gestures toward a 'new' language of creativity and consensus. This new language actively remembers the charged history of its terms but moves beyond their 'old' disputed meanings just the same, acknow-

[25] Many critics have called attention to the fact that the postmodern critique of modernity rested on and perpetuated highly particular readings of the modern. Andreas Huyssen has pointed to the "fundamentally different versions of modernity" that French poststructuralism and the German Frankfurt School subscribed to, for instance, arguing that "the French version […] is quite close to what literary criticism describes as modernism" while Habermas's "modernity goes back to the best traditions of the Enlightenment" (131). The de-centering of creativity and consensus remains inscribed in the complexities of this postmodern/modern exchange.

[26] This evident temporal link between pragmatism and early modernism has led much literary scholarship to focus on realist or modernist literature when reading fiction with a pragmatist framework in mind. See Sämi Ludwig, *Pragmatist Realism*, and Herwig Friedl, "Art and Culture as Emerging Events: Gertrude Stein, Pragmatism, and Process Philosophy," for instance.

ledging the tensions that are bound to remain but opening up a space for new encounters at the same time.

In the case of the Peircean language of creativity, Rob Pope's recent study *Creativity: Theory, History, Practice* provides an excellent backdrop for acknowledging both the complex history and the lasting appeal of the concept. Pope looks to past ideological disputes with a remarkable degree of historical distance, paying tribute to the historical constellations that led to its dismissal in some theoretical circles, acknowledging its continuing relevance in others, and laying out possible ways of reconceptualizing and reintroducing the concept in the present context. He does not mention Peirce in this endeavor and alludes to pragmatist conceptions of creativity only in passing, taking the more familiar work of William James and John Dewey as a loose point of reference. And yet, Pope's declared wish to "get[] beyond stereotypical notions of the inspired individual genius" and insist on "a vision of creativity that embraces radical forms of *re*-creation and includes actively engaged kinds of re-vision, re-membering and re-familiarisation" (xvi-xvii) opens up an intriguing context for appreciating the renewed appeal of Peirce's 'modern' language of creativity and for grasping its potential to engage 'post-modern' concepts of iteration, performativity, and agency.

As an important ingredient in the Peircean process of reality constitution, creativity emerges as an ordinary capacity that drives and perpetuates an insecure and open-ended process rather than designating the exceptional gift of a few individuals or the unfolding of a divine plan. As Rohr emphasizes, Peirce's concept of creativity does not assume the process of creation to take effect 'from nothing,' as most creation myths and modern discourses of godlike creators imply, but binds it to a complex network of habits and beliefs that shape the creative process and its provisional results, limiting the degree of novelty involved to creative re-combinations of what is to be found in the "store-house of premises" the past provides (*Peirce Papers* MS 290).[27] Among the five moments of frailty Rohr identifies, the processes of object formation and abductive inference stand out as especially lucid examples of this specific rendering of creativity. Every sign-object, Rohr notes, is a "*mixtum compositum*" that "entails individual as well as culturally pre-given parts in a historically

[27] See Rohr, *Über die Schönheit* 104.

significant blend" ("Patterns" 34); and every abduction, Peirce argues, combines "elements" that were "in our minds before" and reaches its surprising and innovative potential only by "putting together what we had never before dreamed of putting together" (*CP* 5.181). Peirce's language of creativity, in other words, effectively evades two of the most powerful discourses of creativity that have marked its modern appeal and postmodern decentering: the religious notion of divine creation *ex nihilo* and the humanist extension of this mythical view of creation to the realm of literature and art. Instead, it draws on scientific models of evolutionary change to advance a general theory of knowledge that stresses the fluid nature of all thought and defines creativity as an unpredictable, messy, common affair.

As Rob Pope's study suggests, this Peircean understanding of creativity sidesteps many of the issues that called forth a host of oppositional critiques in the 1960s and 1970s and led to the outright dismissal of the concept by an increasing number of scholars working under the auspices of the newly evolving poststructuralist paradigm. Terry Eagleton, for instance, explicitly rejected the concept in the 1980s on the grounds that it remains complicit with traditional notions of literary authorship. In his entry on "Creation" in *A Dictionary of Modern Critical Terms*, Eagleton challenges the "metaphor of creation" that has "traditionally dominated discussions of literary authorship, with strong implications of the mysterious, possibly transcendental nature of such activity" (45). Arguing from a Marxist perspective, he insists on replacing it with "the concept of literary production, which suggests the essentially ordinary, accessible nature of fiction-making," and can, as Eagleton explicitly notes, draw on poststructuralist and psychoanalytic frameworks for support:

> Post-structuralist criticism, in its own concern with the potentially infinite productivity of language, and Psychoanalysis, which sees the dream itself as the product of a 'dream-work' or determinate process of labor, both tend to converge with Marxist criticism in its dethronement—to many still scandalous—of the 'creative author.' (45-46)[28]

Steeped in a rhetoric of scandal, revolution, and political overthrow, Eagleton's Marxist dismissal of the concept of creativity thus feeds into the larger historical movement against the 'old' humanist

[28] See Pope 7-10.

establishment, attacking its perpetuation of a hierarchical, modernist, bourgeois aesthetic and seeking to undermine its ideological roots by 'dethroning' its mythical figurehead, the 'creative author.' As such, it reminds us of the historical standing and powerful influence of the 'old' school of literary criticism and reveals that it was indeed necessary to challenge and subvert its claims at the time. As Pope notes, however, the field has changed considerably since the proponents of poststructuralist, Marxist, and psychoanalytic critiques—among others—first launched their attacks against the concept of creativity and the 'creative author' (6-7). Eagleton's polarized rhetoric of "iconoclastic 'dethroners' on the one hand and scandalized traditionalists defending 'the creative author' on the other" no longer carries the same polemical force and risks sounding "glib and potentially reductive" in a critical environment which has moved on to negotiate other sites of opposition (10). Creativity, in other words, can no longer be reduced to the liberal-humanist ideology that once elevated it to the rank of a godlike capacity granted to very few exceptional individuals, nor can it be dismissed along the 'old' lines of a subversive struggle against such modernist (mis-)understandings. As Pope argues, the new millennium finds us pressed with the need to think creativity otherwise, to "weigh what may have been lost or misrepresented" during past disputes, and to work toward "an enhanced and extended reformulation of the *concept*" without failing to acknowledge the complex history of "the *term*" (7).

Peirce's language of creativity, I contend, contributes to this contemporary enterprise and provides valuable incentives for such a critical reworking, as it does not take on the question of literary production, but works to advance a pragmatist-semiotic understanding of the generative force and creative dimension of all sense-making processes. As such, it finds important parallels in the redefinitions of creativity advanced by feminist scholars. While the proponents of "male-dominated high theory" hastened to discard the concept in the 1960s and 1970s—the quotation is taken from Eagleton's "Afterword" to the second edition of *Literary Theory: An Introduction* (194)—the women's movement championed 'female creativity' as a key to women's empowerment, encouraging women to affirm their agency and become authors of their own lives, both literally and metaphorically. As an effect of this historical disjuncture—or "*Ungleichzeitigkeiten*" as Andreas Huyssen has put it (148)—the concept of creativity

has remained central to feminist theory, even as the rise of poststructuralist theory made it necessary to search for different ways of theorizing it. For Susan Hekman, for instance, the notion of creativity remains tied to the "question of agency" that feminist theories have persistently addressed in different ways according to the shifting demands of social activism. Embracing postmodernism's critique of the knowing subject, Hekman challenges modernist conceptions of creativity on the grounds that they cannot do without "a constituting subject, a prediscursive 'I'." Rather than simply dismissing the concept altogether, however, she presses for "another definition," one that takes into account the discursive constitution of the subject and defines creativity as a process whereby "subjects piece together distinctive combinations, that is, individual subjectivities, from the discursive mix available to them" (203). Advanced in the early 1990s at the height of feminist debates over the promises and dangers of the new poststructuralist paradigm, Hekman's argument thus reveals how far the concept of creativity has already travelled, linking itself up with postmodern notions of performativity and subject formation and unfolding its appeal in contexts far removed from the humanist ideology Eagleton confronts. As I confront Peirce's language of creativity with postmodern texts, this "redefined understanding of creativity" (Hekman, 203) serves as a constant reminder of the flexibility of the term, marking the possibility of thinking creativity otherwise and opening up additional perspectives on the dialogues I stage across historical, disciplinary, theoretical, and fictional lines.

The history of the term 'consensus' is no less complex. Rooted in the same humanist discourse of modernity and tied to the Enlightenment vision of a universal community of rational men, it, too, was vigorously attacked by the proponents of emerging oppositional critiques from the 1960s onward and soon became the *Unwort*, the despised antithesis, of the new postmodern language of difference. In retrospect, the dismissal of consensus as the privileged model of culture and society may in fact be seen as *the* founding act of postmodernism as it challenged more than a particular mode of literary criticism and led to significant changes in artistic, critical, and political practices across the disciplines and outside the academy. As Linda Hutcheon has argued in her seminal study on postmodern cultural production, *A Poetics of Postmodernism*, "the interrogating of

the notion of consensus" is central to postmodern culture's far-reaching critique of "liberal humanist culture":

> Whatever narratives or systems that once allowed us to think we could unproblematically and universally define public agreement have now been questioned by the acknowledgment of differences—in theory and in artistic practice. It its most extreme formulation, the result is that consensus becomes the illusion of consensus, whether it be defined in terms of minority (educated, sensitive, elitist) or mass (commercial, popular, conventional) culture, for *both* are manifestations of late capitalist, bourgeois, informational, postindustrial society, a society in which social reality is structured by discourses (in the plural). (7)

The shift from consensus to difference, from a model of universal agreement to the concept of pluralist discourses that Hutcheon records here finds an important theoretical grounding in the dispute between Jean-François Lyotard and Jürgen Habermas that shaped the debate over postmodernism in the early 1980s and considerably broadened its scope. Moving beyond the term's previous restriction to a specific tendency in literature, art, and architecture, Lyotard's *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge* turned to the profound epistemological challenges faced by postindustrial societies, famously defining postmodernity as a *condition* of knowledge characterized by "incredulity toward metanarratives" (xxiv). As Frederic Jameson notes in his foreword to the English edition, Lyotard's founding of the concept of postmodernity on the shattering of modern discourses of legitimation barely conceals its "polemic against Jürgen Habermas's concept of a 'legitimation crisis' and vision of a 'noisefree,' transparent, fully communicational society" (vii), providing a wonderful backdrop for the historical dispute over the language of consensus that any post-postmodern return to it must acknowledge.

For Lyotard, "consensus" is nothing more than a "rule" of the "game" of science which depends on "the Enlightenment narrative" of the rational subject, "in which the hero of knowledge works toward a good ethico-political end—universal peace" (xxiii-xxiv). As such, it cannot restore the loss of legitimacy arising from the postmodern dispersal of metanarratives but is itself threatened by it. Under the postmodern condition of knowledge, Lyotard argues, it is exposed as an "outmoded and suspect value" (66) that "does violence to the heterogeneity of language games" as it refuses to "refine[] our sensitivities to differences" and "reinforce[] our ability to tolerate the

incommensurable" (xxv). One can see how the postmodern language of 'heterogeneity,' 'differences,' and 'the incommensurable' is skillfully inaugurated here and takes shape in opposition to the vocabulary of 'consensus,' 'homology,' and 'unanimity' that it seeks to replace. As most pioneering studies of its time, *The Postmodern Condition* thus willfully models itself as an oppositional critique, dismissing consensus-models of knowledge and society while relying on them for an oppositional model of difference and dissension. The antagonist in this case is Habermas, the leading intellectual heir to the Frankfurt School of critical theory, whose work has been devoted to the cause of "rational society" and the fate of the "unfinished project" of modernity.[29] For Habermas, consensus is an indispensable principle of rational society, as it ensures the mutual acceptance of values and norms in liberal, democratic states. The goal of a critical social theory, he argues, is to envision "an organization of social relations according to the principle that the validity of every norm of political consequence be made dependent on a consensus arrived at in communication free from domination" (*Knowledge* 284). Habermas takes much of this from pragmatism, devoting two long chapters to Peirce's logic of inquiry in *Knowledge and Human Interests* and turning to George H. Mead for a grounding of his theory of communicative action in *Zur Rekonstruktion des historischen Materialismus*.[30] Through Habermas, Peirce's pragmatist model of consensus as a regulative principle of scientific inquiry thus lives on, unfolding new potentials in contemporary social thought but encountering new resistances at the same time.

Lyotard's fundamental critique of Habermas's consent-oriented theory of communicative action reveals the extent to which a Peircean language of consensus is bound to remain under attack, no matter how it may be theorized. For Lyotard, the very assumption that "it is possible for all speakers to come to an agreement on which rules

[29] "Modernity: An Unfinished Project" was the title of Habermas's speech on accepting the Adorno Prize in 1980. It was published in English translation as "Modernity versus Postmodernity." *Toward a Rational Society* is the title of one of Habermas's early books that addresses the German student movement of the 1960s.

[30] The English translation of this latter work, *Communication and the Evolution of Society*, is abridged and contains additional essays instead, including Habermas's important essay on the linguistic grounding of normative critique: "What is Universal Pragmatics?"

or metaprescriptions are universally valid for language games" is genuinely flawed, since "language games are heteromorphous, subject to heterogeneous sets of pragmatic rules" (65). This implies, however, that no "universal consensus" (65) can ever be achieved, that striving for such a consensus and upholding it as an ideal is in fact dangerous since it silences those who are eliminated or threatened to be eliminated from any given game. Lyotard uses the term "terrorist" (63) in this context, exposing any attempt to stifle the heterogeneity of language games as an "exercise of terror" (64).[31] His rejection of Habermas's consensus-model of society could thus hardly be more radical. And yet, *The Postmodern Condition* does not end on this note alone. Acknowledging Habermas's commitment to the "cause" of "justice," Lyotard takes up the challenge posed by his dismissal of consensus in favor of notions of heterogeneity and difference, arguing that the key question that demands to be addressed under the terms of the new postmodern condition is how to "arrive at an idea and practice of justice that is not linked to that of consensus" (66). The move toward an "ethics of dissensus" (Ziarek) that Lyotard thus inaugurates has indeed been central to the enterprise of postmodern theory and continues to dominate much critical thinking to this day. As in the case of creativity, it has allowed the initial attack on a suspect concept to give way to a nuanced search for ways of theorizing agency, justice, and social action otherwise—for instance, as "performative acts" or "strategies" (Butler, "Performative Acts" 280) or in terms of "community-building" processes (hooks, *Outlaw Culture* 217) or "working alliances" (Jakobsen). The radical critique of consensus and its replacement with a postmodern politics of difference, in other words, has not ended the search for viable models of social interaction and intersubjective exchange, but has shifted their grounds, locating "political discourse beyond rational communication" and looking to

[31] In "Modernity versus Postmodernity," Habermas responds to this critique by noting that we should not be led "into denouncing the intentions of the surviving Enlightenment tradition as intentions rooted in 'terroristic reason.' Those who lump together the very project of modernity with the state of consciousness and the spectacular action of the individual terrorist are no less short-sighted than those who would claim that the incomparably more persistent and extensive bureaucratic terror practiced in the dark, in the cellars of the military and secret police, and in camps and institutions, is the *raison d'être* of the modern state, only because this kind of administrative terror makes use of the coercive means of modern bureaucracies" (101).

the situated, discursive subject as a central site of resistance, solidarity, and hope (Ziarek 212).

At first sight, then, Peirce's language of consensus could hardly be more at odds with the insights of contemporary postmodern theory. Complicit with the Habermasian belief in public *Diskurs* as a free process of rational argumentation that ensures human progress and, in Habermas's terms, commits humanity to the modernist project of "emancipation," it cannot evade Lyotard's critique and is exposed as an unacceptable relic of the "suspect," if not "terrorist," philosophical tradition that postmodernism so vigorously challenges. As Rohr's work suggests, however, a different reading is possible as well. Implicated in the frail process of reality constitution Rohr lays out, Peirce's notion of consensus ceases to designate a state of rational agreement but comes to embody the *potential* of a momentary stabilization within ongoing processes of signification that unfold along highly unstable lines. Without diminishing the tensions that are bound to remain between Peirce's pragmatist philosophy and postmodern modes of oppositional critique, such a reading holds the potential to move beyond the Habermasian model of rational communication, marking consensus as an impossibility that may yet be realized, if only momentarily, and grounding it in the fleeting and unstable process of cultural self-reflection on the contours of reality. As Rohr suggests, this process cannot be reduced to the unfolding of a rational *Diskurs* but manifests itself in and through the cultural work of literary and non-literary texts. Seen in this light, Peirce's language of consensus provides an important basis for appreciating both the frailty and complexity of ongoing processes of cultural negotiation. Hence, it not only reveals the ruptures between pragmatist and postmodern models of society and philosophical thinking but opens up potential dialogues as well, promising to enrich the redescriptive project I set out to pursue with nuanced critical encounters.

From 'Reflection' to 'Negotiation': Readers and Texts

When speaking of the 'pragmatist negotiations' enabled by Pynchon's *V.*, Morrison's *Beloved*, and Foer's *Everything Is Illuminated*, I have such nuanced encounters in mind. The novels, I argue, critically engage the Peircean language of creativity and consensus. They stage the workings of creativity, explore the (im)possibility of consensus,

and reach for new ways of performing creative (inter)subjectivities in a post-postmodern world. As such, they attest to the continuing relevance of creativity and consensus as conceptual frameworks, acknowledging their complex histories while pushing for new meanings and interconnections in contexts marked by the shifting agendas of their postmodern critiques. The dialogues they enable confront Peirce with postmodern notions of power, difference, and performativity while calling for nuanced re-readings of the founding discourses of postmodernism at the same time. This does not mean, of course, that the novels' engagement with Peirce is intentional, that creativity and consensus are actually acknowledged as key terms, or that the novels openly endorse a pragmatist politics. On the contrary: Reading postmodern fiction with Peirce remains a daring move that only makes sense when geared towards a critical reassessment of the terms through which this fiction has been traditionally viewed. What brings the novels' negotiations of creativity and consensus to light is the critical perspective I adopt with the aim of opening new avenues of inquiry and enabling new dialogues across seemingly incommensurable lines. The term 'pragmatist negotiations' speaks to this open dynamic, designating the novels' involvement in a dialogue with Peirce that is unintended, yet far-reaching and highly revealing.

The move from Rohr's language of 'reflection' to the language of 'negotiation' that my study performs thus involves abandoning the search for systematic, structural universals deemed to be applicable to literature *per se*. Instead, it refocuses attention on particulars, on local negotiations and dynamic interworkings, privileging the work of theory over attempts to construct sound systems of theoretical thinking that Rohr's Peircean project is committed to.[32] Despite these apparent differences, however, Rohr's reading of Peirce and her Peircean engagements with literary texts remain an important source of guidance. Rohr's notion of a text's 'epistemological subtext,' for instance, proves highly valuable in conceptualizing how the novels' pragmatist negotiations manifest themselves. For Rohr, the epistemological subtext or profile of a text is revealed by its "aesthetic profile which in turn establishes a distinct reader position" ("Pragmaticism" 302). Exploring this reader position, then, is key to

[32] This is not to discredit theory-building practices in principle, for theories of such a type are certainly needed to put them to work.

any attempt to discern which moments of frailty a certain subtext chiefly reflects. Within Rohr's model, it forms the first of three analytic steps that seek successively to "correlate" a text's reading position with its aesthetic profile, its aesthetic profile with its epistemological subtext, and, finally, its epistemological subtext with the epistemological profile of a particular decade (302). I wish to avoid this rather bulky technical jargon, and yet I endorse Rohr's notion of a subtext that manifests itself in a text's subtle positioning of its readers.

The pragmatist (re-)readings of *V.*, *Beloved*, and *Everything Is Illuminated* that I turn to now rely on the exploration of such implicit sites of negotiation, reaching beyond the novels' familiar agendas and themes to uncover a subtext that allows the novels' engagements with Peirce's language of creativity and consensus to be revealed. Again and again, I locate these implicit workings in the novels' construction of peculiar reading positions that stage the destabilizing force of creativity or enact the (im)possible struggle for consensus in highly effective ways. Rohr does not explicitly reflect on the theoretical assumptions that guide her analysis of a text's reader position. It is clear, however, that she assumes this position to be created by the text, or rather, by its aesthetic profile, as she states that "we can explore the aesthetic profile by approaching it through the particular reader position that it creates" ("Pragmaticism" 302). The reader position of which Rohr speaks in this context is conceptualized as the function of a text, not as the position actually assumed by reading subjects who may lay claim to individual reading experiences. Rohr consequently distances herself from the practice of reader-response criticism as well as from the work of the so-called "New Pragmatists," who sought to reframe debates over the authority of authors, texts, and readers in the 1980s and continue to focus attention on their functional interaction as empirical entities (*Wahrheit* 50-52).[33] In its hermeneutic guise as 'interpreting mind,' however, the reading subject retains an important position within Rohr's Peircean framework. In "Mimesis of the Mind," Rohr conceptualizes the reader—or interpreting mind—as "the epistemological axis" that connects fictional and nonfictional realities and cognitively grounds their mimetic relation (104). "[A] subject

[33] Rohr turns to Stanley Fish's *Is There a Text in This Class?*, Steven Knapp and Walter Benn Michaels' "Against Theory," and Barbara Herrnstein Smith's *Contingencies of Value* to support her argument.

engaged in interpreting the textual world," she argues, "experiences the workings of its own cognitive structures" and becomes aware of its "historical anchoring" (107).

The blend of textual and hermeneutic frameworks of analysis that thus clearly informs Rohr's conception of the reader and shapes her analytic interest in reader positions is characteristic of her work's attempt to negotiate the lines between diverse philosophical and scholarly traditions and the antagonistic concepts of reading and interpretation, subject and self, text and work, that they variously perpetuate.[34] However, in moving from Rohr's epistemological literary study to the pragmatist negotiations that the three postmodern novels hold out, I evidently choose to follow a path that is much more strictly committed to the textual paradigm of contemporary literary criticism. As I turn to the readerly subtexts through which each of these novels takes on the Peircean language of creativity and consensus, I take Rohr's formalist notion of reader positions seriously and rework it at the same time, shifting its impact from the realm of a formalist aesthetics—inherent in Rohr's concept of the text's aesthetic profile—to a poststructuralist model of textual negotiations and discursive power. Central to my readings of *V.*, *Beloved*, and *Everything Is Illuminated* is the power of texts to constitute, shape, and deny the construction of subjectivities and—by extension—to manipulate and affect the constitution of their readers as reading subjects of a particular kind. As a function of the texts, the reader positions construed by these novels provide snapshots of this power at work and reveal how it may be linked to the negotiations of creativity and consensus that I see them engage.

In what follows, I will thus repeatedly turn to the 'readerly politics' that *V.*, *Beloved*, and *Everything Is Illuminated* put to work, conceptualizing the subtle workings of narrative control as a central site on which their pragmatist negotiations play out. By referring to this complex mechanism of construction and control as a 'politics,' I wish to stress the powerful role cultural discourses play in it, discourses that each novel carefully enacts through the reworking of a

[34] *Über die Schönheit* explicitly confronts Peirce with a hermeneutic terminology of interpretation and meaning, or rather "Interpretation – Verstehen – Bedeutung" (112), seeking to explore parallels and differences between the two philosophical traditions (121). *Die Wahrheit* moves beyond this early concern, providing readings of interpretive processes as they are staged by literary texts.

literary tradition. Pynchon's *V.*, for instance, takes on the powerful legacy of modernist detective fiction, subverting its fantasy of epistemological success through the construction of a reader position that persistently invites detective work and yet stubbornly resists rewarding it. *V.*'s readerly politics thus proves central to its negotiation of the workings of creativity, as it is here that Peirce's belief in man's ability to "guess[] right" (*CP* 2.86) is perhaps most radically challenged and confronted with postmodern notions of power. Morrison's *Beloved*, on the other hand, takes on the sentimental politics of reading that has historically governed the slave narrative tradition, implicating its readers in conflicting modes of identification, participation, and textual inscription to envision alternative ways of imagining the possibility of meaningful intersubjective exchange. The highly complex reader position constructed by *Beloved* thus drives the novel's negotiation of the (im)possibility of consensus, confronting Peirce's pragmatist model with postmodern notions of difference while reworking the grounds of its continuing appeal. Finally, Foer's *Everything Is Illuminated* situates itself within the generic tradition of the epistolary novel, making use of the powerful discourses of subject formation it has traditionally provided to construct its readers as reading subjects engaged in processes of exchange. Here, the mediated quality of this construction is continually exposed, allowing creativity and consensus to emerge in a new performative guise and forcing Peirce's framework to confront the constructedness of post-postmodern (inter)subjectivities.

Rather than linking the novels' reader positions to their aesthetic and epistemological profiles and thus to the epistemological profile of an entire decade, as Rohr suggests, I focus on the readerly politics they put to work, highlighting their imbrication in complex networks of intertextual negotiation and using them as backdrops for the reworkings of creativity and consensus all three novels provide. My attempt to move beyond Rohr's approach and establish a different kind of dialogue between Peirce and postmodern fiction thus demands conceptual changes in many respects. Where Rohr seeks to develop and apply an 'analytic perspective,' I press for dialogic readings that allow Peirce's philosophy to take on the work of theory and reorient our thinking in fields to which it apparently does not belong. Where Rohr sees literary texts 'reflect' the process of reality constitution, I see them negotiate the Peircean language of creativity and consensus.

Where Rohr is concerned with newly defining the relationship between fictional and nonfictional realities as mimetic, I abandon this project altogether, proposing instead to play a new postmodern language game and to explore its implications for contemporary literary theory.

Chapter Two

Creativity and Power: Thomas Pynchon's *V.*

"I haven't learned a goddamn thing" (491). After nearly five hundred pages of encyclopedic details, proliferating clues, and momentous allusions Thomas Pynchon's *V.* (1963) gleefully leaves its reader hanging in mid-air. Voiced by Benny Profane, the novel's self-proclaimed "schlemihl and human yo-yo" (1), the remark spells out the epistemological failure that *V.* dramatizes, and irrevocably thwarts what expectations of character development or narrative resolution the reader may still have entertained. However, Profane's reversal of the classical *Bildungsroman* motif is only part of the game Pynchon plays with literary conventions and cultural assumptions about knowledge. A second narrative strand features Herbert Stencil, son of a British secret agent, who has committed himself to a lifelong search for the mysterious V. mentioned in his father's journals. "There is more behind and inside V. than any of us had suspected," the remark reads, "[n]ot who, but what: what is she. God grant that I may never be called upon to write the answer" (49). Deeply impressed by the seeming weight of this mystery, young Stencil vows to solve it, embarking on a feverish search for clues that leads him across Europe, North America, and Africa, back to the historical sites of his father's activities and the suspected moments of V.'s dangerous presence. The novel traces this search, interweaving its depiction of the events in 1950s New York with stories of the past that return to Egypt in 1898, Florence in 1899, South-West Africa in 1922, Malta in 1942–43, and Paris in 1919. Each of these episodes features a promising candidate for the mystery's resolution, Victoria Wren, Vera Meroving, the "Bad Priest" (368), or simply "the lady V." (439), but their ties remain obscure, increasing the already excessive proliferation of V-signs throughout the novel. The more Stencil searches, the more he loses control over the "magic initial" (241). In the end, his quest is in vain. He cannot solve the riddle but cannot admit his failure either. Having

followed V.'s traces to Malta with Benny Profane at his side, Stencil rushes off to Stockholm, leaving the place of his father's death in frantic pursuit of "another clue" (487).

While Profane may thus be said to function as the novel's anti-hero, Stencil plays the role of an anti-detective. His fruitless attempts to find out and know mock the fantasy of epistemological success that conventional detective plots perpetuate. They infuse the novel with a host of sense-making activities that stimulate the reader's interpretive skills but stubbornly resist resolution. The multiple layers of guesses, hypotheses, and possible answers to the V-mystery that *V.* produces serve as a key to the Peircean reading I wish to provide. With Peirce in mind, I contend, *V.*'s acts of guessing and sense-making can be seen to point to and reflect on two "moments of frailty" within the process of reality constitution that Rohr lays out: the moment of 'abductive inference' and the moment of 'object formation' ("Mimesis" 97). For Peirce, abductions form the transitory moment in which the subject establishes a delicate relationship to the world by "choosing a hypothesis" to explain some "surprising fact[]" (*CP* 7.218-19); the notion of 'object formation,' on the other hand, designates the process through which the subject interprets "*the* world of dynamic objects" by mentally producing "*a* world of immediate objects" (Rohr, "Patterns" 46). In both instances, the subject's relationship to the world is clearly marked as *creative*, since the process of making sense is sparked by "nothing but guessing" (*CP* 7.219) and involves productive acts of object formation as soon as sense-making enters the realm of thought and signification.

Much of the uncertainty that characterizes Pynchon's novel, I wish to argue, stems from its reveling in this space of creative possibility. *V.* pushes the capricious force of creativity to an extreme as it confronts its reader with the destabilizing effects of guesswork gone wild and reveals what happens if the subject's creative efforts to produce reality are no longer counterbalanced and socially limited by intersubjective exchange. At the same time, the novel goes beyond delighting in these moments of creative play by exposing the stifling elements of control at work in each and every act of creation. It reveals a troubling dimension of the very notion of creativity that Peirce does not account for, confronting his pragmatist epistemology with a postmodern conception of power. While *V.* thus performs the cultural work of both reflecting on and participating in its

contemporary culture's dialogue over what Rohr calls "the contours of a particular reality construction" ("Pragmaticism" 302), it also pushes this cultural work into the realm of the political by laying bare the power structures that are woven into the very fabric of every creative reality proposal.

In what follows, I wish to explore *V.*'s insistence on the connections between creative free play and shocking mechanisms of control in more detail by unraveling the subtle ways in which processes of perception and sense-making are staged throughout the novel. In the first part of the chapter, I turn to the workings of focalization in *V.*'s Chapter Three, discussing how the novel repeatedly exposes the conspicuous gap between acts of perceiving and moments of sense-making, only to fill the margin with multiple layers of abductive performances.[1] The guesswork we encounter is explicitly revealed as excessively creative, utterly subjective, and genuinely boundless; and far from exposing what Peirce recorded as the subject's ability to "guess nearly right" (*CP* 2.86), it takes delight in the liberating potential and destabilizing effects of creative play. At the same time, I claim, Chapter Three instigates a particular *mode* of perception that links acts of perceiving to acts of spying and voyeuristic intrusion; and it is through this link that the notion of power enters the picture. In revealing the extent to which objects of perception are always subjected to a particular *kind* of gaze, *V.* lays bare the mechanism of the subject's individual and culturally preconfigured control over the immediate objects it produces.

I will explore this link between creativity and power in the second part of the chapter, tying a discussion of the novel's general obsession with objects and processes of object formation to a rereading of the epistemological concerns involved in Stencil's search for V. As the mental object that Stencil seeks to create and control, I will argue, V. cannot be thought to exist except in uneasy conflation with Stencil's needs and desires. These are highly suggestive of Western (male) imperial culture, and, as such, they are deeply ingrained and subtly at work in *V.*'s narrative texture, accounting for the disturbing fantasies of violence and brutal moments of narrative control that appear alongside the novel's celebration of sheer endless

[1] The narratological concepts I refer to in this context are Mieke Bal's. See her *Narratology: Introduction to the Theory of Narrative.*

creative possibility. The chapter will close with a reflection on the critical implication of such a re-reading, revealing the extent to which *V.*'s negotiation of creativity and power alters our understanding of the 'paradoxical' nature of postmodern fiction—to use Linda Hutcheon's term—and may serve as a warning against attempts to endorse the concept of creativity as the "promise" upheld by a theoretical culture longing "to speak of subjects as *agents* again" (Rohr, "Promises" 381).

Destabilizing Play: *V.*'s Creative Guesswork

It is hardly bold to claim that Pynchon's *V.* teems with guesswork. Next to "yo-yoing" (14) and "rollicking" (399), guessing and hypothesizing are two of the most frequent actions its characters engage in. Much of this guesswork is attributed to the two Stencils. Sidney Stencil, the British spy, uses the term in a conversation with his colleague Demivolt in Malta (512), and his son Herbert, following in his father's footsteps, has committed himself to a lifelong search for the mysterious V. At the same time, the characters' guessing techniques reach beyond the novel's fictional world to prompt the reader into similar reading techniques. As a novel that is at least partially *about* guesswork, *V.* also presents itself to its readers *as* 'guesswork,' proving highly responsive to multiple layers of interpretive work while at the same time mocking the idea that there is a 'riddle' which will eventually be 'solved.' Many Pynchon scholars have commented on this "box-within-box structure" (Hite, *Ideas* 49) and the epistemological issues it raises.[2] But where most critics have used variants of the term 'interpretation' to grasp the complex unfolding of meaning-making processes both within the text and between the text and its readers, the term 'guesswork' shifts our perspective.[3] It not only draws attention to the myriad acts of guessing that the novel

[2] Martin Klepper has drawn attention to "the contradictory logic of 'postmodern knowledge'" that the novel's narrative set-up enacts (601), for instance, and virtually all Pynchon scholars from Thomas Schaub and Toni Tanner to Deborah Madsen and Alan Brownlie have explored how the "problems of decipherment" and knowing that *V.* stages affect the reader's interaction with the text (Tanner, *Thomas* 41).

[3] Dana Medoro has argued that *V.* is "a novel about interpretation" (18), for instance, and Deborah Madsen has explored its concern with different "interpretive modes" (*Postmodernist* 31).

stages, it also resonates with Peirce's pragmatist epistemology and thus functions as a key to the Peircean reading I wish to offer.

Within a Peircean framework, 'guesswork' comes to denote the abductive *work* of *guessing* the world into being. For Peirce, abductions are those transitory moments in which percepts are transformed into perceptual judgments. "I perform an abduction when I so much as express in a sentence anything I see," he writes, "[n]ot the smallest advance can be made in knowledge beyond the stage of vacant staring without making an abduction at every step." Abductive inferences thus make up the "matted felt of pure hypothesis" which constitutes the "fabric of our knowledge" (*Peirce Papers* MS 692); conceptualized as moments of frailty within the Peircean process of reality constitution, they allow the interpreting subject to "weave[] itself into the world while constituting it in signs as reality," as Rohr puts it ("Mimesis" 101). A Peircean reading of *V.*'s guesswork thus emphasizes the creative dimension of the "act[s] of interpretation" that *V.* stages (Medoro 18), shifting our perspective from mysterious textual codes to creative subjects, or, more specifically, from V. as "pure signifier" to Stencil as the signifi*er*, "the one who signifies V." (McHoul and Wills 163-64).[4] With Peirce in mind, Stencil's signifying acts become abductive performances, and we are forced to realize that the novel persistently confronts us with traces of his creative presence, attributing four of its chapters to his inventive reconstructions of the past and explicitly pointing us to the "grand Gothic pile of inferences that he was hard at work creating" (*V.* 239). It therefore makes sense to unravel *V.*'s complex negotiation of creativity from here, beginning with Herbert Stencil's creative abductions and their first narrative enactment in *V.*'s Chapter Three.

Guessing and Hypothesizing: Stencil's Abductive Performances

The chapter opens with a narrator's lengthy remarks on Stencil's "pursuit of V." and Stencil himself "drowsing on the sofa of Bongo-Shaftsbury's apartment," thinking about the "gay, four-color postcard"

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[4] McHoul and Wills point to this intriguing shift in the meaning of the term signifi*er* only in passing. Within their poststructuralist framework, Stencil remains "doomed to copy, to trace, to ceaselessly iterate the signifier 'V.'" (164). As I wish to show, a Peircean perspective allows us to grasp Stencil's role as signifi*er* in a markedly different way.

his father sent him from Malta six months before his mysterious death (57-58). It then shifts to eight short narratives that are set in eight different public locations in Egypt and are related to us from the points of view of eight onlookers who happen to observe the scene.[5] Each episode features a group of Europeans, among them four English men and a girl named Victoria, who drift in and out of the "field of vision" (93) of seven underprivileged Egyptian residents, among them the waiter Aïeul, the factotum Yusef, the impoverished British expatriate Maxwell, the train conductor Waldetar, and the barmaid of a German *bierhalle*, Hanne. What is striking about these fragmented scenes, I wish to argue, is that their careful use of narrative focalization leaves readers with a heightened sense of *perception*, mainly visual, which gives rise to multiple layers of guessing and hypothesizing while perpetuating an eerie sense of estrangement. The seven characters who focalize the events are indeed on*look*ers; they *observe* their surroundings allowing—or rather *forcing*—readers to see the world through their *eyes*. At the same time, they take on the position of outsiders and come across the group of Europeans only by chance—because they happen to visit a specific café or bar, take a particular train, ask for a ride, or visit a party. The difference in social standing, moreover, causes a distance to remain. Aïeul, Yusef, Waldetar, and Hanne wait on the Europeans and register their conversations and motions only in passing. As a result, the chapter's emphasis on the visual creates a sense of intimacy that powerfully draws the reader into the narrative. A sense of strange bewilderment remains, though, since the focalizing characters' extremely limited points of view allow both characters and readers to see but not necessarily to understand. It is precisely this conspicuous gap between perceiving and making sense of perceptions that Chapter Three explores. Soon multiple layers of guesswork evolve, highlighting the frailty of sense-making acts and celebrating the *creative* force that feeds them.

The first episode sets up this mechanism quite promptly. We enter the scene as Aïeul, the café waiter, carefully observes his "lone

[5] Many critics have commented on this sudden shift in narrative technique and have discussed its implications for the novel. See John Dugdale, *Thomas Pynchon* 85-89, Theodore Kharpetrian, *A Hand to Turn the Time* 76-77, Brian McHale, *Postmodernist Fiction* 21-22, Richard Patteson, "What Stencil Knew," and David Seed, *The Fictional Labyrinths of Thomas Pynchon* 84-89, for instance.

customer, an Englishman" (60). Aïeul's gaze becomes our own as the narrative draws us into a distinct field of vision anchored in the physical space that is Alexandria's Place Mohammed Ali. Aïeul is positioned "near the entrance to the café," we learn, and he looks out "across the square" to the "clouds" which "signaled rain." After a while, a second customer joins the first and Aïeul, who is "teeming inside with sad and philosophical reflections," becomes more and more engaged in thoughts over who his customers—"Fat" and "Tweed," as he calls them—might be and what they might be up to. He listens in on bits and pieces of the men's conversation, and begins to speculate on how the fragments might fit together:

> [T]he two were conversing lackadaisically about a grand party at the Consulate tonight. What consulate? All Aïeul could distinguish were names. Victoria Wren. Sir Alastair Wren (father? husband?). A Bongo-Shaftsbury. What ridiculous names that country produced. (60)

The question "What consulate?" and the bracketed interpolation "(father? husband?)" mark Aïeul's struggle to make sense of what he sees and hears, and lend an intriguing vagueness to the events depicted. As such, they expose the gap that is bound to remain between Aïeul's observations and his mental act of reasoning. Since Aïeul's point of view remains limited, this gap cannot be closed, but is immediately filled as his mind begins to offer creative proposals as to how the people behind these names may be connected. The hesitant "father? husband?" introduces a first vague possibility of family relation, but Aïeul's imagination soon runs wild, generating the following chain of hypotheses:

> This fat one was out to seduce the girl, Victoria Wren, another tourist traveling with her tourist father. But was prevented by the lover, Bongo-Shaftsbury. The old one in tweed—Porpentine—was the macquereau. The two he watched were anarchists, plotting to assassinate Sir Alastair Wren, a powerful member of the English Parliament. The peer's wife—Victoria—was meanwhile blackmailed by Bongo-Shaftsbury, who knew of her own secret anarchist sympathies. The two were music-hall entertainers, seeking jobs in a grand vaudeville being produced by Bongo-Shaftsbury, who was in town seeking funds from the foolish knight Wren. Bongo-Shaftsbury's avenue of approach would be through the glamorous actress Victoria, Wren's mistress, posing as his wife to satisfy the English fetish of respectability. Fat and Tweed would enter their consulate tonight arm in arm, singing a jovial song, shuffling, rolling their eyes… (61)

What is striking about this chain of hypotheses is not just the fact that we are confronted with acts of guessing, and thus with a prime example of the Peircean guesswork I see *V.* engage; it is also the fact that we are confronted with acts of guessing freed from any claim to accuracy. The passage clearly delights in the inventive powers of Aïeul's imagination and celebrates the space of opportunity that the lack of certainty creates. Mutually exclusive hypotheses stand side-by-side. The woman Victoria assumes the roles of tourist, anarchist, and actress; she is Alastair Wren's daughter, wife, and mistress. Aïeul's customers, "Fat and Tweed," are cast first as gigolos, then as assassins, and finally as vaudeville entertainers, while Bongo-Shaftsbury is imagined in the roles of competitor, schemer, and producer. Rather than attempting to 'guess right,' then, Aïeul generates hypotheses that are clearly marked as imaginary artifacts. They stand out as products of a process that is utterly creative, highly subjective, and, as the ellipsis that ends the passage indicates, boundless in space and time.[6] Within the context of Aïeul's scene, no regulative force is at work to verify his guesses. As we reach the end of the episode, we even learn that Aïeul couldn't care less about verification. Happy to see his customers go, he falls asleep thinking: "Whatever it is tonight, bonne chance. Because I will see neither of you again, that's the least I can wish" (62).

The mere playfulness of Aïeul's thoughts and his indifference towards "whatever it is tonight" stand in stark contrast to readers' desire to know, a desire that is produced very effectively by the sense of visual immediacy and the pervasive air of secrecy that the workings of focalization create, and that is further spurred by an act of guessing on the readers' part: in contrast to Aïeul, readers assume, they will see "Fat and Tweed" again. About halfway through the second episode, they are proven correct: the name "Victoria" reappears alongside references to "a chubby blond man" and "another man whose face

[6] As Rohr argues, Pynchon's *Gravity's Rainbow* (1973) pushes this notion of an unlimited field of creative play further into what she calls a "radicalized version of 'anything goes'" ("Mimesis" 111). The space in which the endless probing of unlimited interpretive options unfolds is no longer tied to the gap between perceiving and understanding that is bridged by abductive inferences, as in *V.*, but is, as Rohr's interpretation shows, created by the bewildering instances of delay grounded in the structure of infinite semiosis. This structure is most pronounced in the central motif of the rocket whose existence can only be verified retrospectively. See *Wahrheit* 233-60.

looked sunburned" (65); and from then on readers can literally trace the whereabouts of the group of Europeans from their meetings in Alexandria to the final showdown in Cairo. It is with Chapter Three, then, that Pynchon's elaborate game with the notion of detection—as literary genre, trope, and reading technique—takes its start. It is a game that involves provisionally granting readers the familiar and reassuring position as privileged interpreters of the events, by luring them into the role of reader-detectives and providing them with just enough information to encourage the kind of guesses that help recreate what George Levine calls "the continuity of character behind flaking sunburn, suggestive nicknames, blue eyeglasses, fatness" (121). Readers are thus temporarily granted the means to stabilize and counter the indeterminacy produced by the multiple layers of creative guesswork that the focalizors provide.

Given the central role that notions of espionage and detection play throughout the novel, my emphasis on the Peircean notion of abductive inference may hardly come as a surprise. If literary critics have worked with Peirce in the past, it has usually been in the context of detective fiction. The essays collected in Umberto Eco's and Thomas Sebeok's volume *The Sign of Three*, for example, reveal how the literary world's mastermind detectives, among them Sherlock Holmes and Auguste Dupin, use abductive inferences to solve tricky cases. Like Peirce, whose own investigative talents the volume celebrates, the authors focus on the masterminds' outstanding analytic skills and their dazzling ability to 'guess right.' Rohr's reading of Peirce, on the other hand, conceptualizes abductive inferences not merely as exercises in logic but as moments of frailty within the process of reality constitution, and allows for a Peircean reading of detective tropes that moves beyond Eco's and Sebeok's interest in the logic of inference.[7] As detective figures face the task of reading signs, making guesses, and constructing hypotheses, her approach suggests, their efforts to overcome the epistemological crisis produced by an unresolved case reflect key moments of insecurity involved in the daily task of weaving the 'fabric of knowledge' that constitutes reality. In *V.*'s Chapter Three, this insecurity is especially pronounced, since the uncertainty surrounding the events and the agony of not

[7] Rohr herself contributed to debates over Sherlock Holmes' and Auguste Dupin's abductive reasoning before refining and expanding her Peircean model. See her "Stellungnahme."

knowing for sure what the dubious characters get up to are heightened by the sense of danger and imminent threat that hovers over the scene. Conventional plots tend to counter these moments of uncertainty by celebrating the advent of a newly established order, the moment when the case is solved and everything falls into place. Most conventional detective plots culminate in the reassuring finding that the detective has once again 'guessed right,' while others, including the reader, may have 'guessed wrong.' But, if we take Rohr's reading of Peirce to heart, more is at stake even in these more conventional plots than mastery of the high art of logic inference. What emerges as a recurrent concern beneath the surface of many of these texts is a much more far-reaching negotiation, that of the unstable moments of a process of reality constitution constantly underway.

With respect to *V.*, then, Rohr's Peircean framework allows us to appreciate some of the far-reaching epistemological issues at stake in the elaborate game that Pynchon plays with the conventions of detective fiction. The specific ways in which notions of observation are foregrounded in Chapter Three and in other parts of the novel, for instance, both evoke and problematize what Sally Bachner has called detective fiction's erotic "fantasy of a visual empiricism without bounds," a fantasy rooted in the assumption that "if we only look with adequate attention, all will become visible" (104). At the same time, Pynchon's specific rendering of the moments of abductive inference—of those moments in which the gap between subject and world, between observation and understanding, is bridged through acts of guessing—simultaneously plays on and subverts the expectation that the epistemological crisis posed by the 'case V.' can be overcome. While Aïeul's imagination runs wild, producing layer after layer of creative hypotheses, *V.*'s readers are sent hunting for clues, lured into the role of reader-detectives by the chapter's fragmented structure, by the focalizors' ominous references to a possible "game" being played (*V.* 72) and to instances of "disguise" (76) and posture (72), and by the conspicuous scattering of names and physical traits in the text.

The limits of this kind of combinatory guesswork are apparent throughout the chapter, however, and become especially pronounced in the last scene. Like the other episodes, this last piece carefully ties the distinct point of view it establishes to the physical space of a specific Egyptian venue. This time, however, the absence of a focalizing character and the shift to the present tense create an even

stronger sense of visual immediacy that the opening sentence promptly sets up: "The corridor runs by the curtained entrances to four boxes, located to audience right at the top level of the summer theatre in the Ezbekiyeh Garden" (93). What follows is a stylized account of various movements in the corridor and its adjoining boxes that is perhaps best said to verbally (re-)enact the cinematic effect of an old silent movie with a fixed camera eye. For a while, nameless characters enter and "pass out" of the "field of vision." Their succession is meticulously recorded, as the following passage reveals:

> A man wearing blue spectacles hurries into the second box from the stage end of the corridor. […] Ten minutes pass. Two men turn the corner by the allegorical statue of Tragedy. […] The face of the one is hardly to be distinguished beneath masses of white tissue which have obscured the features, and changed slightly the outlines of the face. The other is fat. They enter the box next to the one the man with the blue spectacles is in. […] Shadows become more opaque. The air between them seems to thicken with an indeterminate color, though it is probably orange. Then a girl in a flowered dress comes down the hall and enters the box occupied by the two men. Minutes later she emerges, tears in her eyes and on her face. The fat man follows. (93)

Despite the emphasis laid on visual details, the scene remains ever so slightly out of focus, with its "opaque" shadows and "indeterminate color." As if to underline its enactment of a silent film aesthetic, aural stimuli are explicitly contained: "The silence," we learn, "is total" (93).

By appropriating the visual language of film and aligning the narrative's focalizing agent with the cinematic effect of a fixed camera eye, the final scene once again exposes the gap that is bound to remain between acts of perceiving and attempts to make sense of what is perceived. Though readers can virtually *see* what is happening as they read the passage, there is no way of *knowing* what the men are doing and why the girl is crying, unless the scarce information that is scattered throughout the chapter's other episodes is taken into account. Once readers take on the guesswork they are lured into, the men's physical traits (spectacles, sunburn, fatness) can be matched with names (Lepsius, Porpentine, Goodfellow) and nationalities (German, British). Having combined the clues the text provides in this manner, the passage suddenly takes on meaning. It now serves as a prelude to the final struggle between the British spy Porpentine and the German

spy Lepsius which begins immediately after Goodfellow and Victoria have left:

> [T]here's no warning when the red-and-white-faced man comes through the curtains holding a drawn pistol. The pistol smokes. He enters the next box. Soon he and the man with the blue spectacles, struggling, pitch through the curtains and fall to the carpet. (93)

The limits of this clue-seeking reading technique become apparent as soon as a fourth man enters the scene: "Another has been standing at the end of the corridor" (94). This man shoots Porpentine—who is recognizable by the "masses of white skin" that peel off of his dead face—but remains an anonymous "shadow" (94). The scene provides no clues to his identity, nor do the other seven episodes. And yet, the murderer can be identified. To do so, the reader needs to (re-) turn to Stencil who lies "drowsing on the sofa in Bongo Shaftsbury's apartment" (58), wondering what it was like for his father's colleague Porpentine to be killed "under the duello of Eric Bongo-Shaftsbury" (59).

Stencil appears to be absent from the eight fragmented scenes. With Aïeul, Hanne, Waldetar, and the other focalizors on the one hand, and Porpentine, Goodfellow, Victoria, and the other Europeans on the other, a whole set of new characters take center stage, drawing attention to the nebulous events in Egypt and distracting from the chapter's narrative frame. The chapter's subtitle—"In which Stencil, a quick-change artist, does eight impersonations"—underlines the central part Stencil plays, however, and specifies the 'meaning' of the episodes in the context of the novel. Seen in this light, the scenes are manifestations of Stencil's creative attempts to 'weave himself' into his father's past. They are highly elaborate abductive performances and add an additional, much more fundamental level to the deeply destabilizing layers of guesswork we have encountered. The chapter points to the excessively creative dimension of Stencil's reconstructions from the start, noting that they are based on only a few "veiled references"; "the rest," we are told, "was impersonation and dream" (59). Whether we use the expression "impersonation and dream," as Pynchon does, or "nothing but guessing," as Peirce would (*CP* 7.219), the fact remains that the episodes are creative sense-making acts which are spurred on by the fundamental gap created by the uncertainty surrounding the mysterious V. As such, they not only

enact the creative processes they stage on a larger scale, they also establish the complex structure of multi-layered guesswork that is characteristic of Pynchon's novel and drives its negotiation of creativity.

While Stencil may thus appear to be absent from much of Chapter Three, he is actually present throughout; and this absent presence, as I wish to call it, repeatedly manifests itself. The chapter's ending records one such moment, hinting at Stencil's "vantage" and identifying his position as the key to the seemingly unresolved murder case. "The half-crouched body collapses," the passage reads, "[t]he face and its masses of white skin loom ever closer. At rest the body is assumed exactly into the space of *this vantage*" (94, emphasis added). Here, Stencil's presence manifests itself in the use of the demonstrative pronoun "this." Its sudden appearance not only reaches beyond the narrative space to identify the external position that the scene's focalizing agent and its readers share, it also draws attention to the narrative itself and moves beyond the question of who is looking to the question of who is speaking. As the chapter ends with the words "this vantage," that is, it reaffirms Stencil as its narrating agent, marking his role as a "quick-change artist" who "does eight impersonations" and exposing the complex interplay between focalization and narration that Chapter Three relies on. As such, the final paragraph draws attention to the chapter's actual setting and narrative frame—Stencil in New York, on the sofa in Bongo-Shaftsbury's apartment—and provides the single piece of information needed to identify the anonymous "shadow" of the shooting.

To some extent, this final piece of detective work can then be read as a last missing link in a chain of 'correct' guesses that will eventually allow the what, where, when, and why to fall into place. Readers will be forced to realize, however, how little use there is in solving the murder case, since they have, in fact, known the murderer all along. As our attention thus shifts away from the events in the Ezbekiyeh Garden to Herbert Stencil lying on a sofa in New York, we find ourselves no longer firmly grounded in Egypt but roaming through Stencil's mind, since any attempt at decoding the narrative's clues can, as George Levine observed long ago, "only put us where Stencil already is" (122). As a result, readers are caught in a highly ironic mechanism: while the kind of combinatory guesswork into which they are lured promises a privileged position outside the narra-

tive, such a position is never actually achieved. Quite on the contrary, it is precisely the desire to stand *outside* that pulls readers further *into* a narrative that works to inaugurate the reader as accomplice or secret sharer rather than distanced onlooker.

Spying and Reading: Chapter Three and "Under the Rose"

Let me continue to unravel this complex readerly politics by turning to the short story "Under the Rose." Many critics have read this earlier piece as a pre- or meta-text of Chapter Three and have used it to reclaim the kind of privileged reader position that Pynchon both offers and mocks in *V.*[8] With "Under the Rose" at hand, many of the issues that remain rather nebulous in Chapter Three indeed appear 'clarified.' Long passages of the short story are reproduced on a word-by-word basis in the novel's chapter, the characters are roughly the same, and so is the general plot-line. In contrast to the fragmented structure of the chapter, however, the short story offers a coherent account of the events and uses Porpentine as the sole focalizor. Porpentine, we learn, is preoccupied with his "private mission of keeping off Armageddon" (UR 107). Steeped in "a tradition in espionage where everything was tacitly on a gentlemanly basis" (102), he clings to this "professional ethics" (123), assuming that his opponent Moldweorp, "the veteran spy" (102), will also continue to abide by "The Rules" (103). However, with the Fashoda Crisis reaching its climax and "a century rushing headlong to its end," these rules turn out to apply no longer (102). In the end, Porpentine is forced to acknowledge that he has guessed 'wrong' in assuming that Moldweorp's agents "would never seek his life" (103). Having chased Moldweorp, Lepsius, and Bongo-Shaftsbury from the opera house to the pyramids, he is shot knowing that, for him, no "time" remains "to learn the new role" (137).

In the face of its vivid account of Porpentine's inner life, his personal struggles, and honorable motives, it is indeed tempting to use "Under the Rose" as a foil that gives life to the shadowy and oddly remote figures the reader encounters in *V.* With "Under the Rose" in

[8] Klepper points to this phenomenon in his reading of *V.*: "[U]m aus den Fragmenten eine zusammenhängende Geschichte zu machen, bedienen sich die Kritiker ohne Ausnahme eines à priorischen Meta-Textes: Pynchon's Kurzgeschichte 'Under the Rose' [...]. Damit geht es ihnen genauso wie Stencil: jegliche Erfahrung hängt schon von der vorher gefaßten Hypothese ab" (612).

mind, the strange and disjointed scenes can suddenly take on meaning and reveal a coherent plot: that of "the spy who gets himself killed trying to prevent the Fashoda Crisis from escalating into war" (McClure 162). Simply conflating "Under the Rose" and the novel's third chapter in this manner is problematic, however, since such a reading downplays the many changes that the story underwent in terms of narrative technique and thematic concern to become Chapter Three of *V.* and, perhaps more importantly, since it refuses to acknowledge the different generic functions and contextual frameworks of both texts.[9] In fact, the differences in form and context are of such a radical nature that I think it is essential not to grant "Under the Rose" a status as privileged pre- or meta-text but rather to think of the relationship between these two texts as intertextual, hence as playful and ironic. Obviously, Pynchon draws on the short story's theme of espionage in *V.*'s third chapter; he does so not simply by using the same set of background events—Fashoda, the spy milieu, a murder—but by weaving the theme into the very structure of the new narrative. In *V.*'s third chapter, the ritualized game played by German and British agents in the 1898 setting remains oddly opaque while the eight onlookers take center stage. Douglas Fowler has noted that the privileged position assumed by these focalizors shifts the narrative's emphasis from "acting" to "witnessing" (33). I would like to go one step further and point out that the actual shift occurs not from acting to witnessing but from acting to spying; or rather, that while "Under the Rose" depicts spies in action, *V.* is concerned with the act of spying itself, with spying, that is, as a *mode* of perception and understanding that need not be actualized but may, as Stencil's absent presence reveals, assert its power as a purely imaginary way of thinking.

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[9] McClure is certainly not the only critic to conflate the two Porpentines of "Under the Rose" and Chapter Three, but his case is noteworthy in that the unchallenged conflation allows him to cast Porpentine as one of the few characters of the novel to embody McClintic Sphere's "credo of unheroic engagement" (162). John Dugdale takes a similar stance in consistently fusing both texts into a single "UR/Chapter 3" conglomerate and reading "UR/Chapter 3" as "a burlesque of the spy thriller in the tradition of John Buchan, in which the English hero saves a world on the verge of apocalyptic catastrophe" (85). Among the few to insist on substantial differences between the two texts are critics like Patteson writing in the direct aftermath of the publication of Pynchon's short story collection *Slow Learner* in the early 1980s.

In *V.*'s third chapter, the conventional espionage plot that dominated "Under the Rose" fades into the background. As a consequence, the role formerly played by the proper spies Porpentine, Goodfellow, Lepsius, and Bongo-Shaftsbury is diminished, while Aïeul, Yusef, Gebrail, Hanne, and the others step in as prominent figures who focalize the events and guide the reader's attention. Since their perspective is one of observing, wondering, and guessing, these eight characters assume the roles of focalizor-spies who carefully survey their surroundings, gather information, and pass it on to us reader-spies in the vicinity. The narratives convey a strong sense of secret participation that is fostered not so much by the nebulous events surrounding Fashoda, but by the specific use made of the technique of focalization which allows the reader to hear conversations not meant to be heard and to see events not meant to be seen. To a certain extent, all focalizors are intruders: Aïeul has no right to listen in on his customers' conversations; Girgis witnesses Porpentine's plunge into the bushes only after trespassing on the grounds of the Shepheard's Hotel at "three in the morning" (84); and Hanne is even actively engaged in espionage. The information these characters pass on to us readers is thus obtained secretly and illegally; and through the act of reading, readers become secret sharers of this information, automatically assuming the roles of accomplices. Later chapters of *V.* will link this sense of shared intrusion to the notion of voyeurism. As Hanne's example shows quite clearly, however, Chapter Three remains preoccupied with the theme of espionage, or, to be more precise, with implementing the shift in attention that I have tried to trace: from plot to narrative structure, from spies in action to the act of spying as a mode of perception. In terms of the notion of guesswork, this shift implies that acts of guessing and hypothesizing are no longer exclusively linked to concrete espionage activities which occur in the plot but rather become indicative of the novel's general epistemological concerns.

Seen in this light, *V.* ironically re-enacts one of the central themes of "Under the Rose": the end of the age of the gentleman spy. In the short story, this theme is dramatically staged by Porpentine's failure to guess 'right,' a failure that he has to pay for with his life. Through an ironic twist, *V.* takes this theme to a higher level. Not gentlemen but waiters, conductors, barmaids, factotums, and readers assume the roles of spies in the novel; and it is now young Stencil, the

jobless outcast, who seeks to penetrate and reconstruct his father's past. The age of the gentleman spy has indeed come to an end. As spying techniques are no longer in the exclusive hands of 'gentlemen' but become tied to reading techniques, the problems that worry Porpentine in "Under the Rose" become the readers' problems in *V.* Throughout the short story, Porpentine mourns the apparent loss of the kind of privileged position that he was granted through a strict collegial adherence to "The Rules" (UR 103) of the profession. Likewise, *V.*'s readers are confronted with a high degree of uncertainty about changes in "The Rules" of the game. Lured first into chasing the clues so generously scattered throughout the narrative, they soon begin to suspect that perhaps they have missed the actual game or at least have been clinging to outdated rules. While the rules that matter to Porpentine in "Under the Rose" are those unwritten, commonly accepted codes of the gentlemanly spy trade, the rules that matter to *V.*'s readers are those unwritten, commonly accepted codes of narrative convention. Having noticed that these conventions are just as prone to violations as the spy codex Porpentine clings to, readers, just like Porpentine, are no longer granted the privilege of 'knowing' exactly what to do. Instead, they, too, are left to wonder what the rules of the game are.

The kind of intertextual reading of *V.* and "Under the Rose" that I have offered thus resists setting the short story up as a key to the chapter but allows us to understand further the attacks on potentially privileged positions of reading and interpreting that Pynchon stages throughout his novel. In terms of my argument about *V.*'s guesswork, such a reading underlines the fact that Pynchon only provisionally grants his readers the privilege of being able to verify whether they are guessing 'right' or guessing 'wrong.' In the end, nothing ever falls into place completely and, to use Yusef's phrase, "there is [always] more [t]here" (66), more than readers have already detected. It is in this sense that *V.* lays bare the precarious nature of the creative act through which the subject establishes his or her relationship to the world. As multiple layers of creative guesses fail to convey a sense of stability but keep adding additional moments of frailty to a narrative texture that is already highly unstable, the novel reflects on what happens if the subject's creative efforts to produce reality are no longer limited by mechanisms of intra- or intersubjective scrutiny. It is perhaps one of the novel's most powerful and disquieting moves that

it does so on two levels, the level of character and plot (with Stencil hunting V. but never reaching any stable conclusion as to 'who' or 'what' 'she' is), and the level of narrative (by manipulating the ways in which readers relate to the text), while at the same time establishing a sense of complicity between the two.

Stifling Control: *V.*'s Objects of Desire

In addition to revealing the extent to which *V.* draws it reader's guesswork into "sick moments of uncertainty" (UR 133), my intertextual reading of *V.* and "Under the Rose" has highlighted the conspicuous role that specific *modes* of perception play throughout the novel. As the acts of perceiving and making sense in Chapter Three become suggestive of spying activities and create an uneasy sense of complicity between observing characters and the observing reader, the novel's guesswork ceases to be a playful affair. In fact, while *V.* may be seen to celebrate the creative capacities of the mind, including the sense of freedom and possibility so vitally present in the very notion of uncertainty, it also lays bare the element of control at work in each and every act of creation. In this context, it may be helpful to return to Rohr's reading of the Peircean notion of the immediate object. Within the Peircean framework, as she points out, immediate objects are "objects *of thought*" ("Patterns" 41) which are *composed* by the interpreting mind "according to an interpretive perspective" ("Pragmaticism" 297). It is through these immediate objects that the subject establishes its relationship to the world of dynamic objects, and since this is so, every act of making sense involves an act of production or creation on the side of the subject. Put differently, every attempt at making sense of perceptions will involve mentally producing an immediate object of the object perceived according to a particular perspective based on individual needs and culturally predetermined frameworks. It is this mechanism of the subject's individual and culturally mediated control over his or her objects of perception that *V.* exposes while exploiting the high degree of indeterminacy that the inevitable gap or discrepancy between immediate and dynamic objects produces.

By shifting our attention from the novel's creative play to the hidden desires that its narrative texture fuels and enacts, my juxtaposition of Chapter Three and "Under the Rose" not only

accentuates the link between creativity and power that *V.* draws out, it also encourages us to re-read one of its central motifs, the persistent reference to "animate" and "inanimate object[s]" (*V.* 297, 17). Many critics have commented on *V.*'s obsession with objects, states of object-ness, and processes of object formation, tracing the gradual transformation of Victoria Wren into the human machine that the Maltese children of Fausto Majistral's story dismantle, and assessing the bleak historical vision of decadence and decline that this transformation seems to invoke.[10] Much recent scholarship has turned from such historical approaches to the theme of dehumanization to psychoanalytic theories of the fetish, exploring V.'s transformation as a process of fetishization that not only plays with "the Freudian concept of fetishism" but "displaces" it (Berressem 69).[11] The Peircean concept of object formation, I argue, allows for yet another re-reading, highlighting the epistemological status and semiotic function of *V.*'s numerous objects and object-formations and linking the language of 'desire' that critics like Alice Jardine and Hanjo Berressem have shown to be at work throughout the novel to the older epistemological streak of Pynchon criticism.[12]

A curious key to such a reading lies in a passage that appears in the novel's first chapter. Here, Profane wakes up alone on the kitchen floor of Pig Bodine's apartment. Searching for company, he stumbles to the window and sees Pig outside in the alley, racing the engine of his Harley Davidson in the snow. This suddenly reminds him of Rachel and the special relationship she has to her car, an MG; and it brings back memories of his one-time boss, the Brazilian Da Conho, who never let go of his machine gun, even in front of the guests of the restaurant they worked for. Profane recalls his amaze-

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[10] See Mendelson, Introduction 6, Slade 31-69, Tanner's "V. and V-2," and Plater 140-50, for instance.

[11] Hanjo Berressem's reading ties in with a larger body of work that has explored issues of gender and sexuality in Pynchon's novels. See Alice Jardine's *Gynesis*, Christopher Kocela's "Re-Stencilizing Lesbian Fetishism," Dana Medoro's study of *V.*'s "menstrual economy," and Mark Hawthorne's discussion of "gender blending," for instance.

[12] Due to its psychoanalytic connotations, the term 'desire' may appear too strong or simply inappropriate when used in a Peircean context. I use the term in the sense that Rohr proposes in her Peircean reading of *Lolita*: to acknowledge the novel's concern with 'objects of desire' and explore the narrative enactment of their epistemological constitution. See Rohr's "Patterns in a World of Passion."

ment over such odd behaviour, an amazement which the chapter's external narrator relates in the following manner:

> Profane had wondered then what it was with Da Conho and that machine gun. Love for an object, this was new to him. When he found out not long after this that the same thing was with Rachel and her MG, he had his first intelligence that something had been going on under the rose, maybe for longer and with more people than he would care to think about. (16)

In the face of the elaborate game *V.* plays with notions of detection and clue-seeking reading techniques, it is of course highly ironic to present this passage as a 'key' to the link between the novel's talk of objects and its negotiation of the epistemological process of object formation that I wish to draw. Still, the use of the idiom "under the rose" is intriguing. It takes up the title of the short story and thus alludes to the concerns of Stencil's Chapter Three at a point in the novel when we are introduced to Profane. At the same time, it explicitly links the instances of secrecy and concealment that play such an important role in the ominous espionage plot to states of obsession. What is "going on under the rose," Profane suspects, is "love for an object," and this not only serves as a comment on Profane's uneasy relationship to "inanimate object[s]" (17)—they keep trying to "kill[] him" (17)—it also opens up a subtext for the secretive musings of Chapter Three. Since conventional readings of the spy plot may only put the reader where Stencil already is, Stencil himself becomes the key to the mystery. The bottom line of what is ultimately "going on" in Chapter Three, we may presume, is Stencil's "love for an object," his love for the mental object of his desire: V.

In the following, I wish to explore this link between the staging of Profane's object-dealings and Stencil's quest for V. in more detail, providing a Peircean (re-)reading of the rampant V-structures that Stencil produces before extending this epistemological perspective to *V.*'s general obsession with objects and processes of object formation. In both cases, Rohr's Peircean language of analysis and her reading of Nabokov's *Lolita* (1955) will serve as a valuable source of guidance, underlining the need to engage the novel's complex narrative texture and explore the subtext it carries. In the end, however, *V.*'s 'reflection' on the Peircean process of object formation may also be seen to invite critical revisions of Rohr's approach. The negotiation of creativity and power that a Peircean reading of *V.* draws

out, I will argue, deserves to be acknowledged on its own terms. It does not simply allow "the interpreting mind" of the reader to "explore its own creative capacities," as Rohr suggests ("Patterns" 47), but takes on the work of theory, critiquing Peirce's pragmatist model and advancing a powerful statement on what it can mean to be creative.

From Creative Play to Controlling Desires: Stencil's V.

Seen in the light of the Peircean notion of object formation, Stencil's impersonations in Chapter Three and elsewhere turn out to be creative guesswork of a particular kind. They are reconsiderations, brought about by constant shifts in perspective, on the mental object of his desire, V. The novel stages this "process of constant reinterpretation and continuous integration of new perspectives" not only on the level of characters and plot but, even more powerfully, on the level of narrative (Rohr, "Patterns" 48). It thus shows striking parallels to Nabokov's *Lolita*, a novel which Rohr reads as "a minute exploration of the dynamics and insecurities of object formation and a shrewd illumination of all the gaps and traps that accompany it" (45). Like Stencil, *Lolita*'s Humbert Humbert circles around an object of desire, the "girl-child" Lolita, whose status as Humbert's own mental object-construction is established by the novel's opening lines: "Lolita, light of my life, fire of my loins. My sin, my soul" (*Lolita* 11). As Rohr argues, the ensuing narrative cultivates this object-construction and undercuts it at the same time, creating a "puzzling rift" that functions as "the main structuring element of the novel" ("Patterns" 35). The reader enters Humbert's sick mind, following his "inner eye" and perceiving the world "through the prism of [his] senses" (*Lolita* 19-20). For Rohr, the "gloomy and diffuse" narrative "space in which his object formations evolve" turns out to be highly unreliable, however. Humbert "continuously reorganizes, deconstructs, recreates, and reviews the objects of reality" he encounters, but he can never reach or possess what he longs for ("Patterns" 35). Instead, he tries to convince the "ladies and gentlemen of the jury" of his innocence, concealing his deeds behind words and ensnaring the reader with painstaking exercises in narrative manipulation (*Lolita* 11). Through all this, Rohr notes, the object-construction Lolita remains caught in a "zone of indeterminacy," revealing the extent to which reality comes into being

"as a projection of desire" and "can never really be possessed" ("Patterns" 35, 47, 50).

Stencil's quest for V. is perhaps less explicitly marked as an erotic enterprise at first. Its sexual implications are increasingly revealed, though, culminating in the extensive commentary on V.'s status as "inanimate object of desire" (*V.* 444) in Chapter Fourteen, "V. in Love." Many critics have followed up on this commentary, exploring the novel's gender politics and deepening our understanding of V. as "fetish-construction[]" (443). In one of the first feminist readings of *V.*, Alice Jardine links V.'s sexualized object-status to the question of narrative, stressing the role V. assumes "as the purely female desiring machine holding *V.* or any narrative together" (252); and for Mark Hawthorne, V. is exposed as "a particular man's creation of a woman, a construct that Herbert consciously shapes from the feminine within and which he inevitably masculinizes" (86). In conceptualizing V. as Stencil's object of desire, I clearly draw on this line of Pynchon criticism; but, in the end, the Peircean perspective I bring to the novel allows for a different kind of reading. As in the case of Humbert's verbal summoning of his nymphet-construction Lolita, I wish to argue, Stencil's narrative constructions of V. function as creative reality proposals that seek to conjure and arrest the object of his longings in "the laboratory of [his] mind" (*Lolita* 13). They deepen the profound indeterminacy surrounding it, readjusting the mental picture in an endless series of imaginary sketches while underlining the object's status as "the great rose-grey never-to-be-had" (*Lolita* 266).

Nabokov's *Lolita* frames these mental rearrangements as shifts in visual perspective: "It is a question of focal adjustment," Humbert notes, "of a certain distance that the inner eye thrills to surmount, and a certain contrast that the mind perceives with a gasp of perverse delight" (19). Such a visual economy is also at work in Pynchon's *V.* As Stencil 'disappears' from the scene in Chapter Three, allowing readers to become fully immersed in 'watching' the bygone events in Egypt, the idea of his presence in the form of the "eight impersonations" the chapter's title announces is carried over to the narrative level in the form of focalization. This narratological term proves especially useful in grasping the mechanism at work in this transition because—in contrast to the notion of perspective—the term focalization involves a sense of agency, accounting for the focalizing

agent's active investment with and manipulation of the objects involved in the act of perception.[13] Once we acknowledge the importance of narrative in the context of Stencil's quest, we become aware of the fact that Stencil does not really assume the 'identity' of other characters through his impersonations but utilizes their narrative function as focalizors in the attempt to tell V.'s story. It is in this sense that his acts of 'disguise' are, as we learn, "not exactly the same as 'seeing the other fellow's point of view'" (*V.* 58); they are not about reaching an understanding of other people's lives and perspectives, but about utilizing their pledged, alleged, or merely invented proximity to Stencil's object of desire to foster and control the narrative formation of this object. The workings of focalization in the novel thus highlight the kind of fantasies, desires, and needs of differentiation that go into Stencil's constructions of V. They do so without exposing Stencil's controlling presence directly, but rather through subtle acts of manipulation that affect the novel's readers and draw them into uneasy moments of complicity; and while they offer a powerful glimpse of the mechanisms of control involved in the process of object formation, they also keep this process in constant motion, revealing that the control over a mental object of desire can never be complete.

The workings of focalization in Chapter Three are especially revealing in this context since they tacitly tie the needs and desires Stencil invests in his imaginative creation of V. to a specific cultural framework: that of Western male imperialism. As the acts of spying and voyeuristic intrusion that the fragmented scenes depict become aligned with a specific politics of perception, the chapter reveals the

[13] As Mieke Bal notes in her *Introduction to the Theory of Narrative*, the term 'focalization' is much more appropriate in grasping this active, manipulative dimension of the narrative production of meaning than 'perspective,' as it may easily be modified to account for the act of focalization (to focalize) and the agent of this act (the focalizor). No such verb or noun can be derived from the term 'perspective' (143-44). By reading Chapter Three with Bal's terminology in mind, I rework the narratological assumptions of much Pynchon scholarship. Critics from George Levine to Deborah Madsen have treated Aïeul, Yusef, Gebrail, Waldetar, and the other characters as narrators, arguing that "the narrators' stories seem not to be connected" (Levine 121) and that "[t]he perceptions of each narrator are partial, their knowledge fragmentary and incomplete and subject to cultural bias" (Madsen, *Postmodernist* 40). Rolf Gaasland and Christopher Kocela are among the few who have supported their readings with the analytical means supplied by more recent narratological theory. See Gaasland, "Barbaric" 45 and Kocela 111.

extent to which Stencil—after all, "the century's child" (48)—is haunted by fantasies of colonization, penetration, and a longing that later becomes articulated in "Mondaugen's Story" as the "desire to see and not be seen" (249). The chapter's specific use of focalization, I argue, exposes this uneasy link between historical modes of imperialism and Stencil's mode of perception in the form of an ironic twist: The voyeuristic sense of pure vision that hovers over the narrative actually runs counter to what may tentatively be called the chapter's post-colonial theme. For Ronald Cooley, this theme is established by the chapter's "parodic reworking of the literature of empire," a literature which has traditionally "silence[d] the culture it purports to explore, by making […] European adventurers the centers of consciousness and narrative interest, and pushing the 'natives' to the periphery, where they merely provide entertaining local color" (311-12). As Cooley points out, *V.* now pulls such 'natives' into the spotlight, focalizing the events through those who usually remain invisible.

As we watch Aïeul, Yusef, Gebrail, Waldetar, and the other characters dispassionately watching the Europeans who cross their way, we learn of their personal hopes and fears, of the hardships of their everyday lives, and of their resentment toward the colonizers. Hired to support the kitchen staff for a dinner party at the Australian Consulate in Alexandria, for instance, Yusef observes the visitors with a mixture of marvel and contempt, reversing the trajectory of the colonial gaze and infusing it with his own anarchist musings:

> Not a bad assignment, Yusef thought as he put on the white jacket and combed his mustaches. From the punch table on the mezzanine one could see the whole show: down the decolletages of the prettier women (Italian breasts were the finest—ah!), over all that resplendent muster of stars, ribbons and exotic Orders. Soon, from his vantage, Yusef could allow the first sneer of many this evening to ripple across a knowledgeable mouth. Let them make holiday while they could. Soon enough the fine clothes would be rags and the elegant woodwork crusted with blood. Yusef was an anarchist. (62-63)

Once again, the passage creates a strong sense of visual perception that is underlined by the emphasis laid on the specific "vantage" of Yusef's focalizing act. Looking down at the party from the mezzanine, Yusef finds himself in a temporary position of visual control that reverses the hierarchies of the colonial regime. The term

"exotic" reinforces this reversal as it is used to mark the colorful insignia of European power and establishes the colonizers—rather than the colonized—as the 'exotic Other' to be inspected and explored. The same applies to the remark "Italian breasts were the finest." It takes up the aphoristic gesture of European tourist guidebooks and parodies their clichés.[14] The anarchist turn taken by Yusef's thoughts spells out the political implications which such a radical reversal ultimately yields: an uprising against the colonizers. Yusef is not so sure about his vision of "the elegant woodwork crusted with blood," however, and tentatively revokes some of his most violent fantasies as the evening proceeds. "Perhaps he would spare children like this," we learn as he meets the young Victoria Wren, for instance, but the remark is instantly followed by a question: "Would he?" (63) Yusef's indecision adds a human touch to the scene and underlines the complexities involved in resisting colonial power.

At first sight, the passage thus indeed appears to offer a postcolonial reworking of the literature of empire, shifting the narrative's "consciousness" from the center of colonial rule to its margin and reversing "the clichés about 'natives' with which many novels of empire are littered" (Cooley 312). As John Dugdale has noted, however, Yusef's rebellious stance ties in smoothly with the figure of the anarchist in Joseph Conrad's *The Secret Agent* (86).[15] Apparently, then, his function as the focalizor of the events at the Australian Consulate does not displace the common fantasies of imperialist fiction, but simply rehearses the fears of revolution that novels of empire have always voiced. The passage consequently reinforces Western imperial fantasies at the very moment it appears to counter them. This becomes even more evident as we acknowledge Stencil's function as the chapter's narrator. Yusef and the other 'natives' are, as Cooley notes, "all creations of [his] imagination" and,

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[14] The chapter explicitly ties remarks like these to the novel's Baedeker motif. Half way through Aïeul's episode, for example, "another fat Englishman, fair-haired, florid" arrives in the café, causing Aïeul to think: "[D]idn't all Northerners look alike?" (*V.* 60) As Cooley has noted, the strategy that *V.* employs in such comic moments is made explicit in a self-reflexive passage that acknowledges the "grand joke" that is being played "on all visitor's to Baedeker's world: the permanent residents are actually humans in disguise" (*V.* 76). See Cooley 312.

[15] For Dugdale, *V.*'s Chapter Three "reflects […] Conrad's vision of the secret agent as a secret sharer of those he moves along" (85-86). Dugdale compiles a long list of correspondences between the two texts. See his *Thomas Pynchon*, 85-87.

as such, "mere expansions of the stereotypes of imperialist fiction" (312). In the end, the scene's rendering of a "vantage" position that promises to grant the viewer visual control over the unfolding events thus only points to Stencil's absent presence and reinforces the colonizing trope of intrusion that Stencil's desire to find out and know perpetuates.

The 'immediate object' that is V. becomes linked to notions of imperialism, tourism, and the spy trade, then, to the extent that fantasies of penetration and visual control take hold of Stencil's mind. The fact that these fantasies are woven into the very fabric of the narrative and cannot be separated from V.'s appearance in the chapter as Victoria Wren reveals that there is no way to think of V. other than in this uneasy conflation with Stencil's desires. Ironically, then, Stencil's fantasies—as emblematic of violent and imperialist Western male culture as they are at times—not only determine the specific personas V. comes to embody in each 'Stencilized' chapter, they also form the very basis of his search. It is the modern fantasy of pure and total vision and, as Klepper has argued, "totalizing knowledge" that drives Stencil's desire to know (601). His repeated attempts to remove himself from the narrative, to stand 'outside' it, stage this fantasy, while his presence 'inside' the narrative texture simultaneously subverts it.[16] In the end, the workings of focalization in Chapter Three powerfully bind the chapter's thematic concerns with colonialism, imperialism, and the spy trade to its formal concerns with the politics of perception involved in Western fantasies of conquest and the literary manifestations of these fantasies in detective and spy fiction. By both subverting and reaffirming the notion of a colonial gaze and by undermining as well as re-instigating the fantasy of the detached, disembodied eye, the chapter lays bare the power structures at work in Stencil's acts of perceiving and making sense. It does so not only by revealing the amount of control Stencil exercises in creating his mental object V., but by pointing to the foundations of this control in the culture he is part of. V. in her, his, or its many guises, then, is not

[16] This insight reveals why the distinction between modes of narration and modes of focalization is significant in Chapter Three and why it is problematic to conceptualize the eight onlookers as *narrators*, as most Pynchon scholars have done casually. It is clear that Stencil narrates the scenes in question, although the novel willfully blurs his presence. In the end, this cover-up is just another level on which Stencil's modernist fantasy of detached vision plays out.

merely Stencil's personal creation, but what Rohr calls "a *mixtum compositum*," the product of a blend of personal as well as cultural desires and needs ("Patterns" 34).

Conceptualizing V. in her various disguises as the immediate objects Stencil composes in the process of trying to relate to a mysterious object of desire thus allows us to appreciate *V.*'s insistence on the interconnectedness of creative free play and mechanisms of control. As the various versions of V. materialize as immediate objects in the narrative, the processes of their creation become visible, too, revealing the powerful workings of the imagination on which they rely. At the very moment the presence of these various immediate objects is marked, however, a strange sense of absence remains. In Peircean terms, this sense of absence can be seen to emanate from the discrepancy that is bound to remain between these mental objects, and what may in the end be the dynamic object V., the object that generates the sign, stands outside of the process of signification, and maintains a presence in it only through the 'hints' of the immediate objects. Stencil controls these mental creations, but his control of V. can never be complete since his creations will always be marked by a haunting degree of indeterminacy that cannot be overcome. V., that is, can only maintain a presence in "manifold existences," and it is this inescapably pluralistic status that keeps the process of readjustment and reconsideration in motion, compelling Stencil to keep adding more perspectives by composing more immediate objects (Rohr, "Patterns" 33). Yusef's dictum—"there is more [t]here" (*V.* 66)—thus not only points to the novel's refusal to grant its readers a privileged position as interpreters of the events, it can also be seen as an elegant summary of the kind of Peircean dynamics *V.* stages as it reveals that there will always be another 'version' of V., that there is simply no other way of making sense.

At the same time, *V.* complicates the Peircean notion of progress inherent in this scheme by tying the many versions of V. so closely to Stencil's fantasies and desires that the relationship of his immediate objects to the world of dynamic objects is obscured. Are Stencil's immediate objects 'hints' in the Peircean sense? Do they point to and 'circle around' a dynamic object? Will each 'version' bring us closer to the 'real' V.? The novel does not provide ultimate answers to these questions. In contrast to Nabokov's *Lolita*, it does not hold the rift between "fancy and nature's reality" in place (*Lolita* 266).

Instead, it "joyfully situates itself in the abyss," as Rohr would put it, exploring the additional space of instability and revealing that—just as processes of scrutiny and intersubjective exchange are no longer in place to counteract excessively creative acts of guesswork—links between the world of signs and the world of ('real') objects can no longer be taken for granted ("Patterns" 42). As Stencil's guesswork and his act of creating the many versions of V. become explicitly tied to what may be a 'paranoid' state of mind, *V.* in fact points to a central moment of frailty reflected in Pynchon's *Gravity's Rainbow*: the "flow of frantic connections" kept in motion by a paranoid inductive ordering of data into ever-changing reference systems that obtain equal status of potential validity—or invalidity—rather than ruling each other out (Rohr, "Mimesis" 111).[17] In *V.*, the connections made by Stencil remain tied to a single reference system; and yet, they are indeed portrayed as 'frantic.' Hence, the more *V.* presses the notion of Stencil's 'paranoia,' the less certain the tie between his immediate objects and the world of dynamic objects becomes. *V.* shakes Peirce's firm belief in the power of interpretation to "bring a sign asymptotically closer to its final interpretant," suggesting that it may well be just another (Western male?) fantasy (Rohr, "Patterns" 41).

Creativity, Power, and Violence: Profane Objects and Textual Complicities

While Stencil is the driving force behind much of the novel's guesswork, and while V. is the most prominent example of a mental object caught in a continuous process of re-creation, other characters are involved in similar processes and the manipulative powers of narrative are also at work elsewhere in the novel. This brings us back to Profane's uneasy relationship to objects and slippages in the animate/inanimate distinction. As many critics have noted, the animate/inanimate motif accompanies *V.*'s negotiation of the relationship between the human and the non-human, culminating in V.'s gradual transformation into "an automaton" (*V.* 444). However, the processes of mechanization, fetishization, and textualization that critics like Tiina Käkelä-Puumala have traced are hardly limited to the 'character'

[17] For an extensive account of this radical destabilization see Rohr's Peircean reading of *Gravity's Rainbow* in *Die Wahrheit der Täuschung*.

V., and need not be reduced to the novel's concern with literal processes of 'dehumanization.' As we shift our attention from the surface of the plot to the novel's textual strategies, we may in fact detect various instances of object formation in the novel and learn to appreciate the extent to which other characters are repeatedly framed as "erotic and/or epistemological object[s]" which have to be "understood in relation to the strategies of power and knowledge" that *V.* both exposes and enacts (Käkelä-Puumala 18).

Esther's story is a case in point. Set up as willing to undergo plastic surgery to rid herself of her Jewish "figure-6 nose" in the opening passages of Chapter Four, she soon becomes the physical object Schoenmaker first models with "a few artistic finger-flourishes and wrist-twistings" and then brutally molds with his "knives and kneading fingers" (*V.* 102-04). As in the case of V., the story of Schoenmaker's re-creation of Esther's body resonates with the uneasy adjacency of inventive possibility and stifling control within the very process of creation. At first, the sense of possibility is attributed to Esther herself. We learn that she is "thrilled" by the chance to choose her new nose, a situation she perceives very much "like waiting to be born, and talking over with God, calm and businesslike, exactly how you wanted to enter the world" (104). This positive take on the process of her re-creation is immediately troubled, however, as "her so-called choice" (Medoro 22) becomes tied to the pervasive power of cultural norms manifest in "an ideal of nasal beauty established by movies, advertisements, magazine illustrations" (*V.* 104). The most troubling shift occurs as the role of creator passes fully from Esther to Schoenmaker, who brings male fantasies of conquest and control to the act of creation, fantasies that resemble Stencil's. "The first day Schoenmaker spent in pre-operative reconnaissance of the terrain," we learn, "photographing Esther's face and nose from various angles, checking for upper respiratory infections, running a Wasserman" (103). The actual surgery is then accompanied by the hilarious chants of Schoenmaker's aid Trench, who keeps calling "Stick it in … pull it out … stick it in … ooh that was good … pull it out …" (105-06), as if to verbally (re-)enact the sexual pun of the chapter's title: "In which Esther gets a nose job" (95). Schoenmaker's surgical act is thus explicitly cast in terms of a military and sexual siege, revealing the extent to which Esther's, like V.'s, objectification is framed by male desires and needs. Next to the 'real' Esther we find the 'immediate

object' Esther, an eroticized object of unlimited surgical penetration composed as such in Schoenmaker's mind.[18] Later in the novel, the discrepancy between the two becomes quite apparent. In one of their few taciturn moments of communication, Schoenmaker tells Esther that she is "beautiful," only to add: "Perhaps not as you are. But *as I see you*." He then urges Esther to let him conduct another operation to "bring out the beautiful girl inside you, *the idea of Esther*" (313, emphases added). Quite tellingly, the act of composing Esther as an object of desire is framed in the now familiar terms of a penetrating sense of male vision. The 'idea of Esther' is what Schoenmaker *sees* her to be, it is the mental object he seeks to foster and control.

While Esther's case thus resembles V.'s in many respects, it differs significantly in the way the fragile link between the immediate objects of thought and the dynamic objects of the 'real' world is negotiated. As I have shown, this link is obscured in the case of V. with the effect of propelling—or at least threatening to propel—Stencil's object fully into the realm of signification. What is perhaps most disturbing about Esther's case, however, is that the object-state Schoenmaker ascribes to her does not remain confined to the level of thought and signification, but enters the realm of the 'real.' Esther's body is mutilated beyond repair as Schoenmaker begins to craft his mental creation into being. By pointing to the power of mental sign-objects to penetrate, shape, and change dynamic objects rather than merely 'encircle' them in thought, Esther's surgery touches on Peirce's conception of the relationship between sign and world, reversing the destabilizing dynamic that Stencil's creative inventions of V. effect. Within the Peircean framework of reality constitution, dynamic and immediate objects do not exist independently of one another in "the realm of an ontology" but stand "in a relation of infinite interplay and mutual influence," as Rohr stresses. This implies that dynamic objects, conceptualized as "objects of consensus," are subject to change just as much as immediate objects are ("Patterns"

[18] The term 'real' is of course misleading and highly problematic in this context, as we are dealing with the fictional world of a novel. By using the term, I wish to draw attention to the initial difference between the object-status that V. and Esther assume within the world of the novel—Esther may safely be called a character while V.'s status remains open to speculation. Such an easy distinction between the two collapses, however, once we leave the level of plot and consider the novel's narrative design. I will thus complicate the use of the term 'real' as I move on.

42). Esther's case underlines this interdependence, revealing how culturally determined reality proposals shape reality and how this reality is always already semiotically constructed just as much as it is real. However, it also undercuts the notion of gradual, consensual change for the better that remains tied to this Peircean concept of reality, pointing to the workings of power in the construction of 'the real' and exposing the brutal acts of bodily violence that accompany it.[19]

Such an epistemological reading of Esther's 'nose job' reveals interesting parallels with Nabokov's *Lolita* and invites us to push beyond Rohr's analysis of the link between creativity and power. Esther's case resembles Lolita's in that it leaves intact the sense of a 'real' Esther against which we can hold Schoenmaker's version. Just as the 'real' Lolita, Dolores Haze, repeatedly troubles Humbert Humbert's mental creations of his object of desire, the 'real' Esther talks back, refusing another operation and leaving Schoenmaker's office with the accusatory remark "Why can't it just be me?" (*V.* 313). For Rohr, *Lolita*'s staging of the gap between Humbert's mental nymphet-constructions and the 'real' Lolita serves as a "vivid illustration of th[e] continuous struggle for mutual acknowledgment of the other's perspectives on 'the real'." The "marge [sic!] between Lolita the immediate object and Lolita the dynamic object is stretched so very much to its extreme," she argues, "that understanding is impossible between the nymphet and her creator" ("Patterns" 43-44). In *Die Wahrheit der Täuschung*, Rohr acknowledges the central role that power relations ("Machtverhältnisse") play in the construction of this unequal relationship, pointing to the ways in which Humbert abuses his position of power to silence Lolita's voice and negate her perspective on the real (216). *Lolita*, she consequently argues, reveals how power relations constitute reality and shape structures of com-

[19] At this point, *V.* exposes a fundamental difference between Peirce's pragmatist conception of the process of reality constitution and poststructuralist accounts of the linguistic-performative construction of social realities. Both acknowledge the fact that reality is always already semiotically constructed just as much as it is real. But where Peirce holds fast to the vision of an orderly process that involves acts of exchange between individuals, poststructuralist theorists like Butler have pointed to the "subordinating and producing" effects of power in the construction of psychic, social, and embodied realities (*Psychic Life* 2).

munication (219).[20] Rohr is thus clearly aware of the pervasive workings of power in Nabokov's novel, but she speaks of "Machtverhältnisse" or "Machtmißbrauch," power relations or abuses of power, noting that Humbert's ugly act of child abuse remains at odds with the beauty of the novel's language and aesthetic appeal (194).[21]

Pynchon's *V.*, I argue, clearly insists on a much more far-reaching and radical conception of power, one that locates power in the workings of language and the *ways* of thinking and perceiving that a particular cultural episteme produces and perpetuates. Within the textual universe that is *V.*, power is never reduced to unequal social relationships or the abuse of parental responsibility. It manifests itself in the highly manipulative workings of narrative and thus calls attention to a troublesome dimension of the novel's staging of creativity that Nabokov's *Lolita* may be seen to have pioneered. In the case of Esther's 'nose job,' this deeper concern with power becomes apparent as we shift our perspective from the story of the surgery—which includes the power-struggles over Esther's 'real' body—to its narrative enactment. Here, a mixture of gruesome detail, narrative detachment, and an eerie sense of play add up to one of the most brutal, vulgar, yet clinically precise narrative performances in American fiction. The following passage gives an impression of this odd combination, revealing the extent to which the reader becomes drawn into the brutal act of bodily disfigurement. It begins with one of Schoenmaker's explicatory remarks:

> 'And now the hump floats inside the nose.' He pulled back one nostril with a retractor, inserted a pair of forceps and fished around for the hump. 'Take that back,' he smiled. 'It doesn't want to come just yet.' With scissors he snipped the hump loose from the lateral cartilage which had been holding it; then, with the bone-forceps, removed a dark-colored lump of gristle, which he waved triumphantly before Esther. 'Twenty-two years of social unhappiness, nicht wahr? End of act one. We'll put it in formaldehyde, you can keep it for a souvenir if you wish.' As he talked he smoothed the edges of the cuts with a small rasp file. (107-08)

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[20] The German passage reads: "Nicht zuletzt handelt *Lolita* auch davon, inwieweit Machtverhältnisse Realität und gleichzeitig Kommunikationsstrukturen konstituieren" (*Wahrheit* 219).

[21] Rohr writes: "[I]n diesem Fall reibt sich der ästhetische Genuß, den die Poetik der Sprache erzeugt, am Thema des Kindes- bzw. Machtmißbrauchs, wobei die Schönheit der Sprache die Häßlichkeit des Dargestellten gleichzeitig verdeckt und hervorhebt" (*Wahrheit* 194).

The chilling effect of this narrative performance is produced by subtle shifts in focalization, forcing the reader into the roles of both victim and perpetrator while carefully blurring the boundaries between the two. Schoenmaker's perspective is marked by excessive references to technical equipment—"retractor," "forceps," "scissors," "rasp file"—and by the use of anatomical terms that reduce Esther's face to a "hump" and "lateral cartilage." The verbal precision that accompanies the narrative enactment of Schoenmaker's moves is suddenly undercut by the reference to "a dark-colored lump of gristle," however. With this amateur attempt to describe the remains of Esther's nose, we enter the mind of the victim, Esther, who sees the lump as it is waved in front of her eyes. The shift occurs within a single sentence, and it is unclear whether we are still with her when the last sentence returns to her "cuts" and Schoenmaker's "small rasp file." Not until we read the next sentences do we return to Schoenmaker's perspective for sure, this time without the distancing effect of his comic remarks: "So much for the hump. But where the hump had been was now a flat area. The bridge of the nose had been too wide to begin with, and now had to be narrowed" (108).

As it alternates between Esther's and Schoenmaker's perspectives, the quoted passage enacts a larger shift in focalization that the narrative account of Esther's surgery undergoes. The description begins with Esther's excitement and pain and her visual screening of Schoenmaker's moves—"nothing before in her experience had hurt quite so much," we learn, and are told that she "sobbed quietly" and "watched his eyes as best she could, looking for something human there" (105-07). Esther's perspective soon fades into the background, however, allowing the narrative to become fully enmeshed in Schoenmaker's technical jargon. Anatomical terms now proliferate and the range of technical instruments used is scrupulously identified. Terms like "spine" (108) and "seam" (109) are set in quotation marks, which call attention to the narrative act of naming, and create the only kind of distance that the text allows for. From the casual remark "So much for the hump" onwards, the reader is drawn fully into the mindset of the perpetrator; there is no escape from Schoenmaker's sawing and stitching and the cold narrative precision that records it.

As this reading of Esther's surgery reveals, *V.*'s negotiation of power reaches far beyond the portrayal of the unequal power-relations between Schoenmaker and Esther, between the active (male) subject-in-penetration and the passive (female) object acted upon. Power is rather shown to be at work in the rational, objectifying language of medical science that shapes Schoenmaker's mindset and infuses his perception of Esther's body. Hence, the process of object formation that the Schoenmaker/Esther episode stages does not simply dramatize "the continuous struggle for mutual acknowledgment of the other's perspectives on 'the real'" (Rohr, "Patterns" 43); it highlights the powerful impact of epistemic formations on the constitution of reality. In contrast to *Lolita*, the abuse of power that *V.* portrays is no longer attributed to the abnormal, pathological mind of a pedophile criminal; it becomes the cultural norm. This implies that it is no longer marked as an 'abuse,' an aberration, but comes to embody a common, routine phenomenon. The quoted passage underlines this sense of normalcy by evoking a series of motifs and allusions that resonate throughout the novel. Preserved in "formaldehyde," Esther's old nose becomes a "souvenir," introducing the tourism motif that pervades the novel as a metaphor for the detached, clinical Western mindset. Together with Schoenmaker's name, the German interpolation "nicht wahr" links the scene to the German atrocities committed in South-West Africa and to the Holocaust, to which the narrator of "Mondaugen's Story" alludes.[22] This creates an ironic subtext for the disfigurement of Esther's Jewish nose and at the same time draws a direct connecting line between the objectifying force of Schoenmaker's medical language and the precision and detachment that characterizes the narrative accounts of rape, torture, and brutal killings in Mondaugen's chapter. In both cases, the epistemic regime of science and technology is shown to reduce bodies to objects, people to things, turning them into anatomical pawns, in the case of Schoenmaker, or to statistics, in the case of the German Schachtmeister, who comments on the Hereros' plight: "[Y]ou were forced to look at them as a collection: knowing from statistics that twelve to fifteen of them died per day" (*V.* 285).

[22] Commenting on the 60,000 Hereros and Hottentots murdered by the German General Lothar von Trotha in 1904, he notes: "This is only 1 per cent of six million, but still pretty good" (*V.* 259).

With this insistence on the troubling relationship between creativity and power in mind, it is possible to extend the dialogue between *V.* and *Lolita* and push Rohr's reading of Nabokov's novel in a different direction. The two novels not only share an intriguing set of intertextual ties—*V.* plays on *Lolita*, for instance, by linking Stencil's object of desire to the longing of a pedophile British expatriot for his 'girl-child' Alice and to Botticelli's Venus, who features as Humbert's support-frame for one of his mental Lolita-constructions—they also reveal a common interest in the manipulative power of language and the controlling force of narrative enactments.[23] In Pynchon's *V.*, this interest manifests itself in a flow of obscene details and repulsive detachments, drawing the reader into the kind of disquieting narrative complicity that Esther's surgery enacts. In *Lolita*, scenes of violent penetration surface only within the narrative workings of a mechanism of suppression. Humbert's Lolita-constructions serve as linguistic cover-ups advanced by an unreliable criminal who must take responsibility for his deeds in front of the jury which he repeatedly addresses. This means that the novel's poetic language—its rich metaphors, frequent alliterations, and elegant rhythm—not only remains at odds with the ugly act of child abuse that hovers beneath the surface, as Rohr suggests (*Wahrheit* 194), but also enables the cover-up, constituting the highly manipulative narrative texture through which Humbert's mindset is exposed to be not so abnormal—and unreliable—after all. It would at least be rewarding to re-read *Lolita*'s negotiation of the process of object formation through such a Pynchonesque lens, stressing the mechanisms of discursive power at work in the semiotic object-constructions of a text that is so fervently obsessed with suppressing and outsmarting them.

The dialogue between the two texts thus invites us to reconsider *Lolita*. At the same time, it reveals that *V.*'s negotiation of creativity is much more far-reaching and radical in its conception of power, its narrative set-up, and its manipulation of readers. No longer granted the distance of the jury, *V.*'s readers are drawn into the power matrix of the text; and the controlling desires of men like Stencil, Schoenmaker, and Schachtmeister become their own. This applies not only to the kind of clue-seeking reading techniques that Stencil's

[23] *Lolita*'s Humbert refers to Botticelli toward the end of the novel when he realizes "how much she [Lolita] looked—had always looked—like Botticelli's Venus—the same soft nose, the same blurred beauty" (272).

search induces, but to specific—objectifying, eroticizing—ways of perceiving, thinking, and reading as well. Moments of such uneasy complicity pervade the novel, and although I have already touched upon several of them, I wish to close my reading with a passage that draws together some of the novel's most salient narrative strategies and thematic concerns, revealing the extent to which *V.* not only complicates the Peircean process of object formation but unsettles Peirce's pragmatist conception of the subject/object relation as well.

The passage introduces us to Rachel Owlglass who lies "curled on the pine floor" of Fergus Mixolydian's apartment with one of the Whole Sick Crew's notorious parties under way (*V.* 47). The text immediately sets her up as an eroticized object of perception, creating a sense of visual penetration that is heightened by the attention drawn to Rachel's legs: they "shin[e] pale through black stockings." The gaze is external, disembodied, anonymous, and it powerfully enacts the same kind of visual economy that many of Stencil's narrative performances put to work. The scene's external focalization pulls the reader into the text by creating a sense of shared space 'outside' the narrative; and yet it renders the reader complicit with the very process of the mental-visual-verbal construction of Rachel as object, imposing the gendered perspective of erotic desire onto the reader and allowing no room outside it. Having thus aligned focalizor and reader under the auspices of a sexualized gaze, the narrative suddenly shifts to the second person:

> You felt she'd done a thousand secret things to her eyes. They needed no haze of cigarette smoke to look at you out of sexy and fathomless, but carried their own along with them. […] Smoke seemed to be in her voice, in her movements; making her all the more substantial, more there, as if words, glances, small lewdnesses could only become baffled and brought to rest like smoke in her long hair; remain there unless she released them, accidentally and unknowingly, with a toss of her head. (47)

At first, the shift to the pronoun 'you' works to close the gap between text and reader by linguistically fusing the positions of the focalizing agent and the reader. The effect is the same as in Schachtmeister's account of the Hereros' plight and his reaction to it: "*you* were forced to look at them" (285, emphasis added). The intrusion of the personal pronoun 'you,' however, also troubles the economy of the disembodied eye that the preceding sentences set up. Suddenly, there

are eyes that "look *at you*," and this not only personalizes the gaze but also reverses its trajectory, undercutting the fantasy of seeing without being seen that the novel so often enacts. As Rachel looks back through her "sexy and fathomless" eyes and the observer assumes a veiled presence in the narrative through the pronoun 'you,' the passage's negotiation of the process of object-formation and control becomes more complex. It is striking that Rachel is cast in the role of the female seductress at the very moment the male visual paradigm threatens to break down. Auditory perception is added to the visual picture as "her voice" and her "words" are held to exercise just as much of a tantalizing power over the observer as her "long hair" and the "toss of her head." While the passage thus challenges the workings of the male gaze, an eroticizing visual paradigm ultimately remains in place. Rachel's words are never voiced, nor does she assume a presence 'outside' the mind of the anonymous observer whose desire to possess and control her image remains inscribed in the very shift to the personalized 'you.'

It is in such moments of barely noticeable slippages in subject/object positions, I wish to argue, that *V.*'s negotiation of the Peircean process of object formation reaches its most subtle ground. As Berressem has noted with respect to the novel's reworking of Freud's theory of the fetish, *V.* repeatedly "blur[s] the initial difference between subject and object on which the Freudian binarism [of subject and fetish] is based" (70). Translated into the framework of Peirce's pragmatist epistemology, this implies that the boundaries between creating agent and created object remain highly unstable. The anonymous observer's subject position constitutes the object Rachel, just as the reader becomes inscribed in the text; but the text also creates the reader and the object 'Rachel' that is evoked signifies back on the observer. Given Peirce's insistence on the theoretical distinction between immediate and dynamic objects, such an interweaving of subject and object positions is hardly surprising. It is in fact central to the pragmatist attack on Western metaphysics and constitutive of Peirce's triadic-relational—rather than static-dyadic—conception of the sign. *V.* takes this pragmatist critique of Enlightenment philosophy much further than Peirce could allow for, however. As Rohr argues, Peirce's theoretical account of the process of reality constitution stresses the creative dimension of "the interpreting mind's relation to the world of objects" ("Pragmaticism"

297). *V.* stages this process; but in addition to unsettling the ontological status of the objects created, it also unsettles the position of the creating subject, drawing attention to the pervasive workings of power and the constitutive effects it has on the creation of specific subject positions. Next to processes of object formation, we are confronted with acts of subject formation, which further destabilize Peirce's already dynamic conception of the subject/object relation. In the end, *V.* not only exposes what Thomas Claviez has called "pragmatism's naïve neglect of the problem of power—especially as it inheres in the subject/object relation" (359), it also confronts pragmatism's belief in the subject-as-agent with postmodern conceptions of the subject-as-text, moving from subject-centered models of agency to a postmodern understanding of the power of discourses and cultural texts.

This does not mean that *V.* negates the subject's central role within the process of reality constitution. It decenters the subject but celebrates its creative capacities at the same time, linking one to the other in ways that provide an intriguing backdrop for contemporary debates over the concept of agency. Where critics like Fluck turn pragmatism's belief in human creativity against poststructuralist accounts of "the all pervasive power-effects of linguistic and discursive regimes" and champion the pragmatist "promise of describing central aspects of cultural expressions […] in terms that do not have to ignore the constructive and creative dimensions of these acts" (Introduction ix), *V.* reveals that poststructuralist notions of power may very well account for the workings of human creativity, even while they demystify and decenter them. By returning to this early postmodern text and unraveling its negotiation of creativity and power, we may thus not only begin to re-read literary postmodernism but unsettle some of the crude antagonisms that have shaped—and obstructed—theoretical encounters between pragmatism and postmodernism over the years. We may contextualize and rework pragmatist conceptions of creativity to acknowledge the decentered position of the discursive subject, for instance, and we may learn to appreciate anew 'the constructive and creative dimensions' of the processes of (re-)signification that poststructuralist theories allow for. *V.* demonstrates that such a reciprocal shift in theoretical perspective is both possible and desirable; and it reveals that early postmodern

texts may prove promising partners in helping us grasp the issues at stake.

Play and Control: Re-Engaging the 'Paradox' of Postmodern Fiction

While *V.* may be seen to stage two key moments of the Peircean process of reality constitution, the moment of abductive inference and the process of object formation, it also radicalizes and contests central aspects of Peirce's pragmatist epistemology. Peirce's belief in the subject's "divinatory power of guessing right" (*CP* 2.86) is mocked by endless layers of creative guesswork that elude right/wrong distinctions altogether. Whereas Peirce's model counters the unstable process of guessing the world into being with stabilizing acts of intersubjective exchange, *V.* features no regulative force of this kind, propelling its rapidly increasing range of reality proposals into a boundless space of creative possibility. Pynchon's novel thus confronts the epistemological optimism that characterizes Peirce's pragmatist philosophy with a deep skepticism that does not simply question 'man's' ability to know—the gendered term that Peirce used is highly evocative in this context—but recognizes the fundamental link between knowledge and power. In this sense, *V.*'s careful dismantling of the epistemological desires that feed Stencil's quest also provides an intriguing critique of the modernist assumptions that underlie Peirce's model. *V.* clearly mocks Peirce's faith in the progress of human knowledge, for instance, aligning his pragmatist concept of "the one Interpretative result to which every Interpreter is destined to come if the Sign is sufficiently considered" (*Semiotic* 111) with Stencil's fantasies of complete penetration.

Next to such important instances of critique, the dialogue between Pynchon and Peirce has also revealed a striking array of affinities and productive interconnections, and it is to these that I now wish to turn in more detail. Peirce's conception of reality as the in/stable result of semiotic processes of interpretation powerfully resonates with V.'s fictional world of signs, sign-objects, and sign-interpretations. It alters and deepens our understanding of the novel's semiotic play by drawing attention to the ways in which V. binds its rampant signifying processes to the productive mind of an interpreting subject who "weaves" himself "into the world," as Rohr would put it,

"while constituting it in signs as reality" ("Mimesis" 101). In contrast to poststructuralist accounts of the novel's proliferating V-signs, a Peircean reading centers on Stencil's role as signifying agent, or signifi*er*, exploring *V.*'s concern with interpretative *work* while revealing its far-reaching epistemological implications. Most importantly, however, such a reading highlights the conspicuous coexistence of play and control in the novel and accounts for their systematic interworking. The dialogue that this chapter has staged between Pynchon and Peirce thus not only shifts our critical perspective on *V.*, it also allows us to reconsider the "paradox" that Hutcheon ascribes to postmodern fiction in her highly influential sketch of "a poetics of postmodernism" (*Poetics* ix). This potential for recontextualization, as I will now argue, is perhaps one of Peirce's most significant contributions to the project of re-engaging the classical texts of literary postmodernism.

Writing in the 1980s when debates over the concept of postmodernism were still in full swing, Hutcheon defines the postmodern as "a contradictory phenomenon." On the one hand, she writes, postmodern fiction makes ample use of irony, parody, and intertextual play, "us[ing] and abus[ing], install[ing] and then subvert[ing], the very concepts it challenges." On the other hand, this overtly self-reflexive streak is met with a "counterforce in the form of a grounding in the historical, social, and political world," (*Poetics* 3, ix). This co-existence of "self-reflexivity" and "historical grounding," she argues, constitutes the fundamental "paradox" of postmodern literature and art (xiii). To do justice to Hutcheon's argument and appreciate its lasting appeal, we must remember the critical positions it sought to oppose at the time. On the one hand, this is the claim that postmodernism adds up to nothing more than aesthetic play; on the other, it is the belief that the postmodern turn to history verges on nostalgia. Against this backdrop, Hutcheon defines the postmodern as *both* "intensively self-reflexive" *and* "resolutely historical, and inescapably political," countering tendencies to trivialize and dismiss postmodern forms of cultural production and demonstrating that they deserve to be taken seriously (*Poetics* 5, 4). Her recent "Postmodern Afterthoughts" underline this critical context, historicizing her

argument and rephrasing it.[24] Postmodernism, Hutcheon now suggests in the past tense, "could be said to have been born out of the particular confrontation between realist referentialism and modernist reflexivity, between the historical and the parodic, or the documentary and the intertextual." This confrontation, she continues, "ended in a typically postmodern truce: no 'either/or' decision was required; the more inclusive 'both/and' prevailed" ("Postmodern" 5).

What is striking about this specific formulation of Hutcheon's argument, I wish to argue, is that it highlights the conceptual binarism that her account of the "paradoxical" nature of postmodern fiction perpetuates even as it works to cut across it. For Hutcheon, postmodernism takes us beyond the binary logic of "either/or" distinctions. And yet, her account of its shift to "the more inclusive 'both/and'" leaves the binarism in place. If we take Pynchon's *V.* as an example, her model invites us to appreciate the novel's metafictional play as well as its "claim to historical events and personages" (*Poetics* 5). We may acknowledge its textual instabilities, its parodic reworking of countless literary and cultural intertexts, and its refusal to yield stable meanings, on the one hand; and we may take note of the novel's extensive references to Maltese and German history, on the other. But these two sites simply coexist. "There is no dialectic," Hutcheon notes, "the self-reflexive remains distinct from its traditionally accepted contrary—the historico-political context in which it is embedded" (x). Apparently, then, Hutcheon's account of postmodernism's "both/and" stance does not escape the binary logic it seeks to unsettle. In fact, I would argue, it cannot do so, since Hutcheon operates with a poststructuralist framework that remains bound to the binary setup of Saussurean semiotics. It is hardly surprising, then, that critics like Hans Bertens have been tempted to reinforce her model's binaries, arguing that "the postmodern art that is Hutcheon's subject […] is simultaneously referential and non-referential, political (because of its referentiality) and apolitical (because of its self-reflexivity)" (7). The link Bertens draws between the political and the referential, the apolitical and the self-reflexive, oversimplifies Hutcheon's notion of 'historical grounding' and distorts her conception of the political; and yet, it powerfully

[24] In this essay, Hutcheon looks back to postmodernism as "a thing of the past," defining it as "a twentieth-century phenomenon" and recapitulating the history of its theoretical construction ("Postmodern" 5).

underlines the fact that the 'paradox' discerned by Hutcheon functions according to figures of binary opposition.

The Peircean reading I have advanced moves beyond such a binary approach, replacing Hutcheon's poststructuralist paradigm with an epistemological or cognitive model that lays claim to a triadic conception of the sign and advances a dynamic, subject-oriented notion of referentiality. The conceptual foundations of the two approaches are thus substantially different, and it would be presumptuous to dismiss one in favor of the other. Peirce provides an intriguing alternative to Hutcheon's poststructuralist model, however, since his language of creativity allows us to re-engage the 'paradox' of postmodern fiction and view it from a different angle. Where Hutcheon links postmodernism's contradictory nature to the binary opposition of 'self-reflexivity' and 'historical grounding,' a Peircean reading accentuates the simultaneous workings of 'play' and 'control,' locating both in the epistemological negotiations of postmodern texts. Unlike self-reflexivity and historical grounding, the Peircean notions of play and control follow no binary logic but remain systematically intertwined within the pragmatist-semiotic epistemology Peirce advances. Both are integral to the productive dimension of the process of reality constitution and accompany the subject's creative acts of guessing the world into being. Diverging from the poststructuralist concept of semiotic "freeplay" that Derrida's seminal essay "Structure, Sign and Play" established (240), the Peircean notion of 'play' comes to designate the space of creative opportunity that every sense-making act entails; 'control' marks the subject's attempts to stabilize his or her objects of knowledge and arrive at specific reality proposals; and the interplay between the two both points to and embodies the profound insecurity and productive in/stabilities that characterize the subject's relation to the world.

Read with Peirce's epistemological framework in mind, the eerie combination of aimless drifting and brutal atrocities that has always startled *V.*'s readers thus turns out to be not so paradoxical after all. Once we shift our perspective from poststructuralist accounts of the novel's 'self-reflexive' play and 'historical grounding' to a Peircean conception of creativity, the meaning-making processes so rigorously staged by *V.* become creative sense-making acts that attest to the inventive powers and controlling desires of an interpreting subject who remains caught up in an endless process of creative

re/cognition. Play and control go hand in hand, exposing the link between creativity and power and infusing the novel's highly manipulative narrative texture with creative excess and semiotic instabilities as well as powerful mechanisms of control. Touching on a debate that is almost as old as the notion of literary postmodernism itself, such a reading challenges the privileging of either 'play' or 'power' in critical approaches to postmodern fiction and allows us to reconsider their interconnectedness. It thus resists the same kind of reductive arguments that Hutcheon's *Poetics* worked to counter, including the claim that postmodernism adds up to nothing more than a "disengaged, aestheticist, and ultimately narcissistic project" (Hite, "Postmodern" 699). But it also moves beyond Hutcheon's model, engaging the "complexit[ies]" that Hutcheon registers (*Poetics* xvii) through a Peircean rather than poststructuralist lens and enhancing our understanding of early postmodern fiction.

By (re-)turning to the concept of creativity that the dialogue between Pynchon and Peirce has both revitalized and reworked, a Peircean re-reading can thus add an important pragmatist perspective to the contemporary project of rethinking postmodernism. It may seem odd to re-introduce the language of creativity to the work of classical postmodern writers like John Barth, William Gass, Donald Barthelme, and Robert Coover. After all, creativity has been traditionally linked to humanist conceptions of authorship, which texts like Barth's *The Sot-Weed Factor* (1960) and Coover's *The Public Burning* (1977) challenge and decenter. However, understood along the Peircean lines of an ordinary capacity that drives and perpetuates the ubiquitous process of reality constitution, the concept of creativity turns out to be not so irrelevant to postmodern fiction after all. As my reading of *V.* has shown, it may allow us to rethink some of the central features of postmodern texts and revise the history of postmodern literary criticism, reaching from early thematic studies to the rise of debates over modern and *post*-modern modes of cultural production, from Derridean deconstruction to Foucaultian readings of power, from post-modernism's encounter with feminism and gender theory in the 1980s to its postcolonial turn in the 1990s.

At the same time, *V.*'s negotiation of creativity and power urges us to restrain our enthusiasm over the 'promises' of pragmatism, warning against uncritical attempts to endorse the "theory of human creativity" that Rohr sees Peirce convey. For Rohr, Peirce's prag-

matist belief in the creative capacities of the human subject serves as a promising corrective to poststructuralist theories. "[E]ven as a literary studies person I may finally think of myself again as a real *subject* able to act on meaningful *objects*," she notes, and adds, "doesn't this truly sound like a significant promise of pragmatism?" ("Promises" 381). Pynchon's *V.* resists such far-reaching, celebratory claims, confronting Peirce's pragmatist conception of creativity with postmodern notions of power and staging not only the chances but the dangers and limits of human creativity as well. By exposing pragmatism's need to acknowledge the workings of power, it invites us to reassess Peirce's pragmatist-semiotic theory, but it also urges us to push beyond Rohr's epistemological approach to literature. Where Rohr sees literary texts 'reflect' un/stable moments in the process of reality constitution, the dialogue between Pynchon and Peirce that this chapter has staged encourages us to press for a different kind of theoretical encounter and explore how postmodern literary texts 'negotiate' the Peircean concepts at stake. In the case of *V.*, this conceptual shift has certainly broadened our perspective, allowing us to link the novel's staging of the Peircean moments of abductive inference and object formation to its concern with the workings of creativity. Such a move becomes decisive as I now turn to *Beloved*, for Morrison's novel could hardly be more at odds with the epistemological foundations of Peirce's rational, white, male philosophy. The novel does not 'reflect on' the process of reality constitution along the epistemological lines Rohr lays out. And yet, as I now wish to argue, it powerfully *negotiates* Peirce's concept of consensus, confronting his pragmatist model with a postmodern understanding of language, difference, and power, while exploring the grounds on which the pragmatist vision of a temporary arrest of meaning may still hold.

Chapter Three

Consensus and Difference: Toni Morrison's *Beloved*

Toni Morrison's *Beloved* (1987) culminates in a remarkable scene: Thirty women gather in front of the house on Bluestone Road. "Accumulating slowly in groups of twos and threes," they "walk, slowly, slowly toward 124" and begin to pray (257). On the porch, Denver hears their "murmuring and whispering" (258) and bears witness as the muffled voices gather strength and break into a loud, archaic song. The women have come to confront the girl Stamp Paid saw "sleeping on the kitchen floor" of the house (234); they have come to face what rumors have spread: that the girl is "Sethe's dead daughter, the one whose throat she cut" who has "come back to fix her" (255). The women are a motley crowd, clearly divided in their assessments of the rumors' accuracy and not at all certain about what to do once they reach the house. But they have come to Sethe's "rescue" (256); in their primeval, wordless song they have found a common weapon against the intrusive powers of the supernatural as well as their own fears and internal divisions. As their voices unite against whatever it may be that haunts and terrorizes Sethe in her own house, the mysterious girl finally appears on the porch. She has grown into "a pregnant woman, naked and smiling in the heat of the afternoon sun" (261), but before the women are able to fully take in the sight of her glistening blackness and dazzling smile, Mr. Baldwin appears on his cart. Mistaking the former abolitionist for yet another white man who has come to take her child away, Sethe rushes toward him. The women pile over Sethe, seeking to prevent her from attacking Baldwin with the ice pick in her hand, and as the scene erupts into a tumultuous struggle the mysterious pregnant girl, Beloved, disappears.

As many critics have noted, the scene is remarkable in that it envisions a potentially healing moment for the novel's main female character, a moment in which the self-destructive impulse that lay at

the heart of Sethe's infanticide is overcome in the act of reliving the traumatic experience. Rather than attempting to murder her own kin once again, Sethe directs her rage against the white oppressor and finds an alternative outlet through which the wounds of slavery and oppression can be healed.[1] Just as remarkable, however, is the women's communal resolve. The novel repeatedly stresses the frailty of their decision to gather in front of the house on Bluestone Road and take action against whatever it might be that harasses Sethe in ways they feel they can no longer tolerate. Their gathering is marked by uncertainty as to what it is they will have to face; and their resolve is grounded not in fact, but in multiple layers of guesswork, in various rumors and competing accounts of "who […] or *what*" (188) has possibly moved in with Sethe. As they slowly assemble in front of the house on Bluestone Road, the women form a frail coalition marked by internal divisions, by the absence of those who—for various reasons—have chosen not to join, and by a deep, unresolved ambiguity as to the precise status and meaning of the novel's central, enigmatic figure, Beloved. And yet, despite the many disagreements, insecurities, and doubts, this group of women is capable of concerted action; enough common ground is found to collectively move toward Bluestone Road, to find strength and resolve in a primordial, wordless howl, and to drive off what may or may not have been the reincarnation of Sethe's murdered child. The scene thus depicts a triumphant moment of communal resolve; but it also stages its limits. The key moment, in which not only the novel's population but the narrative itself breaks out of the paralyzing circularity of memory and trauma and turns to action, remains short-lived; it is frail and fleeting and vanishes as soon as the silhouette of the pregnant woman disappears from the porch. In the dénouement that follows, the questions concerning who or what Beloved is or was and whether—if she was indeed a malign intruder from the realm of the dead—she was successfully exorcized are recast but remain unanswered; rumors continue to spread; Cincinnati's black community continues to disagree; and rather than ending in the linear, plot-ridden movement of the exorcism-scene, the narrative returns to a circular, self-reflexive mode in an epilogue that resists any one interpretation critics propose.

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[1] See Bouson, *Quiet as It's Kept* 157-59, and Krumholz, "The Ghosts of Slavery" 402-05, for instance.

What is remarkable about the scene, then, is not only that it quite compellingly stages a frail and ephemeral coalition-building process through which a loosely defined group can temporarily overcome its divisions and move to action, but that it opens up a rather unexpected dialogue with Charles Sanders Peirce on the one hand and Pynchon's *V.* on the other. This dialogue unfolds around the pivotal role both novels ascribe to the enigmatic figures whose names their titles bear and Peirce's notion of consensus. Throughout *Beloved*, questions concerning the history and whereabouts of the strange young woman who suddenly appears on a stump near the house on Bluestone Road abound—questions like Stamp Paid's worrisome "Who is that girl? Where she come from?" (234) or Paul D's probing "How'd you come? Who brought you?" (65). But in the end, it is Ella who casts her urge to find out "who she is. Or *what* she is" (188) in words that bear a striking resemblance to the words Stencil uses in *V.* to describe his own investigative project in a conversation with Eigenvalue: "He doesn't know who she is, nor what she is. He is trying to find out. As a legacy from his father" (*V.* 161). It is in the uncertainty surrounding the precise status and meaning of their mysterious figures and in the endless proliferation of possible answers to this pending question, then, that *V.* and *Beloved* unexpectedly meet. Both confront their readers with a fictional universe in which processes of signification abound and meaning can never be entirely fixed; and both touch on the vain human impulse to find out and know. While the similarities are thus striking, the directions in which both novels take this affirmation of a semiotically construed world could hardly be more diverse. In the case of *V.*, the novel celebrates the destabilizing and liberating potential of the openness that signifying processes entail. Herbert Stencil remains caught in an endless series of subjective reality proposals while the uncertainty surrounding the mysterious V. is endlessly re-inscribed. *Beloved* is no less vigorous in keeping the question of 'who or what' its enigmatic figure may be open to debate. However, within the novel's dense layering of possible meanings, we find the remarkable moment of the women's gathering, a moment in which the uncertainty surrounding the mysterious Beloved is temporarily bracketed—though never overcome—to give way to a frail and highly unstable consensus. In the end, it is the sheer possibility that the rumors about Sethe *may* contain a grain of truth that serves as a sufficient basis for the women to set aside their

many differences and temporarily unite as they walk toward the house on Bluestone Road.

While *V.* thus takes delight in gesturing toward optimal epistemological destabilization, and while it radically exploits moments of deferral and estrangement in what is ultimately staged as an utterly subjective world-making process, *Beloved*, I want to argue, carefully negotiates how the paralyzing thrust that lies at the heart of the very concept of 'endless' signifying processes might—at least provisionally—be overcome, how action might be possible—at least temporarily and on volatile grounds—and how frail moments of meaningful and empowering intersubjective exchange might be conceivable in the very midst of an unstable world of de-centered subjects who are not only struggling to communicate with one another, but must work hard to construct their own subjectivity in the first place. In my attempts to ground this important negotiation in the scene of the women's gathering, two key terms have surfaced: I have spoken of the 'coalition' the women form and the 'consensus' on which their action is based. The term 'coalition' emphasizes the strategic dimension of the women's decision to confront Beloved and speaks to contemporary debates over the fate of alliance politics and collective agency in a world of difference.[2] The notion of 'consensus,' on the other hand, takes us one step back, referring to the inevitable sense-making process that must proceed and complement any such moment of strategic action. As such, it brings Peirce's pragmatist theory of meaning into play and reveals how it may unexpectedly be of help in discussing Morrison's novel.

As my introductory chapter on Peirce has shown, the notion of 'consensus' constitutes a vital element within the pragmatist epistemology Peirce advances. It designates the intersubjective process by which subjects can come to temporarily agree on those elements of their individual sense-making acts that withstand intersubjective scrutiny. Through this process, knowledge becomes differentiated from the jarring mass of utterly subjective beliefs, allowing a community of interpreters to move toward an increasingly 'accurate'

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[2] For a politically engaging account of these debates, see Janet Jakobsen, *Working Alliances and the Politics of Difference*. April Lidinsky has drawn attention to the "politics of collectivity" *Beloved* enacts along these lines. Morrison's novel, she argues, affirms the agency of "shifting collectives of difference" and celebrates the power of community (194).

account of the reality they live in. In the indefinite future and under ideal conditions, Peirce claims, this process will finally allow an "ideal communicative group" to reach an "ultimate consensus" or "final opinion" about the world (Oehler, "Outline" 12-13). As Peirce explicitly states, this "ultimate consensus" will then represent or rather *be* the truth and, by extension, reality. "The opinion which is fated to be ultimately agreed to by all who investigate," he writes in *How to Make Our Ideas Clear*, "is what we mean by the truth, and the object represented in this opinion is the real. This is the way I would explain reality" (*CP* 5.407). In the light of this pragmatist consensus theory of truth and reality, the process of reaching an agreement over 'what is true' and 'what is real' becomes located in the realm of social and communicative relations. In this realm, knowledge is subject to constant change; it is never objective, but always intersubjective, drawing its validity from the fleeting power of consensus and never quite losing its hypothetical ground. Likewise, each moment of consensus is frail and temporary; it may be over no sooner than it has been reached, giving way to new constellations of intersubjective agreement and keeping the process of intersubjective scrutiny and exchange in constant motion. While the Peircean world is thus clearly "open" and "unfinished," as David Depew notes (7), the normative idea of a universal, larger-than-life "COMMUNITY, without definite limits, and capable of a definite increase of knowledge" (*CP* 5.311) and the notion of "ideal conditions" and an "ideal consensus" (Oehler, "Outline" 13) offer the contradictory promise of closure and reveal the uneasy tension Peirce's model harbors. Are these concepts meant to serve as "the regulative idea of scientific reason," as Oehler suggests ("Outline" 13)? Or does Peirce believe they are actually realizable and will take effect in the future? Does the concept of 'consensus' thus designate a fixed state of rational agreement? Or does it remain inscribed in a frail process of becoming? An ambiguity remains, leaving the very concept of a Peircean 'consensus' open to debate.

If the struggle to define the precise implications of the term 'consensus' is thus already ingrained in the very texture of the Peircean model, *Beloved* can be seen to offer its own thought-provoking contribution to this debate. In the scene of the women's gathering, the novel compellingly stages the promising fulfillment not simply of consensus as such, but of *a particular kind* of consensus, a consensus that is unstable and frail, that remains provisional and

collapses as soon as the context in which it was formed changes. The struggle for such a consensus is ongoing throughout the novel. It is cast as a struggle for intersubjective exchange and intersubjective understanding; and while *Beloved* persistently holds out the promise of limited, frail, yet powerfully enabling moments of understanding, it also quite vigorously lays bare the power structures at work in the very act of relating to 'the other.' The novel locates these power structures in the workings of language and narrative and renders them visible by subtle manipulations of its own dense verbal texture. Readers repeatedly find themselves implicated in uneasy moments of complicity that reveal the extent to which every attempt to 'understand' the other involves a process of mentally, discursively, and/or physically exercising power over him or her. Any attempt to reach a state of (rational) agreement is, as the novel compellingly reveals, not only doomed to fail but also extremely dangerous as it relies on the erasure of difference and the affirmation of pre-existing power positions. It is in this sense that *Beloved* vigorously works against the normative aggrandizement of the Peircean notion of consensus confronting Peirce's late nineteenth-century, modernist model of a universal community of man with a late twentieth-century understanding of language, difference, and power. At the same time, the notion of consensus clearly retains an undeniable appeal throughout the novel. Inscribed into the very texture of *Beloved*, we find a deep desire to make the impossible possible: to envision enabling moments of collective agency in the very midst of a highly unstable world of de-centered and powerless subjects, to generate moments of intersubjective understanding where there can only be difference, and to locate meaning where there are always already too many.

What is at work throughout *Beloved*, I wish to argue, is thus a complex negotiation of the (im)possibility of consensus. Put this way, the graphically modified term '(im)possibility' serves as a marker for the paradoxical position into which the concept of consensus becomes inscribed. In a semiotically construed world of difference, consensus is always already impossible, unachievable, even dangerous in its totalizing form. Recast as a limited, frail and provisional agreement that is directed toward strategic action, however, it becomes not only possible, but desirable, even necessary if one is not to altogether give up the possibility of limited social change and a meaningful dialogue about the past. The scene of the women's gathering functions as the

pivotal site on which this recasting is performed. It represents the one moment in the novel in which the ongoing negotiation of the *(im)*possible culminates in a brief but forceful demonstration of what *is* indeed possible. In the following, I wish to revisit this remarkable scene for a more detailed analysis of how it works toward a new kind of 'consensus' and what the implications of this refashioning are for *Beloved*'s project of bringing a "disremembered" (274) past back to light. First, however, I wish to contextualize the novel's concern with the reworking of consensus by discussing how it manifests itself aesthetically in the persistent (de-)construction of an intersubjectively configured reading position that is brought about by the novel's highly manipulative narrative texture. I wish to argue that the unstable and often paradoxical positioning of the reader emerges as a pivotal site on which *Beloved*'s negotiation of the (im)possibility of consensus is carried out, as it is here that the novel's critical reworking of the generic conventions of the slave narrative culminates in a vigorous attack on a sentimental politics of reading. The novel's subtle and highly unsettling readerly politics severely challenges the kind of homogenizing consensus ingrained in sentimental concepts of sympathy and identification that traditional slave narratives conventionally put to work, and yet it simultaneously gestures toward alternative ways of imagining the possibility of meaningful intersubjective exchange and thus reaffirms the reworking that the scene of the women's gathering compellingly dramatizes.

(De-)Constructing Intersubjectivity: *Beloved*'s Politics of Reading

Beloved tells the story of Sethe, a runaway slave mother who chooses to kill her children rather than return them to the hands of her former master. As Morrison herself has noted, Sethe's story is based on the famous case of Margaret Garner, a slave who escaped from a plantation in Kentucky with her husband and four children and was tracked down by slave catchers in her Cincinnati hideout ("Conversation" 584-85). Faced with the sheer hopelessness of their situation, Garner attempted to kill her four children and herself but managed to kill only one before she was overpowered. In 1856, Garner's case was immediately put to work for the abolitionist cause. Leading abolitionist newspapers, including *The Liberator* and the *Annual Report of the American Anti-slavery Society*, reported the case

and numerous abolitionist activists, among them Lucy Stone and Frederick Douglass, referred to Garner in their fiery speeches. According to a contemporary chronicler, Levi Coffin, Garner's story soon "attracted more attention and aroused deeper interest and sympathy" than any other he had known (557).[3] In this context, Coffin's emphasis on the 'deep interest' and 'sympathy' that Garner's case 'aroused' is telling as it highlights the kind of politics commonly involved in the appropriation of slaves' stories for the abolitionist cause. Coffin's comment points to the highly popular language of sentimentality in which stories about slaves were often coded, and sheds light on the principles of readerly engagement involved in traditional slave narratives.

Morrison herself has commented extensively on *Beloved*'s intertextual ties to this important African American literary genre. In her much-cited essay "The Site of Memory," she has suggested that a central aim of her critical return to the slave's story in general and Margaret Garner's case in particular was "to find and expose a truth about the interior life of people who didn't write it" and to "fill in the blanks that the slave narratives left—to part the veil that was too frequently drawn" (113). Much has been said about the textual strategies Morrison employs to foster these goals and "do justice to Garner's stupendous act of resistance" (Grewal 99).[4] And yet, Morrison's often-quoted remarks on the slave narrative tradition and her own concerns in revising this tradition remain intriguing. What is particularly striking about "The Site of Memory," I find, is Morrison's repeated appropriation of the veil metaphor to describe her project of revising the slave narrative: Her "job," she claims more than once, is "to part the veil" (113), "to rip that veil" (110), to "mov[e] that veil aside" (111). Read in conjunction with Coffin's remark on the 'sympathy' that Garner's case 'aroused,' the repeated use of this metaphor—a metaphor that is, after all, a sentimental trope par excellence—reveals a fundamental dilemma that *Beloved* must textually

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[3] See Ahraf Rushdy, "Daughters Signifyin(g) History" 569-74. Portions of Coffin's narrative have been reprinted in Gerda Lerner's *Black Women in White America* 60-63. For historical accounts of Margaret Garner's case see William Andrews and Nellie McKay, *Toni Morrison's* Beloved: *A Casebook*.

[4] See Wilfred Samuels' and Clenora Hudson-Weems's chapter on *Beloved* in *Toni Morrison*, Marilyn Mobley's "A Different Remembering," and Bernard Bell's "*Beloved*: A Womanist Neo-Slave Narrative," for instance.

engage. As the novel works "to rip that veil" and expose the "interior life" that has hitherto remained "unwritten" (110-11), it risks perpetuating the kind of reading position inscribed in the sentimental language of 'sympathy' and 'arousal'—albeit without the pretentious retreat into the kind of literary decorum that traditionally characterized the genre.[5] As it seeks to openly display torture and bodily pain, it risks drifting into "what Hortense Spillers has called 'porno-troping'—a parading of the black body as stimulus and satisfaction for a (white) readerly voyeuristic gaze" (Bröck 39).[6]

In the face of this genuine dilemma, I want to argue, the strategic positioning of the reader becomes a vital component of the novel's reworking of the slave narrative. Exposing the reader to the 'interior life' and bodily pain of the novel's slave population while immediately undercutting both the formation of a voyeuristic gaze and the construction of a sentimental sisterhood (or brotherhood) of pain and sorrow becomes a highly significant task that not only sheds critical light on the problematic readerly politics of a literary tradition but provides an interesting backdrop for the kind of reworking of the notion of consensus that I see the novel engaged in. As recent scholarship has shown, sentimental fiction played a pivotal role in the formation of the "imagined community" (Anderson) of equal citizens both prior to and after the founding of the young, democratic American nation.[7] Expressed in popular forms of literature as well as in political speeches and essays of the day, the language of sentimentality proved highly instrumental in envisioning and forging the kind of consensus on which the construction of a community with a distinctly American identity rested. Sentimental narratives called upon readers to imagine themselves "in another's position," as Elizabeth Barnes has argued, and encouraged their participation in "a fantasy of democracy that would fulfill its promise of equality by negating diversity in the cause of union." This "fantasy," Barnes

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[5] Valerie Smith has commented on "the decorousness of the genre" in her introduction to the Schaumburg Library's edition of Harriet Jacob's *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, arguing that in Jacob's case "the white middle-class assumptions of the sentimental novel" contrast starkly with "the urgency of the slave woman's situation" (xxxiii).

[6] Bröck quotes from Spillers' "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe" 67.

[7] See Bruce Burgett, *Sentimental Bodies*, and Shirley Samuels' volume *The Culture of Sentiment*, for example. For an overview of the field see Mary Louise Kete, "Sentimental Literature."

notes, however, bears the risk of undermining "the democratic principles it ostensibly means to reinforce" as it "relies on likeness and thereby reinforces homogeneity" (4).

If *Beloved* indeed "announces a new epoch in the history of American sentimentalism," as Nancy Armstrong claims, then this brief glance at the cultural work sentimental fiction has historically performed suggests that it does so not only by reinventing "the pure daughter's narrative" of the American sentimental tradition, as Armstrong argues (17), but also by envisioning new answers to the old question of "how to create […] community once the traditional bonds of blood and geography have been loosened" (Kete 546). Though less concerned with "blood and geography" than with much more far-reaching challenges to the concept of human agency and the possibility of communal understanding, *Beloved* may indeed be seen to revise the sentimental "fantasy" of a democratic community from within as it renegotiates the interplay of likeness and difference on which this "fantasy" draws. As I have already suggested, the new kind of consensus and the new kind of community that *Beloved* thus envisions become manifest in the scene of the women's gathering in front of the house on Bluestone Road. I now wish to show, however, that possible new forms of consensus are negotiated throughout the novel. They manifest themselves in the text's persistent subversion of homogenizing modes of 'sympathy' and 'identification' and in the construction of a much more complex, unsettling reader position that constantly reinscribes difference while simultaneously reaching for non-homogenizing modes of intersubjective understanding.

Beyond Sympathy

Beloved's persistent construction of such a highly unstable and yet still intersubjectively configured reading position begins with the novel's opening lines: "124 was spiteful. Full of a baby's venom. The women in the house knew it and so did the children" (3). These short, rhythmic sentences instantly set in motion a constant, iridescent, shifting movement between the verbal creation of a space in which characters, readers, and narrators are constructed as subjects engaged in acts of 'sharing' stories and experiences, and the continuous subversion of this promise of intersubjective intimacy through an overtly self-reflexive narrative language which repeatedly calls atten-

tion to itself and its own manipulative power. Morrison herself has introduced the notion of 'sharing' in this context, claiming that the confusing immediacy of the novel's "*in medias res* opening" works to invoke "the *shared experience* that might be possible between the reader and the novel's population" ("Unspeakable" 32, emphasis added). Her use of the term 'shared experience' is interesting in that it explicitly advances a model of interaction between readers and text that seeks to place the reader in a direct relationship with the novel's characters, constructing both as subjects defined by and engaged in the quintessentially intersubjective act of 'sharing.' Such an identificatory mode of reading is already undercut by the paradoxical status ascribed to the number "124," however, the place/name of "the grey and white house on Bluestone Road" (*Beloved* 3). Though not immediately apparent in a first reading of the novel's first sentence, this paradox suddenly reveals itself as we learn that the house

> didn't have a number then, because Cincinnati in fact didn't stretch that far. In fact, Ohio had been calling itself a state only seventy years when first one brother and then the next stuffed quilt packing into his hat, snatched up his shoes, and crept away from the lively spite the house felt for them. (3)

The sudden intrusion of the particle 'then' instantaneously highlights the implied 'now' of the narrative and reveals that the place/name "124" belongs to this 'now' of narration, not to the 'then' of the narrated past. The very first signifying act of the novel, the act of placing and naming the house on Bluestone Road, thus not only produces what W.T.J. Mitchell has called a "chronologically impossible sentence"—with the adjective 'spiteful' designating "the condition of the house from 1855 to 1873, the period when it was haunted by an invisible baby ghost" and the place/name '124' referring to "the house at a much later period, when Cincinnati has extended its suburbs" ("Narrative" 206)—but calls attention to itself as a *belated* act of signification that seeks to place and name and to give form and meaning to the past from a position rooted firmly in the present. From the very beginning, the narrative generates a distance in space and time between the narrated events and the act of narration and creates a temporal space in the present in which not characters and readers but the external narrator and her (or his) reading audience come together in the 'shared' act of (re-)visiting the past. At the same time, however, the belated act of signification implied in the number

"124" also calls attention to the narrative *as narrative*, foregrounding the scope of the text's own manipulative powers and providing a glimpse of its potential to trick and mislead as well as caress and entice.

Inscribed into the dense verbal texture of the novel's opening paragraph we thus already find three important textual strategies that will subsequently characterize the novel's complex positioning of the reader. A first strategy works to implicate the reader in a direct relationship with the novel's characters; it gestures toward moments of readerly 'identification' and powerfully draws the reader into a disquieting world of psychic abuse and bodily pain, of confusion, disorientation, and looming threat. A second strategy works counter to this kind of identificatory impulse by continuously highlighting the act of storytelling. In keeping with the oral tradition of African American cultural texts into which Morrison demonstrably writes, it persistently fashions *Beloved* as a "told story" (Morrison, "Site" 121) and thus aligns the reader with the bodiless voice of the novel's narrator and—by extension—with the imagined community of listening readers who may bear witness to the communal event. In the opening paragraph, this strategy of readerly participation, as I wish to call it following Morrison's own diction, not only manifests itself in the distancing effect of the place/name "124" but also in the peculiarly oral rhythm of its sentences—in the climactic reinforcement of the "No" that occurs in a sequence of sentences reflecting on the boys' decision to run away, for instance: "Neither boy waited to see more […]. Nor did they wait […]. *No.* Each one fled at once" (3, emphasis added).[8] While these first two strategies gesture toward intersubjectively configured reading positions—albeit featuring substantially different intersubjective alignments with substantially different effects—these positions become undercut by a third textual strategy, a strategy that seeks to expose the text *as text*, breaking both the illusion of readerly 'identification' and the fantasy of a communal storytelling event. It is through this strategy that the signifying power of language is exposed—as in the case of naming and placing "124"—and the novel's critical reflection on the intricate relationship between language, power, and (inter)subjectivity becomes palpable, forcing the reading

[8] In "The Site of Memory" Morrison notes: "What I really want is that intimacy in which the reader is under the impression that he isn't really reading this; that he is participating in it as he goes along" (121).

subject to enter what Andrew Schopp has called an "inevitable power struggle with those narrative processes that [...] shape and constitute it" (359).

Beloved's opening paragraph allows us to distinguish between these three textual strategies and their corresponding reading positions. It also reveals that all three strategies are almost always simultaneously at work, implicating the reader not in one stable reading position at a time, but in an ever-shifting and often paradoxical space *in between* identification, participation, and a recurring textual inscription into the power matrices of the very language that constitutes both the text and—by extension—its reader. Among the many passages that both foster and self-consciously reflect on the production of this kind of shifting reader position, the passages leading up to the telling of Sethe's story are particularly striking. One such passage appears early on in the novel and sets in as Denver returns to the house from her secret hiding place in the garden, her thoughts drifting to the story of her own birth:

> Easily she stepped into the told story that lay before her eyes on the path she followed away from the window. There was only one door to the house and to get to it from the back you had to walk all the way around to the front of 124, past the storeroom, past the cold house, the privy, the shed, on around to the porch. And to get to the part of the story she liked best, she had to start way back: hear the birds in the thick woods, the crunch of leaves underfoot; see her mother making her way up into the hills where no houses were likely to be. (29)

As it beautifully fuses physical and narrative space, this passage quite literally lays out generous stepping stones that pave the reader's way into the story that is about to be 'told.' At the same time, it skillfully inaugurates the narrative itself as a *space* in which memories are *stored* as stories to be shared and thus comprises one of the novel's most overtly self-reflexive moments. Working both to implicate the reader in the act of storytelling and to expose once again the workings of the text *as text*, the passage positions the reader in between participation and textual inscription at the very brink of a narrative transition to Sethe's story. Through this strategic move, the reader's identification with Sethe which the text will subsequently invite—and which the quoted passage already works to establish—remains explicitly mediated and is thus always already undercut.

Marked by a spatial metaphor of entry, the participatory gesture involved in the powerful image of Denver's 'stepping into the story' immediately creates the illusion of a space of shared intimacy into which the reader is drawn. This illusion is strengthened both by the explicit designation of the story that is about to be related as a '*told* story,' which ties the sense of a shared space to the communal act of story*telling*, and by the emphasis that is laid on the house as domestic terrain, which adds to the sense of familiarity and intimacy that the pronounced 'ease' of Denver's act invokes. The gradual transition from Denver to Sethe's story that the passage instigates marks this space as a realm of visual and aural participation. Depicting what is initially Denver's immersion into a familiar part of her mother's past, the verbs "hear" and "see" become exclamatory appeals, encouraging the reader to tune in to the story about to be told and to become part of the imagined community of listeners.[9] As the quoted passage slowly guides the reader into the horrific story of Sethe's flight, it sheds light on the ways in which the illusion of orality that is so often created functions as an important vehicle in the construction of a reader position that encourages involvement while working against the impulse of outright identification. It implicates Denver in the important mediating position between the reader and Sethe—a position that ultimately grants her the status of what Ashraf Rushdy has termed the novel's primary "site of participation." As Rushdy argues, it is through Denver's "filtering ear" that Sethe's side of the story—the side she tells Beloved—is eventually related in the final part of the novel, allowing Denver to emerge as "the space for hearing the tale of infanticide with a degree of understanding—both as sister of the murdered baby and as the living daughter of the loving mother" (585-86). Rushdy's observation is illuminating as it suggests how Denver comes to serve as a role model for the kind of involvement—or 'degree of understanding'—*Beloved* wishes to impart. In the passage I have quoted, such an edifying gesture is certainly involved

[9] Morrison herself has commented on her fiction's ability "to deliberately make you stand up and feel something" and has tied this participatory gesture to specifically 'black' forms of cultural expression, including music and black preaching. Her texts, she claims, involve the reader in "the same way that a Black preacher requires his congregation to speak, to join him in the sermon, to behave in a certain way, to stand up and to weep and to cry and to accede or to change or to modify—to expand on the sermon that is being delivered" ("Rootedness" 341).

in the implicit appeals to "hear the birds" and "see her mother," as these appeals encourage readers to relate to Sethe and 'picture' her hardships in ways that establish a context for the infanticide that is revealed later. This early in the novel, however, appeals like these—tied to Denver's function as "site of participation"—lay bare the novel's continuous negotiation of the slave narrative's sentimental heritage and open up a space for it to envision alternative modes of relating to the slave mother's story.

What is at stake in this negotiation is much more forcefully revealed in a parallel passage that resumes the telling of the story of Sethe's flight later in the novel. This time Denver tells the story to Beloved, but once again her act is framed as an imaginative immersion into her mother's past. The intensity of this immersive performance is stressed by the narrative's sudden shift to the present tense:

> [T]here is this nineteen-year-old girl—a year older than herself—walking through the dark woods to get to her children who are far away. She is tired, scared maybe, and maybe even lost. Most of all she is by herself and inside her is another baby she has to think about too. Behind her dogs, perhaps; guns probably; and certainly mossy teeth. She is not so afraid at night because she is the color of it, but in the day every sound is a shot or a tracker's quiet step. (77-78)

Even more powerful in its participatory outreach than the earlier calls to 'hear' and 'see' Sethe in the woods, the passage evokes very personal ways of relating to "this nineteen-year-old girl"—primarily through a direct comparison of age—and explicitly works to reach beyond acts of 'hearing' and 'seeing' to the act of 'feeling.' Denver, we learn in the next line, "was seeing it now and feeling it," "[f]eeling how it must have felt to her mother" (78) to be out in the "dark woods," all "by herself," "scared" and "afraid." Quite remarkably, then, the passage openly casts Denver's attempt to immerse herself in her mother's past in sentimental terms. Her act becomes an act of sympathy, a powerful demonstration of the sentimental ritual of "imagining oneself in another's position" (Barnes 2). Moreover, Sethe's flight is framed in the familiar terms of a story about a "girl" who is "lost" in the "woods," terms so familiar that they nearly gloss over the less common presence of "dogs," "guns," "mossy teeth" and a "tracker" in these same woods. As the passage powerfully stages

Denver's act of sympathy, it also extends the sentimental mechanisms at work in this act to its readers, encouraging them to 'feel' for the "girl" in the "woods," and placing them in an identificatory relationship to Sethe.

The sentimental politics of identification that is clearly put to work in this passage, however, is simultaneously undercut by the strong emphasis that is laid on the particles "maybe" and "perhaps." The repeated use of these particles points to the speculative quality of the immersive act and highlights Denver's mediating role as the teller of Sethe's story. As the qualifying particles reveal, the picture that the text draws of Sethe in the woods is, after all, Denver's own imaginary creation, and although it is based on her mother's telling of the story, it can never quite capture "how it must have felt" for her. The text explicitly reveals this inevitable limit to Denver's and Beloved's act of immersing themselves in their mother's past—and the inevitable limit of any identificatory mode of reading—shortly before it shifts to the actual telling of Sethe's story. As "Denver spoke" and "Beloved listened," we learn,

> the two did the best they could to create what really happened, how it really was, something only Sethe knew because she alone had the mind for it and the time afterward to shape it. (78)

At this point, the qualifying insertion of "something only Sethe knew" into the depiction of Denver's and Beloved's storytelling act underscores Sethe's right to her own story. How she really felt and "how it really was" are explicitly revealed as "something only [she] knew," not something that acts of sympathy can convey or that others can ever fully imagine. As the passage points to the inevitable gap that is bound to remain in the girls' attempt to imagine themselves in their mother's position, it reveals the limits of sentimental appeals to a common humanity and the limits of the very concept of identification. At the same time, it does not ridicule Denver's and Beloved's attempts "to create what really happened," nor does it exploit the destabilizing effects that lie at the heart of the inevitable failure of these attempts. By underlining the girls' joint efforts to do "the best they could," the passage rather envisions an alternative mode of meaningful intersubjective exchange that need not altogether devalue the attempt to reconstruct Sethe's past. This possible alternative to an identificatory relationship to Sethe manifests itself in the community Denver and

Beloved form in the very act of telling Sethe's story. Already within the first few lines of the scene—shortly after Beloved voices her request to hear "how Sethe made you in the boat" (76)—we learn that Denver's aim in telling the story is not to imagine herself in her mother's place but "to construct out of the strings she had heard all her life a net to hold Beloved" (76); likewise, Beloved's role as attentive listener, "her downright craving to know" (77), becomes increasingly vital to the event, allowing "the monologue" of the telling to become "a duet" in which "the two" jointly work "to create what really happened" (78). The emphasis that the passage thus lays on the communal dimension of the act of storytelling gestures toward a different kind of involvement with Sethe's story and a different kind of community than the one implied in sentimental conventions. Rather than encouraging readers to identify with Sethe, it includes them in the *telling* of her story, in the community of daughters which is formed for and by this intersubjective act, and—just as notably—in the process of the story's aestheticization. The passage explicitly ties Sethe's privileged knowledge of "how it really was" to the fact that "she alone had the mind for it and the time afterward *to shape it*" (78, emphasis added) and highlights the essential process of mentally shaping experiences, of bringing them into a form that will be communicable—a process that Sethe remains painfully caught up in while Denver can mould "the scraps her mother and grandmother had told her" (78) into the vivid narrative of her birth the reader is about to turn to.

The illusion of orality which the two major passages leading up to the telling of Sethe's story create thus works to construct a kind of community that does not rely on the homogenizing zeal of sentimental modes of identification but implies a communal, participatory belonging to "the told story." At the same time, the emphasis that is laid on the process of the story's aestheticization—a process that such a telling inevitably involves—prevents such a newly configured intersubjective reading position from ever reaching a stable ground. For just as the novel's opening signifier "124" implicates the reader in the act of narration and inscribes him or her in the signifying power of language, the passages which depict Denver's "stepp[ing] into the told story" never cease to expose their own workings within the novel's highly manipulative narrative texture. Both moments, the novel's opening and subsequent story-telling passages, constitute key

self-reflexive moments in the text. These moments underscore the novel's construction of itself as a narrative *space* in which memories are *stored* as stories to be shared—as in the case of the spatial rendering of Denver's "path" into the story, a path that is clearly marked by the house's external storage places: "the storeroom, […] the cold house, […] the privy, the shed" (29). And they open an important space for critical reflection on the kind of access the novel can provide to the slave mother's memory—a reflection that is prompted by the detailed account of Denver's and Beloved's joint efforts to recreate their mother's story. For in the end, their attempt to do "the best they could to create what really happened" (78) parallels and foregrounds Morrison's own determination to 'do the best' she can "to find and expose *a truth* about the interior life of people who didn't write it" ("Site" 113, emphasis added).

In this context, the implicit convergence of the daughters' communal immersion in Sethe's story and the self-conscious surfacing of the novel's commitment to revealing "a truth" about her "interior life" is especially remarkable as it ties the novel's search for a kind of truthfulness or ethical responsibility to its search for workable forms of meaningful intersubjective exchange. The passage that leads up to the second telling of the story of Sethe's flight beautifully lays out the moral grounds on which *Beloved*'s concern for the revitalization of a kind of non-homogenizing consensus must be understood: if the 'true' stories of the victims of history are to be told, the adjective 'true' must be both meaningful and relevant, and for the notion of 'a truth' to be significant, there must be some sort of consensus, hence, some sort of meaningful intersubjective exchange. Before I turn to the novel's negotiation of this intricate link between intersubjectivity, consensus, and truth, however, I want to continue my discussion of the complex readerly politics *Beloved* utilizes to forcefully reveal that all three concepts—intersubjectivity, consensus, and truth—cannot be taken for granted, that they are, in fact, just as dangerous as they are indispensable and must be considerably reworked if they are not to perpetuate the erasure of difference. As I have shown so far, this persistent destabilization is achieved in part by *Beloved*'s continuous subversion of a sentimental politics of reading—a subversion that goes hand in hand with the critical dismantling of the homogenizing impulse ingrained in the sentimental fantasy of a common humanity—and by its efforts to implicate the reader in a different kind of parti-

cipatory relationship with the text and the slave mother's story—a strategy that remains tied to the illusion of orality that the novel repeatedly creates. I have already suggested that this illusion remains undercut, however, by the workings of an overtly self-reflexive language that repeatedly draws attention to its own manipulative powers. It is this important textual strategy, the strategy of subtly implicating the reader in the workings of narrative control, that I now wish to turn to.

Language, Power, and Subjectivity

Among the many passages that are clearly marked by an overtly self-reflexive use of narrative language, the long section depicting Paul D's chain gang experience is perhaps most far-reaching in revealing what is at stake in the novel's repeated display of its own manipulative powers. The chapter is narrated in a remarkably linear fashion with few temporal ruptures, Paul D as the main focalizor, and a strong presence of the external narrative voice. It relates what Paul D is unable to tell Sethe, the story of "where they led him off to sucking iron" (99) that the narrative has denoted as one of the central "unspeakables" of the novel. Sent to a prisoners' camp in Georgia after attempting to kill the man he was sold to after the failed attempt to flee from Sweet Home, Paul D is confronted with the horrific routine of life in a chain gang. The chapter carefully depicts the daily camp procedures, including the outrageous practice of prisoner abuse related in the following passage:

> Chain-up completed, they knelt down. The dew, more likely than not, was mist by then. Heavy sometimes and if the dogs were quiet and just breathing you could hear doves. Kneeling in the mist they waited for the whim of a guard, or two, or three. Or maybe all of them wanted it. Wanted it from one prisoner in particular or none—or all.
>
> 'Breakfast? Want some breakfast, nigger?'
>
> 'Yes, sir.'
>
> 'Hungry, nigger?'
>
> 'Yes, sir.'
>
> 'Here you go.'
>
> Occasionally, a kneeling man chose gunshot in his head as the price, maybe, of taking a bit of foreskin with him to Jesus. Paul D did not know that then. He was looking at his palsied hands, smelling the guard, listening to his soft grunts so like the doves'. (107-08)

The fact that this passage reveals a shocking case of abuse is all but apparent at first. The passage opens with the evocation of a pastoral scene of misty morning calm and cooing doves. The vague hint of a possible rupture in this tranquil setting remains confined to the repeated use of the ambiguous pronoun 'it': "maybe all of them wanted *it*. Wanted *it* from one prisoner in particular or none—or all." Full recognition of what this pronoun refers to remains eerily suspended throughout the dialogue that follows, however, since its opening line "Breakfast? Want some breakfast, nigger?" seems at first to altogether shift the subject matter from the disquieting 'it' the guards 'want' to the harmless dietary needs of the prisoners. That 'breakfast' does not stand for the morning's ration of food handed out to the prisoners but is in fact the guards' outrageous misnomer for rape is explicitly hinted at only afterwards as the narrative suddenly refers to "a bit of foreskin" and the "soft grunts" and "smell[]" of the guards. What the guards 'want,' that is, can eventually be deciphered as a blow job, what they call 'breakfast' is in fact their semen.

As the passage clouds the horrors of sexual abuse in an eerily opaque language, it serves as a compelling example for the kind of narrative strategy *Beloved* repeatedly puts to work to "rip that veil drawn over 'proceedings too terrible to relate'" (Morrison, "Site" 110) in ways that expose the power structures at work in such a veiling and resist the impulse to aggrandize or voyeuristically display black torture and pain. The passage quite openly invests the narrative attempt to veil the horror of the abuse with the language of the oppressors. Much more is therefore at stake in the use of the obscuring term 'breakfast' than the disquieting effect of a "benign image" turned gruesome—an effect Andrew Schopp attributes to the novel's repeated reference to boys in trees, for example, that invokes the image of playing children while in fact signifying their lynching (364). The term 'breakfast' stands out as a perverse pun used by the guards to linguistically mask their outrageous behavior. It points to the guards' unlimited power over the prisoners, a power that includes both the right to physically torment and kill and the right to 'authorize' these acts, to define them in whatever way they wish. What the quoted passage quite effectively stages are thus the workings of "the master's language," the workings of slavery as a discursive regime (Morrison, "Friday" xxix).

Much has been said about *Beloved*'s nuanced portrayal of the ways in which the black subject becomes both physically and mentally inscribed in this discursive regime and—by extension—in the concomitant discourses of patriarchy, masculinity, and motherhood; and many critics have commented on the interconnections of language, power, and the process of subject formation that the novel dramatizes.[10] While the valuable insights provided by these critical interrogations clearly inform my reading of *Beloved*, I wish to take them in a different direction by focusing on the function of such passages as the chain gang incident within the novel's negotiation of the (im)possibility of consensus. The foregrounding of what Rafael Pérez-Torres has called "the 'slipperiness' of language" that occurs in the quoted passage implicates the reader in an uneasy complicity with the mechanisms of linguistic control (695). The passage provides no commentary on the jarring pun, as other passages in the novel oftentimes do, by explicitly stating that "definitions belonged to the definers—not the defined," for instance (*Beloved* 190). The inconspicuous use of the appalling misnomer 'breakfast' appropriates the oppressors' language, puts it to work, and implicitly stages rather than openly reflects on the subtle workings of linguistic manipulation. The passage thus radically undercuts both the possibility of identifying with the victims of oppression, in this case Paul D, and the possibility of relating to an imagined community of listening readers absorbed in the telling of a story. Instead, it forces the reader into a reading position that reaffirms the cover-up—since the outrageous misuse of the term 'breakfast' will at least initially remain unnoticed—and aligns him or her with the outrageous practices of discursive mastery. As Andrew Schopp has noted, the disturbing tension that is thus created among identificatory, participatory, and inscriptive reading positions not only "disrupts the 'safety' of the narrative space," it also implicates the novel's readers in "the very processes of narrative control and coercion that strive to construct and shape" them as subjects (356).

It is in the subtle manipulations of its own dense verbal texture in passages like these, then, that the novel's attack on the very notion of 'consensus' reaches its most far-reaching and radical

[10] See Homi Bhahba, *The Location of Culture* 22-25, Mae Henderson, "Toni Morrison's *Beloved*," and Rafael Pérez-Torres, "Knitting and Knotting the Narrative Thread," for instance.

ground. As they enact insidious mechanisms of control and oppression, these manipulations powerfully expose the uneasy link between consensus and hegemony. 'Consensus,' that is, becomes explicitly cast as an ideology complicit with the discursive construction of supremacy—be it built on categories of gender, race, or class or any combination of the three; it is exposed as a concept that mainly serves 'the definers' in their attempts to marginalize, disempower and oppress 'the defined.' The vigor with which the novel challenges the very concept I have brought into play reveals the tensions involved in my bold move of reading *Beloved* with Charles Sanders Peirce in mind. Clearly, Peirce did not fully account for the dangers inherent in his consensual approach to knowledge, truth and reality—dangers that Morrison's text forcefully exposes; nor did he (or rather: could he) fully acknowledge the psychoanalytic constitution of the subject with all its consequences, including the fact that the subject does not simply exist prior to intersubjective exchange but is constituted through it—a reciprocal interdependence that *Beloved* compellingly stages. Rather than undermining the strength of the dialogue I have instigated, however, these apparent disjunctions turn out to be highly productive as they draw our attention to the ways in which the novel *reworks* the notion of consensus in a manner that takes the pervasiveness of oppression and the interconnections between language, power, and subjectivity into account. *Beloved* challenges Peirce's consensus theory by asking how there can be 'consensus' without the perpetuation of hegemony and the erasure of difference, how 'consensus' can be desirable in the face of millions of marginalized and disempowered people whose oppression is brought about precisely by the 'consensus' of those in power, and how a state of 'consensus' can be reached at all in a world of decentered subjects who are constituted by rather than in control of the signifying power of language. My discussion of the complex reader position *Beloved* continuously constructs has shed light on the multiple ways in which the novel voices this challenge in its negotiation of the slave narrative's sentimental heritage. At the same time, it has revealed that *Beloved* never quite abandons the notion of 'consensus.' On the contrary: it retains a strong appeal that manifests itself in the novel's deep concern with community. As the novel engages the question of how community can be created and maintained in a world marked by hierarchies of power, by difference and uncertainty, 'consensus' becomes firmly tied to the

question of agency and—by extension—to the novel's project of reclaiming history both from the void of a "national amnesia" and from the impulse to align the de-centering of Western historiography with a de-centering of history itself (Morrison, "The Pain" 120). The reworking of the notion of consensus becomes necessary because it cannot be discarded, because it remains highly relevant both for the creation of community and for the kind of discursive intervention into American society's memory politics that *Beloved* itself seeks to accomplish. It is this reworking that I will now finally turn to, a reworking that severely challenges Peirce's consensus theory but does not render Peirce irrelevant; on the contrary, it quite astonishingly brings to light those elements of his thought that remain highly up to date.

Reworking Consensus: The Women's Gathering and *Beloved*'s 'Referential Debt'

The one scene that most clearly lays out the ways in which *Beloved* not merely challenges but *reworks* the notion of consensus is the scene of the women's gathering. Much has been said about the "power of community" this climactic scene stages (Higgens 103), about the "redemptive transfiguration" it holds out (Bowers 225) and the "healing process" (Krumholz 395) it envisions for Sethe in particular, but also for Denver and for the "community of survivors" (FitzGerald 124) who both jointly enable and take part in it. While the pivotal role the novel ascribes to the community in this passage and the emphasis it lays on the collective process of coming to terms with a traumatic past are thus clearly marked and have been amply discussed, I wish to draw attention to the ways in which the novel stages the *creation* of this community. Rather than simply taking 'community' for granted, that is, the scene of the women's gathering compellingly reflects on the ways in which 'community' becomes possible in the first place and how its creation can lead to empowering moments of collective action. It is in this reflection that the intricate link between community and consensus is revealed, that the need for some kind of frail, limited consensus becomes apparent and the novel's reworking of the concept is carried out.

Toward a Frail Consensus: The Scene of the Women's Gathering

What is perhaps most striking about the black 'community' Morrison portrays in the passages leading up to the women's gathering is the fact that this 'community' is not 'strong' and 'empowering' at all, but internally divided, marked by differences in class and social standing, by racial hierarchies and human prejudices. Lady Jones, Denver's former teacher, for instance, "disliked everybody a little bit because she believed they hated her [yellow woolly] hair as much as she did" (247); Ella does not feel "loved" by anyone either and like the other women she "junked" Sethe when she "got out of jail and made no gesture toward anybody" (257). The novel carefully stages these internal divisions as well as the community's disdainful posture toward Sethe and her kin and quite forcefully underlines the fact that this community is neither unified nor innocent. Accordingly, the "news" Janey spreads about "Sethe's dead daughter, the one whose throat she cut" who has possibly "come back to fix her" does not automatically lead the women to action (255). On the contrary: what evolves is a lively debate over the accuracy of the rumor.

What is interesting about the novel's portrayal of the women's debate at this point is the fact that it highlights, reflects on, and ultimately reinforces the fundamental uncertainty over who or what has moved in with Sethe and Denver. Is she indeed the ghostly reincarnation of Sethe's murdered daughter, the "true-to-life presence of the baby" who haunted the house on Bluestone Road before Paul D's arrival? Or is she a girl who "had been locked up by some whiteman for his own purposes" like Ella, who then "escaped to a bridge or someplace and rinsed the rest out of her mind," as Sethe and Stamp Paid suggest (119)? Or is she "more" than both, as Denver later implies (266)? The uncertainty surrounding the girl's background as well as her precise status and meaning within the novel is profound and becomes inscribed into the text from the very moment her appearance is announced in the strangely ambiguous line "a fully dressed woman walked out of the water" (50). As soon as Sethe, Denver and Paul D find her asleep on "a stump not far from the steps of 124" (50), dubious hints at what may possibly be the higher significance of her arrival—hints at the conspicuous absence of Here Boy, the old dog, for instance, or Sethe's impulsive reaction and

Beloved's "incontinence" (54)—begin to mix with overt speculations about her personal history and the precise circumstances of her sudden appearance. "She must have hitched a wagon ride" (52) is one such early speculation that leads Sethe to think that the stranger is "probably one of those West Virginia girls looking for something to beat a life of tobacco and sorghum" (52); later speculations attribute Beloved's strange behavior to the fever that "caused her memory to fail […] [and] kept her slow-moving" (55); and they finally culminate in the repeated assertion that Beloved "must have been locked up" and misused by "some whiteman" (119) since all she remembers is "a woman who was hers," "being snatched away from her," "standing on the bridge," and "one whiteman" (119).

It is this kind of 'guesswork' surrounding the strange young woman that links Beloved to Pynchon's V. And just as the multiple layers of guesswork surrounding the V-mystery reach beyond the novel's fictional world to involve generations of critics in an ongoing conversation about Pynchon's novel, *Beloved*'s readers are "kept guessing" (Atwood 35). It is thus hardly surprising that more than fifteen years of extensive criticism on the novel have produced an amazing array of possible answers to the question of who or what Beloved is, answers that span from assessments of her role as character within the fictional universe of the novel to far-reaching interpretations of her function within the text. For Elizabeth House, Beloved is a literal survivor of the Middle Passage, a young women who was forced onto a slave ship as a child and then "suffered the horrors of slavery" in North America (17); for Jean Wyatt, she is both Sethe's murdered daughter and her murdered African mother (479-82); and according to Deborah Horvitz, Beloved "represents the spirit of all the women dragged onto slave ships in Africa and also all Black women in America trying to trace their ancestry back to the mother on the ship attached to them" (157).[11] Critics working with psycho-analytic frameworks have stressed her function as "a specter of

[11] House's insistence on textual "evidence" which shows that Beloved "is not a supernatural being of any kind but simply a young woman who has herself suffered the horrors of slavery" (17) finds an intriguing parallel in Kenneth Kupsch's assertion that "there is a knowable, unequivocal, and essentially irrefutable answer to the question" of who or what V. is (428). This joint desire for critical closure is intriguing as it underlines the affinities between the two novels and affirms their shared concern with meaning and interpretation.

trauma" (Spargo 121), as "a ghostly double that enacts fragmentation and alienation" (Moglen 206), as "the Freudian principle of 'the return of the repressed'" (Grewal 105), and as "a wound that cannot be effectively healed" (Schopp 377). According to Homi Bhabha, Beloved is "a daemonic belated repetition of the violent history of black infant deaths" (15); for Linda Krumholz, she is a "trickster figure" and "a rift in the attempt to close meaning and thereby close off the past from the present" (402); and for Lori Askeland she is "the pervasive, tyrannical memory of the 'patriarchal institution' that continues" to haunt the women in 124 (799). More recently, critics like Kathleen Marks and Lisa Williams have added additional layers to this already impressive range of critical assessments by reading the figure of Beloved as "an apotrope" (Marks 70) or as "the true migrant" who, "as a totally displaced human being," "becomes the voice of the hybridization of African culture that occurred during slavery" (Williams 155-56). Clearly, the critical conversation surrounding the status, meaning, and function of Beloved is still ongoing, and although much has already been said about her, she—like V.—remains highly elusive.

This elusive status, or rather, this inevitable conversation over the possible significance of the strange figure Beloved is mirrored intratextually in the neighborhood women's debate over Janey's "news" (255). "It took them days to get the story properly blown up and themselves agitated," we learn, but then, as they begin "to calm down and assess the situation," disagreements disperse what unity gossip may have produced. Some women are willing to believe "that the dead daughter had [indeed] come back" (258), others refuse to give credit to the rumors, and still others "thought it through" (255). The fact that the women thus fall "into three groups" (255) is hardly surprising; what is indeed remarkable, though, is that these apparent differences remain in place as the women finally gather in front of the house on Bluestone Road. They are never overcome and no absolute certainty over who or what the "something-or-other" (256) is that haunts Sethe's house and what may be done about it is ever achieved. Quite the contrary:

> They had no idea what they would do once they got there. They just started out, walked down Bluestone Road and came together at the agreed-upon time. The heat kept a few women who promised to go at home. Others who believed the story didn't want any part in the confrontation and wouldn't

> have come no matter what the weather. And there were those like Lady Jones who didn't believe the story and hated the ignorance of those who did. So thirty women made up that company and walked slowly, slowly toward 124. (257)

As the women thus gather in front of the house on Bluestone Road, they form a "company" that is limited in numbers, diverse in its makeup, and unsure about its precise agenda. And yet, this "company" is capable of action, of leaving an unresolved debate and their own internal divisions aside—at least for the time being—to do something about the rumors they have heard and jointly face whatever it may be that "occupie[s] 124 (256).

Ingrained within the scene of the women's gathering we thus find a remarkable moment of communal empowerment. A group of ordinary black women—women who, as the narrative explicitly states, "could have been going to do the laundry at the orphanage or the insane asylum; corn shucking at the mill; or to clean fish, rinse offal, cradle whitebabies, sweep stores, scrape hog skin, press lard, case-pack sausage or hide in tavern kitchens" (258)—achieve what Stencil cannot: they break through the disempowering momentum of endless signifying processes, of proliferating meanings and inexorable difference and take action in the very midst of uncertainty. What enables the women to temporarily set aside the uncertainty surrounding the mysterious Beloved is a frail and limited consensus, the consensus that the sheer possibility of a daughter returning from the dead to beat up her mother is so outrageous that it cannot be left aside, whether this scenario ultimately applies to Sethe's case or not. The novel carefully records this consensus, attributing its creation largely to the "practical" Ella who, "more than anyone [...] convinced the others that rescue was in order" (256). Through Ella, the tacit agreement on which the women's action is finally based becomes tied to "very personal" (256) worries and anger; Ella, at least, once refused to nurse a child she had borne as a victim of rape and "the idea of that pup coming back to whip her" (259) is enough to set her going.

While the action depicted in the scene of the women's gathering may thus be seen as a strategic intervention, while it is launched by a temporary coalition that is formed for a specific, limited purpose, its effectiveness is based on an amazing process whose pragmatist features could hardly be more pronounced: For a fleeting moment a frail consensus disrupts the endless deferral of meaning,

cuts through endless processes of interpretation and re-interpretation, and brings the process of infinite semiosis to a temporary halt. Action becomes possible, that is, as meaning becomes temporarily arrested. However, this provisional stabilization does not imply that the signifying process itself has come to an end or that the meaning of the "something-or-other" (256) the women seek to confront has suddenly become stable. On the contrary: Beloved's status remains elusive and the debate surrounding her continues after her mysterious disappearance. Throughout the dénouement that follows the exorcism scene the question of who or what Beloved is becomes rehearsed. Rephrased as "who was the naked blackwoman standing on the porch" (264), it continues to absorb the community's attention and foster much disagreement. As this renewed debate is focalized solely by those who were not present in the tumultuous scene, Stamp Paid and Paul D, the persistent vagueness that pervades it is skillfully reinforced. According to Stamp Paid, the women "saw something. […] But from the way they describe it, don't seem like it was the girl I saw in there" (265). And the "one point of agreement" Paul D can make out in "the stories he had been hearing" is the fact that "first they saw it and then they didn't" (267); whether the "naked woman with fish for hair" that a little boy claims to have seen "cutting through the woods" by the stream (267) is indeed the same "naked woman" the women saw remains uncertain.

In the face of this powerful reinscription of uncertainty, it is clear that the provisional consensus that enables the women's action does not resolve the mystery of Beloved; it does not tame or even overcome the bewildering ambiguity that surrounds her, nor does it bring the endless signifying processes she remains inscribed in to a close. Rather, it temporarily interrupts the endless flow of signs and the proliferation of meaning by a provisional assessment of the possible (future) effects the "something-or-other" (256) that occupies Sethe's house might have. And with this temporary arrest and the leeway for action it grants, a possible future suddenly materializes in the midst of a novel that is otherwise fully immersed in the past. This future lies in Beloved's final exorcism—not only in the symbolic terms of a ritualistic deliverance from an overly intrusive past that the novel stages, as many critics have noted, but perhaps more powerfully so in the pragmatist terms I have drawn out. In these terms, Beloved's exorcism takes effect as a possibility-turned-manifest, a possibility

that becomes realized by the women as they turn a vague potential into a future reality through their temporary will to believe and their temporary determination to act on this belief.[12] Seen in this light, the future *Beloved* finally envisions for its protagonists does not begin with the fact of Beloved's exorcism but with the forging of the consensus Ella initiates and thus both with the creation of community and with the provisional interruption of the infinite process of interpretation that is brought about by practical considerations. The scene of the women's gathering not only holds out the promise of breaking out of an obtrusive, disempowering past into a future that is open to human intervention and change, but quite compellingly stages how such a breaking out can be achieved and how such a future can be arrived at in the midst of a highly unstable world: through the collective agency made possible by a frail and fleeting consensus.

'Pushing Realism to Its Very Limits': Beloved*'s 'Referential Debt'*

The process that *Beloved* stages in the remarkable scene of the women's gathering not only constitutes an important moment of empowerment for the characters in the novel, it is also highly revealing in terms of the kind of political intervention *Beloved* itself seeks to accomplish. As the scene affirms the possibility of a limited and yet powerfully enabling consensus and reveals how a temporary fixation of meaning can be achieved, it quite forcefully reflects on the novel's own strong commitment to revealing what Morrison herself has called "a kind of truth" about slavery and its victims ("Site" 115). In pointing to the "urgency" involved in this commitment, Sabine Bröck has claimed that Morrison—like many other postcolonial authors—finds herself "in a state of 'referential debt' to the victims of history," a debt that compels *Beloved* to "take[] up realism's ethical gesture" and "insert[] itself crucially into the postmodern crisis of realism and representation" (34, 43). It is the term "referential debt," a term Bröck borrows from the Holocaust critic Shoshana Felman, that I find especially useful in revealing the intricate link between (reclaiming) history and (reworking) consensus that I see at work in *Beloved*.[13] As

[12] For an account of this future-oriented Peircean process, see Pape, *Charles Sanders Peirce* 131-42.

[13] Bröck draws this term from Felman's "Camus' *The Plague*, or a Monument to Witnessing" 115.

it highlights the strong moral desire for a sign to yield a referent, for meaning-making processes to yield "a kind of truth," the term 'referential debt' underlines the contested ground on which *Beloved*'s intervention into American society's memory politics, its search for "a truth" about a repressed past, is carried out (Morrison, "Site" 115, 113). For the 'debt' to the victims of slavery to be adequately met their story cannot remain caught up in endless signifying processes that yield no referentiality beyond the self-referentiality of language itself. And yet, as *Beloved* demonstrates, there can be no return to a state of linguistic innocence either, no simple restoration of the referential power of language, as it is language itself that has proven highly complicit both with the implementation, justification, and perpetuation of the horrific institution of slavery and with the marginalization of its victims and their descendants in public memory. How, then, can the 'referential debt' to these victims be met? And how can a story about them make a real difference in the context of American society's late twentieth-century memory politics?

I wish to argue that it is here, in the context of these questions, that *Beloved*'s ongoing negotiation of the notion of consensus becomes decisive—both as it compellingly stages the limits of any attempt to reveal a historical 'truth,' as I have shown, but perhaps even more so as it forcefully holds out the promise of a frail and limited consensus after all and thus eventually locates the possibility of discerning 'a truth' not in the referential power of language per se but in the provisional consensus of a community that is reached with the need for action impending. The pragmatist politics that *Beloved* thus both reflects and reworks not only allows us to appreciate how the novel takes up and negotiates its 'referential debt' to the victims of history; it also enables us to rethink the question of *Beloved*'s realism, a question that, as Bröck reveals, remains intricately tied to this 'debt' and to the "responsibility […] not to lie" that Morrison herself explicitly takes on ("Site" 115).[14]

In the light of this strong moral commitment, the successful creation of a frail and limited consensus that is staged in the scene of the women's gathering takes on additional meaning. Far from merely serving as a powerful climax and turning point of the novel, the scene

[14] Bröck points to Morrison's use of the term 'responsibility' in an interview with Marsha Darling ("In the Realm of Responsibility" 5). See Bröck 43.

suddenly appears to negotiate the grounds on which the novel's own moral commitment to revealing 'a truth' about the time and people it portrays can take effect. It does so by demonstrating that who or what haunts Sethe in her house can—like the novel that bears its name—indeed be meaningful even though its precise meaning cannot ultimately be fixed. It can be meaningful, that is, because a provisional meaning can temporarily be agreed upon and because this provisional meaning is not entirely open to play, nor entirely arbitrary, but determined by the intersubjective assessment of the possible effects it is believed to have at a particular moment within a sense-making process that is endless in principle but can be interrupted any time. Read in this manner, the scene of the women's gathering not only reveals how *Beloved* both reflects on and lays claim to the possibility of fixing 'meaning' and recovering 'a truth,' it also shows how the novel explicitly casts these concepts in intersubjective terms, tying them to the notion of a frail consensus and to the (im)possibility of intersubjective exchange that it so saliently negotiates. As such, it establishes an important linkage that allows us to reach a deeper understanding of what is at stake in the ongoing (de-)construction of an intersubjectively configured reading position I have described. With a consensus theory of meaning and truth in mind, the complex positioning of the reader that the novel undertakes becomes indicative of the paradox the novel engages: It must counter sentimental modes of reading to thwart the homogenizing thrust ingrained in the very notion of consensus and acclaim the ubiquity of genuine difference; but since—as the scene of the women's gathering reveals—it takes a community to render a story meaningful, such a community of readers must simultaneously be created.

The desire for community that *Beloved* acknowledges forms a persistent subtext to the novel and repeatedly surfaces in overtly self-reflexive passages. The scene depicting Denver's and Beloved's immersion into the story of their mother's flight, for instance, demonstrates that it takes two to render the story meaningful. Thus, their joint efforts to tell Sethe's story and do "the best they could to create what really happened" (*Beloved* 78) not only parallel Morrison's own commitment to 'do the best' she can "to find and expose a truth about the interior life of people who didn't write it" ("Site" 113), they also quite compellingly lay out the intersubjective grounds on which such 'a truth' can be created and, further still, they draw the reader into this

intersubjective realm of storytelling and sense-making. If, then, as Philip Page has claimed, the passage installs the reader in a position vis-à-vis the novel as it positions Beloved vis-à-vis Denver's story—as "listener" and "co-creator" (38)—this participatory gesture not only renders him or her part of an ancient oral tradition, it simultaneously involves the reader in, or rather, it commits him or her to the creation of 'the kind of truth' *Beloved* can possibly yield. While the girls' joint storytelling reveals that it takes a community to give meaning to the "scraps" (*Beloved* 78) of mediated knowledge about the past, the intersubjective reading position which this passage carefully constructs simultaneously creates the community of readers that *Beloved* needs to be rendered meaningful and, in some sense or other, 'true.'

It is in moments like these, then, in the subtle negotiation and temporary fulfillment of a frail and yet meaningful intersubjectivity, that it becomes both possible and instructive to speak of *Beloved* as a 'realist' novel. Understood in the Peircean terms Rohr has laid out, this is a realism that manifests itself in the ongoing exploration of "intersubjectivity, consensus, and truthful interpretation [...] as social acts that are necessary and possible, if only momentarily" ("World" 104). As Rohr has shown in her readings of William Dean Howells and Paul Auster, this concern for consensus and for the communicative processes through which it may be reached is central to both late nineteenth-century classical and late twentieth-century neo-'realist' fiction. In *A Hazard of New Fortunes*, she argues, it becomes cast in terms of the pragmatist-realist question of what it is "we all know" (*Wahrheit* 87), a question that forms a persistent subtext to the "endless dialogues" ("World" 98) which its protagonists, Basil and Isabel March, engage in as they seek to "cop[e] with the general obscurity of reality" and overcome the "moments of bewilderment" (99) the world holds out for them.[15] One hundred years later, in *Moon Palace*, Rohr reveals, the same question is again at stake, though it is substantially reframed and significantly challenged by "the semiotic turn of the text—and the linguistic turn of the century" (107). *Moon*

[15] In this context, Rohr draws on the "Editor's Study" Howells himself wrote to *Harper's New Monthly Magazine* in 1887, in which he programmatically delineated his realist project in the following manner: "Let fiction cease to lie about life; let it portray men and women as they are, actuated by the motives and the passions in the measure *we all know*" (quoted in *Die Wahrheit* 87, Rohr's emphasis).

Palace, she claims, takes up the realist project of exploring the possibility of intersubjectivity and consensus, but does so in full recognition of the poststructuralist and/or postmodernist destabilization of the notion of the subject on which these concepts rely. For Rohr, the question *Moon Palace* engages is thus no longer the classical realist question of what it is "we all know" but the neo-realist question of how and "under what premises" a "return of the subject [could] come to pass" ("World" 103), how intersubjective exchange could once again become meaningful and truthful interpretation possible.

Read in the manner I have proposed, *Beloved* clearly takes up a similar set of questions, tying the strong sense of a communal 'we' apparent in the plot and the novel's readerly politics to the question of how this 'we' can be created in the first place, how community can become possible and, perhaps even more significantly, how such a community can forge a pragmatist consensus that can yield the kind of limited and yet powerful 'truth' the novel seeks to reveal. It is in this sense, I wish to argue, that the novel's realism emerges not in tension with but in the very midst of a fragmented, multivocal, redundant verbal texture. As Rohr's interpretation of Peirce allows us to expand and rework our definition of literary realism, that is, as it shifts our attention from realism as a specific rhetorical strategy—or, as Fluck argues, as "a system of rhetorical strategies" designed "in order to claim special authority for one's own interpretation of reality" and "influence a culture's view of, and consensus on, what is valid knowledge about the real" ("Surface" 67)—to a definition of realism that adopts the *negotiation* of the possibility of consensus and the intersubjective dimension of the process of reality constitution as a decisive 'realist' trait, a new understanding of *Beloved*'s realist outreach can be reached. As the scene of the women's gathering reveals, *Beloved*'s realism manifests itself in the affirmation of the possibility of intersubjectivity, consensus, and truthful interpretation in full recognition of the frailty, impermanence, and potential dangers that these concepts entail. *Beloved* thus indeed takes up what Bröck calls "realism's ethical gesture" (43), but at the same time it vigorously opposes and forcefully undermines the realist tradition, laying bare the homogenizing impulse ingrained in the classical realist question of what it is "*we all* know." As I have argued, it is precisely such an appeal to a universal community of interpreters that *Beloved* always

already undercuts; there is no "we all" throughout the novel, no reassuring moment of intersubjectivity that might transcend the boundaries of a specific, limited group, and there cannot be. *Beloved*'s realism remains committed to the truthful recovery of a past that is "unaccounted for" (*Beloved* 274), after all, and seeks to reveal a truth about a history that is absent from the historical consensus "we all" have produced—"we all" both in the sense of the realist imperative that has traditionally governed Western historiography and, much more concretely, in the sense of the novel's late twentieth-century readership. As a story that "delineates the place of absence" rather than presence and continuity (Rody 106), *Beloved* thus hardly engages the question of what it is "we all know;" rather, it reverses its premises asking instead what it is we rather not know, what we—following a moral obligation—ought to know but cannot ever fully know since limits to the communicability of personal experiences will remain in place, just as the communal 'we' involved cannot ever be simply taken for granted.

In the face of these findings, I feel inclined to assert Bröck's "tentative[]" claim that *Beloved* can be seen to "push[] realism to its very limits, [to] expand[] realism's range to the point of bursting" (44). However, I contend that the novel does so not only with respect to the kind of "alternative temporality" Bröck is concerned with, but also on the grounds of the vigorous negotiation my Peircean perspective has sought to reveal: the negotiation of the (im)possibility of intersubjective exchange and consensus. This negotiation, I claim, "push[es] realism to its very limits" by exposing its complicity in perpetuating the marginalization and suppression of a painful history, and yet by refusing to give it up altogether and surrender to the disabling momentum of endless, self-reflexive language games. The desire for and promise of consensus remains in place precisely because its workability is stretched to a true "point of bursting," to a point at which it barely survives and yet remains effective—no longer as an ordinary state of affairs all processes of sense-making eventually culminate in, as Peirce seems to have perceived it, but as a frail, limited, fleeting and thus truly extraordinary moment of a provisional intersubjective agreement that is capable of interrupting the infinite process of interpretation, of fixing meaning for the time being, and of paving the way for action. In the scene of the women's gathering, *Beloved*'s realism may thus be said to signify upon itself, delineating

the frail grounds on which it can stay in effect and realize the novel's moral project of truthfully reclaiming the history of slavery from the void of a 'national amnesia.' At the same time, however, it remains stretched to "a point of bursting"; and although my reading of the scene has stressed the enabling momentum the women's gathering emanates, it is clear that the novel as a whole continues to undercut what frail promises of stability and agency it may hold out. *Beloved* not only pushes the concept of consensus and its own realist claims to "a point of bursting," one might say in keeping with Bröck's metaphor, at times it pushes them beyond, revealing the ultimate limits of their workability.

It is hardly surprising, then, that *Beloved* ends not on the triumphant note of the exorcism scene and the temporary affirmation of the possibility of consensus but with an epilogue that re-inscribes the fundamental ambiguities of the text and self-consciously re-opens it to endless interpretations. *Beloved*'s ending thus actually consists of a double move: First, the narrative dénouement that follows the women's gathering and Beloved's sudden disappearance carefully resolves the main characters' struggle for a meaningful intersubjective exchange and brings the negotiation of the (im)possibility of intersubjectivity and the novel's revision of the sentimental heritage on which it draws to a temporary fulfilling close. As Paul D returns to Sethe and finds that he is now ready "to put his story next to hers" (*Beloved* 273) and as Denver ventures into the world of learning without cutting the ties to her mother, the promise of a frail and yet powerfully enabling communal relationship that the women's action holds out is once again reaffirmed. Thus, *Beloved* first ends with the temporary fulfillment of a considerably reworked notion of community. The community Sethe, Paul D, and Denver finally form is, as Armstrong has noted, no longer defined by homogenizing notions of a sentimental "family" but by a "household" that can accommodate and foster "a mixed, mangled, and yet fiercely knit group" (19). In the pragmatist terms I have introduced, it is a community that is actively created by its members and becomes possible as a frail, temporary intersubjective agreement is reached. The novel's second and final ending, however, radically dissolves the conciliatory message contained in both the exorcism scene and the narrative dénouement. Shifting back from a more or less linear mode of narration to a much more dense and ambiguous textual engagement, the epilogue forcefully reinstalls the

ambiguity surrounding the novel's central enigmatic figure, Beloved, disrupts what frail stability the preceding chapters may have promised, and effectively reopens the text to manifold interpretations. As such, it not only constitutes the novel's final move in the construction of its highly complex and oftentimes paradoxical reading position—a construction that I dealt with in the first part of this chapter—it simultaneously complicates the pragmatist reading I have proposed with regard to the kind of limited consensual empowerment *Beloved* envisions. Since the epilogue thus brings together the two parts of my argument and allows us to critically assess the interpretative potency and inevitable limits of the Peircean approach I have brought to the novel, I will now tie a more detailed discussion of its function within the novel to a recapitulation of the argument I have put forth.

Toward a Readerly 'Response-Ability': Beloved*'s Epilogue*

Steeped in a dense and highly poetic prose, the epilogue returns to the figure of Beloved and in "a kind of elegy" (Phelan 234) relates how she falls into oblivion soon after her sudden and mysterious disappearance from the porch of the house on Bluestone Road. Set apart by conspicuous gaps in the pages' typeface, five paragraphs trace how she and her story are soon forgotten first by the novel's population—who "quickly and deliberately forgot her […] like an unpleasant dream during a troubling sleep"—and then, in a figurative sense, by subsequent generations of African Americans and by American culture as a whole until "[b]y and by all trace is gone, and what is forgotten is not only the footprints but the water too and what it is down there" (*Beloved* 274-75). As these elegiac passages track the process of a cultural "disremembering," they call to mind some of the prominent images and tropes previously associated with Beloved—her enormous "loneliness," for instance, "a loneliness that roams," her fear of "erupt[ing] into her separate parts" and being "swallow[ed]," or "the underwater face she needed like that" and the "footprints" that "come and go" by "the stream in back of 124"—and re-inscribe the mystery and ambiguity that surround her. These passages are interrupted by the repeated interjection of single, bald sentences that are also set off through blank lines in the typeface. Twice this sentence reads "It was not a story to pass on"; then a shift in tense and pronoun occurs to "This is not a story to pass on"; and finally the

interpolation consists of a single word: "Beloved." It is with this final call, with this final enunciation of the name the mysterious title figure bears that *Beloved* ends.

Many critics have commented on the challenges this ending holds out for the novel's readers. "When the reader arrives at the novel's end and reads 'Beloved' displaced from any context on the page," William Handley writes, "the questions remain: who is Beloved now that she has been 'disremembered' by everyone in the novel, and why is this 'not a story to pass on'?" (680) James Phelan goes even further in voicing his own irritation and impatience with the text's pervasive 'stubbornness.' "And why the cryptic ending?" he asks, "Why move away from the intimate scene between Sethe and Paul D to declare 'this is not a story to pass on'?" (226) As the epilogue thus clearly engages the reader in a final, bewildering struggle over the 'meaning' of the text, it once again reveals that the willful construction of a complex reading position serves as a pivotal site on which the novel's central thematic and political concerns become manifest. In fact, I wish to argue that *Beloved*'s final pages put to work the same kind of readerly politics that I have earlier discerned and thus effectively reinforce the political message this important subtext bears. On the one hand, the epilogue irrevocably undercuts what identificatory impulse may have been produced by the scene of Sethe's and Paul D's reconciliation—and earlier scenes of this kind—and carries the novel's persistent deconstruction of sentimental modes of reading to a logical extreme, dissolving what traces of a sentimental consensus, what residue of the homogenizing, universalist fantasy of a common humanity the novel's critical recovery of the slave narrative tradition may have retained. It does so by generating a considerable distance in space and time between the novel's population and its contemporary readership and by strategically positioning the reader in a complicated and highly paradoxical relation to the text. On the other hand, however, the novel does not end in utter confusion; it does not surrender its willful ambiguity to a dodging arbitrariness, nor does the self-reflexive stance it openly takes remain confined to the foregrounding of the text as text. Quite the contrary: the epilogue vigorously reinforces the novel's ethical appeal by forcefully affirming the possibility of a different kind of meaningful relationship to the text, a relationship that gestures towards a different kind of intersubjective involvement and compellingly envisions

a different kind of consensus. As such, it carries the remarkable reworking of consensus I have traced throughout this chapter to a powerful close.

The key to such a reading lies in the novel's last signifying act: "Beloved" (275). Among the many critics who have discussed the ending of the novel, Handley has most convincingly pointed to the crucial significance of this last call. Handley's reading of *Beloved* focuses on the interplay between different conceptions of language in the novel, between the concept of "language-as-loss," that is, and the West African concept of the word as "*nommo*," which he conceptualizes as "a coming-into-being, a creative presenting, rather than a mournful re-presenting of something lost" (679-82). This concern with language leads him to highlight the subtle distinction that *Beloved*'s epilogue draws between naming and calling: "Everybody knew what she was called but nobody knew her name" (*Beloved* 274). Although the personal pronoun 'she' remains indeterminate at this point—the actual word 'Beloved' in fact only appears in the epilogue's last line—it is clear that the passage refers to the figure we have come to know as 'Beloved' and explicitly reveals that the printed word or sound-image /Beloved/ we associate with her is indeed not her "name" but a "call." For Handley, the emphasis that the novel thus lays on the act of calling is crucial to the epilogue's ending. "Because Sethe kills her daughter to prevent her being taken as a slave," he argues, "'Beloved' is a call that resists slavery's name and that asks for response. 'Everybody' must answer this call and assume what Morrison calls 'response-ability' for the unnamable and unspeakable loss to slavery" (681).

The link Handley draws here between the novel's final call, "Beloved," the response that is implied in this call, and what he calls the readers' "response-ability" is highly intriguing. Put to work in the context of the argument I have pursued, it reveals how the novel finally positions the reader in a relationship to the text that encourages—even demands—intersubjective involvement. It grounds this involvement in a far-reaching readerly participation, however, in a call that "asks for response" and entails a "'response-ability,'" but not in the homogenizing zeal of a universalist identification. Seen in this light, the epilogue compellingly reveals how the novel's strong ethical commitment manifests itself in a readerly politics that aims to vigorously undercut all tendencies to ground what imagined com-

munity the process of reading creates in an erasure of difference and a denial of history while simultaneously creating the imagined community of readers needed to realize its moral project of reclaiming the "disremembered" history of slavery. Handley points to this important textual strategy in arguing that *Beloved* finally forces us to "see in Morrison as a contemporary writer and ourselves as contemporary readers the ethical task at hand to make a community with the past through narration, figuration, and naming" (688). And while the Peircean approach I have brought to the novel clearly supports this claim, it also takes it one step further, tying "the ethical task […] to make a community" to the novel's persistent negotiation of the (im)possibility of intersubjective exchange and consensus.

It is on this level, I have argued, that the novel's deep concern with the question of how community can be created in a world marked by hierarchies of power, by difference, and genuine uncertainty is reflected most intriguingly, and it is here that *Beloved*'s transformative vision of frail and yet powerfully enabling moments of consensus becomes manifest—moments of a consensus that may temporarily interrupt the endless flow of interpretation, cut through the disabling thrust of a radical uncertainty and give way both to action and to a future that is at least partially self-possessed and open to change. The "ethical task" that the epilogue holds out for its readers is thus grounded in what I have identified as a reworking of the notion of consensus from the all-encompassing claims of a sentimental common humanity to a point that is stunningly pragmatist in a radical Peircean sense. Accordingly, the community that is implied in the novel's final call, "Beloved," bears no resemblance to the homogeneous—or rather: homogenized and homogenizing—audience of the traditional slave narrative. Created solely by an enunciative act rooted in the African American call-and-response tradition, it is frail, provisional, and unstable and does not resolve what uncertainty the text continues to exude. It exists chiefly as the future potential of "response-ability," to once again draw on Handley's term, that is, as the frail promise of a response to the novel's call.

The epilogue thus clearly carries the negotiation of community and consensus that I have traced throughout the novel to a compelling end, but it also reveals that the power *Beloved* ascribes to the possibility of consensus and a pragmatist will to believe ultimately remains limited. For although the novel's last pages reaffirm the need

for community and some sort of limited, temporary consensus for its readership to take on the "ethical task" of reclaiming a history that has been largely repressed, they unmistakably make clear that this history exists independent of such a consensus. Beloved may be forgotten, but the epilogue's temporal shift to the present tense compellingly suggests that she is still there: "Her footprints come and go" and "[s]ometimes the photograph of a close friend or relative—looked at too long—shifts" (275). Though "disremembered," she remains "out there," a term the novel uses earlier in the context of the theory of "rememory" Sethe puts forth: "If a house burns down it's gone, but the place—the picture of it—stays, and not just in my rememory, but out there, in the world. […] I mean, even if I don't think it, even if I die, the picture of what I did, or knew, or saw is still out there" (36). Taken for itself, this emphasis on an "out there," on a realm of worldly experience or reality that exists independent of what Peirce would call "the vagaries of me and you" (*CP* 5.311) does not challenge the pragmatist reading of *Beloved* I have proposed. It is what Caroline Rody calls the novel's implicit "elevation of memory to a supernatural power that connects all minds" (102) in passages like the following, however, that creates a considerable tension between the novel's remarkable concern with the demanding and frail process of community *creation* that I have emphasized and its recurring postulation of a universal or at least intergenerational interconnectedness of minds. In this famous passage immediately following the first "rememory" remark, Sethe addresses Denver, warning her to visit the place where Sweet Home used to be:

> Where I was before I came here, that place is real. It's never going away. Even if the whole farm—every tree and grass blade of it dies. The picture is still there and what's more, if you go there—you who never was there—if you go there and stand in the place where it was, it will happen again; it will be there for you, waiting for you. (36)

Beloved harbors this tension between the enabling momentum of a future-oriented process of community creation as it is staged in the scene of the women's gathering on the one side and the haunting thrust and looming threat of a predestined collective no-future that "will be there for you, waiting for you" on the other. My reading of the novel cannot resolve this tension, nor does it wish to. However, I do contend that *Beloved*'s fervent insistence on the limits of human

agency renders the more remarkable the vision which the novel holds out of a provisional, contested and yet truly transformative consensus- and community-building process. Precisely because the world *Beloved* portrays is not a Peircean world of inventive possibility, of human progress and rational discourse, because the creative capacities of the decentered, linguistic subject that *Beloved* delineates are certainly not boundless but form a vital strategy of survival and painful act of resistance to the imminent threat of its own dissolution, the Peircean reading I have proposed is illuminating. *Beloved*, it reveals, not only challenges many of Peirce's nineteenth-century beliefs, as is to be expected, it also quite astonishingly reworks and radicalizes some of his most seminal theoretical conceptions and thus envisions how his pragmatist heritage can remain meaningful in the context of the social, political, and philosophical challenges its present-day audience faces.

Chapter Four

Creativity and Consensus: Jonathan Safran Foer's *Everything Is Illuminated*

"There was nothing" (184). With these words and a grassy field too dark to see, Jonathan Safran Foer's *Everything Is Illuminated* (2002) brings its protagonists' hilarious search for the former shtetl Trachimbrod and a woman named Augustine to a provisional, anti-climactic close. The Ukrainian wannabe-translator Alex Perchov, his grandfather, their crazy dog Sammy Davis, Junior, Junior, and the Jewish American tourist not-so-accidentally named Jonathan Safran Foer find "nothing" on their journey into the past, nothing that would exist beyond or outside of the imaginative realm of lost memories and proliferating stories, no referent to history that might move beyond the trivial non-sense of a grassy field. The contrast to *Beloved*'s vision of a haunting intergenerational "rememory" (*Beloved* 36) could thus hardly be more pronounced. For Alex and Jonathan, grandsons of a Ukrainian perpetrator and a Jewish survivor of the Holocaust, Sethe's warning to her daughter—"if you go there and stand in the place where it was, it will happen again; it will be there for you, waiting for you" (*Beloved* 36)—does not apply. Standing "in the place where it was" on a mild summer evening in 1997 does not make "it"—the horrors of the Holocaust—"happen again." On the contrary: The grassy field in the midst of the Ukrainian countryside reveals "nothing," as Alex, the eccentric narrator of the novel's quest story, does not fail to emphasize in his wonderfully awkward English:

> When I utter "nothing" I do not mean there was nothing except two houses, and some wood on the ground, and pieces of glass, and children's toys, and photographs. When I utter that there was nothing, what I intend is that there was not any of these things, or any other things. (184)

In the conspicuous absence of "things" that would provide traces of and referents to the destroyed shtetl and its murdered inhabitants, "place" looses its significance as intergenerational memory site, shifting the grounds of memory work instead to the frail generative realm of language, storytelling, and the productive powers of the imagination. Consequently, I wish to argue, *Everything Is Illuminated* (re-)opens the past to a Pynchonesque realm of creative guesswork and endless (re-)interpretation, severely shaking what referential foundations the culture of Holocaust remembrance may continue to cherish. The novel's experimental form reflects this far-reaching challenge to the notion of historical referentiality as it loses itself in meta-narrative discussions and persistently questions its own reliability. Like *V.*, however, *Everything Is Illuminated* does not ground this destabilization in the workings of a self-reflexive language alone but ties it to the interpretive powers of the subject. The novel takes delight in rehearsing the sheer, unlimited possibilities and destabilizing potential of the subject's imaginative powers, rushing headlong into a world of storytelling that is both outspokenly inventive and excessively creative. And yet, unlike *V.*, it manages to simultaneously resist the impulse of a radical epistemological destabilization. The dialogical structure set up by the implicit exchange of stories and letters between Alex and Jonathan—each contributing their own passages to Jonathan's evolving "*novel*" (25), commenting on the other's draft and revising their own—frames the creative (re-)invention of the past as an intersubjective affair and lends a compelling moral urgency to the collective project of writing a "*truthful*" (55) piece of fiction.[1] As it thus ties its negotiation of concepts such as 'truth' and 'meaning' to the return of the epistolary subject, *Everything Is Illuminated* draws the reader into an intimate world of private exchange that may indeed be highly unreliable—and may self-reflexively reveal the traces of its own artificiality—but nonetheless opens up a space of creative possibility where stories matter and fiction can (once again?) change lives. Alongside the mind-boggling "nothing" of the grassy field and the exuberant playfulness of the imaginative stories to which it gives rise, we thus find a moving family (hi)story and an ending that allows the meta-

[1] In the following, I will use the short form 'Jonathan' to refer to the fictional character Jonathan Safran Foer as a means of distinguishing him from the real-life author of *Everything Is Illuminated*.

fictional letter-writing enterprise to take a final turn to action: Having learned of his grandfather's tragic role in the murder of his best friend—Alex Sr., we learn, once pointed his finger at the Jew Herschel to save his own life—young Alex rids his family of his abusive father, relinquishes his dream of "altering residences to America" (28), and takes responsibility for his mother and brother. The novel ends with a letter to Jonathan in which Alex translates his grandfather's suicide note, expressing the old man's ardent wish for his death to allow his two grandsons to "begin again" (275).

As the novel thus negotiates the creative and social spaces delineated by the simultaneous absence and presence of a remote and yet proximal past, challenging conventional notions of referentiality while exploring the grounds on which the past can or must remain 'meaningful' for today's young generation of Jewish Americans and Eastern Europeans, it recasts creativity and consensus—the two Peircean concepts that have informed my readings of *V.* and *Beloved*—as interconnected modes of human sense-making, opening up a paradoxical and yet highly productive realm of oscillating textual in/stability. While *V.* explores the capricious force of creativity in the absence of intersubjective exchange and *Beloved* depicts a world in which the subject's creative powers are severely stifled by the harsh realities of oppression, making the process of reaching a frail, limited consensus the more imperative, *Everything Is Illuminated*, I wish to argue, has it both ways. Combining a dazzling Pynchonesque excess of creative guesswork and proliferating stories with *Beloved*'s deep yearning for moments of intersubjective exchange and social empowerment, the novel explores the premises of a new fusion where exuberant creativity is intersubjectively induced and consensus is reconfigured as an open-ended creative possibility. The remarkable effect of this renewed merger might be called what Rohr, in her reading of Peirce, refers to as a "volatile stability-instability" ("Pragmaticism" 300), a text that "permanently oscillates between the poles of stability and instability" ("Mimesis" 107) continuously holding out the promise of 'making sense'—both in itself and of the past—while simultaneously undercutting any move towards interpretive closure, allowing the letter-writing enterprise to culminate in action while reaffirming the outspoken inventiveness of its historical (re-)constructions.

In the following, I wish to explore in more detail this interesting effect and the implications of the new fusion *Everything Is Illuminated* holds out. I wish to discuss how the novel's joint negotiation of creativity and consensus reworks these Peircean concepts yet again, opening up fresh ways in which the dialogue I have set out to pursue can—to pick up the novel's peculiar jargon—indeed be illuminating. Once again, I will turn to the novel's subtle positioning of the reader as an important site of these Peircean negotiations, arguing that the novel's appropriation of the epistolary form is central to its construction of a readerly realm where texts serve communicative—and thus social—purposes even as they propel the reader into a highly unreliable world of playful excess, buoyant uncertainty, and vast potential. Creativity and consensus, that is, come together in a frail open space of opportunity as *Everything Is Illuminated* explores the grounds of a new epistolary (inter)subjectivity where generically mediated constructions of the reading and writing epistolary subject celebrate the subject's enormous productive powers while situating it within the margins of a delicate process of intersubjective exchange. As the novel's reader is drawn into a textually construed in/stable realm of (inter)subjective letter exchange and becomes, as I wish to argue, inscribed as both witness to and participant in the strikingly Peircean process of collectively reading and writing the world into being, the novel's latent negotiation of creativity and consensus becomes intricately tied to its overt concern with processes of memory, (fiction-)writing, and the challenging (im)possibility of 'making sense' of the Holocaust. The epistolary mediations that shape the novel's readerly politics and drive its (re-)enactment of 'meaningful' (inter)subjectivities thus bring Peirce's concepts not only to the twenty-first century but to the familiar question of Holocaust representation as well, confronting both with contemporary notions of performativity and opening up promising new ways of thinking '(inter)subjectivity,' 'responsibility,' and 'meaningful' representation. As such, they eventually allow me to read *Everything Is Illuminated* in the context of current debates over the 'end of postmodernism' and to raise the question of how the Peircean dialogue I have staged might be of help in addressing, framing, and (re-)conceptualizing the questions and concerns that the

current 'post-postmodern' moment holds out.[2] First, however, I wish to unravel the indeed strikingly postmodernist dynamic of the novel's creative destabilizations, focusing on the shifting ambiguities, creative excess, and powerful moments of metafictional subversion its three narrative strands hold out, before I turn to the shift from textual play to a new sense of 'meaningful' textual engagement that the novel's epistolary mediations eventually perform.

Staging Creativity: *Everything*'s Playful Destabilizations

Everything Is Illuminated readily embraces the radical destabilizations of a markedly postmodernist textuality as it confronts its readers head on with a dazzling world of profound ambiguities, manifold (im)possibilities, and seemingly unlimited creative potential. Much of this frolicking force and creative excess arises from the unique narrative performance Alex, the eccentric Ukrainian translator-guide, tirelessly puts on as he relates the comical story of his bizarre summer adventures with his grandfather, their silly dog Sammy Davis, Junior, Junior, and Jonathan, oftentimes simply referred to as "the hero" (1), who has come to the "totally awesome former Soviet republic" (23) on a trip with "Heritage Touring" (3), a small travel agency run by Alex's father for, as Alex puts it, "Jews who try to unearth places where their families once existed" (3). Steeped in sly wit, strewn with awkward puns, and awash with odd twists and a skewed logic, this narrative delights in the sheer unlimited possibilities of its own inventiveness, staging Alex's productive powers and celebrating the unrivaled vitality of his storytelling verve. The dynamic of textual destabilization and creative play that is thus set in motion is heightened by the novel's second narrative strand. Narrated by Jonathan, this strand relates the fabulous story of Trachimbrod and its eccentric inhabitants from roughly 1791 to the shtetl's destruction in 1942; or rather, it relates Jonathan's fantastic version of it, for the highly speculative quality of the episodic accounts and their reliance

[2] In using the term 'post-postmodern,' I wish to acknowledge current attempts to push beyond the all-too-familiar schemes of postmodern textual critique and arrive at a mode of thought and representation that is "no longer postmodern quite the same way as when the concept was set loose" (Green 1). In this sense, the term marks a new form of postmodern self-awareness and does not imply that postmodernism must be over or has already come to an end.

on the idealized "image of the shtetl" (Miron)[3] that has been deeply inscribed into the Jewish literary and cultural imagination are persistently revealed. The playful metafictional gesture that is involved in the authorial appearance of Jonathan Safran Foer in the novel is finally intensified by the letters Alex writes to Jonathan. Scattered throughout the novel, these letters form the novel's third narrative strand and will eventually drive its move from the familiar destabilizations of textual play to a new performative vision of 'meaningful' textual engagement. At first they provide a splendid series of metanarrative reflections, however, highlighting the many "*not-truths*" (144) Alex tells and spelling out the pleasures of a markedly open fiction-writing process.

The dazzling yarns of hilarious incidents, amazing encounters, and marvelous coincidences that Alex and Jonathan relentlessly spin enact the novel's postmodernist decentering of history *as text* and dramatize the capricious force of creativity in ways that resonate with the destabilizing vigor of Pynchon's *V.* The cultural space into which these creative destabilizations proceed, however, is markedly different. *Everything Is Illuminated* speaks to the important tradition of Jewish American Holocaust fiction and proves highly responsive to the large body of literary, scholarly, and popular work on issues of Holocaust memory and representation. As Christoph Ribbat has argued, the novel looks to the Holocaust and the debates over its representation from a third-generation perspective; it negotiates the challenges faced by the advent of an age of "post-postmemory" (213) and explores the pending, post-communist *Vergangenheitsbewältigung* of Eastern Europe.[4] Much of its destabilizing force is grounded in the historical convergence of a double void: the irreversible loss of Jewish history and culture that the destruction of Eastern European Jewry involved, and the loss of memory that the passing away of its last

[3] For Miron, the shtetl serves as "an artistic, imaginary locus" of Jewish cultural memory kept alive by the classical texts of Yiddish and Hebrew modernism (4). Around the turn of the twentieth century, he argues, "[l]iterature was nominated as the official custodian of the national collective memory, guaranteeing the accessibility of the recent past to those who had drifted away from it. It had to enable one to be in the shtetl and yet at the same time to be away from it, to maintain emotional ties with the past and yet belong to the present" (8).

[4] Ribbat here adds an additional prefix to a critical term that Marianne Hirsch introduced to debates on memory and representation in her study on *Family Frames: Photography, Narrative, and Postmemory*.

witnesses entails. Both of these voids loom large in the exuberant tales *Everything Is Illuminated* tells. And yet, they do not stifle its creative vigor. On the contrary: Twice removed from the historical events of World War Two and the Holocaust, Jonathan Safran Foer and his two protagonists are free to playfully confront the multiple layers of cultural and textual mediation through which this past speaks to us today, to expose the liberties they take in shaping their 'material' and overtly undermine the trustworthiness of their texts—be it through boisterously exaggerated claims and the amusing effects of a flashy, self-aggrandizing showmanship, as in the case of Alex, through explicit references to the speculative quality of the undertaking and its reliance on cultural texts rather than reliable historical 'sources,' as in the case of Jonathan, or, in the case of Jonathan Safran Foer, through a skillful interweaving of the two into a highly self-reflexive novel that playfully charts the process of its own making. As I now set out to discuss the novel's creative destabilizations in more detail, I wish to shed light on the ways in which the three narrative strands stage this intriguing dynamic of void and excess, imminent loss and open potential complementing each other to heighten the novel's playful appeal.

Confronting "Lost History": On Finding and Not Finding Trachimbrod

Alex's hilarious tale of finding and not finding Trachimbrod proves highly instrumental in staging the void the men confront as they embark on their journey into the past. The many moments of bewilderment, incomprehension, disorientation, and confusion it holds out both dramatize and parody the workings of 'post-postmemory' culture, mapping out the realm of imaginative opportunity into which Jonathan's creative (re-)constructions of Trachimbrod's shtetl life proceed. From the very beginning, Alex readily assumes the role of a "very potent and generative" (1) language artist whose power to produce the most hilarious images and absurd narrative plots seems boundless. His is a highly unreliable world of fearless bravado and outrageous claims where the "mentally deranged" (5) dog Sammy Davis, Junior, Junior serves as the "Seeing Eye bitch" (5) for a blind driver who appears not to be so blind after all. In fact, the story Alex tells is so full of amusing details and skewed logical twists—*à la* "the

bitch is his, not mine, because I am not the one who thinks he is blind" (1)—that the effect is simply overwhelming. The multiple layers of absurd story material produced by Alex's boisterously exaggerated creative performance, however, are not only wonderfully entertaining but quickly create a giddy sense of instability and confusion that is heightened by his linguistic floundering and the ostensibly naïve stance he takes as narrating focalizer.

From the start, Alex's slapstick comedy generates a profound sense of destabilization which becomes carefully tied to the fundamental uncertainties the men's "very rigid search" (105) for Trachimbrod reveals. Alex's narrative stages these uncertainties in various manners and disguises. The dynamic into which they are inscribed, however, is perhaps most beautifully encapsulated in Alex's explicit rendering of their impossible mission as one of "find[ing] lost history" (108). For indeed: The history Alex and Jonathan encounter on their journey through the bleak Ukrainian countryside is always already "lost" and cannot be retrieved. The men spend many hours driving "in the same circles" asking men and women on the roadside about Trachimbrod and ways to get there, and yet their search remains unsuccessful: "It was seeming as if we were in the wrong country, or the wrong century, or as if Trachimbrod had disappeared and so had the memory of it" (115). In moments like these, Alex's narrative explicitly voices the double void the men's search explicitly confronts: Not only the former site of the shtetl seems to have "disappeared" but "the memory of it" as well, complementing the devastating material effects of Nazi Germany's scorched-earth policy that the post-communist Ukrainian countryside still reveals with a second, belated form of annihilation, the threat of a complete loss of historical, cultural, and personal knowledge and remembrance. Consequently, the grassy field the men eventually do find reveals "nothing" (184) at all. Only a "piece of stone" dedicated to the memory of the murdered Trachimbroders by the Prime Minister of Israel in 1992 bears witness to the shtetl's former existence, though it remains, as Alex remarks, "very impossible to find" (189).

As the scene thus records Alex's bewilderment over the absence of "things" (184) that would provide meaningful traces of the past, it resonates with the accounts of trips to former Holocaust sites Gary Weissman refers to in his study on *Fantasies of Witnessing:*

Postwar Efforts to Experience the Holocaust.[5] Many of these trips, Weissman notes, culminate in "empty spaces overgrown with grass and weeds" that are "altogether too pretty" to convey the sense of "horror" and "be[ing] *there*" the travelers desire to feel (2, 4). In the face of the void that the historical sites reveal, Weissman contends, the longing to experience "what it was like" that many "nonwitnesses" harbor can thus "be satisfied only in […] fantasies of witnessing" that must feed on the cultural texts of museums, monuments, documentaries, memoirs, and other forms of cultural memory to make the Holocaust "feel *more real*" (4-5).[6] *Everything Is Illuminated*, I wish to argue, stages this dynamic, and yet, it ironically undercuts it as well, parodying the 'fantasy of witnessing' involved in Jonathan's wish to "sightsee the shtetl" (60) and exploring the effects of the profound uncertainty that the highly unrevealing grassy field prompts at the same time. As Alex's hilarious account of the men's search translates this uncertainty into the amusingly circular movements of both the car and the text, it thus infuses the novel's parodic subversion of the undertaking with a powerful sense of endless deferral that underlines the elusiveness of the past and highlights the impossibility of ever fixing its 'meanings.'

A very similar fusion of parodic destabilization and a thorough decentering is at stake in the scene that records Alex's reaction to the house of the one Holocaust survivor the men eventually do find, a woman who calls herself Lista but might be her sister and continues to be referred to as Augustine (193). This time, however, the men encounter the direct opposite of the field's material void: sheer material excess. Packed to the ceiling with relics of every kind that amount to almost the entire material remains of the shtetl and its former population, Lista's house comes to embody the fantasy of complete documentation and collective survival that contemporary memory culture holds out as it seeks to memorialize history in ever-

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[5] In fact, Foer himself has commented on the decertifying effect of encountering this "nothing" in his own trip to the Ukraine, which initially inspired his novel: "I did go, and I just found—nothing. At all. It wasn't like a literary, interesting kind of nothing, an inspiring, or a beautiful nothing, it was really like: nothing. It's not like anything else I've ever experienced in my life." See Erica Wagner's feature in the *Times*.

[6] Throughout his study, Weissman uses the term "nonwitness" to refer to those who did not experience the Holocaust themselves but rely on "representations of the Holocaust" to "gain access to and 'remember'" it (20, 5).

increasing numbers of museums and exhibits. The scene, I wish to argue, parodies this fantasy and the obsession with relics it involves, and yet it also beautifully dramatizes the imminent threat of loss that the fading—or non-existent—memory posed by Lista's objects. Without the instructive captions that usually accompany museum exhibitions, the material remnants of the shtetl remain just as un-revealing as the "nothing" (184) of the grassy field, and only heighten Alex's sense of bewilderment, as his description of the house reveals:

> I must describe her house. It was not similar to any house that I have seen, and I do not think that I would dub it a house. If you want to know what I would dub it, I would dub it two rooms. One of the rooms had a bed, and a small desk, a bureau, and many things from the floor to the ceiling, including piles of more clothes and hundreds of shoes of different sizes and fashions. I could not see the wall through all of the photographs. They appeared as if they came from different families, although I did recognize that a few of the people were in more than one or two. All of the clothing and shoes and pictures made me to reason that there must have been at least one hundred people living in that room. The other room was also very populous. There were many boxes, which were overflowing with items. These had writing on their sides. A white cloth was overwhelming from the box marked WEDDINGS AND OTHER CELEBRATIONS. The box marked PRIVATES: JOURNALS/DIARIES/SKETCHBOOKS/UNDERWEAR was so overfilled that it appeared prepared to rupture. There was another box, marked SILVER/PERFUME/PINWHEELS, and one marked WATCHES/WINTER, and one marked HYGIENE/SPOOLS/CANDLES, and one marked FIGURINES/SPECTACLES. (147)

Here Alex's naïve astonishment over the sheer endless amount of "things" stored in the woman's "two rooms" and the simple, accumulative syntax into which it becomes translated work to create an odd sense of lack in the very face of "overwhelming" excess. What is lacking is 'meaning' or 'context,' something that would 'explain' the massive collection of boxes, photographs, and ordinary objects and would—to once again play on Alex's diction—'illuminate' the strange categories under which they are filed. Instead, the passage records the material surface of the "many things" stacked "from the floor to the ceiling," exploiting Alex's ostensible lack of under-standing to heighten the haunting void that these objects mark. Alex's 'reasoned' guess that "there must have been at least one hundred people living in that room" thus only makes their looming absence more palpable.

Likewise, the impressive number and size of the "many boxes" that fill the second room forcefully highlight the scope of Lista's collection; and yet, their bizarre labels add a comical note to the scene as they reveal that the "items" they store include not only "JOURNALS," "DIARIES," and "SKETCHBOOKS," as is to be expected, but also "UNDERWEAR," "CANDLES," and "PERFUME" as well—all of them filed according to a puzzling (dis-)order that pairs "WATCHES" with "WINTER" and "FIGURINES" with "SPECTACLES." Apparently, Lista has carried the impulse to preserve the material remains of what was once Trachimbrod to an extreme, collecting every single "scrap" (61) of evidence down to such seemingly banal oddities as "DUST" (147) and actual bodily remains such as "HAIR" (150). Her boxes attempt to capture all the many aspects of shtetl life that remain etched in her vast memory from the ring of particular seasons—"WINTER" (147)—to religious rituals—"WEDDINGS" (147) and "KIDDUSH CUPS" (150)—to ordinary events such as "SLEEP/SLEEP/SLEEP" (150) and the cosmic appeal of "DARKNESS" (147). But even though Lista's collection of boxes appears to cover the entire remains of the shtetl at the point of its destruction—we later learn that she returned to Trachimbrod after the raid, "went through the Jewish houses with silence, and gathered everything" (188)—it, too, remains oddly deficient. Its "overwhelming" excess cannot make up for the material loss of lives and histories and can only be rendered meaningful where there is memory to bring it to life. In the absence of memory, Alex's account demonstrates, the many boxes, "piles of […] clothes," and "hundreds of shoes of different sizes and fashions" are doomed to remain hauntingly unrevealing. Asked about the reasons for her friend to give her wedding ring for safekeeping "in case" she died, Lista consequently rejects Jonathan's belief in "Evidence. Documentation. Testimony." Instead, she comments on the power and transience of memory with the words: "People can remember without the ring. And when those people forget, or die, then no one will know about the ring" (192).

Although the discrepancy between Augustine/Lista's "overfilled" (147) house and the "nothing" (184) of the grassy field is thus unmistakable, both ultimately dramatize the profound absence that Alex's chapters persistently confront as they stage the young men's encounter with the scarce remains of a past that is always already twice removed and irreversibly "lost" (108). Again and again, Alex's

hilarious tale of finding and not finding Trachimbrod touches upon this inevitable gap as it carefully registers the young men's bewilderment and incomprehension, heightening these moments through Alex's own ostentatious incompetence and linguistic naïveté. And yet, the strange sense of loss that many of the novel's central scenes so powerfully exude does not restrain Alex's efforts to tell his story, nor does it stifle the past's genuine appeal. Instead, it immediately opens up and contextualizes the space of creative potential into which Jonathan's chapters eagerly proceed.

Trachimbrod 1791–1942, or: (Re-)Inventing an Invented Past

The episodic accounts of shtetl life that Jonathan writes and mails to Alex immediately suffuse the shifting voids Alex's narrative confronts with imaginative excess. Marked as highly speculative narrative enterprises, they reflect Jonathan's genuinely creative—and unmistakably fictional—attempts to (re-)construct his family's history and to imagine what life may have been like for his Jewish-Ukrainian predecessors. The rather fruitless tourist trip to the site of his family's origin Alex recounts is thus superceded by a purely imaginary journey into the past whose reliance on documentary 'evidence' and surviving 'records' is persistently undermined and eventually clouded in a profound ambiguity. Jonathan's chapters are indeed "fantasies of witnessing," though their aim is not to make the catastrophic events of the Holocaust "*more real*," as Weissman's usage of the term implies (4), but to (re-)imagine that vibrant shtetl culture that the Holocaust has irreversibly destroyed. Like the "stencilized" chapters of Pynchon's *V.*, Jonathan's chapters most effectively ground the novel's destabilizations in the workings of creativity, staging its capricious force while exposing the personal and cultural desires that go into their making.

With no records to draw on apart from a few family photographs and his grandfather's unrevealing journal, Jonathan's reconstructions of shtetl life quickly spin off into a fantastic world of Yiddish folklore featuring, as Lee Behlman points out, a "host of magical-realist devices, including a baby mysteriously born from a river, a synagogue that moves on wheels, and at one point, a sighting of the shtetl by a future astronaut on the Moon" (59). The fantastic world Jonathan invents thus adds to the already excessively creative

momentum of his narrative performance as it becomes steeped in the playful ambiguities and marvelous rhythms of Yiddish storytelling. This rich literary and cultural tradition has clearly been inscribed into Jonathan's imagination and has come to fully shape his image of the shtetl—just as that of other contemporary Jewish Americans eager to book a trip of the "Heritage Touring" (3) kind.

While Jonathan's fantastic (re-)constructions may thus indeed appropriate a narrative mode reminiscent of 'magical realist' renderings of the ordinary myths, legends, and gossip of a small rural village, as Behlman suggests and many reviewers have advocated, the fact that Jonathan's authorship remains visible and is continually negotiated throughout the novel has this mode appear as a conscious or subconscious *choice* Jonathan makes in telling his story. The effect, I would argue, is a multi-layered self-reflexive destabilization that exposes the 'magical realist' plot as a culturally inherited narrative convention Jonathan draws on, staging the subject's culturally preconfigured control over the products of its creative sense-making processes and laying bare the kind of fantasies, desires and needs of differentiation that go into the specific (re-)constructions Jonathan generates. Read in this Peircean manner, with Peirce's notion of 'object formation' in mind, the overtly "conventional" (Lawson) quality of the chapters' "magical-realist vignettes" (Mendelsohn) that many reviewers have lamented cannot be simply dismissed as a lack of skill on the author's, i.e. Jonathan Safran Foer's part, but must be seen as an integral part of the novel's negotiation of creativity, or, rather, of the creative process of (re-)inventing the past that is exposed to inevitably rely on culturally predetermined patterns of interpretation. Jonathan's chapters are not 'magical realist' in any conventional sense of the term; their use of this narrative mode rather functions to highlight and deepen the purely imaginative quality of Jonathan's immersive act and to reflect on the literary and cultural modes of imagining it relies on. Hence, the apparently 'magical' occurrences the chapters relate—such as the baby girl's appearance in the river—do not function as "ordinary events in a realist story," as Maggie Ann Bowers would expect them to do in a 'magical realist' context (25), but only widen the gaps and deepen the ambiguities the

novel exploits in staging a world that is endlessly (re-)created in the act of its belated fictional (re-)construction.[7]

At the same time, the creative routines of its imaginary Jewish inhabitants heighten, reflect, and mirror the creative act that goes into their making and add to the destabilizing force of Jonathan's excessive guesswork. Thus, the line that sparks Jonathan's narrative enterprise—"It was March 18, 1791, when Trachim B's double-axle wagon either did or did not pin him against the bottom of the Brod River" (8)—beautifully sets the tone for the host of ambiguities, profound uncertainties, and myriad (im)possibilities to come and immediately instigates Jonathan's construction of the shtetl as a haven for lively disputes, "ever-changing negotiation[s]" (10), and a seemingly boundless creative ingenuity. From the very beginning, the uncertain fate of the wagon's unfortunate driver, who may or may not have been Trachim B and may or may not have drowned, opens up the speculative realm of creative guesswork which the novel has the shtetl's "three-hundred-odd citizens" (12) gladly exploit.[8] "*I have seen everything that happened*," Sofiowka N "*hysterically*" exclaims, for instance,

> *I witnessed it all. The wagon was moving too fast for this dirt road* […] *and suddenly it flipped itself, and if that's not exactly the truth, then the wagon didn't flip itself, but was itself flipped by a wind from Kiev or Odessa or wherever, and if that doesn't seem quite correct, then what happened was* […] *an angel with gravestone-feathered wings descended from heaven to take Trachim back with him.* (9)

As this declaration, put forth by the sole self-proclaimed eye-witness of the event, marks the creation of a seminal shtetl legend, the 'magical' appearance of an "*angel with gravestone-feathered wings*" only adds to the jumble of possible accounts that vie for public recognition and cloud the event in mystery. The novel clearly delights in Sofiowka's incoherence and explanatory inconsistency—as they become explicitly pronounced in the recognition that his proposed

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[7] The term 'magical realist' is of course highly contested. For a detailed discussion of 'magical realism' and its distinction from related literary and artistic modes such as 'magic realism' and 'the fantastic' see Bowers, *Magic(al) Realism*, or Anne Hegerfeldt, *Lies that Tell the Truth*.

[8] Large sections of Jonathan's chapters and all of Alex's letters are set in italics. I quote these passages as they appear in the text.

versions of the event are "not exactly the truth" and don't "seem quite correct"—emphasizing the creative dimension of his performance instead and undermining his trustworthiness to the point that it is explicitly called into question. "Is this someone to trust for a story?" a group of Trachimbroders eventually asks, doubtfully pointing to his "madness" and his tendency to forget even the most "terribly important" things (15).

No less eager to "debate that about which they knew nothing" (12), the other Trachimbroders soon join the chorus of passionate interpreters—"curiosity being," as we learn, "the only thing the citizens shared" (10)—bringing forth additional conflicting accounts of the unfolding of events, Trachim's fate, and the mysterious appearance of the baby girl—Jonathan's "great-great-great-great-great-grandmother" (16)—in the wagon's floating debris. Jonathan's narrative carefully stages the shtetl's divisions over these issues once again grounding his image of shtetl life in an atmosphere of lively disagreements, productive uncertainties, and creative sense-making practices. "There were those who thought that Trachim would never be found, that the current brushed enough loose sediment over him to properly bury his body," we learn; and "[t]here were those who suspected that he was not pinned under his wagon but swept out to sea"; while "[s]ome argued that there was never a body at all," that Trachim, "the con artist," simply "wanted to be dead without being dead" (14-15). The unexpected surfacing of the child sparks additional and increasingly elaborate layers of guesswork, leading Harry V, "the shtetl's master logician and resident pervert" (16), for instance, to "put forth a lengthy argument" (16) about Trachim's pregnant wife and her possible involvement in the accident that could hardly be more vivid in detail and spectacular in story line and yet only deepens the profound ambiguity Jonathan's legendary family origin story remains inscribed in—after all, we learn, "not even Harry could explain the absence of an umbilical cord" (16).

As Jonathan's chapters thus delight in the Trachimbroders' passionate speculations and their excessive production of ever-more creative hypotheses, they join Pynchon's *V.* in reflecting on the frail Peircean moment of abductive inference and the destabilizing thrust of the subject's creative act of guessing the world into being. More and more layers of ever-more elaborate rumors, gossip, theories, arguments, and tales reveal how the shtetl's population constantly

"weaves itself into the world constituting it in signs as reality," as Rohr would put it ("Mimesis" 101), while keeping it open to debate and inscribing it in an endless process of (re-)negotiation. And just as *V.* grounds its creative guesswork in Herbert Stencil's attempts to reconstruct his father's past, *Everything Is Illuminated* intensifies the already exuberant playfulness of its abductive performances by tying them to Jonathan's narrative project of (re-)creating the lost world of his predecessors. In both cases, the host of speculative guesswork produced by the characters of the respective stories—by the waiters, conductors, and barmaids of *V.*'s Chapter Three and the eccentric Trachimbroders in Jonathan's tale—reflects on, mirrors, and deepens the profound destabilizations at work in the narrators' acts of speculatively immersing themselves into a past that neither has direct access to. Both novels compellingly explore the creative dimension of the process of reality constitution, staging the creative subject's power over the objects of its creation and accentuating the uncertainty and frailty that are bound to always remain at the same time.

Despite these striking similarities, however, the effects of the novels' creative vigor could hardly be more different. Whereas *V.*, as I have argued, dramatizes the capricious force of a sense-making process reduced to utterly subjective acts of guessing the world into being and draws much of its disturbing potential from Stencil's inability to cope with the frailty of his creative (re-)constructions, the creative destabilizations Jonathan's chapters prompt as they spin dazzling tales of imaginative excess remain infused by a remarkable sense of collective involvement. The creative guesswork brought forth by the shtetl's eccentric inhabitants, that is, feeds into a collective process of reality constitution that translates Peirce's vision of a communal sense-making process into creative acts of a collective self-fashioning. Likewise, Jonathan's chapters remain inscribed in a dialogic process of exchange as they contribute to the collective fiction-writing enterprise the two young men are engaged in. In contrast to *V.*, *Everything Is Illuminated* thus pairs its destabilizing vigor with moments of collective empowerment and explores the grounds on which the margin of opportunity produced by the very frailty Stencil so radically confronts might open up the space for a new kind of agency, one that reworks notions such as 'meaning' and 'truth' along the open-ended, pragmatist lines of intersubjective exchange and processes of cultural self-fashioning. The key to this

markedly different approach to the workings of creativity and consensus, I will argue, lies in the novel's appropriation of the epistolary mode. The letters Alex writes to Jonathan ground the novel's creative destabilizations in a dynamic of textual exchange, creating the powerful sense of oscillating textual in/stability the novel exudes. Most importantly, however, they eventually drive the novel's intriguing shift from textual play to 'meaningful' textual engagement, mediating the return of the subject into the text and performatively enacting the 'meaningful' (inter)subjectivities that *Everything*'s vision of collective involvement relies on. At first, though, as I now wish to show, Alex's letters serve as vehicles of the novel's postmodernist play, heightening its already highly destabilizing force through an additional layer of metafictional subversion.

Alex's Letters and the Destabilizing Momentum of Metafictional Play

The novel's first letter, dated "*20 July 1997*" (23), immediately establishes this subversive dynamic of metafictional play. Inserted after Alex's and Jonathan's opening chapters, it looks back to these "*first division*[s]" (24) of the men's evolving "*novel*" (25), commenting on their effectiveness and discussing possible "*corrections*" (24) to be made. Apparently, Alex responds to an earlier letter Jonathan sent as he expresses his joy over Jonathan's positive reactions to his text ("*I am so happy because you were appeased*"), thanks him "*for not mentioning*" some of "*the not-truth*[s]" he tells, and announces to have "*performed the corrections*" Jonathan "*demanded*" (24). These, we learn, involve the inclusion of entire new "*parts*" Jonathan proposed to add and several minor changes. Alex claims to have "*jettisoned out the word 'Negroes'*" for instance—an act that highlights the novel's implicit negotiation of 'race' as a category that has dominated the critical self-reflection of some cultures over the past decades while remaining markedly absent from debates in others—and quite amusingly tells Jonathan that he will no longer refer to him as "*a very spoiled Jew*" but simply as "*a spoiled Jew*" instead (24). In turn, Alex comments on Jonathan's first chapter, praising it as "*a very exalted beginning*" (25) but admitting that "*there were parts that*" he "*did not understand*," possibly "*because they were very Jewish, and only a Jewish person could understand something so Jewish*" (25). Finally, he points to the chapters' "*many mishaps*"

asking Jonathan whether he "*know*[s] *that many of the names*" he "*exploit*[s] *are not truthful names for Ukraine*" and summing up his sense of bewilderment in the highly evocative question: "*Are you being a humorous writer here, or an uninformed one?*" (25).

The destabilizing effects of the witty, metafictional commentary Alex's letter provides are indeed profound. The letter's overt display of the "*not-truth*[s]" Alex tells and its ironic rendering of Jonathan's creative transgressions as "*mishaps*" undermine the reliability of the two men's narratives and further strip them of referential grounding—beautifully parodying Alex's own inclination to uphold the conventions of literary realism along the way. At the same time, the changes to the evolving "*novel*" (25) Alex discusses inscribe the text in a powerful dynamic of endless creative re-invention that translates the novel's negotiation of the capricious force of creativity into the workings of a genuinely open fiction-writing process. Through Alex's letters, *Everything Is Illuminated* playfully charts the process of its own making and yet moves beyond it, hinting at the unlimited potential of possible revisions and opening its pages to the workings of textual play. The familiar—and most far-reaching—effect of this postmodernist metafictional subversion is an instant destabilization of the ontological boundaries between the world of the text and the world of the reader. The novel the reader holds in hand becomes the novel its two protagonists are writing, and yet this intriguing fusion remains undercut. Since the "*corrections*" Alex's letter records are yet to be included in future versions of the evolving "*novel*," the book that is *Everything Is Illuminated*, one might say, always remains late to come to itself, translating the postmodernist maxim of endless deferral into belated acts of revision that always wait to be realized. The letter's explicit rendering of Jonathan Safran Foer's authorial appearance in the text as that of the fiction-writing character Jonathan who pays and "*tutor*[s]" Alex "*to write for*" him (24) further adds to this destabilization as it unsettles the claim to authorship Foer makes on the cover of the published version of the book.[9] The subversive gesture involved in this amusing detail is beautifully accentuated later as Alex informs Jonathan in his third letter that he will "*not require*"

[9] I will return to this question of authorship in the context of *Everything*'s epistolary mediations arguing that the novel eventually moves beyond such a playful decentering, opening up new ways of *performing* authorship in a post-postmodern world.

that his "*name is on the cover*" and will generously allow him to "*pretend that it is only*" his (104).

From the start, Alex's letters thus exploit the acclaimed "destabilizing" (Kauffman 263) momentum of epistolary "play" (Bower 3), undermining what claims to 'accuracy' and referential grounding the novel may yield and steeping its historical re-constructions in radical uncertainty. What is indeed remarkable is that Alex's epistolary interventions never actually lose this subversive appeal either, even as the novel markedly shifts its tone from exuberant playfulness to a serious mode of ethical engagement. Thus, a bracketed remark Alex weaves into his narrative very late in the novel radically undercuts the referential links between the two narrative strands that the novel simultaneously works to establish. As part of a series of direct appeals to Jonathan that increasingly extend the epistolary mode and the space for metafictional commentary to the chapters Alex sends with his letters, this remark accompanies the scene that has Jonathan, Alex, and Grandfather inspect the one box Augustine/Lista gave them from her vast collection. The item Jonathan retrieves from this box is a dusty book that, as Alex notes, not only has "writing [...] on both covers, […] on the insides of both covers, and, of course, on every page" but bears the Ukrainian title "*The Book of Past Occurrences*" (224). As this title resonates with "*The Book of Antecedents*" Jonathan repeatedly refers to as the 'source' of his reconstructions, the recovery of the marvelous book Alex stages holds out the exciting promise of a link between Lista's exhaustive collection of historical objects and "*The Book of Antecedents*" Jonathan uses. The impression Alex's narrative conveys, in other words, is that Jonathan's 'source' is part of this collection, or rather: that "*The Book of Antecedents*" and "*The Book of Past Occurrences*" are indeed identical. The sense of documentary reliability that is thus created, however, is immediately undermined by the bracketed remark Alex adds: "(You may understand this as a gift from me to you, Jonathan. And just as I am saving you, so could you save Grandfather. […])" (224). As Alex refers here to the passage on the book's recovery as "a gift" to Jonathan that serves the purpose of "saving" him, the scene's credibility is instantly called into question drawing attention instead to the fiction-writing project both Alex and Jonathan are engaged in. Apparently, Alex simply invents the scene, after reading about the book in Jonathan's chapters to give his highly

speculative stories of Trachimbrod and its inhabitants the illusion of historical grounding.

As this late example of metafictional subversion reveals, the move the novel eventually makes from postmodernist play to a new sense of 'meaningful' textual engagement does not rely on notions of textual referentiality, nor does it involve a return to 'realist' modes of narration. Instead, I now wish to argue, it comes into effect as the text begins to compellingly (re-)enact 'meaningful' (inter)subjectivities, mediating their textual emergence through the powerful discourses of subject formation that gradually infuse Alex's letters. As the novel increasingly exploits the readerly politics of a literary tradition that many critics have revealed to be "irrevocably intertwine[d]" with the "history of modern subjectivity" (Simon 2), it takes an indeed strikingly pragmatist turn, marking the path that contemporary fiction has taken from the subject's postmodernist decentering that *V.*'s troubling vision of creative excess once heralded to its return in a new, post-postmodernist disguise. As I wish to show, the epistolary mediations *Everything Is Illuminated* performs not only provide a crucial backdrop and additional source for the Peircean negotiations of 'creativity' and 'consensus' I see the novel engage. They also explore how 'meaningful' (inter)subjectivities might be reclaimed through the very workings of a postmodernist textuality and how the contemporary literary project of moving 'beyond postmodernism' might be effectively pursued.

Performing (Inter)Subjectivities: *Everything*'s Epistolary Mediations

As in the case of *Beloved*'s intertextual ties to the slave narrative and its sentimental heritage, *Everything*'s (re-)turn to the epistolary genre brings into play a longstanding tradition of cultural negotiations that shape the novel's readerly politics. Drawing on the cultural work this fiction has historically performed in the construction (and deconstruction) of modern subjectivities and in related negotiations of national identities, gender roles, and the ever-shifting boundaries between public and private spheres, the novel puts the formal features of the epistolary genre to work to invest its narrative with a discourse of subject formation that proves to be highly instrumental in the construction of a reading position that fashions the reader as a reading

subject—absorbed in and constituted by a process of intersubjective exchange—even as it simultaneously exposes the generic tropes on which the illusory process of this construction relies.[10] The epistolary form, I wish to argue, functions as the central structural device that allows *Everything Is Illuminated* to have it both ways: to construct subjectivities coherent enough to be able to uphold their agency in the production of texts and 'meanings' on the one hand; and, on the other, to make use of the genre's critically acclaimed "open dynamic" (McArthur 186) and "destabilizing" potential (Kauffman 263) to simultaneously undermine these constructions and the potential meanings they produce.

In a process very similar to the one observed by N. Katherine Hayles with respect to Mark Danielewski's *House of Leaves*, Foer, it seems, has thus "found a way to subvert and have his subject at the same time" (279). His (re-)turn to the epistolary mode marks the return of the reading and writing subject whose textual engagements within the novel elicit readerly "responses" (Bower 2) that forcefully create a sense of 'meaningful' intersubjective exchange both within the fictional world of the novel (between its two main characters) and without (in the external reader's act of relating to the text). At the same time, however, the novel's construction of these intersubjective realms of exchange remains a highly mediated affair. The subject returns in its generically encoded *epistolary* form and thus emerges as the construct of a literary and cultural tradition. This tradition is put to work in a series of generic mediations that instigate the novel's vision of an ethically meaningful intersubjective exchange while exposing the discursive formations that go into its construction at the same time. The effect, I would argue, is again similar to the one achieved by the process of "remediation" that Hayles sees at work in *House of Leaves* (781). The subject becomes cast "as a palimpsest, emerging not behind but through the inscriptions that bring the book into being" (779), and is thus bestowed with a new kind of agency, an agency that

[10] The epistolary form has been the focus of a large body of scholarly work. In framing my argument on Foer's novel, I have especially drawn on Terry Castle's *Clarissa's Ciphers*, Terry Eagleton's *The Rape of Clarissa*, Linda Kauffman's *Special Delivery*, Elizabeth McArthur's *Extravagant Narratives*, Ann Bower's *Epistolary Responses*, and Sunka Simon's *Mail-Orders*. For an overview of the state of the field see Amanda Gilroy's and W. M. Verhoeven's introduction to the edited volume *Epistolary Histories: Letters, Fiction, Culture*.

manifests itself not *in spite of* but *through* the very process of the subject's textual inscription as it draws on cultural texts that have critically charted and determined the subject's fate ever since its emergence as a relevant cultural concept three centuries ago.

Since the agency that *Everything Is Illuminated* envisions must be continually performed, the novel's subtle movement from the destabilizing fervor of creative play to the ethical urgency of a meaningful intersubjective exchange remains intricately tied to the generic mediations the text carefully enacts. Alex's letters and the traces of Jonathan's responses mediate, generate, and stage the subject's return and spur the novel's negotiation of concepts such as 'agency,' 'meaning,' and 'truth' in the very context of a world marked by highly unstable signifying practices. It is thus hardly surprising that the interesting shift in tone that occurs between the markedly comic playfulness of the novel's early chapters and the sense of urgency and commitment that its final pages exude is prompted by two letters that herald a new dynamic in the subject's epistolary (re-)inscription about half-way through the novel. Dated "*17 November 1997*" (142) and "*12 December 1997*" (178), these two letters suddenly diminish the letters' earlier function as vehicles of metafictional subversion and textual play. Instead, they turn to the subject and the process of its constitution as important new sites of the novel's textual engagement, laying out the path of its return through a series of mediated textual inscriptions.

Reclaiming the Subject: Alex's Epistolary Confessions

In the first of the two letters, Alex's subjectivity is performed through a cultural practice that has been endlessly rehearsed by letter-writing heroines and heroes throughout the ages and has proven highly instrumental in the construction of a modern Western subjectivity in other literary and cultural contexts as well: the confession. Having spent much time and energy to repeatedly brag about his "many girls" (1) and numerous sexual adventures on the beach and in Odessa's "famous nightclubs" (2), Alex suddenly strikes a new tone as he writes:

> *I must inform you something now. This is a thing I have never informed anyone, and you must promise that you will not inform it to one soul. I have never been carnal with a girl. I know. I know. You cannot believe it, but all*

> *the stories I told you about my girls who dub me All Night, Baby, and Currency were all not-truths.* (144)

Properly announced through the confessing subject's appeal to the addressee's confidentiality, this confession marks an important step in the novel's construction of 'meaningful' (inter)subjectivities as it makes use of the trope of epistolary authenticity to implicate the subject's textual emergence both in the conventional discourse of the 'true' and 'authentic' 'self' and in a constitutive moment of exchange. The subject fashions itself as subject as it 'confesses' its 'true self' to an 'other' and performatively enacts its own inscription in a set of discursive formations that combine such powerful tropes as 'honesty,' 'intimacy,' 'truth,' and the aforementioned 'authenticity' with notions of an 'essence,' 'core,' or—to use the religious concept the passage itself alludes to—"*soul*" that the subject is implied to possess. To be effectively performed, the confession relies on a discourse of subjectivity as well as on the presence of a 'confessor' or confidant who bears witness to the act and realizes its constitutive potential.

The passage thus not only marks the subject's emergence within the text, it also generates a strong illusion of intersubjective exchange that reaches beyond the construction of the novel's internal dialogic dynamic to draw the external reader into the text as both participant in and witness to an intimate act of communication. As the letter form makes the external act of reading appear as an extension of the processes of reading staged within the novel, the reader becomes implied in the role of the confession's addressee, the second person "*you*" to whom the "*I*" confidentially speaks, and is thus constituted by the same discourse of subjectivity through which this "*I*" comes into effect. At the same time, the external reader remains outside the intimate bond of exchange and is forced into the role of an involuntary witness and discomfited intruder, who—in keeping with the epistolary tradition—is confronted with the uneasy voyeuristic attraction of a cryptic subtext of domestic violence and a looming sexual crisis that Alex's letters increasingly bring to the fore. After all, Alex's bragging is encoded as a strategy of survival in the face of a violent, abusive father who, as Alex later notes, "*would kill*" him if he were to find out "*who*" his son "*desire*[s] *to love*" (241). Written into the letters we find subtle traces of the whole range of veiled epistolary disclosures, spanning from instances of bodily abuse to a repressed and barely articulated homosexual longing.

By means of Alex's confession, the novel thus plays on, rehearses, and parodies the dynamic of a highly influential cultural practice of constructing and performing subjectivities. At the same time, it skillfully puts this practice to work in the attempt to instigate and strengthen its own efforts to reclaim the subject and (re-)negotiate the tropes into which it has traditionally been inscribed. Carefully placed about halfway into the novel, the letter thus sparks an interesting new dynamic: As Alex's confession explicitly exposes yet another set of "*not-truths*" he has boldly woven into his earlier accounts, it contributes to the same kind of destabilizing textual play that the earlier letters' metafictional commentary generated. This destabilizing effect, however, is now explicitly complemented by—or countered through—the willful construction of an illusion of 'truthfulness' that is grounded in the confessional bearings of an 'authentic self' engaged in a momentous act of intersubjective exchange. Both this 'self' and the act of exchange, however, (and this is now indeed an ironic twist) openly bear the traces of their own discursive construction. The confessional note, which the letter strikes as it has Alex cast his announcement in the confessional language of an intimate, confidential exchange over the 'private' issue of his sexuality, adds an air of 'truthfulness' to the novel and heralds its shift from uncommitted play to a 'meaningful' textual engagement. This new sense of an ethical urgency remains mediated, however, and never ceases to openly parade its own mediated quality. The effect, I wish to argue, is an intriguing interplay of oscillating textual in/stability through which 'stability'—like 'the subject'—is exposed as nothing more than a textual effect and is yet shown to perform a relevant function as a dynamic category within a dynamic process of signification.

The process that is thus set in motion is reinforced by a second letter Alex writes. Dated "*12 December 1997*" (178), this second letter builds on the confessional mode of the first as it further invests the novel with traces of the epistolary subject's meaningful presence. This time Alex writes:

> *There is so much that I want to inform you, Jonathan, but I cannot fathom the manner.* […] *I want to inform you about what it is like to be me, which is a thing that you still do not possess a single whisper of. Perhaps when you read the next division of my story, you will comprehend.* (178)

At this point, the epistolary trope of a private, heart-to-heart exchange is once again put to work in the attempt to both reveal and exploit the powerful discourse of subject formation that lies at its heart and to enhance the dialogic dynamic of the novel's textual engagement. The 'self' here emerges as the product of a discourse of 'self-expression' that perpetuates the familiar tropes of 'authenticity' and 'essence' as it pursues the subject's construction along the lines of a performative struggle to communicate its 'innermost' feelings and convictions. Alex's proclaimed effort to "*inform*" Jonathan "*about what it is like to be me*" picks up and strengthens the discourse of the 'self' that his earlier confession brought into play. This time, however, this discourse is mediated by means of the epistolary language of 'self-reflection' that has traditionally fashioned the private letter as a privileged space for articulations of the 'self' and musings of the "*what it is like to be me*" kind. As a result, the subject becomes even more deeply inscribed into the text. Through an instructive appeal that once again marks the convergence of internal and external processes of reading, the letter's addressee is then finally asked to read for the subject's traces in "*the next division of*" Alex's "*story*" and is encouraged to help enact its inscription beyond Alex's letters and extend it into the novel at large.

In both instances of the subject's mediated return, cultural discourses of subjectivity and practices of subject formation are effectively put to work to construct subjectivities coherent enough to render the novel's vision of a 'meaningful' intersubjective exchange plausible. To draw on Hayles' terms once again, the subject indeed emerges as a "palimpsest" (779); it comes into being as the *product* of "multilayered" cultural and generic "inscriptions" and processes of "remediation," and is cast as a textual effect through which such key concepts as 'agency' and 'meaning' can be performed and reclaimed (779-81). Unlike *House of Leaves*, however, where this process, as Hayles contends, is marked by "the advent of digital technology" and such digital "inscription technologies" as film, video, and the computer (780-81), *Everything Is Illuminated* enacts these (re-)mediations through the appropriation of the epistolary genre and its literary and cultural tradition. As a result, the emergence of the subject-as-palimpsest is both accompanied and reinforced by "a palimpsest of reading" that, as Terry Castle has extensively argued in his study on Samuel Richardson, characteristically adds to the "unique

power" of the epistolary mode by inscribing the reader in a complex overlay of reading processes that inevitably include, shape, and reflect on his or her own (16). As the two exemplary moments of epistolary 'self-fashioning' have shown, the processes of subject formation staged within the fictional world of epistolary exchange automatically reach beyond the internal negotiations of the text in order to construct and position the reader as reading *subject* involved in a process of exchange. To a certain degree, the effect is similar to the one Hayles ascribes to *House of Leaves*: As readers, "we find ourselves […] positioned *inside* the book we read, receiving messages but also constituted by the messages" that comprise the book (803). The epistolary "messages" sent and received throughout *Everything Is Illuminated* differ from the technological remediations of *House of Leaves*, however, in that they infuse the "communication circuit" (Hayles 803) with a discourse of 'human' agency and exchange. In drawing on the epistolary tradition, the novel (re-)turns to the historical site of the subject's cultural emergence to infuse "these posthuman days" (Hayles 803) with a strong sense of 'human' subjectivity and to re-engage the postmodernist letter-as-text with its (co-)function as a means of intersubjective communication. As the novel confronts the epistolary genre with its own past, it reaches beyond the widely acclaimed destabilizing potential of its texts and their status as "distressingly ambiguous linguistic artifacts" (Castle 43) and works to (re-)construct a pervasive sense of 'humanness' that effectively resists the impulse of a nostalgic retreat by never ceasing to openly display its reliance on a postmodernist textual performance. This is indeed remarkable, for it allows the novel's postmodernist (inter-)textuality to emerge *as a device* through which the return of the subject can be staged and the communicative function of its texts can be performatively (re-)enacted.[11]

It is therefore hardly surprising that the subject and its involvement in processes of sense-making and exchange remain intriguing sites of the novel's negotiation through much of its second half. As the two narrative strands slowly begin to converge—one moving backward, the other forward in time, toward the fateful

[11] I wish to thank Nicoline Timmer from Utrecht University for drawing my attention to this post-postmodern turn through the manuscript of her dissertation "For Real: The Post-Postmodern Syndrome in American Fiction at the Turn of the Millennium."

moment of Trachimbrod's destruction and the two grandfathers' survival in adjoining villages—the novel increasingly strengthens the letters' discourse of subjectivity and, perhaps even more strikingly, intensifies the dialogic dynamic of its epistolary form. Of course, Alex's skewed idiolect (re-)inscribes language in processes of translation and communication from the start, and his direct appeals to Jonathan explicitly frame the novel's narrative enterprise as an act of exchange even before the first letter formalizes its appropriation of the epistolary form.[12] After Alex's confession, the dialogue that Alex's narrative sets up becomes more pronounced, though, until Jonathan's chapters finally begin to explicitly respond. Just as Alex's letters heighten their sense of urgency and turn to a discourse of 'self,' Jonathan turns to Alex and addresses him from within the story of his womanizing grandfather in a bracketed remark that resonates with the same kind of new inter-subjective sensibility: "(Alex, this is part of the reason I can't tell my grandmother about Augustine)" (170). Throughout the novel's final pages, Alex and Jonathan then repeatedly speak to each other interrupting the flow of their respective narratives more often to insert bracketed remarks that openly acknowledge the other's presence in the fiction-writing process. Their dialogue thus becomes less and less confined to those passages that explicitly take a letter form allowing their texts to merge.

The effect of this fusion, however, reaches far beyond the mere formal fulfillment of a temporal narrative convergence. The skilful interweaving of narrators and texts rather intensifies the novel's negotiation of concepts such as 'agency,' 'meaning,' and 'truth' and compellingly ties the ever-increasing sense of 'urgency' and the pervasive 'need' for 'meaningful' engagement to a strikingly pragmatist notion of intersubjective exchange and communal involvement. The intriguing dynamic that is set in motion is beautifully conveyed in Alex's penultimate letter to Jonathan.

[12] The two early remarks "(Jonathan, this part about Grandfather must remain amid you and me, yes?)" (5) and "([…] [H]ow does this make you feel, Jonathan, in the luminescence of everything that occurred?)" (6), for instance, instigate the dialogic networking of the text(s) and effectively implement the epistolary politics of reading that later passages will reinforce. In this respect, the paradoxical gesture of a proclaimed and yet inevitably breached confidentiality and the skillful foreshadowing of ominous 'occurrences' yet to be disclosed are especially intriguing.

Commenting on the new sense of connection their joint fiction-writing process has reached, Alex writes:

> *We are talking now, Jonathan, together, and not apart. We are with each other, working on the same story, and I am certain that you can also feel it.* (214)

As this passage marks the emergence of the frail textual "*we*" that the novel's final pages carefully negotiate, it "*now*" explicitly advances a rhetoric of collective engagement and inscribes the growing intensity of the men's dialogic exchange in a language of action and power that underlines the dynamic quality of the "*work*" the two men are engaged in "*together*." At the same time, the passage frames this 'new' sense of correspondence as a question of "*feel*[ing]," or rather, as a question of being able to "*also feel it*," to 'share' a 'sense' of involvement in "*the same story*" without ever articulating or even knowing for sure wherein this 'sameness' actually lies.

Just as the 'consensus' Morrison's *Beloved* envisions manifests itself in nothing more—and nothing less—than a vague potential for a frail communal bond realized in momentary action, *Everything Is Illuminated* thus eventually ties the 'sense of urgency' it carefully builds to the vague potential of a frail, affective connection realized in the "*work*" of relating to "*the same story*." What drives the novel's urge to break out of the endless deferral of its creative play is the skilful construction of a hazy sense of being "*with each other*," of 'sharing' in the process of reading and writing a piece of fiction that ultimately resists closure and remains highly elusive. As the passage reveals, this "*feel*[ing]" of intersubjective connection seizes the narrators in the novel's final pages, but it also reaches beyond the fictional world of the text to powerfully draw the reader into the same kind of participatory relationship *vis à vis* the novel. The intricate tie that is forged between 'meaning' and intersubjective exchange, between the desire for a 'consequential' textual engagement and the dialogic positioning of the reader as a subject involved in processes of exchange, is indeed remarkable. It is remarkable because it taps into the same kind of pragmatist negotiations I have shown to be at work in Morrison's *Beloved*, reworking 'consensus' along the lines of an affectively induced dynamic of exchange that demands to be enacted and exploring ways to render the novel itself and its engagement with a troublesome and yet highly evasive past 'meaningful.'

"Do you feel it too?"
Performing Sentimentality in a 'Post-Postmodern' World

The sentimental discourse of "*feel*[ing]" that the passage explicitly evokes finds interesting parallels in *Beloved*'s complex reworking of the sentimental tradition and resonates with other contemporary attempts to infuse the fiction-writing enterprise with a new sense of 'urgency' and 'meaningful' commitment. In David Foster Wallace's short story "Octet," for example, the vague sense of a shared "feeling" (131) of something "profound and [...] urgent" (130) emerges as the central trope of resistance against "the tired old 'Hey-look-at-me-looking-at-you-looking-at-me' agenda of tired old S.O.P. metafiction" (130) that the story's desperate "fiction writer" (123) is struggling to overcome.[13] Not unlike the fiction-writing protagonist of John Barth's postmodern metafictional manifesto "life-story," this post-postmodern writer finds himself confronted with a literary tradition that has somehow exhausted its potential. Caught up in the "serious (and hideously time-consuming) conundrum" (125) of wanting to "somehow" convey "something" (123) through a series of "Pop Quiz-type" (127) fictions that seek "to compose a certain sort of '*interrogation*' of the person reading them" (123), he is forced to realize that "what that something is remains maddeningly hard to pin down" (123) while his playful formal exercises actually risk "compromising the queer *urgency* about whatever it is [he] feel[s] [he] want[s] the pieces to interrogate in whoever's reading them" (124). The situation, in other words, is terribly confused and rather hopeless until finally, "after the requisite amount of time-intensive worry and fear and procrastination and Kleenex-fretting and knuckle-biting" (130), it occurs to the writer that he can free himself from the threatening shallowness of "pseudo-metabelletristic gamesmanship" (127) after all if he only turns directly to the reader and asks "her straight out whether she's feeling anything like what [he] feel[s]" (131). In the case of Wallace's "Octet," the key to overcoming the pitfalls of postmodern metafiction and (re-)connecting to the reader in a different, "urgent, truly urgent" (133) way thus lies in a single, decisive question that Wallace's writer eventually

[13] I once again wish to thank Nicoline Timmer for pointing me to this parallel.

formulates in the following manner: "'This thing I feel, I can't name it straight out, but it seems important, do you feel it too?'" (131).

The significance that Wallace's story—or post-postmodernist metafictional manifesto—ascribes to the connective potential of a language of sentimentality is highly instructive; and the parallels between Wallace's urgent request to "feel it too" and Foer's engaging impulse to "*also feel it*" could hardly be more pronounced. In both cases, the act of 'feeling' "too" or "*also*," of sharing a sense of togetherness and connection, is crucial while the object matter of this act, what "it" actually is that the characters and fictional writers "*also feel*" and we as readers are asked to "feel too," remains oddly indistinct. I myself have repeatedly used the word 'urgency' to express this vague and yet compelling sense of 'meaningfulness' that Foer's novel exudes while refusing to ever tame the highly destabilizing force of its excessive textual playfulness. In Wallace's "Octet," the same word, "*urgency*" (124), comes to stand for a very similar dynamic. It is rehearsed over and over again in various nominal, adverbial, and adjectival variations and comes to signify the strong, even desperate desire to invest the text with "far more" (130) than the "tired old" (130) postmodernist playfulness, though this "more" (130) remains profoundly vague and manifests itself only in the frail gesture of an affectively induced intersubjective "feeling" of exchange that is heightened by the sentimental register of the "queer" (124), "weird" (129), "ambient" (129), and "nameless" (133) sense of potential into which this 'urgency' is persistently inscribed.

As it combines a strikingly sentimental discourse of "feel[ing] it too" with an extensive metafictional commentary on the exhausted potential of the "S.O.P." ('same old postmodern') "metatext" (124)—the latter establishing an unmistakable parallel to the feeling of "exhaustion" expressed by John Barth with respect to the formal innovations of high modernism four decades ago—Wallace's "Octet" both accentuates and contextualizes the sentimental tone *Everything Is Illuminated* eventually strikes.[14] Read in the context of Wallace's post-postmodernist (mock-)manifesto, Foer's epistolary negotiations are revealed to create the same frail sense of inter-subjectivity Wallace heralds as a key to overcoming the impasse of a by-now worn out and

[14] Barth's highly influential essay "The Literature of Exhaustion" was published in the *Atlantic* in 1967.

markedly shallow postmodernist textual play. Their move toward a frail, dialogic textual "*we*" that engages characters and readers alike in a dynamic process of exchange resonates with novels like Wallace's *Infinite Jest*, which voices this new "structured need for a *we*" (114), Douglas Coupland's *Life After God*, whose narrator "can no longer make it alone" (359), and Dave Eggers' *A Heartbreaking Work of Staggering Genius*, whose narrator is likewise overcome by a desperate longing for intersubjectivity and exchange: "I need community, I need feedback, I need love, connection, give-and-take" (237).[15]

What's more, both Foer's and Wallace's explicit rendering of this new sense of "connection" in a language of "feeling" opens up a highly promising path of (re-)constructing (inter)subjectivities in a post-postmodern age. As both authors reveal, this path leads through the longstanding cultural history of sentimentality and seeks to attune its powerful discourses of subject formation and "interhuman sameness" (Wallace, "Octet" 133) to the needs of the twenty-first century in ways that Morrison's *Beloved* has pioneered, as I have shown. In Foer's case, this strategy yields results that are just as intriguing as *Beloved*'s and, as I would argue, much more far-reaching than Wallace's. For whereas "Octet" remains infused by a desperate longing for a "completely naked helpless pathetic sincerity" stripped of "anything coy or performative" (131), even as it ironically subverts any such desire through its own excessively self-referential meta-fictional performativity, Foer's (re-)enactment of the sentimental tradition firmly resists any sense of nostalgic retreat and thus opens up a much more promising way out of the "pernicious conundrum" than the one Wallace's writer pursues ("Octet" 131). Not unlike the narrator of Eggers' *A Heartbreaking Work of Staggering Genius*, who vows to "*celebrate*" rather than "lament" the "end of unmediated experience" (270), Foer's novel thus eagerly endorses the notion of a pervasive performativity, holding it out as a central key to re-constructing and re-negotiating 'meaningful' (inter)subjectivities beyond "the now-tired S.O.P. 'meta'-stuff" ("Octet" 125).

If the current historical moment is indeed marked by a desire to return to "realer" and "more sentimental" subjects, as Wallace puts it in his recent short story, "Good Old Neon" (181), then *Everything Is*

[15] Once again, I wish to thank Nicoline Timmer for drawing my attention to these texts.

Illuminated forcefully reveals that "realer" need not imply 'more naked' and 'less performative.' On the contrary: Foer's novel exposes the link that is inherent in Wallace's pair—"realer" and "more sentimental"—as it enacts the return of the subject by means of cultural discourses of subject formation that include the language of sentimentality. The subjects that *Everything Is Illuminated* constructs are "realer" precisely because they are performed; and they are "more sentimental" because their enactment relies on the discourse of sentimentality that has historically performed the cultural work of negotiating and constructing the subject in its 'modern' form. Both properties—"realer" and "more sentimental"—are openly revealed to be textual effects that the novel carefully works to achieve; and yet they are also shown to perform relevant and powerful functions both within the novel's dynamic of exchange and within the contemporary discourse of 'new' literary trends to which the novel responds.

As *Everything Is Illuminated* celebrates the productive potential of mediation and performance and champions the peculiar agency that these acts can hold out, it not only adds a realm of creative potential to *Beloved*'s sentimentally educed and yet stifled (inter)subjectivities, it also opens up new ways of addressing the questions of 'authorship' that Wallace's "Octet" raises. For the performative return of the subject that *Everything Is Illuminated* envisions goes hand in hand with the performative return of the 'author' into the text. 'Jonathan Safran Foer' first enters the novel by means of a playful, metafictional gesture highly reminiscent of the kind of authorial appearances 'Paul Auster' makes in texts like *City of Glass* or "Auggie Wren's Christmas Story." Not unlike the character 'Paul' of the "Christmas Story," who has been asked to write a piece for the Christmas edition of the *New York Times* but cannot think of a story until Auggie Wren, the shopkeeper of a cigar store, offers to tell him one, 'Jonathan' faces the challenges of a fiction-writing project he cannot handle alone. His appearance, like Paul's, accentuates the precarious processes of fiction-writing and storytelling and severely shakes what ontological foundations the dynamic interplay of author and text, fiction and reality, truth and delusion may be expected to yield.

The key function that Foer's novel ascribes to the performance of 'meaningful' (inter)subjectivities, however, eventually allows *Everything Is Illuminated* to move beyond this familiar gesture of a

profound fictional destabilization. As I have argued, Foer's generic mediations destabilize 'modern' notions of the subject and 'modern' notions of the 'Author,' but also work to reclaim new post-post-modernist versions of them. *Everything Is Illuminated* thus pairs its decentering of the 'author' with an exploration of new ways of thinking and performing 'authorship' in a post-postmodern world. The metafictional comment Alex makes as he suggests that he would like to "*continue to aid*" Jonathan "*write more*," but will "*not require*" that his "*name is on the cover*" and will generously allow Jonathan to "*pretend that it is only*" his (104), not only playfully unsettles the status of the book as a novel expected to have been written by the one author whose name appears "*on the cover*"—Jonathan Safran Foer. It also promotes and reinforces the text's decisive move of enacting 'authorship' as a profoundly *dialogic* process of creation, invention, and exchange. Hence, the 'author' who emerges from the pages of *Everything Is Illuminated* is no longer the solitary mind struggling desperately to (re-)connect to its potential readers and to 'somehow' overcome the paralyzing thrust of its own proclaimed 'death' that both Barth's and Wallace's metafictional stories parody and yet perpetuate. The 'authorship' Foer's novel envisions is rather performed by a series of epistolary mediations that allow the 'author' to return as a subject produced by and involved in a dialogic process of textual exchange. The 'appearance' of Foer's authorial stand-in, 'Jonathan Safran Foer,' in the text destabilizes the novel's relationship *vis à vis* the 'real' world of the reader and playfully unsettles the conventional boundaries of its fictitiousness. At the same time, this persona, 'Jonathan Safran Foer,' is constructed *by* the text and *enacted* as an 'author' whose presence is woven into the novel as part of a collective process of creation. 'He' cannot ever fully control this process, and yet 'he' remains deeply involved in "something" "truly urgent" (Wallace, "Octet" 123, 133) that draws its urgency from the very presence of a readership that remains bound to the text by the performative act of communication.

The dialogic process of creative invention that Foer's epistolary mediations ascribe to the workings of 'authorship' beautifully accentuates the profound interconnectedness of the novel's generic and pragmatist negotiations. The return of the reading and writing epistolary subject, which *Everything Is Illuminated* enacts, reinforces and conditions the novel's Peircean negotiations, allowing

'creativity' and 'consensus' to (re-)emerge as interconnected modes of human sense-making caught up in a perpetual dynamic of destabilizing play and potentially 'meaningful' acts of exchange. The highly productive realm of oscillating textual in/stability that the novel's epistolary mediations produce (re-)negotiates the two Peircean concepts that have informed my reading of *V.* and *Beloved* once again, pushing the Peircean dialogue I have set out to pursue in new directions and adapting its critical momentum to the concerns and needs of the new century. While *V.*'s negotiation of creativity takes up, prefigures, and reflects the radical philosophical, cultural, and political destabilizations that characterized the 1960s, and while *Beloved*'s search for moments of a frail, limited consensus speaks of the (im)possibility of social (re-)empowerment in the 1980s, Foer's insistence on the intricate dynamic interplay between the two Peircean modes of sense-making draws out and reinforces a contemporary desire to have it both ways: to embrace the liberating potential of a radical postmodernist uncertainty on the one hand, and to reclaim meaningful (inter)subjectivities on the other and to explore new ways of conceptualizing 'agency,' 'meaning,' and 'truth' in a post-postmodern age.

As I now turn to discuss these 'new ways' of thinking that *Everything*'s epistolary mediations hold out, I wish to unravel the remarkable interplay of creativity, (inter)subjectivity, and the notion of a profound 'moral' or 'ethical' responsibility that the novel carefully negotiates as it struggles to 'illuminate' the momentous and yet highly elusive past that its narrators collectively (re-)create. An important key to the novel's 'ethical' turn, I wish to argue, lies in its reworking of the Peircean notion of 'consensus' along the performative lines of a communal self-fashioning that engages the world's factitiousness in bold demonstrations of a strong 'will to believe.' This interweaving of a strikingly pragmatist dynamic with contemporary notions of performativity, I contend, is perhaps the most innovative contribution *Everything Is Illuminated* makes to the contemporary literary project of rethinking and reworking the rich legacy of postmodernism. Together with the compelling appeal of a genuine "response-ability" (Handley 681) that resonates with the intersubjective positioning of the reader suggested by *Beloved*'s epilogue, it allows the novel to resist the inherent conventionality of its postmodernist textuality and forces the 'old' pragmatist notions to return

in a 'new' performative disguise. The effect, as I will now argue, is an interesting new fusion that adapts both literary postmodernism and Peirce's pragmatism to the new challenges of the twenty-first century and once again reveals the critical potential of the dialogue I have set out to pursue.

Reworking Consensus: Toward a 'Moral' Vision of 'Collective Creation'

At a September 2005 reading of his second novel *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* in Cologne, Foer himself used the remarkable term "collective creation" to describe the larger cultural, political, and societal processes of (self-)reflection and creative invention to which he sees his novels contribute and respond.[16] Asked about his views on the political function of literature and his role as a contemporary writer, he responded by pointing to the unfinished story of creation that the Old Testament holds out and spoke of his fascination with the idea that the world must be continually created and that this process of creation remains an ongoing collective affair. Literature, he went on, can be said to assume a "moral" responsibility in the sense that it takes part in this creative process and stimulates others to join in. The best reaction to his novels that he could wish for, he concluded, would therefore be a creative act of some kind, a sudden impulse to "write a book, take a picture, make a phone call," or do something one would otherwise not necessarily have done.[17]

In the context of my Peircean reading of *Everything Is Illuminated*, Foer's own use of the term "collective creation," his specific rendering of the notion of a "moral" dimension of fiction and his insistence on his texts' potential to elicit responses and stimulate action are highly intriguing. The ubiquitous status Foer ascribes to the workings of creativity in the world and the dynamic, communal context into which he optimistically places the subject's creative

[16] The reading was hosted by Buchhandlung Bittner on Wednesday, 21 September 2005 in the Königin-Luise-Schule, Albertusstr. 19, Cologne, Germany.

[17] This last remark resonates with comments Foer has repeatedly made on his role as fiction writer. In a 2002 interview with Erica Wagner, for instance, he speaks of wanting "to make people say: 'maybe I never loved a book before, but I loved this book.' Or: 'maybe I never wanted to write a book before, but now I do'; or sing a song, or do this or that." See Erica Wagner's feature in the *Times*.

capacities bear striking resemblance to the Peircean world-in-the-making and resonate with Peirce's pragmatist faith in the productive powers of the mind and the social capabilities of human agents. At first sight, the effect of the epistolary mediations *Everything Is Illuminated* stages could hardly be more Peircean. The novel's epistolary mediations allow the subject to return as a letter-writing agent endowed with creative capacities and involved in dialogic processes of exchange. The workings of creativity and consensus complement each other, creating a Peircean world of "volatile stability-instability" (Rohr, "Pragmaticism" 300), in which the subject's creative guesswork is continually woven into processes of intersubjective scrutiny and exchange. The interplay of stability and instability, creativity and consensus that Foer's novel stages, however, actually takes Peirce far beyond his own philosophical thinking. The subject, in particular, returns to Foer's text through a series of enactments. It is never simply there, as Peirce was inclined to believe in his pre-Freudian times, but must be—and can be—continually constructed and performed. As in the case of *Beloved*, the Peircean movement "from subjectivity to intersubjectivity" (Rohr, "Mimesis" 109) is thus persistently undercut. Throughout *Everything Is Illuminated*, subjectivities are constituted through powerful cultural discourses that, as Alex's confession illustrates, construct the subject as the *product* of intersubjective exchange rather than its source.

As a result, the Peircean notion of in/stability becomes much more dynamic than Peirce himself foresaw (or could foresee). In a world in which subjectivities are always already intersubjectivities and must be continually enacted to come into effect at all, the Peircean "poles of stability and instability" (Rohr, "Mimesis" 107) can no longer be comprised of the subject's destabilizing 'creativity' on the one hand and the potentially stabilizing 'consensus' of an intersubjective agreement on the other. As the term "collective creation" that Foer himself has brought into play implies, the in/stability *Everything Is Illuminated* exudes cuts across these Peircean lines and insists on a much more intricate dynamic, where creativity remains intersubjectively induced and consensus can only come into effect as an open-ended creative potential that demands to be continually realized. As a consequence, the performative turn *Everything Is Illuminated* takes pushes the Peircean notion of 'consensus' to the realm of a creative 'will to believe' that, as I wish to argue, becomes

recast along the performative lines of an open-ended collective process of creative 'self-fashioning.' Since the intriguing dynamic of this performative reworking of 'consensus' as creative 'will to believe' is especially pronounced in the chapters that chart the Trachimbroders' ongoing construction of their own collective present and past, I will first expand my earlier argument on this particular site of the novel's creative historical reconstructions before I return to the critical stakes involved in the letter-writing enterprise at large.

Consensus as Collective 'Self-Fashioning': Everything*'s 'Will to Believe Anyway'*

Within the world of lively disagreements, "ever-changing negotiation[s]" (10), and creative sense-making practices that Jonathan's creative vision of Trachimbrod evokes, the case of a widow stands out as an especially instructive example of the kind of 'will to believe' *Everything Is Illuminated* celebrates as a key to reclaiming 'meaning' and re-enacting agency in a profoundly unstable world. This widow, we learn, "found" the unfortunate Trachim B after his mysterious disappearance in the river and

> took him in: bought him an easy chair, changed his sweater every morning, shaved his face until the hair stopped growing, took him faithfully to bed with her every night, […] cried with him over yellow pictures, […] began to miss him before she became sick, left him everything in her will, thought only of him as she died, always knew he was a fiction but believed in him anyway. (15)

Even though the widow's caring activities are revealed to involve a purely imaginary partner rather than an actual man in need, her 'will to believe anyway' lends a strong sense of agency and empowerment to her story. As in the case of the many other Trachimbroders who "willfully play[] the parts they wrote for themselves, willfully creating and believing fictions necessary for life" (83), this agency, I would argue, is grounded in the dynamic rendering of 'belief' as a creative act of 'self-fashioning' which 'willfully' confronts the profound epistemological uncertainty that any attempt to 'know' is bound to reveal. Even though the widow "*knew* he was a fiction," she "*believed* in him anyway" and is shown to use the "fiction" she has created to actively shape the rhythms and 'meanings' of her own life. The

illusion of factuality that the long list of physical activities produces before the text exposes the purely imaginary quality of the woman's commitment beautifully underlines the performative dynamic which the act of self-fashioning involves: The widow's 'will to believe' allows the products of her imagination to become 'true' as it performatively enacts fiction as reality. The performative reality that comes into being can then serve as a powerful source of comfort and guidance even as it never ceases to parade openly its frailty and constructedness.

Recast as a creative means of actively producing 'meaning' where none is ever simply there, the 'will to believe' *Everything Is Illuminated* holds out considerably reworks the notions of 'doubt' and 'belief' that inform Peirce's pragmatist thought.[18] For Peirce, both are "states of mind" (*CP* 5.369) that govern processes of inquiry. "Doubt," Peirce writes in "The Fixation of Belief," causes the process of inquiry to begin as it initiates "a struggle to attain a state of belief" (5.374); "as soon as a firm state of belief is reached," he continues, inquiry ends and "we are entirely satisfied, whether the belief be true or false" (5.375). Even though "we might fancy that […] we seek, not merely an opinion, but a true opinion," he argues, such a distinction becomes meaningless in the face of our tendency to "think each one of our beliefs to be true" (5.375). As Peirce establishes "belief" as "the sole end of inquiry" (5.375) and rejects the notion of 'truth' as a key category in dealing with sense-making processes, he offers an open and dynamic model of human sense-making that acknowledges the power of beliefs to "guide our desires and shape our actions" (5.371) in ways *Everything Is Illuminated* forcefully takes up. And yet, the kind of creative self-fashioning Foer's widow performs as she lives her life according to the fiction she has herself created pushes this Peircean world of "reasoning" (5.365) to new grounds. In her case, as in the case of the many other Trachimbroders who partake in similar

[18] At this point, it is important to note that the pragmatist notion of a 'will to believe' goes back to William James and was repeatedly attacked by Peirce. As Susan Haack has noted, the philosophical dispute revolved around the question of whether Peirce's pragmatic maxim tied meaning "to the pragmatic consequences of a proposition's being true," as Peirce argued, or "to the pragmatic consequences of a proposition's being believed," as William James suggested (13). The pragmatist stance *Everything Is Illuminated* takes may thus be said to be much more Jamesian than Peircean in approach, but it certainly radicalizes James' position.

practices, doubt and belief no longer complement each other as mutually exclusive "states of mind" (5.369). On the contrary: As *Everything Is Illuminated* explicitly reworks the Peircean 'will to believe' as a will to 'believe anyway,' belief becomes cast as a performance which provides an affective-creative response to a never-ending state of epistemological doubt. As a consequence, 'belief' ceases to exist as the doubt-less 'state of mind' Peirce had in mind and becomes an act of self-fashioning stripped of all certainty Peirce could once take for granted as he sought to lay out a "method of fixing belief" (5.378) that would eventually allow "opinions to coincide with the fact" (5.387) and cause "the ultimate conclusion of every man [to] be the same" (5.384). Instead, the novel envisions a world of profound uncertainties and myriad (im)possibilities where "nothing" (*Everything* 184) exists outside the generative realm of language and the productive powers of the imagination. Since the possible link between "opinions" and "fact" that Peirce could once expect his "scientific method" (*CP* 5.384) to bring about is thus always already undercut, 'belief' becomes a matter of 'willfully' producing what the novel beautifully terms "fictions necessary for life" (83).

Despite the profound destabilizations Peirce's 'will to believe' is forced to undergo, the performative dynamic of self-fashioning into which it becomes newly inscribed emerges as a key source of agency and empowerment not only for the widow, whose case I have cited, but for the entire shtetl. Yankel, for instance, who is chosen by lottery to become Brod's foster parent, "invented stories so fantastic that she had to believe" (77). He even manages to fall in love with the beautiful, loving mother he invents for Brod, "wake[s] from sleep to miss the weight that never depressed the bed next to him" and "remembers in earnest the weight of gestures she never made" (48). As Yankel and Brod thus join forces to "make a new world" (82), each "playing the parts they wrote for themselves" (83), their case underlines the collective dimension of the 'will to believe anyway' *Everything Is Illuminated* envisions. Again and again, the many instances of creative self-fashioning that the novel depicts feed into a collective process of reality constitution that resonates with the "social impulse" Peirce deemed highly important as he considered "the problem [of] how to fix belief, not in the individual merely, but in the community" (*CP* 5.378). In contrast to Peirce's model, however, the novel's communities are never simply there but must be performed.

As characters fashion stories to make others believe, and as the fictions they create become part of the social texture of tales and legends that shape the shtetl's past and present, their 'will to believe' emerges as a key to creating community and enacting 'consensus' in a world in which (inter)subjectivities are always already performed. It is thus hardly surprising that the novel's rendering of these collective acts of self-fashioning often involves stage metaphors and, as in the case of Yankel and Brod, images of role-playing that emphasize the performative quality of the 'consensus' they enact. Recast in the performative terms *Everything Is Illuminated* holds out, 'consensus' takes on the form of a 'deal' or 'pact' that forges communities in the simple collective act of 'believing anyway.' It becomes—in other words—what Paul Auster in *Moon Palace* has beautifully termed an "act of bringing nonexistent things to life, of persuading others to accept a world that [is] not really there" (209).

The parallel that can be drawn between *Everything Is Illuminated* and Auster's 1989 novel is indeed intriguing. As Rohr has shown, *Moon Palace* engages in a very similar project of rethinking 'consensus' along the lines of a pragmatist 'will to believe' that would allow for meaning to be performatively arrested in a temporary act of "play[ing] along" (*MP* 209). Key to this remarkable vision of a meaningful in/stability grounded in the newly reclaimed powers of intersubjective exchange is the "umbrella scene," which Rohr has extensively discussed in *Die Wahrheit der Täuschung*.[19] Here, Marco Fogg and Thomas Effing cheerfully join a young man who is walking the streets of New York on a "cloudless spring night" with the metallic remains of a broken umbrella in his hand: "the protective cloth had been stripped off the armature, and with the naked spokes spread out uselessly in the air, it looked as though he was carrying some huge and improbable steel flower" (*MP* 209). Together they playfully shield themselves from a non-existent heavy rain and "play[] along […], intuitively understanding that nonsense of this sort could continue only if [they] all pretended to believe in it" (*MP* 209). For Rohr, this scene is especially revealing as it picks up and reworks the broken umbrella motif already at work in *City of Glass*. In this earlier novel, Rohr argues, the broken umbrella comes to stand for the

[19] See pages 278-83 of her chapter "'Looking to what we're not': Narrativer Realismus in Paul Austers *Moon Palace"* and pages 103-08 of her essay "The World as Ordinary Miracle."

incapability of language to yield a referent. It is used by the delirious Professor Stillman to support his thesis that "our words no longer correspond to the world" and to justify his project of "inventing a new language […] that will at last say what we have to say" (*CG* 92). "When you rip the cloth off an umbrella, is […] it possible to go on calling this object an umbrella?" Stillman rhetorically asks Daniel Quinn at one point and provides the answer himself: "In general people do. At the very limit they will say the umbrella is broken. To me this is a serious error […]. Because it can no longer perform its function, the umbrella has ceased to be an umbrella" (93). In *City of Glass*, Rohr contends, the motif of the broken umbrella affirms poststructuralist conceptions of language and negates the possibility of "establishing truthful and reliable connections between the world's and the word's objects" ("World" 106). *Moon Palace*, on the other hand, demonstrates how a broken umbrella can be rendered meaningful after all: all it takes is a community and a strong 'will to believe.' Set off from the postmodernist appeal of *The New York Trilogy*, Rohr argues, the umbrella scene marks the 'neo-realist' turn *Moon Palace* takes as it stages "intersubjectivity, consensus, and truthful interpretation as social acts that are necessary and possible, if only momentarily" ("World" 104).

What is especially striking in the context of my reading of *Everything Is Illuminated*, however, is not so much the 'neo-realist turn' *Moon Palace* takes, but the peculiar reworking of 'consensus' this turn brings about. In her reading of the scene, Rohr refers to the men's collective act of bringing the umbrella to life as "a communicative game of mutual persuasion" ("World" 108). As she translates the extensive stage metaphors on which the scene draws—casting Fogg's and Effing's chance acquaintance in the role of a "gifted comedian," for instance, who "tiptoe[s] nimbly around imaginary puddles, ward[es] off raindrops by tilting the umbrella at different angles, and chatter[s] on the whole way in a rapid-fire monologue of ridiculous associations and puns" (*MP* 209)—into the language of a collective "game of mutual persuasion," she highlights the "playful" ("World" 108) dynamic into which the novel's reworking of 'consensus' becomes inscribed. And yet, her use of the term "persuasion" is somewhat misleading as it still resonates with Peirce's world of 'reasoning' and falls short of fully appreciating the performative dimension of the 'will to believe' the men's "game"

actually involves. For throughout the episode, it is in fact quite clear that no one is ever persuaded. The "game" the men play becomes possible only as they "pretend[] to believe" and as they "play[] along" with "the spirit of the joke" (*MP* 209). Their 'consensus,' in other words, is not only a "game" to be played, it is a performance, a 'will to believe anyway' of the kind *Everything Is Illuminated* envisions. As such, it does not—and cannot—remain limited to playful acts of "mutual persuasion" that work to render words meaningful once again by shifting the problem of the signifying function of language from an issue of pure correspondence to the social realm of communal meaning-making processes. Instead, I argue, the act of "pretending to believe" that the men's "game" involves comes to serve as a powerful means of performing community in a world in which intersubjectivities cannot be simply taken for granted. The broken umbrella brings three men together for a frail and limited moment of intersubjective exchange. This moment clearly does not precede the men's "game" of "pretending to believe" but is made possible by it, allowing the umbrella scene to reveal a performative dynamic of community creation that bears striking resemblance to the workings of the 'will to believe anyway' enacted by Foer's novel.

While the scene's intertextual ties to *City of Glass* thus cause Rohr to focus on the markedly different approach to language and meaning which *Moon Palace*'s 'neo-realist turn' brings into play, its remote and yet no less productive dialogue with *Everything Is Illuminated* adds a new dimension to the 'return of the subject' that Rohr sees the novel herald as it calls attention to the ways in which *Moon Palace* enacts the (inter)subjectivities this 'realist turn' relies on ("World 103).[20] In turn, *Moon Palace* underlines both the sense of open potential and the inevitable limits involved in *Everything*'s reworking of 'consensus' along the lines of a creative self-fashioning. If all it takes to actually walk the streets of Manhattan, shielded from the rain on a "cloudless spring night" with the "naked spokes" of an umbrella "spread out uselessly in the air," is "imagination in its purest form," as *Moon Palace* suggests (209), then "anything can happen" ("Auggie") and we find ourselves immersed in a world of unlimited

[20] Rohr argues that *Moon Palace* "is all about intersubjectivity," but since her focus is on the novel's *reflection* of the Peircean moment of intersubjective exchange, she does not discuss how these intersubjectivities are in fact enacted by the text ("World" 104).

creative possibility typical of the fictional universes Auster's novels create. As Rohr has argued, however, *Moon Palace* also stages the limits of such a creative approach to 'reality' and its discursive construction (*Die Wahrheit* 282). Once Effing insists on using the broken umbrella during a thunder storm the next day, the physical consequences of wet clothes are stronger than any 'will to believe' in dryness: Effing falls sick and eventually dies of pneumonia.

As Effing's death thus forcefully marks the inevitable physical limits of the creative process of self-fashioning *Moon Palace* stages, it opens up intriguing parallels to the fateful moments of destruction and suicide that markedly restrict *Everything*'s vision of a 'new' performative agency. No matter how hard they 'pretend to believe,' the Trachimbroders cannot stop the inescapable unfolding of historical events that lead to death and destruction. Likewise, Alex and Jonathan cannot escape the momentous bearings of a past that has irrevocably come to shape their own lives. And Grandfather cannot right the wrongs of his own actions; tormented by guilt, he chooses death as a final means of taking responsibility for them. In *Moon Palace*, Effing's death forces Marco Fogg to admit that "not a day has gone by when I have not regretted the decision" to play along with Effing's umbrella-game, "but at the time it seemed to make sense, as though it would have been morally wrong to stand in Effing's way" (*MP* 213). The threat of "imminent death" that *Everything Is Illuminated* verges on (270), I now wish to argue, eventually introduces a similar 'moral' dimension to the act of storytelling Alex and Jonathan are engaged in. As in *Moon Palace*, this 'moral' appeal manifests itself in a language of 'responsibility' that seeps into the men's exchange. Unlike *Moon Palace*, however, it is also performed and becomes deeply inscribed in the responsive dynamic of the text itself. The result, as I now wish to show, is a world of epistolary "response-ability" (Handley 681) that allows notions of 'truth' and 'moral' commitment to be reclaimed as textual effects that demand to be enacted in the process of an open-ended 'meaningful' textual engagement of the kind envisioned by Foer's notion of "collective creation."

"Do you think that is acceptable?"
Enacting Moral 'Response-Ability'

The language of 'responsibility' that *Everything Is Illuminated* gradually weaves into its protagonists' collective fiction-writing project most prominently manifests itself in a passage that has already obtained a status of critical fame within the small body of scholarly work published on Foer so far. Given the key role my argument has ascribed to the novel's epistolary mediations, it is hardly surprising that this passage appears in the letter Alex writes to "*inform*" Jonathan "*about what it is like to be me*" (178), which is the second letter to advance the discourse of subject formation I have discussed. In this particular letter, Alex first thanks Jonathan for the "*momentous lessons*" (178) his writing has taught him—including "*the one lesson* [...] *that it does not matter if you are guileless, or delicate, or moderate. Just be yourself*" (179). He then turns to pose an outright ethical question that gives way to a remarkable moment of metafictional reflection:

> *We are being very nomadic with the truth, yes? The both of us? Do you think that is acceptable when we are writing about things that occurred? If your answer is no, then why do you write about Trachimbrod and your grandfather in the manner that you do, and why do you command me to be untruthful? If your answer is yes, then this creates another question, which is if we are to be such nomads with the truth, why do we not make the story more premium than life?* […] *We could* [...] *find Augustine, Jonathan, and you could thank her, and Grandfather and I could embrace, and it could be perfect and beautiful, and funny, and usefully sad, as you say.* […] *I do not think there are any limits to how excellent we could make life seem.* (179-80)

This moment of reflection not only brings an intriguing discourse of ethical responsibility into play but raises a host of important, interrelated questions and concerns. The notion of an "*acceptable*" mode of representation that, as Ribbat has argued, "will always be central to any debate on Holocaust literature" (215), for instance, appears alongside a reflection on possible "*limits*" to the novel's creative exuberance. In turn, the looming presence of "*things that occurred*" is explicitly pronounced, just as the fantasy of a "*story more premium than life*" exposes what Lee Behlman has called a

"subterranean desire" for "an escape from an uncomfortable reality" (61). Finally, and most importantly for my argument, the passage draws on the novel's dialogic form to frame the notion of 'responsibility' as a question of response, or rather as a question that explicitly calls for a response and action. As it thus ties the novel's exploration of memory and the challenging (im)possibility of 'making sense' of the Holocaust to its epistolary mediations, the passage opens up multiple layers of negotiation that dramatize the dynamic interworking of creativity and consensus, performativity and responsibility, textual play and ethical engagement the novel finally envisions.

The key to this interworking lies in the link between the discourse of 'moral' responsibility and the performative enactment of 'meaningful' (inter)subjectivities that Alex's question and the epistolary context in which it appears carefully draw. The ethical notion of an "*acceptable*" way of "*writing about things that occurred*," in other words, is brought into play alongside the discourse of 'authentic selfhood' that Alex's letters increasingly strengthen. The quoted passage pairs the epistolary tropes of 'intimacy' and 'authenticity' that mark the subject's mediated return with a confessional rhetoric of 'honesty,' to revive the notion of "*the truth*" as a relevant category in dealing with "*things that occurred*," and to affirm the narrating subjects' responsibility in dealing with historical events and realities. It infuses the letter with a discourse of 'responsibility' and indicates that there may indeed be ethical limits to the novel's creative play. This potentially stabilizing gesture, however, remains contested, for the passage actually reinforces the profound sense of unreliability that the novel's playful fabulations exude. After all, the two narrators are revealed to tell precisely not "*the truth*" but "*very nomadic*" variants of it. Both possible responses Alex provides to his question—"*yes*" and "*no*"—underline this fact as they propose to either spread out or cut back an already "*untruthful*" narrative. As a result, "*the truth*"—like 'the subject' and notions of "*right*" (218) and "*wrong*" (240) that Alex's subsequent letters draw on—enters the text first and foremost as part of a discursive strategy that relies on the discourse of 'self' which the novel's epistolary mediations enact.

This, of course, has far-reaching consequences for the question of "*acceptable*" representation that the passage raises and that any reading of the novel within the generic tradition of "Holo-

caust literature" is bound to elaborate (Ribbat 215).[21] Recast as a question of ethical 'responsibility' rather than mimetic correspondence, it returns to the text in a new performative disguise and enters the novel as a site of negotiation that is powerfully enacted by the text's dialogic form. Alex's discursive intervention pays tribute to what Ribbat has called "earlier debates on Holocaust representation" (214), but refuses to endorse the notion of representational standards or norms which this debate has continually produced. The debate enters the text as a self-reflexive discursive device that helps promote the discourse of "*limits*" the novel brings into play as it both negotiates the irrevocable reality of "*things that occurred*" and voices Alex's desire to "elud[e] the terms of his own history and heal[] the physical and emotional wounds of both his and Jonathan's families" (Behlman 61). Read in this manner, the passage once again exposes the discursive in/stability the novel's mediations create. Its negotiation of possible "*limits*" to creative (re-)constructions of the past both does and does not enforce the terms of the debate on Holocaust representation, and yet never ceases to expose their reliance on processes of mediation. The notion of a social agreement on "*acceptable*" norms ('consensus') and Alex's fantasy of boundless imaginary revision ('creativity') stand side by side, leaving open to response the ethical question of whether one or the other 'should' guide the novel's historical reconstructions, or to which degree they 'should' do so.

In the face of the profound discursive openness *Everything Is Illuminated* exudes, this call for response, I finally wish to argue, comes to serve as an important key to the strong sense of ethical engagement the novel's final pages nevertheless hold out. As Alex addresses the reader directly and explicitly asks "*Do you think that is acceptable when we are writing about things that occurred?*" his call frames the question of possible ethical "*limits*" as a question of exchange and shifts the ethical grounds of the novel's engagement with the past from issues of mimetic representation to the dynamic "response-ability" (Handley 681) of the text itself. Recast as the text's ability to elicit responses, as well as its status as response, as act or work that involves processes of exchange, this performative vision of "response-ability" is rooted in and enacted by the dialogic form of the

[21] For extensive readings of the novel along these lines see Ribbat and Rohr, "Transgressing Taboos."

epistolary novel and the intersubjective reading position it inscribes. It relies on the construction of 'meaningful' textual (inter)subjectivities binding these constructions in turn to contexts in which texts serve communicative purposes and consequently yield a potential for action and social change. The impulse to respond that Foer himself has associated with the 'moral' dimension of his fiction is indeed deeply inscribed in the text, marking the strikingly pragmatist turn the novel takes as it moves beyond the pending circularity of its textual play to ground notions of 'moral' responsibility, 'meaning,' and "*truth*" in the frail realm of performative intersubjectivity and action.

The notion of a pragmatist "response-ability" that the novel's epistolary form thus enacts remains a source of negotiation throughout the moments of narrative fusion and intense dialogic exchange that culminate in Alex's translation of the suicide letter Grandfather writes to Jonathan on January 22, 1998. Here, the classical epistolary ending of guilt-ridden self-inflicted death comes to embody a radical form of response to "*things that occurred*," revealing what Ribbat has called "the destructive force of a much more painful, much more direct form of memory" than the "'post-postmemory'" Alex and Jonathan are confined to (213). As Grandfather enters the epistolary exchange with this final letter, history's lasting power to traumatize and "destroy" (Ribbat 213) confronts the novel's pragmatist vision of creative self-fashioning, etching the ultimate "*limits*" of Alex's fantasy of escape deeply into the narrative texture of its final pages. And yet, Grandfather's suicide note has the novel end on an optimistic note of imminent action. Instead of brooding over the past, the letter looks to the future, speaking of Alex's successful rebellion against his abusive father and voicing the old man's wish for his grandsons to "*begin again*" (275). As it then breaks off in mid-sentence with the three words "*and I will*," it creates a powerful illusion of suspended reaction that opens the text to acts of response and exchange. Despite the destructive force of memory Grandfather's death reveals, the novel thus ends with a moment of urgent communication, pending action, and implicit response that literally translates the terms of historical engagement from one generation to the next. The old man's radical move of taking responsibility for his actions gives way to the text's own 'response-ability' one last time, translating the novel's engagement with the past into the kind of ongoing dynamic intersubjective process of exchange which the vision of "collective creation" implies.

As Grandfather's death marks the final advent of a new 'post-postmemory' age, the letter form once again emerges as a crucial site of negotiation that allows the novel to envision a path through which the past can be rendered 'meaningful' even as it becomes ever more deeply inscribed into multiple layers of cultural and textual mediation. Although Alex and Jonathan find "nothing" on their journey into the past, the novel and its title can boldly declare "everything" to be "illuminated" in the end. "Nothing" and "everything" thus stand side by side, highlighting the remarkable dynamic of shifting textual in/stability that keeps the novel's performative revisions in constant motion. This in/stability, as we have seen, marks the return of the subject that Foer's epistolary mediations enact and pushes the Peircean concepts of creativity and consensus to new grounds. It generates a productive realm of dynamic volatility that cuts across conventional dichotomies and allows the novel to have it both ways: To reclaim the subject and subvert it at the same time; to embrace the destabilizing vigor of textual play and pair it with a sense of 'urgent' textual involvement; to celebrate the performative agency of collective self-fashioning and reveal its "*limits*" (180); and to appropriate discourses of 'self' and "*truth*" (179) allowing them to perform relevant functions within the text while never ceasing to expose their mediated quality.

This list could easily be extended, and yet it already reveals the impressive spectrum of critical (re-)negotiations *Everything Is Illuminated* undertakes. As it draws on the now familiar conventions of literary postmodernism to (re-)enact the powerful discursive formations of its literary and cultural intertexts, Foer's highly innovative novel not only hails the advent of a post-postmodern literary age that is marked by the use of postmodernist textuality *as a device*, it also establishes the return of the subject and the performance of meaningful (inter)subjectivities as key concerns of the current historical moment. Allowing Peirce's 'old' pragmatist concepts to return in a 'new' performative disguise, the performative (inter)subjectivities *Everything Is Illuminated* enacts most notably open up promising new ways of reclaiming 'meaning' and 'truth' in a post-postmodern world, underlining the promising potential that Peirce's pragmatist thinking continues to hold out and revealing the extent to which *Everything Is Illuminated* follows *V.* and *Beloved* in adjusting it to its own times.

Conclusion

When I opened my introduction with Ihab Hassan's redemptive vision of a "postmodern pragmatism" that would move "beyond" postmodern "nihilism" toward a pragmatist "aesthetic of trust" ("From" and "Beyond"), it was to shed light on the shortcomings and troubling misconceptions at work in much literary scholarship written under the auspices of the pragmatist turn. How might postmodern literary critics respond to this turn, I asked, if the apparent *raison d'être* of much pragmatist scholarship is to denounce postmodern theory and culture and set up pragmatism as an "American response to the quicksands and carapaces of cultural postmodernism" (Gunn 7)? May we dismiss Hassan's privileging of "great literature" over the "hubris of theory" as a humanist-conservative backlash irrelevant to postmodern literary criticism ("From" 11)? Or does pragmatism hold out a promise for postmodern theory and criticism after all? What kind of promise is this and how may it be fulfilled?

In the light of the encounters I have staged between Charles Sanders Peirce's pragmatist philosophy and the novels of Thomas Pynchon, Toni Morrison, and Jonathan Safran Foer, these questions demand to be revisited. What answers have my Peircean (re-)readings provided? And what larger implications do these answers hold out for contemporary criticism and theory? The argument I wish to make as I summarize and contextualize my findings is the following: Pragmatism provides concepts and tools for much innovative critical work that need not limit itself to the familiar canon of Ralph Waldo Emerson, Henry James, Gertrude Stein, and Wallace Stevens that Richard Poirier and Jonathan Levin—and many other scholars—have delineated. As my readings of *V.*, *Beloved*, and *Everything Is Illuminated* have shown, pragmatism may very well enhance and alter our understanding of postmodern fiction and may—by way of redescriptive gestures—newly engage the terms under which this fiction has traditionally been read. The far-reaching negotiations and critiques of pragmatism that the three postmodern novels have offered,

however, reveal that convincing theoretical versions of the "post-modern pragmatism" Hassan envisions still demand to be realized. As theories of knowledge, (inter)subjectivity, society, and culture, pragmatism and postmodernism may share certain affinities with what Hassan calls "pluralism" and "open, liberal, multicultural societies" ("From" 10); apart from that, however, they diverge significantly. Their endorsement of pluralist models of society and culture turns out to be based on rather incompatible grounds, for instance. Postmodern theory ascribes its pluralist outreach to the workings of linguistic *différance*; for pragmatism, on the other hand, pluralism is the result of human individuality and the uniqueness of subjective experience.

While affirming pragmatism's potential for contemporary literary criticism, my readings have complicated the terms of the encounter between pragmatism and postmodern theory. As such, they have extended the scope of recent pragmatist scholarship but have also challenged and reworked its central claims and assumptions, demonstrating that current pragmatist scholarship will go nowhere as long as it fails to acknowledge and engage important insights of postmodern theory and culture. My (re-)turn to Peirce's pragmatist philosophy has served as a valuable source of guidance for such a double move. Since Peirce stands apart from the work of William James and John Dewey that literary scholars have turned to in large numbers, since his work is, as Frank Lentricchia has noted, "difficult [to] access" ("Making" 220), and since it has largely been neglected by American neo-pragmatists, Peirce's peculiar brand of pragmatism enables us to both broaden and rework the pragmatist enterprise from within and without. Peirce has stimulated a kind of pragmatist scholarship that differs markedly from the general trend. Susanne Rohr, most notably, has applied Peirce to literary studies in ways that bridge the gap between theoretical encounters and textual practices, committing the pragmatist enterprise to the kind of concrete textual work it has tended to lack. What insights, then, has my turn to Peirce provided? How has my critical extension of Rohr's approach contributed to contemporary literary criticism and theory? And where do the Peircean negotiations I have staged locate pragmatism's future place in literary and cultural studies? As I now turn to address these questions in more detail, I wish to unravel my twofold argument, exploring the general implications of my Peircean (re-)readings for contemporary literary criticism before widening the scope to address the larger theoretical concerns

raised by the dialogue between pragmatism and postmodernism that this study has staged.

Rethinking Postmodernism(s): Peirce and Contemporary Literary Criticism

As part of an emerging body of critical work that has only just begun to reassess literary postmodernism and unsettle the terms under which it has been extensively viewed, my study has opened up new ways of reading postmodern fiction by shifting the rules of the language game that postmodern literary criticism has traditionally played. Rather than perpetuating the privileged postmodern idiom of hybridity, difference, power, and play, my readings of *V.*, *Beloved*, and *Everything Is Illuminated* have turned to a language of creativity and consensus, confronting the texts with key concepts of Peirce's pragmatist philosophy while allowing them to speak back to and rework Peirce's nineteenth-century model where necessary. What role does 'creativity' play in Pynchon's *V.*, I have asked. How is the (im)possibility of 'consensus' negotiated in Morrison's *Beloved*? How does Foer's *Everything Is Illuminated* stage 'creativity' and 'consensus'? And where do all these responses take the language of Peirce's pragmatism? In answering these questions, my study has provided fresh readings of each text, demonstrating that Peirce's pragmatism allows for a remarkable range of new interpretive perspectives that not only alter our understanding of individual texts but also open up new and at times rather unexpected dialogues among them.

Pynchon's *V.*, I have argued, is obsessed with the workings of creativity in a way that dramatizes both the destabilizing effects of creative play and its troubling mechanisms of control. The novel highlights the failure of grand 'modern' worldviews, speaking to the early postmodern moment as it confronts Peirce's concept of creativity with a critique of agency and the workings of power. Morrison's *Beloved*, on the other hand, carefully probes how frail moments of meaningful and empowering intersubjective exchange might be conceivable in the very midst of an unstable world of 'endless' signifying practices. Its complex negotiation of the (im)possibility of consensus thus eventually reworks Peirce's notion of consensus along the lines of a postmodernism of difference. Within the fictional universe of Foer's *Everything Is Illuminated*, creativity and consensus are finally recast

as interconnected modes of human sense-making. The novel's epistolary mediations, I have shown, negotiate the grounds on which creative (inter)subjectivities might be enacted, confronting Peirce with contemporary notions of performativity and opening up new ways of conceptualizing agency, responsibility, and power in a 'post-postmodern' world.

Apart from altering and enhancing our understanding of *V.*, *Beloved*, and *Everything Is Illuminated* and exploring the kind of critical work Peircean pragmatism allows us to pursue, my readings have also raised a number of critical concerns and agendas. Let me briefly sketch these out. First of all, my study has revealed that ethics and aesthetics are not the only fields of inquiry that current re-readings of literary postmodernism may look to in support of their re-evaluative work. As my Peircean readings have shown, pragmatism lends itself to critical interrogations that underscore the importance of such a revisionary enterprise and broaden its scope at the same time. By (re-)turning to pragmatist concepts such as creativity and consensus, we may revisit the founding moments of postmodern critique, "weigh what may have been lost or misrepresented," as Rob Pope suggests (7), and push for new readings and encounters. Adapted to the humble analytic purposes of literary criticism, Rorty's 'method' of redescription proves highly valuable in this context as it acknowledges the inevitable link between critical terms and analytic perspectives, and encourages us to shift our readings by shifting the rules of the critical language game. Both pragmatist theory and its 'method' thus contribute to the contemporary project of re-reading postmodernism while inviting us to further expand and widen its critical impact and theoretical range.

As a second important corollary, my Peircean re-readings have underlined the need and potential for enabling extended dialogues between the different postmodernisms that have come to shape postmodern literary production over the past fifty years. We have learned to appreciate postmodernism as a markedly pluralist and heterogeneous cultural phenomenon, but who would have thought that Pynchon's *V.* and Morrison's *Beloved* speak to each other in such remarkable ways? As Cyrus Patell has noted, "critics routinely assign" these authors "to separate pigeonholes and […] rarely find cause to consider [their] novels together" (xvi). One reason, Patell suggests, is that "Pynchon and Morrison are typically taken to be authors who

occupy radically different subject positions": Pynchon is received as "a white male, a descendant of the Puritan Fathers"; Morrison, in contrast, as "a woman descended from African American slaves." In an academic "climate" shaped by the pervasiveness of identity politics, Patell argues, these "differences in their personal genealogies" have led to the establishment of "different interpretive communities," both within the academy and without, and have thus "prevent[ed] Morrison and Pynchon from being compared to one another" (xvi).[1] Increasing levels of specialization among literary scholars have reinforced the tendency toward critical and institutional compartmentalization, one might add, creating distinct fields of academic inquiry and limiting the scope of critical interaction between them. Within postmodern literary criticism, moreover, the language of 'turns'—be they political, ethical, or postcolonial—has tended to set different brands of postmodernism off from each other, marking their differences rather than pushing for productive dialogues. In the case of Pynchon and Morrison, this has resulted in the perpetuation of a critical antagonism between Pynchon's early or high postmodernism, which has oftentimes been branded as "masculinist or misogynist" (Hite, "Postmodern" 698), and the postmodernism of difference that Morrison is seen to have established.[2]

Whatever the reasons for a lack of dialogue and exchange, my study has demonstrated that much is to be gained from a serious encounter between the different postmodernisms that we have come to place into separate camps for too long now. Novels like *V.* and *Beloved* not only share the kind of "formal affinities" Patell registers (xvi), they also hold out a remarkable range of negotiations that are yet to be fully explored in dialogue with each other. My Peircean

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[1] Patell provides evidence for this finding in a note, pointing to the contexts in which Pynchon and Morrison appear in the *Columbia Literary History of the United States*, the *Cambridge History of American Literature*, and the *Columbia History of the American Novel*. With the sole exception of Cornel West's essay on "Postmodern Culture" in the *Columbia History*, he notes, all entries assign Pynchon and Morrison to separate niches. Pynchon is variously aligned with "self-reflexive fiction," "metatexts," and "the avant-garde," while Morrison is grouped under "neorealist fiction," "women's fiction," and "postmodern realism" (Note 5, 198).

[2] Theo D'haen's notion of "counter-postmoderism" (54) underlines such an antagonistic setup, as does Deborah Madsen's use of the term "postmodernist 'antimodels'" in her abstract for "The Racial Dominant" (v).

language of creativity and consensus has opened up one particular avenue of such an exchange, shedding light on the ways in which the novels' negotiations of creativity and power, and consensus and difference, jointly address the workings of meaning-making in a world of proliferating signs and profound ambiguities. As such, it has enabled us to look closely at the two texts, acknowledging their differences while appreciating their subtle interconnections at the same time; and it has revealed that an extension of this kind of critical work promises to yield much innovative scholarship in the future. As I have shown, the search for new encounters and dialogues between texts like *V.* and *Beloved* and the different postmodernisms they both respond to and enact provides ample opportunities for expanding the project of re-reading literary postmodernism. My readings encourage us to further explore this potential, expanding the corpus of texts and range of postmodernisms involved, and looking to other theories that might draw out more connections and different interworkings.

One such additional field of inquiry may involve an extended exploration of the dialogue between realism and postmodernism that my readings of *V.*, *Beloved*, and *Everything Is Illuminated* have drawn out. This, I would argue, is the third important agenda my readings hold out for contemporary literary criticism. At a moment in time when the "merging of realism and experiment" draws increasing attention from literary scholars working on contemporary literature (Nünning 236), our notions of 'realist' and 'postmodernist' fiction demand to be reassessed. As Robert Rebein has argued, the "lens through which contemporary American fiction is viewed" has often been a "narrative of realism giving way to modernism, giving way to postmodernism" (6). Rehearsing such linear readings of American literary history, Rohr has extended this line of progression to include "a somewhat resigned return" to (neo-)realism in the 1980s ("Mimesis" 108). By breaking with Rohr's linear model and moving from her language of 'reflection' to a language of 'negotiation,' my readings have invited us to question the validity of such categorizations, pushing for new ways of engaging the relationship between postmodernist and (neo-)realist fiction. As such, they have also revealed the great potential of Rohr's Peircean approach. Its emphasis on the modes of inquiry and ways of reading that a text's aesthetic profile evokes does not ignore the formal features involved in distinguishing realism from experiment, nor does it privilege them,

allowing us to make out intriguing parallels between postmodernist and realist texts and acknowledge the interworkings of postmodernist and realist elements within a single novel. This potential demands to be further explored and realized as we struggle to make sense of texts such as *Everything Is Illuminated* that challenge conventional definitions of both realism and postmodernism, and force us to rethink the terms and effects of their interaction.

As my reading of Foer's novel has revealed, our understanding of the fiction of our time has much to gain from a critical rereading of the postmodern past and of the relationship between realist and experimental modes of postmodern literary production, but we must also explore the current return of much older literary and cultural traditions to the postmodern context. Peirce's language of consensus and the significance it ascribes to processes of intersubjective exchange have pointed me to *Everything*'s engagement with the cultural history of the epistolary novel and the language of sentimentality, revealing the extent to which the current desire for "realer" and "more sentimental" (inter)subjectivities (Wallace, "Good" 181) may be satisfied by appropriating sentimental strategies of subject formation and enacting them through the very workings of a highly self-reflexive, postmodernist textuality. "Realer" need not imply 'more naked' and 'less performative,' then, but may account for the enactment of meaningful intersubjectivities by and within a text that openly parades its constructedness. In the context of current debates over the fate of postmodernism in the new millennium, my reading of *Everything Is Illuminated* underlines the fact that we must alter our understanding of 'realism' to do justice to the reality effects produced by postmodern fiction. At the same time, it encourages us to move beyond the (post)modernist/realist framework that traditional conceptions of postmodern literature have tended to draw on and expand the range of intertextual and intergeneric dialogues across broader historical lines. Foer's and Wallace's joint interest in cultural discourses that reach back to the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries is highly intriguing, for instance. Postmodern appropriations of the sentimental tradition and the generic forms this tradition has produced demand to be further explored alongside other textual strategies of re-enacting (inter)subjectivities in a post-postmodern world. This fourth set of future inquiries that my study calls for will enhance our understanding of contemporary fiction, allowing us to further engage the current uses

of postmodernist textuality *as a device* and explore the source of the sense of urgency and commitment that many contemporary texts work to establish.

The fifth agenda that I finally wish to draw attention to concerns the future role of pragmatism in literary and cultural studies. In this respect, my Peircean readings have revealed the need to push for nuanced textual encounters, encouraging us to conceptualize and employ pragmatism as 'theory' in the poststructuralist sense of the term. Committing pragmatist scholarship to postmodern conceptions of (inter)textuality rather than modernist concepts of "great literature" that critics like Hassan tend to revert to ("From" 11), such a move opens up a whole new range of critical inquiries, taking pragmatism far beyond the kind of (neo-)humanist criticism that the pragmatist revival has tended to spur. What this involves is perhaps best illustrated by the dialogue between Pynchon and Morrison that Cyrus Patell's study *Negative Liberties: Morrison, Pynchon, and the Problem of Liberal Ideology* stages. Patell casts Pynchon and Morrison as "political novelists" who remain "strongly drawn to the overarching goals of Emersonian liberalism" (xviii, xx). Their novels are presented as "experimental and self-consciously difficult pieces of prose" that "pull apart, deconstruct, and re-imagine this official narrative, exploring in palpable detail what it means to live in a culture of Emersonian individualism, investigating its benefits and costs, its victories and tragedies, and the kinds of knowledge and power that it promotes" (xvi, xviii).

In a manner that is symptomatic of much pragmatist scholarship, Patell thus perpetuates the language of "U.S. individualism" without acknowledging the fact that both Pynchon's and Morrison's texts severely contest this language—not by playing it against a language of "community," as Patell suggests, but by radically undermining the very concepts of 'the individual' and 'the community' on which such a language draws in the first place (xiii, xx). What Patell fails to recognize, in other words, is the postmodern textual paradigm these novels engage so centrally. The effects of this failure are far-reaching. On the one hand, Patell cannot escape the language of "*Emersonian liberalism*" he claims to contest (xiii); on the other, he is forced to perpetuate a troubling notion of the kind of dialogue literature and philosophy may engage in. For Patell, literary texts in general—and Pynchon's and Morrison's novels in particular—have

the "ability to dramatize the complexities and idiosyncrasies of human life" in ways that "professional philosophy" cannot fully account for (xv). Literature, Patell consequently argues, "dramatize[s] philosophical situations" and "brings philosophy to life" (xv). This view brings to mind Martha Nussbaum's turn to literature as a terrain of ethical reflection and follows an argument that has accompanied much recent work in 'ethical criticism.' It remains highly problematic, however, as it not only turns the dialogue between literature and philosophy into a one-way affair—asking literary texts to (re-)affirm the philosophical views one seeks to engage—but misreads the texts by disregarding their self-conscious workings as *texts*.

Patell's example thus underlines the key role that conceptions of (inter)textuality are bound to play in realizing pragmatism's potential for contemporary literary studies. As long as pragmatist scholarship fails to engage the textual paradigm of postmodern literature and theory, it will hardly enhance our understanding of postmodern texts, nor will it contribute to the field's current debates in any productive way. Once we treat pragmatism as theory and confront it with the textual negotiations of novels like *V.*, *Beloved*, and *Everything Is Illuminated*, however, productive new insights become possible. In such a textual model, the dialogue between literature and philosophy can no longer be reduced to a one-way affair, with literary texts "dramatiz[ing] philosophical situations." Instead, it is forced to cut both ways, allowing literary texts to speak back to and contest the language brought to them. As my readings have shown, such a textual encounter opens up a range of negotiations that allows us to further engage the dialogue between pragmatism and postmodernism on theoretical grounds. Rather than simply 'reflecting' the philosophical insights of Peircean pragmatism, texts like *V.*, *Beloved*, and *Everything Is Illuminated* advance complex negotiations of creativity and power, consensus and difference, subjectivity and performativity, challenging the framework I have brought to them while revealing its relevance for contemporary theory at the same time. As such, they allow us to further explore the theoretical potential of the dialogue between pragmatism and postmodernism that I now wish to turn to.

Pragmatism(s) and Postmodernism(s): Peirce and Contemporary Literary Theory

Ever since Rorty's turn to Derrida in the 1970s and Habermas' seminal response to postmodern theory in *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity* (1985), theoretical arguments about possible lines of exchange between pragmatism and postmodernism have largely been brought forth in reference to the work of these three leading figures of late twentieth-century philosophy: Rorty, Derrida, and Habermas. As representatives of American neo-pragmatism, French deconstruction, and the German Frankfurt School, the three have come to personify the dialogue among these diverse, oftentimes conflicting strands of contemporary thought, providing ample material for comparative studies that variously engage their thinking about democracy, their different conceptions of ethics and politics, and their readings of continental philosophers like Kant, Hegel, Nietzsche, Wittgenstein, and Heidegger.[3] My study has taken a different route, turning to Peirce rather than Rorty and confronting his pragmatism with postmodern literary texts rather than the work of contemporary theorists. However, the theoretical insights gained by this line of approach overlap with key issues debated with respect to Rorty, Derrida, and Habermas, underlining the central sites of conflict that this dialogue yields while adding new perspectives and delineating further intersections and avenues of exchange. In the following, I wish to focus on two such sites of reciprocal critique: the clash between pragmatist notions of consensus and poststructuralist accounts of difference, and the diverse conceptions of subjectivity and agency that pragmatism and poststructuralism uphold. Both feature centrally in *V.*'s negotiation of creativity, *Beloved*'s reworking of consensus, and *Everything*'s (re-)enactment of 'post-postmodern' (inter)subjectivities, and both, as I will show, open up promising spaces of inquiry from which further encounters may fruitfully proceed.

In her introduction to *Deconstruction and Pragmatism*, a collection of essays documenting a 1993 Paris symposium that featured both Rorty and Derrida as well as Simon Critchley and

[3] See Chantal Mouffe's introduction to the volume *Deconstuction and Pragmatism*, Rebekka Reinhard's *Gegen den philosophischen Fundamentalismus*, and Mike Sandbothe's introduction to *Die Renaissance des Pragmatismus*, for instance.

Ernesto Laclau, Chantal Mouffe identifies consensus and difference as the central points of divergence between pragmatist and poststructuralist conceptions of politics and democratic society. Asking how "Derridean deconstruction and Rortyian pragmatism could contribute to the elaboration of a non-foundationalist thinking about democracy," Mouffe attacks Rorty for advancing a liberal utopia that is "more akin" to a "'consensus' view of democracy" than "one would have expected" ("Deconstruction" 2, 7-8). Like Habermas, she claims, Rorty privileges harmony over conflict, envisioning "moral and political progress in terms of the universalization of the liberal democratic model" and committing democratic politics to the creation of "the largest possible consensus among people about the worth of liberal institutions" (6-7). Rorty differs from Habermas in that he replaces the Habermasian belief in rational argumentation with a belief in sentimental education, but, as Mouffe argues, he likewise fails to acknowledge the "*pluralist*" nature of democracy, holding fast to the vision of a consensus-governed public sphere while relegating conflicts and differences to the realm of the private and personal (8-9). For Mouffe, deconstruction has exposed the shortcomings and dangers of such a consensus approach to society, replacing it with a "radical and plural" concept of democracy that accounts for notions of difference and indeterminacy and engages the complexity of social conflicts and power structures (9-10). In advancing non-foundationalist ways of thinking about democracy, she concludes, deconstructive models of difference prove "superior" to "all those who [sic] aim at consensus" (11). Rortyian pragmatism may share deconstruction's rejection of foundationalist concepts of philosophy, including Habermas's belief in the universal unfolding of reason, but the "unacknowledged presuppositions about politics and democracy" that are expressed in its vision of a liberal utopia "put the pluralist democratic project at risk" (7-8).[4]

The conflict between pragmatist conceptions of consensus and poststructuralist notions of difference that Mouffe draws attention to here is especially pronounced in *Beloved*'s reworking of Peirce's pragmatist-semiotic consensus-model. As I have argued, Morrison's

[4] Note how Mouffe unmasks Hassan's argument about pragmatism's and postmodernism's joint appeal to "open, liberal, multicultural societies" as simplistic. The "epistemic or noetic pluralism" that both envision, she reveals, is hardly of the same quality (Hassan, "From" 10).

novel powerfully exposes the dangers inherent in a consensual approach to knowledge, truth, and reality, asking how there can be consensus without the perpetuation of hegemony and the erasure of difference, how consensus can be desirable in the face of millions of marginalized and disempowered people whose oppression is brought about precisely by the consensus of those in power, and how a state of consensus can be reached at all in a world of decentered subjects who are constituted by rather than in control of the signifying power of language. Like Mouffe, *Beloved* insists on confronting pragmatism with a concept of difference derived from poststructuralist notions of language, subjectivity, and power, exposing its theoretical blind spots and marking its evident shortcomings from a postmodern perspective. But the dialogue that *Beloved* finally enables between pragmatism and postmodernism does not end on such a note of irreconcilable differences. Rather than dismissing the pragmatist concept of consensus and replacing it with a deconstructivist model of difference, as Mouffe suggests we do, *Beloved* demonstrates how the notion of consensus may be *reworked* to enhance our understanding of the link between meaning-making processes and social action in a world of linguistic *différance* and gender, race, and class differences.

The dialogue between Peirce and *Beloved* that I have staged thus expands, challenges, and recontextualizes Mouffe's thoughts on Rorty, Derrida, and Habermas. Mouffe clearly privileges deconstruction's notion of difference over pragmatist models of consensus but fails to think beyond the models of consensus that Habermas and Rorty engage. "Consensus, of course, is necessary," she argues, "but it should be limited to the institutions that are constitutive of the democratic order." In her attempt to decenter "'consensus' view[s] of democracy," Mouffe thus upholds the link between "consensus" and "democratic order," holding fast to a conception of consensus as agreement and merely limiting its scope to democratic "institutions" ("Deconstruction" 8). *Beloved*'s negotiations of consensus and difference, in contrast, move far beyond such an institutional approach to democratic politics, advancing a model of consensus that is much more closely aligned to the "'radical and plural democracy' informed by deconstruction" that Mouffe envisions (10). *Beloved*, I have argued, ties its reworking of Peirce to the question of how the paralyzing thrust that lies at the heart of the very concept of endless signifying processes might provisionally be overcome, how

momentary action might be possible, and how frail moments of meaningful and empowering intersubjective exchange might be conceivable in the very midst of an unstable world of de-centered subjects who are not only struggling to communicate with one another, but must work hard to construct their own subjectivity in the first place. As such, the novel envisions ways of theorizing consensus *within* a poststructuralist framework of difference, linking it to the highly unstable dynamics of coalition-building, community-formation, and social activism at work in pluralist democratic societies.

Seen in this light, *Beloved*'s reworking of consensus powerfully speaks to ongoing debates over what Judith Butler has called "political agency in postliberatory times" (*Psychic Life* 18). The fragmentation of gender, race, and class categories through which social movements could legitimize their agendas in the past—by appealing to the universal cause of 'women' or 'blacks' or 'the working class,' for instance—has challenged conventional theories and practices of feminist, anti-racist, and labor politics, raising the question of how to endorse radical notions of difference and think collective agency at the same time.[5] For bell hooks, one of the leading proponents of postmodern black feminism, the answer lies in a "devout commitment to building […] anti-racist communities of resistance" where "borders can be crossed and cultural hybridity celebrated" (*Killing* 272). Revisiting Martin Luther King's vision of a "*beloved community*," she rejects the claim "that such a community could exist only if we erased and forgot racial difference" (*Killing* 263) and rigorously contests Rorty's model of solidarity on the grounds of its re-inscription of a category of "sameness" (*Outlaw* 234). Instead, she insists on advancing communal forms of "anti-racist living and being" that affirm "differences of skin color, class background, and cultural heritage" as they radically contest "notions of racial purity, authenticity, nationalist fundamentalism […] that […]

[5] This challenge to conventional modes of political activism was prominently debated in feminist scholarship of the late 1980s and early 1990s. See Nancy Fraser and Linda Nicholson, *Feminism/Postmodernism*, Michèle Barrett and Anne Phillips, *Destabilizing Theory*, and Judith Butler and Joan Scott, *Feminists Theorize the Political*, for instance.

keep racist thinking and action intact" (*Killing* 264-65).[6] For Nancy Fraser and Linda Nicholson, the answer lies in rethinking political practice along the lines of alliance politics, conceptualizing feminist politics as "a patchwork of overlapping alliances" that might forge "a broader, richer, more complex, and multilayered" notion of "feminist solidarity" ("Social" 35). In *Working Alliances and the Politics of Difference*, Janet Jakobsen has pushed this notion further, enhancing our understanding of political agency as an "active site of alliance formation" and exploring how we can "work—in, with, through—alliances" without resorting to "unitary, pregiven selves and communities" as "building blocks" (2).

Beloved's reworking of consensus provides a remarkable backdrop against which to newly engage the terms of this debate. Consensus, *Beloved* suggests, forms an integral part of the frail and ephemeral coalition-building process through which a heterogeneous group can temporarily overcome its divisions and move to action. Reworked along the lines of Peirce's pragmatist-semiotic theory, it marks the temporary arrest of meaning within a highly unstable and potentially endless signifying process and thus adds a semiotic component to the theories of alliance and community politics that hooks and Jakobsen advance. As the scene of the women's gathering reveals, the forging of a frail and limited consensus does not erase the ambiguity and uncertainty that governs all sense-making processes. It does not take social form except in momentary action, underlining Jakobsen's claim that "communality" cannot exist "prior to the activity of movement" but is "constituted in and through activity" (2-3). In keeping with poststructuralist notions of subjectivity and agency, *Beloved* thus links consensus and collective agency in ways that radically differ from Habermas's model of "mutual understanding," which sees consensus as the result of an "interaction" between subjects "who coordinate their plans for action by coming to

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[6] For hooks, the challenge of moving beyond an understanding of community along the lines of "sameness" marks the ground on which Rorty's concept of solidarity fails. For Rorty, she argues, white America can develop a sense of solidarity with urban black youth by ceasing to look at them as 'black youth' and see them as 'Americans' instead. Such an argument, she notes, grounds solidarity on sameness: "If you can find yourself in the Other in such a ways as to wipe out the Otherness, then you can be in harmony." For hooks, the question that needs to be asked, however, is "Why do we have to wipe out the *Otherness* in order to experience a notion of *Oneness*?" (*Outlaw* 234).

an understanding about something in the world" (*Discourse* 296). Consensus, for *Beloved*, is not about coordinating plans, nor is it a state of agreement or understanding. Rather, it is a semiotic site of alliance formation through which "communality" may be temporarily forged to make collective action possible.

Such a reading underlines the importance of contemporary attempts to (re-)think community, solidarity, and alliance within a framework of difference; but it also reveals what may be gained by moving beyond the easy antagonism between consensus and difference that contemporary theory has tended to set up. In her introduction to *An Ethics of Dissensus*, Eva Ziarek notes, for instance, that she prefers the term "dissensus" over "dissention" for the reason that it "preserve[s] not only the inverted reference to consensus but also the carnal implications of *sensus* in its double significance as meaning and sensibility" (1). Why not explore the "double significance" of 'con-sensus' along these same lines and unsettle the binary opposition between the two? *Beloved*'s reworking of consensus indicates how this may be done, inviting us to expand Ziarek's reading and renegotiate the interworkings of 'con-sensus' and 'dis-sensus' in poststructuralist terms. Rather than envisioning consensus as the result of people operating rationally in their own light, *Beloved* stresses the affective dimension of the process of alliance formation, tying meaning to sensibility in ways that account for fleeting moments of consensus while otherwise affirming the workings of 'dissensus' along Ziarek's lines.

If the renegotiation of consensus and difference forms one important site on which the dialogue between pragmatism and poststructuralism may be extended, the question of subjectivity and agency—to which these terms are inevitably linked, as we have seen—forms another. For Mouffe, the "question of how […] democratic agency [is] possible" is "crucial" to the dialogue between Rorty, Derrida, and Habermas, as it points to the different ways in which pragmatist and deconstructivist theories account for "the conditions of existence of the liberal democratic subject." Within Habermas' model, she argues, political agency rests with "the individual" who appears "abstracted from social and power relations, language, culture, and the whole set of practices that make agency possible." As "rational subject," he or she exists "prior to society" and enters into communicative relationships with other rational subjects who con-

stitute the democratic public sphere ("Deconstruction" 6).[7] Rorty, on the other hand, acknowledges the fact that "democratic forms of individuality" do not simply exist but must be created. As Mouffe stresses, he envisions this creation "as a complex process that takes place through a diversity of practices, discourses and language games" (5). The poststructuralist streak that Rorty's pragmatism thus acquires is undercut, however, by the conception of political agency that suffuses it. Within Rorty's model, Mouffe notes, politics remains a matter of "pragmatic, short-term reforms"; it is, as Rorty explicitly states, "a matter of reaching accommodation between competing interests" ("Remarks" 17). For Mouffe, such a view fails to do justice to "the complexity of politics" and deconstructivist notions of "*the political*" ("Deconstruction" 6, 8). Speaking with Butler, one might add, it defines the political "as a set of practices derived from the alleged interests that belong to a set of ready-made subjects," tying political agency to the bargaining power of more or less stable agents rather than locating it "in the very signifying practices that establish, regulate, and deregulate" subjectivities (*Gender* 188, 190).

When it comes to delineating the grounds on which political agency may take effect, profound differences between pragmatism and poststructuralism thus come to the fore, exposing the key role that conceptions of subjectivity play in marking the theories' diverse agendas. As Sabine Sielke has argued, pragmatism "may allow for the processural nature of reality and subjectivity, yet [it] retain[s] the sense of a consistent subject, of an individual who can make his or her ideas clear" (86). My readings of *V.*, *Beloved*, and *Everything Is Illuminated* have underlined this discrepancy, revealing how all three novels challenge Peirce's belief in the rational subject and radically undercut his conception of intersubjective exchange as an exchange between pre-existing 'individuals.' *V.* mocks modernist conceptions of the knowing subject and exposes the power structures on which they rely. *Beloved* explores the psychoanalytic dimension of the process of subject formation, dramatizing the lasting effects of slavery on the construction of black (inter)subjectivities and displaying "the inter-dependence between discourses of power and the topography of the

[7] This view is expressed in the "paradigm of mutual understanding" that Habermas advances. For him, "mutual understanding" denotes "the intersubjective relationship between individuals who are socialized through communication and reciprocally recognize one another" (*Discourse* 310).

psyche" that poststructuralist thinkers like Butler and Slavoj Žižek have extensively theorized (Sielke 86). Notions of subjectivity and agency have featured most centrally in my reading of *Everything Is Illuminated* as it is here that the subject of Peirce's language of creativity and consensus is not only undercut but recast. Foer's novel demonstrates that (inter)subjectivities never simply exist but must be continually mediated and performed. At the same time, it reveals that such mediations and performances may very well be effective and that they may indeed allow us to speak of creative subjects and 'meaningful' intersubjectivities 'anyway.' As I have argued, *Everything Is Illuminated* thus adds a performative dimension to *Beloved*'s reworking of consensus, demonstrating how communities may be performed through affective-creative acts of 'belief.' But it also recasts *V.*'s negotiation of creativity, exploring the grounds on which the marge of opportunity produced by the very frailty Stencil confronts might open up the space for a new kind of agency, one that reworks notions such as 'meaning' and 'truth' along the open-ended, pragmatist lines of intersubjective exchange.

The dialogue between Peirce, Pynchon, Morrison, and Foer over notions of subjectivity and collective agency thus affirms the differences that Mouffe detects in reading Rorty, Derrida, and Habermas. Once again, it also opens up new lines of theoretical exchange, however, revealing the need—and potential—of confronting pragmatist conceptions of agency and subjectivity with poststructuralist accounts of power, with psychoanalytic notions of the unconscious, and contemporary theories of performativity. On this site, more than anywhere else, I contend, the encounter between pragmatism and poststructuralism must be pursued further; and here, more than elsewhere, a turn to Peirce's semiotic brand of pragmatism may prove especially rewarding. As we have seen, Peirce's pragmatism cannot escape its nineteenth-century roots and the belief in rational argumentation and consensual agreement that they espouse. Its unique configuration as a semiotic theory, however, provides ample opportunities for recontextualizing and reworking these notions from within. When we re-read Peirce along the lines Rohr has delineated, consensus becomes inscribed in the frailty of semiotic processes, for instance, and next to the rational subject who features centrally in Habermas's concept of modernity, we find the Peircean subject of semiosis, the "man" who is a "sign" (*CP* 5.314). But what are we to

make of this ambivalence? How might it help us (re-)negotiate the differences between pragmatist and poststructuralist conceptions of subjectivity?

Much has been written about Peirce's "approach to the self" and his "semiotic perspective on human subjectivity" (Colapietro, *Peirce's*), but critical views differ widely. After all, Peirce never developed a coherent theory of subjectivity, notions of 'the subject' were unknown to him, and his thoughts on 'man' and 'human nature' remain contradictory—like so many of his best ideas. Apart from this, approaches that link Peirce to theories of subjectivity differ substantially with respect to the kind of criticism they practice and the kind of agendas they propose. Peirce scholars like Rohr and Vincent Colapietro turn to Peirce's writings in search of an 'alternative' to poststructuralist theories of subjectivity; their aim, in other words, is to (re-)construct a distinctly Peircean theory of the subject by engaging Peirce's philosophy on its own terms.[8] Poststructuralist theorists, in contrast, tend to pick up particular aspects of Peirce's philosophy, for the most part specific semiotic concepts, extracting them from their philosophical context in order to enhance and alter contemporary theories of subject formation. Such critical eclecticism is practiced by Teresa de Lauretis, for instance, who has used Peircean concepts like the interpretant and habit change to "redefine experience" and "bridge[] the theoretical divide between semiotics and psychoanalysis" ("Gender" 166, 159).[9] For the purpose of enhancing the dialogue between pragmatism and poststructuralism and engaging their conflicting conceptions of subjectivity and agency, de Lauretis' model certainly holds out much more promising options. Let me briefly point out why.

Attempts to retrieve a theory of subjectivity from Peirce's pragmatist-semiotic philosophy cannot escape the paradigm of the

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[8] See Rohr's chapter on "Die Stellung des Subjekts" in *Die Wahrheit der Täuschung*, 27-43, and Colapietro's *Peirce's Approach to the Self*. Colapietro has also explored Peircean conceptions of subjectivity in a series of essays including "Peircean Reflections on Gendered Subjects" and "Notes for a Sketch of a Peircean Theory of the Unconscious."

[9] De Lauretis first turned to Peirce in her chapter on "Semiotics and Experience" in *Alice Doesn't*; in *The Practice of Love*, she extended her Peircean readings to issues of lesbian sexuality; and her essay "Gender, Body, and Habit Change" explores Peirce's relevance for gender theory. It was published in John Muller and Joseph Brent's volume *Peirce, Semiotics, and Psychoanalysis*.

philosophy of consciousness which Peirce worked to unsettle. They may point to Peirce's achievement in decentering the autonomous, Cartesian self, but this leaves Descartes in place as the relevant anti-model, raising the question of why we should revert to this framework to arrive at a theory of subjectivity today.[10] The problems that this major fault produces are apparent in Rohr's chapter on the Peircean subject in *Die Wahrheit der Täuschung*, and they pervade Colapietro's book-length study on *Peirce's Approach to the Self*. Both are forced to operate with notions of 'the self' and '*Bewusstsein*,' and both refuse to engage the insights of poststructuralist theory beyond a general interest in semiotics. For Colapietro, Peirce's model of "human subjectivity" is "superior to the antihumanist orientation of Saussure's structuralist and poststructuralist offspring," since Peirce refuses "to eliminate the acting subject along with the Cartesian cogito" (xix).[11] Rohr's chapter likewise ends on a note that affirms the superiority of Peirce's model, celebrating the 'resurrection' of the subject—"die Wiederauferstehung des Subjekts"—that it enables and noting that, with Peirce, we may safely speak of subjects again as agents (43). Attempts to (re-)construct a distinctly Peircean theory of subjectivity thus widen the gap between pragmatism and poststructuralism, either by playing Peirce against poststructuralism's alleged "liquidation of the agent" (Colapietro xix), as these examples reveal, or by buying into the kind of 'Peirce-was-there-first' argument that Walter Benn Michaels propagates by reading Peirce's attack on Descartes as "a high-water mark in American mistrust of the self" ("Interpreter's" 188).

In contrast to this, de Lauretis's attempt to integrate particular aspects of Peirce's semiotic theory into psychoanalytic accounts of subject formation opens up promising sites of exchange. For her, Peirce's theory of the interpretant and his notion of habit change are valuable conceptual tools when it comes to linking representation to the body and exploring the interplay between the two. As "an ongoing

[10] The titles of most essays on Peirce's conception of the subject reflect this problem. See Walter Benn Michaels' seminal "The Interpreter's Self: Peirce on the Cartesian 'Subject'" and Silvia Dapía's "Reclaiming the Subject: Mauther's and Peirce's Responses to the Cartesian Self," for instance.

[11] Colapietro, as we shall see, has somewhat changed his stance over the years, partly in response to an extended dialogue with de Lauretis. His more recent writing on Peirce's conception of the subject is less antagonistic, but it remains dedicated to the project of constructing a uniquely Peircean model of subjectivity.

series of semiotic mediations linking objects, signs, and events of the world to the 'significate effects' in the subject," she argues, Peirce's chain of interpretants "joins subjectivity to the social as a confrontation with material reality, and in particular the materiality of the body" ("Gender" 166, 169).[12] Such an understanding of the body as the place in which "the significate effect of the sign takes hold and is real-ized," she contends, links the subject of semiosis to Freud's bodily ego, opening up ways of joining "Freud's psychosexual view of the internal world with Foucault's sociosexual analysis of the discursive practices and institutional mechanisms that implant sexuality in the social subject" (167, 170). The eclecticism involved in reading Peirce with Freud and Foucault—or rather: Freud and Foucault with Peirce—in this manner does not erase the tensions that are bound to remain between Peircean pragmatism and post-structuralism. As the dialogue that has developed between de Lauretis and Colapietro reveals, however, such eclecticism delineates the grounds on which these tensions may be specified and further engaged.[13] Peirce's privileging of consciousness over the unconscious is bound to remain a central point of conflict, for instance. As de Lauretis argues, Colapietro's "sketch of a Peircean theory of the unconscious" cannot escape Peirce's description of the unconscious as "quasi-logical" and must consequently posit "a continuity between the unconscious and the conscious." In her view, however, "the unconscious as a psychic agency […] is not homogenous or contiguous with the agency of consciousness and is not amenable to that part of consciousness that pertains to deliberative agency" (171-72). Though Peirce's theory of the interpretant accounts for unconscious habit, that is, his conception of the unconscious cannot live up to the insights of psychoanalytic theory, revealing the difficulties involved in turning to Peirce for a state-of-the-art theory of subjectivity.

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[12] De Lauretis coined the term 'significate effects' in *Alice Doesn't*. For her, it "conveys the processlike and open-ended nature of meaning" ("Gender" 167).

[13] This dialogue began with Colapietro's response to de Lauretis in "Notes for a Sketch of a Peircean Theory of the Unconscious" and is staged in John Muller and Joseph Brent's volume *Peirce, Semiotics, and Psychoanalysis*. Here, de Lauretis' "Gender, Body, and Habit Change" and Colapietro's "Further Consequences of a Singular Capacity" speak to each other through a range of comments and reciprocal critique.

Uwe Wirth has staged a similar encounter between Peirce and contemporary theory, turning to Peirce's semiotic pragmatism—his "*Semiopragmatismus*," as he calls it ("Performanzbegriff" 45)—for a set of concepts and tools that might expand and rework contemporary theories of performativity. Drawing on Peirce's classification of signs, his concept of indexicality and his type-token-tone distinction in particular, Wirth explores how we may come to terms with notions of mediality, materiality, embodiment, and enactment as they are centrally involved in the conceptualization of performative acts. How may we theorize 'embodiment' in performative terms, he asks, and how are such acts of embodiment linked to acts of signification? Peirce provides answers to these questions, Wirth argues, since his pragmatist-semiotic theory allows us to link semiotics to theories of performativity and to engage the insights of current media theory at the same time.[14] For Wirth, Peirce's index and his distinction between type and token (*CP* 4.537)—a distinction that pertains to the material quality of the sign or its "presentative condition" (Liszka 20)—are important tools when it comes to devising a theory of performativity that accounts for the material conditions of performative acts and processes of reiteration while linking these to processes of signification—Wirth speaks of "Verkörperungsbedingungen" and "Akt[e] der Sinnzuschreibung" (52). Peirce thus allows for a reformulation of Derrida's concept of iteration and Foucault's concept of "repeatable materiality" (*Archaeology* 102) in the light of contemporary media theory, joining the two together while proposing to rethink performativity along the lines of a media-theoretical understanding of performative indexicality; Wirth frames this as "Konzept medial-performativer Indexikalität" (53).

As an intriguing site of exchange between poststructuralist and pragmatist conceptions of the subject and notions of performativity, the Peircean dialogue between de Lauretis and Colapietro over Freud and Wirth's Peircean re-reading of Derrida and Foucault reveal how the concrete dialogic work that I have pushed for by reading *V.*, *Beloved*, and *Everything Is Illuminated* with Peirce in mind may be realized in theoretical terms. Where nuanced encounters between

[14] Peirce, Wirth writes, "erlaubt sowohl eine Engführung von Zeichentheorie und Performanztheorie als auch eine Kopplung von Zeichentheorie und Medientheorie und eröffnet neben neuen Anschlußmöglichkeiten auch neue Perspektiven der Kritisierbarkeit" (45).

pragmatist and poststructuralist theories replace the easy antagonisms of much scholarship written in the wake of the pragmatist revival, fruitful dialogues are possible; and the insights gained through them may very well speak to central debates within the field of contemporary literary theory. Peirce, as we have seen, has much to offer in this respect. His writings provide a storehouse of concepts and tools that may be variously extracted, reworked, and combined to recontextualize poststructuralist models of sense-making and spur theoretical re-readings across a wide range of fields. Such eclectic work tends to bracket the distinctly pragmatist reach of his philosophy, however, singling out specific elements of his semiotic theory while ignoring the philosophical contexts in which Peirce's semiotic thinking developed. Like the Peircean re-readings of postmodernism I have proposed, the eclectic fusions of Peircean and poststructuralist elements that literary theorists like de Lauretis and Wirth advance thus not only reveal the unique potential of a nuanced dialogue between pragmatism and poststructuralism, they also underline its inevitable limits.

What my study finally reveals, then, is that easy fusions between pragmatism and postmodernism are not to be had and that the kind of "postmodern pragmatism" Hassan envisions is not only flawed but hardly desirable ("From" 13). *V.*, *Beloved*, and *Everything Is Illuminated* powerfully demonstrate that pragmatism risks perpetuating humanist models of 'man,' 'human progress,' and literary 'achievement' unless it confronts poststructuralist notions of power, difference, and performative language and takes the psycho-linguistic constitution of the de-centered poststructuralist subject into account. Pragmatism must travel quite a bit, that is, if it is to fulfill its promise for postmodern theory and criticism. It must move away from its nineteenth-century philosophical roots and venture further into the critical spaces delineated by postmodern theory. These may be the spaces that novels like *V.*, *Beloved*, and *Everything Is Illuminated* explore, and that theorists like de Lauretis and Wirth engage; but they may also involve confrontations with race, class, and gender theories of the kind that Bill Lawson and Donald Koch push for in their collection *Pragmatism and the Problem of Race*, or encounters with postcolonial theory and border studies that Paul Jay's *Contingency Blues* calls for. The time for a multi-faceted revision of pragmatism has come, it seems, and the floor for new encounters is open.

If pragmatism demands to be set on the move, however, postmodern theory must travel as well. As my readings reveal, it must reflect on and revisit its founding moments of oppositional critique, re-assessing the critical language it has come to take for granted and opening its agendas to a range of critical re-readings. The language of Peircean pragmatism has proven to be a valuable partner in pursuing such an enterprise. But this does not mean that pragmatism must incorporate poststructuralist insights into its philosophical system of thought, or that poststructuralism must become pragmatist in its reach and endorse Peirce's pragmatist language. My study offers no account of what such a fusion might look like. Echoing Stanley Cavell's famous challenge to "the use of calling Emerson a pragmatist" (215), I rather question the use of calling Peirce a poststructuralist or Derrida a pragmatist. As my nuanced encounters have revealed, it may be much more advisable to insist on differences and make use of the productive tensions they create, carrying the dialogue to the kind of critical contexts my readings have opened up.

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