

An Imaginary *Flânerie*: On Reading *Word of Mouth*

1. Introduction

“Theory in musical composition is hindsight. It doesn’t exist. There are compositions from which it is deduced. Or, if this isn’t quite true, it has a by-product existence that is powerless to create or even justify. Nevertheless, composition involves a deep *intuition* for theory.”

Stravinsky

To reflect on one’s own novel raises a number of points relating to critical procedure. How far does one *retrospectively* attribute intentions and designs which were not readily apparent at the time of composition? Is it possible (or desirable) to describe the imagination’s ‘method’ in selecting and metamorphising artistic material? What form of critical language will not restrict the novel’s capacity to generate multiple interpretations?

Two forms of potential abuse are immediately apparent; the first may be inflicted by a persuasive, sophisticated, and, perhaps, necessarily disingenuous commentator. It involves an abuse of authority (the supposed authority of one who wields ‘privileged insights’ into his/her own work). The second, related to the above, is inflicted on the novel itself by the imposition of a schema on a process and a text which ultimately resist theoretical closure:

“When I write a theoretical text I try to reach, from a disconnected lump of experiences, a coherent conclusion and I propose this conclusion to my readers. If they do not agree with it, or if I have the impression that they have misinterpreted it, I react by challenging the reader’s interpretation. When I write a novel, on the contrary, even though starting (probably) from the same lump of experiences, I realize that I am not trying to impose a conclusion: I stage a play of contradictions. It is not that I do not impose a conclusion because there is no conclusion; on the contrary, there are many possible conclusions (frequently each of them being interpreted by one or more

different characters). I refrain from imposing a choice between them not because I do not want to choose but because the task of a creative text is to display the contradictory plurality of its conclusions, setting the readers free to choose — or to decide that there is no possible choice. In this sense a creative text is always an Open Work. The particular role played by language in creative texts — which in some sense are less translatable than the scientific ones — is just due to the necessity to leave the conclusion to float around, to blur the prejudices of the author through the ambiguity of language and the impalpability of a final sense.”¹

From the beginning of the novel, I have gained many ideas from works of theory. Theory offers the writer of fiction a map of critical reflections, an organized and often concise database of observations, references, and connections. Yet when I have periodically set out to theorize my own procedures—in progress reports, for example, to the Graduate Studies Committee—the resulting statements seem inauthentic. Most writers, I suspect, can make confident and often impressive predictions based on their creative intentions; the novel will address x by means of y and will thereby represent a useful exegesis of z . Of course, the moment a work of fiction is reducible to such a convenient formula it ceases to be a work of fiction. We need a language of doubt and uncertainty for these are, in my view, the inevitable and even necessary conditions of truly “creative” writing, be it fiction, theory, or philosophy.

94. [But] I did not get my picture of the world by satisfying myself of its correctness; nor do I have it because I am satisfied of its correctness. No: it is the inherited background against which I distinguish between true and false.

95. The propositions describing this world-picture might be part of a kind of mythology. And their role is like that of rules of a game; and the game can be learned purely practically, without learning any explicit rules.

¹ Umberto Eco, Interpretation and Overinterpretation [Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1992], pp. 140-141

Wittgenstein²

In theorizing the conceptual and methodological underpinnings of one's own novel, one is similarly constructing the "rules of a game," but the game is played *outside* the text and is quite different from that played between the author and the primary reader of his/her fiction. What level of intimacy can exist between the author-as-critic and the reader-as-examiner? What are the terms of trust? Maclean describes narrative as "a delicate interplay of power," with the narrator's 'territory' clearly distinguished from that of the narratee and with each therefore being open to "invasion" by the other:

"How does a text maintain its authority, how does it keep a firm grasp on interpretation? The rules of the game involve control, at first seen as the control of the telling by the teller. Narrative may be seen as a delicate interplay of power in which the narratee submits to the control of a narrator, while the narrator must scheme to overcome the power of the narratee. Each experiences an invasion of his or her territory by the other. The narrator has the advantage that a map of the territory (a *self-reflexive* segment) can be included in the text. This is a means by which the narrator can control the advance of the other, turn it into desired paths, and ultimately even persuade him or her to cede territory."³

Eco, on the other hand, regards the text as a series of strategies which aim to construct a "model reader:"

"A text is a device conceived in order to produce its model reader. I repeat that this reader is not the one who makes the 'only right' conjecture. A text can foresee a model reader entitled to try infinite conjectures. The empirical reader is only an actor who makes conjectures about the kind of model reader postulated by the text. Since the intention of the text is basically to produce a model reader able to make

² Ludwig Wittgenstein, On Certainty, ed. G.E.M. Anscombe and G.H. von Wright, [Basil Blackwell, Oxford, 1969]

³ Marie Maclean, Narrative As Performance: The Baudelairean Experiment [Routledge, London, 1988], p.18

conjectures about it, the initiative of the model reader consists in figuring out a model author that is not the empirical one and that, in the end, coincides with the intention of the text. Thus, more than a parameter to use in order to validate the interpretation, the text is an object that the interpretation builds up in the course of the circular effort of validating itself on the basis of what it makes up as its result.”⁴

The intention, then, is to avoid squaring this hermeneutic circle by defining Word of Mouth as a text which bears a single, extractable “meaning.” We must accordingly consider our reading practices as an integral inquiry of the text, a point which is made at the beginning of the novel in the following *mise-en-abyme*:

Here it comes, the filth, soot and stench, the muggings, murders and riots, the daily parade of flesh and metal—STOP WAIT WALK—hurrying along, borne on a blithe navigation between two points in a city, two moments in time, eyes averted from the colliding worlds, the intimate drama of public space.

Word of Mouth, Prologue, p.1

Anecdote, autobiography and confession all have a role in this commentary which is not a commentary, this diary of strategic concealment. I shall offer no totalizing ‘interpretations’ of the novel because to do so would be to assume firstly that the “text” is somehow ‘stable’, and secondly that I, as its author, retained proprietorial rights over that text. It is not *useful*, in my view, to think of a literary text in terms of ownership—be the proprietor the author or, in more recent theoretical practice, the critic—rather, the rules of the game played between text and reader should be established by *negotiation*. The proper forum for such negotiation, of course, is that of dialogue:

“The dialogue provides a model for the reading of texts, even though we may not find a dialogue in the text. We can,

⁴ Umberto Eco, Op. cit., p.64

however, always find something (yet) unsaid, before, in, and after the text.”⁵

But how does one negotiate meaning(s) with an absent or silent partner?

Finally, the value of the essay form itself, with its positivist faith in the unfolding of thesis, antithesis and synthesis, needs to be questioned. The various drafts of my novel have incorporated ideas triggered not only by printed texts—fiction, theory, poetry, journalism, religious pamphlets, and advertising, amongst others—but also by film, visual media, musical forms and architecture. Critical reflection on source material might be expressed more appropriately, therefore, in the form of a multi-media presentation, illustrating lessons in compositional balance and disruption with passages from Stravinsky, for example, or the comedy of cruelty with a scene from a Buster Keaton film. Above all, however, a writer works from experience, and thus a walk through an unknown city at midnight may be more illuminating on the subject of fear than citing any number of existing representations or scholarly disquisitions.

“I like to let the winds and the rain blow through me: chance is my only experience, hazard my sole experiment. I do not subscribe to the idea that the world can be had for the asking. This handkerchief saleswoman, this little sugar bowl which I will describe to you if you don’t behave yourself, are interior boundaries of myself, ideal views I have of my laws, of my ways of thought, and may I be strung up by the neck if this passage is anything else but a method of freeing myself of certain inhibitions, a means of obtaining access to a hitherto forbidden realm that lies beyond my human energies.”

Aragon⁶

This paper will accordingly adopt a dialogic form where necessary, using citations both exponentially and antithetically, in the hope that critical reflection on the composition of the novel will be possible *between* the commentaries advanced. In this, I am adapting for critical practice my favoured approach for writing fiction;

⁵ Bengt Molander, “Socratic Dialogue: On Dialogue and Discussion in the Formation of Knowledge,” Artificial Intelligence, Culture and Language: On Education and Work [Springer-Verlag, 1990], Chapter 25, p.230

⁶ Louis Aragon, Paris Peasant, trans. Simon Watson Taylor, [Picador, Pan Books Ltd., London, 1987], p.101

the accumulation, selection, and organisation (or juxtaposition) of disparate “texts” in order to explore relationships of meaning, to find connections (or Baudelairean *correspondences*) where none were previously perceived. As in my novel, the reader is invited to participate in the construction of meaning(s) by mapping—or appropriating—the fragments in a way useful to his/her interests. This approach makes explicit the dialectics of reading; reading, in other words, not as the adoption of *made-to-measure* conclusions, but as a dynamic dialogue between different systems of reference.

2. Preparations

“You don’t ask a jazz musician, ‘But what are you going to play?’ He’ll laugh at you. He has a theme, a series of chords he has to respect, and then he takes up his trumpet or his saxophone and he begins. It’s not a question of *idea*. He performs through a series of different internal pulsations.”

Julio Cortázar⁷

It is important to record at the outset that my novel was difficult to conceive. I had been accepted onto the programme not only before I had a novel I *needed* to write (one hears this idea expressed often amongst novelists, as if a novel sets its own gestation period before announcing itself), but before I had a *practical* understanding or appreciation of the genre. I had always considered myself a short story writer. Indeed, before being obliged to write twenty page submissions for the MA writing workshops, my short stories were *very* short—more akin, perhaps, to prose poems. I could capture ‘textures’ (moods and atmospheres) effectively enough and I have always been drawn to “the suction of the absurd”, but plot, character, and structure were relatively uncharted territories for me. I had no specific political or philosophical agenda to translate into scenes, characters, and events. In the absence of a theme or central conflict, everything became potential material. I developed a voracious appetite for reading, conversation, films, walking, looking and listening.

“As a writer, I do more listening than talking. W.H. Auden called the first act of writing ‘noticing’. He meant the vision - not so much what we make up but what we *witness* .”

John Irving⁸

In assembling fragments for my mosaic of postmodernity, I had to learn how to look and listen to what was already present in my surroundings. Two characters in the novel—Cod and Ella—illustrate different stages of my training in this respect. Cod seeks confirmation in his surroundings for his own system of belief, a form of solipsism which is articulated in characteristically impersonal terms by using the pseudo-objective ‘voice’ of the third person:

⁷ Julio Cortázar, cit. in The Writer’s Chapbook [ed. George Plimpton, Penguin Books, 1992], p.106

⁸ John Irving, cit. in The Writer’s Chapbook [ed. George Plimpton, Penguin Books, 1992], p.37

In Cod's world change was nowhere more noticeable than in the changing sounds of the new neon theme park arising behind the listed facades of Addleton. Cod knew the world by its various sounds. He listened keenly to the aura of the times, to the invisible, pan-global signals in the satellite-studded air. He did not like what he was starting to hear. It was the sound of money - no, more than that, it was the sound of the *absence* of money, of cancellation, of self-liquidation. It was the frenetic, computerized music of panic, a faintly wailing white noise, liquidating all but its own urge to circulate. And circulate it did, digitally mastered for maximum violence, over jukebox, car stereo and Walkman, from boutique, barrack, and club, in teenage bedrooms and TV docudramas, on and on, blaring banalities, the new blitzkrieg beat bent on erasing all but itself in the bunker minds of its audience, who generally nodded in recognition, tapped a foot vaguely, and went quietly beserk with private panic.

Word of Mouth, Chapter One, p.5

In his objectification of experience there is no consideration of the role of subjectivity in forming his conclusions—the status of the observing I/eye—and thus the world is shaped to conform to his consciousness. His own, unacknowledged crisis becomes the crisis of a culture and the economic system which sustains it. There are parallels with Ella, who also filters her surroundings for ‘supportive evidence’ (in her case, of a love reciprocated), but here the narrating subject is quite clearly at the centre of the narration—indeed the *telling* itself (her daily search for signs from Kobal-Heath) has eclipsed the tale (or the “signified”). Her “system of belief” is accordingly achieved through the imaginative manipulation of signs prised from their original context of signification. I shall return to this point when I discuss paranoia as a principle of organization, but for now we should note that whereas Cod’s approach—which, of course, has analogies in certain critical practices—results in the exclusion of imaginative possibilities, the loss of interpretative limits experienced by Ella dramatizes the fragmentation of consciousness when *no* possibilities may be excluded from the fiction-making process:

“When my eye picks up something it is always a something intended for my eye.”

Word of Mouth, Chapter Two, p.14

Before perceiving the world as a text to be *written*, in other words, I had to serve my apprenticeship alongside Ella, by learning to see the world as a text to be *read*. In both examples, however, the *simulacrum* of experience is sought through the practice(s) of narrative.

A developing story operates as a filter between the writer and his or her experience of the world; it becomes a surrogate identity, framing one’s perceptions and qualifying one’s responsiveness to details, observations, and anecdotes, which are sought for their potential resonance, rather than for their capacity to confirm *a priori* conclusions. Or so one would like to believe. In fact, as a narrative takes shape in the imagination one seeks both “supportive evidence” for existing characters and principles, and contrary or contradictory lines of inquiry in order to test the validity of each reported “truth” before it congeals on the page. The essential dynamism of literary fiction (and, arguably, the linguistic vitality of Danny Zimms) may be attributable in part to this dual process of frame-making and frame-breaking.

With neither the foundations nor the scaffolding of my novel in place, I became a *flâneur* (before encountering the term in critical theory), browsing London streets and library shelves alike, gathering impressions, curiosities, brief passages of language and urban *tableaux*. Three related categories were starting to emerge in my thinking on (post)modernity; the city, shopping, and the paranoid reflex when multiplicities threaten. Each category represented a useful model for the organization and assimilation of information, and offered practical applications of narrative theory. Doubtlessly, their political significance was enhanced by the necessity of finding a framing principle for my expanding source material. In my later discussions of the city, paranoia and consumerism, therefore, the reader should bear in mind that an interest in the theoretical aspects of these themes is not unrelated to the practical problem of reading and appropriating a system as complex as that of contemporary capitalism for the purposes of writing a novel.

“Work on good prose has three steps: a musical stage when it is composed, an architectonic one when it is built, and a textile one when it is woven.”⁹

This combination of metaphors has particular resonance for me; not only does it effectively describe the changing approaches adopted in the different stages of writing (reflection, composition, and revision), but —with the exception of the textile/weaving analogy¹⁰—it also summarizes the shifts in emphasis on the *contents* of my novel as its stories unfolded. In order to trace the evolution of ideas which resulted in the present draft of Word of Mouth we must lower ourselves into the swamplands of scholarship and try to identify the individual features which came together to form the first draft of a story which subsequently became the opening chapter of the novel. Again, our critical methodology will be undermined by the unfortunately unavoidable elements of autobiography and serendipity in what follows. These reflections are therefore offered in a purely speculative vein, as factors contributing to the initial conception of the novel. Inevitably, the author is the last person to trust in these matters.

⁹ Walter Benjamin, “Caution: Steps”, One Way Street and Other Writings [Verso, London, 1992], p.61

¹⁰ I note, however, that this was the central metaphor in the novel [The Yarn Spinner] and critical commentary of my predecessor, Fadia Faqir.

3. Origins

“We desert the museum only to see it reconstructed on the streets.”

Word of Mouth, Prologue, p.1

i) In Summer 1987, during my final year studying English at the University of York, I rented a flat overlooking Clifford’s Tower near the city centre. Beneath my bedroom window tour buses would stop while the guide delivered a monologue on the history of the tower opposite. Through listening to the rival companies describe the same monument in significantly different terms, I learned a practical lesson in the instability of historical narrative. Each account was coloured by the speaker’s personality, sense of humour, mood, even by the time of day. My future wife, a historian, had recently moved in with me and we would lie in bed, comparing the competing *re-presentations* of Clifford’s Tower, arguing whether a verifiable historical objectivity could exist outside the seductions of story-telling. This memory informs each section of the novel where Addleton’s heritage industry is seen to manipulate the past in the ideological interests of the present.

ii) In Spring 1989, while studying for a MA in Creative Writing at the University of East Anglia, I was due to submit my fourth—and final—piece of prose fiction to a workshop supervised by Rose Tremain. My three previous submissions had each sought if not “my” writer’s voice, at least a stylistic strategy within which I could define my writing identity, and had received, understandably enough, mixed responses from the members of the workshop. With the deadline approaching for my final submission I faced the harrowing realisation that I had nothing of (perceived) interest - or, worse, *significance* - to write about. Outside the demands of studying for the MA, my life seemed to consist of little more than a daily commute to the university from the Norfolk Broads (my wife was now working in the university library and the only means of transport was a shared car). My encounters with postmodern theory and semiotics were redefining my world as a series of texts, waiting to be ‘decoded’. But as I stared at the flat Norfolk landscape, the private and disappointingly respectable inhabitants of the nearby village, the dome of distant stars, I could find nothing on which to focus my new-found powers of interpretative play. I searched my memory for anecdotes which might contain the kernel of a story. I read voraciously, seeking a textual spark which would ignite my own imagination. The deadline for my

submission neared. I re-examined my daily routine; driving, reading, cooking, sleep. It was no use. I was not an interesting person. Whereas my colleagues in the workshop had lived all over the world, raised families, and worked in stimulating or unusual jobs, gaining experiences which were now providing them with a mine of material for their writing, I sat alongside my retired neighbours, gazing from a patio at the oppressive Norfolk landscape, contemplating my insignificance. I had nothing to say - and no desire to pretend otherwise.

One of the benefits of writing to a deadline is that one is obliged to persevere despite such bouts of self-doubt. I knew from my reading of, *inter alia*, Beckett and Pynchon that it was possible to write significantly about insignificance (the distinction was eroded swiftly as I thought about it). And if my life felt like it was going nowhere—stuck in a traffic jam on a Norwich ring-road—then perhaps that in itself was worth writing about. The following morning I *paid attention* to the traffic jam. As a motif, the traffic jam had a certain resonance; a jaded Eighties' update of the Beats' dreams of freedom and escape on the open road ("Once a Beat, now a beaten generation," as one of my characters drily observed), and as a device it allowed me to 'freeze' the narrative action at the outset and thereby introduce information about the setting by obliging my traffic-bound characters (and reader) to 'read' the surroundings. It was also, as I now realise, an appropriate expression of my own creative paralysis.

From this traffic jam grew a story* which later became the opening chapter of my novel. The chapter survived, in changing forms, five years of continuous revisions. Only on the final draft, in January 1994, was it sacrificed for the sake of the novel's pacing. Thus the foundations of the novel were removed and the aftershocks were felt through the ensuing chapters.

iii) Reading Eco's comments on Disneyland in Travels in Hyper-Reality once again reminded me of York, a city unusually rich in historical representations. The city began to interest me as a contested space, a "degenerate utopia" to cite Marin.¹¹ What was the relationship between the city centre, with its spectacular architectural remains and flourishing heritage industries, and the decline of the rest of the city? The distinct temporal identities of York also interested me; in the daytime the city is occupied by tourists (between 2.5 and 3 million visitors per

* "Jamming," a term which also refers to musical improvisation

¹¹ "[A] degenerate utopia is an ideology realized in the form of a myth," Louis Marin, cited by Eco, Travels in Hyper-Reality [Picador, Pan Books Ltd., London, 1987], p.43

year¹²), whereas nightfall returns the city — and its three hundred and sixty five public houses — to York residents.

Addleton's bruised monuments were beckoning, demanding awe, exploration, or the attentions of an instamatic. Beneath the flaring traffic, one could almost hear the repentant chants of a lost Cistercian order, longboats parting the waves, the rhythmic splash of triremes, carriages rattling on cobblestones, canings and cries from the orphanage. But the after-hours revellers were indifferent to the Siren songs of the past. They were not listening for soliciting whispers from the old, familiar stones. They were reclaiming their territory from the daytime hoards. They were creating an alternative topography of significance, a counterpoint to the signs, plaques, and directions which mapped out the consumable city. The fantasy on offer in the darker hours related to an internal landscape, a network of imagined intimacies rather than the technicolour images of the tourist board.

Word of Mouth, Chapter One, p.6

What is the historical status of the nocturnal city? By what values do we confer significance? How does it feel to grow up in a city whose prosperity depends upon promoting the past over the present? By considering these and related questions, the principle settings began to take shape in my imagination; on the one hand, a city which for centuries had been a contested space and which had become an assemblage of distinct historical ‘moments’, on the other a moment in history (mid-Nineteen Eighties) which sought to reify the present by fixing the past in its own ideological image. By considering the extension of a form of ‘museum-culture’ to subsume all the dynamic and evolving forms of culture in a city, I started to conceive of the city itself as a commodity:

“Marx talks of the commodity as ‘congealed labour’, the frozen form of a past activity; to the consumer it is also congealed longing, the final form of an active wish. And the shape in which fulfilment is offered seems to become the shape of the wish itself. [...] Passion is a longing that breaks

¹² Source: “New Enthusiasm for Tourism,” Investor’s Chronicle, 14 December 1990, p.84

beyond the present, a drive to the future, and yet it must be satisfied in the forms of the past.”¹³

Unlike a commodity, of course, the city cannot be purchased and assimilated into a private system of ownership by its pilgrims. Any appropriation of museums and monuments takes place purely in the imagination. But perhaps this brings the city closer to the true function of the commodity—not a material symbol of “congealed labour”, but a tool for inscribing an ideological value:

“Once it was thought that the ad existed to sell the product, but now we know that the product is sold to finance the ad.”¹⁴

Among many possible descriptions, the nineteen eighties in Britain might be described as a decade of nostalgia (or amnesia) during which the erosion of the concept of “community” became manifest both in the ‘virtual community’ manufactured by the new heritage industries and in the creeping ‘privatization’ of public space. It seemed increasingly likely that the protagonist of my novel would not be any of the characters but the city itself.

¹³ Judith Williamson, Consuming Passions: The Dynamics of Popular Culture [Marion Boyars Publishers, London, 1986], pp.12-13

¹⁴ from “Panic Ads”, Arthur Kroker, Marilouise Kroker, David Cook, Panic Encyclopaedia [Culturetexts, Macmillan Education Ltd., London, 1989], p.55

4. Writing the City

i) Losing the map

“In order to be a good guide, one should show people the main streets first. But I am an extremely bad guide, and am apt to be led astray by little places of interest and to dash down side streets before I have shown you the main streets. The difficulty in philosophy is to be able to find one’s way about, and that is a matter of memory—memory of a peculiar sort.”

Wittgenstein¹⁵

“How well do you know your city?” he began. “On what is your knowledge based? Judging from what I have seen and heard so far, I would say that your knowledge of this city is substantially incomplete. In the first place, try as I might, I have been unable to unearth a single detailed map showing every one of Addleton's streets, thoroughfares, graveyards, fountains etcetera. Your existing maps are laughable. You pinpoint monuments which are already clearly visible to the eye. Even the most self-doubting tourist can have little use of these comic strips. 'You are here'. Indeed, gentlemen. You label your assets with a crude self-satisfaction, obscuring the more interesting areas of the city which therefore remain unexplored.”

Word of Mouth, Chapter Five, p.72

A city is a database of potential stories; it dramatizes, (geo)graphically, the choices involved in writing. In navigating the city, each visitor or inhabitant is selecting, and therefore excluding, areas of interest. Any attempt to experience or represent the city is destined to be partial. A city simultaneously invites and resists authorship. As such, it is a useful metaphor for the novelist’s imagination. In the same way that a novel will sustain more than one reading, so a city cannot be experienced satisfactorily on a single tour. The tour is a monologic form, a form

¹⁵ Cited in Beyond All Certainty by Bo Göranson and Anders Karlqvist [Springer-Verlag, forthcoming] Source: Wittgenstein’s Lectures on the Foundations of Mathematics, ed. Cora Diamond [University of Chicago Press, 1989], p.44

which invariably *conceals* the city's diversity and complexity from us. What do we hope to gain from this mode of 'reading'? What is the value of anything we might learn?

In fiction, I find my way *outside* the story; I write without first mapping a destination or route. This is my excursion into the unknown. Guides volunteer themselves—but, as in a *suq*, they also vanish without warning.

Writing of the beginning of mass tourism in the nineteenth century, Friedberg reminds us that the Grand Tour, for Americans and Britains of a certain generation and class, was considered “a necessary part of one's education”, one which offered the tourist “a preplanned narrative of space”:

“The tourist industry successfully marketed an organized mobility, arranged prearranged “sights” in narrative sequence. The guidebook served as textual captions to otherwise visual “sights.” This commoditized combination of voyeurism (*sight* seeing) and narrative grew in parallel with the industries of telegraphy, photography, and the cinema.

“The subjective effects on the tourist are not unlike those of the cinema spectator. Tourism produces an escape from boundaries, it legitimates the transgression of one's static, stable, or fixed location. The tourist simultaneously embodies both a position of presence and absence, of here and elsewhere, of avowing one's curiosity and disavowing one's daily life.”¹⁶

Writing of his travels across the United States in search of instances of “hyper-reality,” Eco notes “the American imagination demands the real thing and, to attain

¹⁶ Anne Friedberg, *Window Shopping: Cinema and the Postmodern*. [University of California Press, Oxford, 1993], p.59 [Friedberg adds in a footnote; “To pursue the subjective effects of tourism, it is helpful to briefly distinguish between exploration, travel, and tourism. *Exploration* implies an excursion into the entirely unknown, uncharted, and never repeatable. *Travel* has a more predictable itinerary but still has possibilities for misadventures and a latitude for unplanned experiences. *Tourism*, on the other hand, prepared by mass publicity and cliché, is designed to encode the foreign in the familiar, to introduce the new and exotic from a vantage mitigated by comfort and expectations. The correlations between tourism and structured fantasy seem quite suggestive—a cruise has its own narrative codes involving departure, engagement, and conclusion.” Op. cit., p.237]

it, must fabricate the absolute fake.”¹⁷ Similarly, Kobal-Heath urges his audience to “seize the initiative” by “carrying the torch of British tourism forward into the twenty-first century,” before setting out his vision of Addleton as a manipulation of the nostalgic impulse:

“Ladies and gentlemen, I invite you to imagine a world, a world of your own devising, whose colours and customers and rules all bear your stamp of approval. Think of the daydreams with which you sometimes soothe yourself to sleep, those harmonious tapestries of the mind, those vistas of peace in which every smiling face is lit by a spirit of neighbourly co-operation. Instead of running the gauntlet of the city streets at night, imagine an unhurried stroll past our famous landmarks in the company of a friendly and fascinating stranger, a person untouched by malice or the idiocy brought on by drink, whose amusing anecdotes fill you with joy, laughter, and boundless curiosity. Banish therefore the eyesores of modern life, the litter and graffiti, the sick and their slums. Banish the architects responsible for high-rise blocks and multi-storey car parks. This is an orderly world, a well-managed estate if you like. Everyone has a place and a corresponding sense of pride. Here we see the mellow red brick of a Tudor manor house reflected in its moat; there, across a lake at sunset, beyond the deer grazing at the water's edge, we see the portico of a Palladian mansion, or the domes and statues and cupolas and turrets of one of Sir John Vanburgh's baroque palaces. Addleton, ladies and gentlemen, will become the world, and the universe will be Addleton. Addleton will climb to the clouds, scale the heavens of the heavens, make districts for itself out of the planets and the stars. Let us share, ladies and gentlemen, this vision of Elysium, this tantalising glimpse of human possibility.”

Word of Mouth, Chapter Five, pp.69-70

¹⁷ Umberto Eco, Travels in Hyper-Reality, trans. William Weaver, [Picador, Pan Books, London, 1987], p.8

He proposes, in effect, to redesign Addleton as pure simulacrum, a model of the entropic desires he perceives in the tourists who visit the city.

In using York as a model for Addleton, I deliberately avoided visiting or researching the actual city until my imaginary city was already established on paper. My goal was not to reproduce mimetically an identifiable physical space but to explore a perceived set of relations. Those familiar with York may be able to map certain spaces in the novel onto their concrete counterparts in the city, but a similar game, I hope, may be played by readers in Chester, Edinburgh, Bath, Norwich... The Addleton settings invert hegemonic assumptions of cultural and historical significance, as defined by such bodies as the Tourist Board and English Heritage; the spectacular ruins, museums, and monuments of York form the backdrops to those traditionally excluded from the discourses of the dominant culture—except, as now, as anonymous or generic abstractions.

As with any leisure space, the York of weekend visits is a highly mediated space. Unlike the shopping mall or theme park, however, York city centre is not self-enclosed. It cannot exclude unwelcome elements (as with a text, the use of a space rarely conforms to its *intended* use). On the final draft of the novel, I considered sealing the Medieval gates to the city (or the “bars” as they are rather misleadingly called in York) and thereby portraying Addleton as a self-referential space, an isolation zone akin to an institution or a quarantine. In this vacuum, horrible truths would emerge about the characters relations to each other. I decided, however, that this would take the novel too far into the realm of allegory, whereas the style I sought was located at the intersection of metonymy and mimesis. With so many characters reading their surroundings metaphorically, it was important, I felt, that the city itself should be built partly on mimetic foundations.

ii) Streets and Communications

“I’ll tell you what makes a *real* city.” Cod leaned towards Wax. “The opportunities it offers for anonymity; the ability to be lost, to re-invent yourself at will. For this you need a maze of streets and a never-ending circulation of strangers. A Cathedral alone means nothing. It’s a con. It allows a dreary market town like Addleton, where you can learn all the important faces in less than a week, to pass itself off as something rather more grand and mysterious.

Addleton is a city in name only. We might just as well call a strait-jacket a continent.”

“Compared to prison,” Wax muttered. “Addleton *is* a continent.”

“In a *real* city,” Cod continued, ignoring him, “you can turn yourself inside out. If you start the day in one mood you can have it rubbed out by evening. Other lives crowd out your own. Imagine it.”

Word of Mouth, Chapter Ten, p.138

Although York served as the initial model for Addleton, the latter is in fact a montage of details from quite different cities. I have already indicated that my early ‘research’ was conducted largely in London (especially the City, the East End, and the all too evident “structured fantasy” of the Docklands), but other elements come from further afield. The Prologue, for example, was written in a coffee shop (the “Cafe Tipaza”) in San Francisco in December 1993. It indicates my fascination at the time with the relationship between the sparkling streets of San Francisco and the former prison island Alcatraz which can be sighted from every vantage point, it seems, on the mainland (and is now, of course, a popular tourist site); in constructing its prisons in more remote and less visible settings, English society misses the lesson of San Francisco/Alcatraz, namely that “pleasure depends upon a view of the prison beneath the shining cobblestones, and, conversely, that the art of deprivation demands a view of the illuminations framed by the dripping drain.” [Word of Mouth, Prologue, p.2] To my delight, the promotional leaflet for a wax museum in San Francisco invited me to *meet the international renowns! Feel their presence, charisma, and brilliance!* – echoing the culture of stasis in my imaginary provincial city. The Addleton ring-road, as mentioned, belongs around Norwich and the Black Angel in Chapter Three should rightfully be restored to its proper place in an Iowa City cemetery. My ‘cut and paste’ approach to urban planning is an analogy, of course, to my composition of prose (I can identify seven textual influences in the Prologue alone; the opening line of DeLillo’s Mao II¹⁸, the recorded voice of a former inmate of Alcatraz, a promotional leaflet for a San Francisco wax museum, an aphorism by E.M.Cioran¹⁹, an editorial in *The New Yorker*,²⁰ the sermonizing prose of Bernard

¹⁸ “Here they come, marching into American twilight.” Don DeLillo, Mao II [Vintage, London, 1992], p.3

¹⁹ “Even when they desert hell, men do so only to reconstruct it elsewhere.” From The Trouble With Being Born, [The Viking Press, New York, 1976], p.82

²⁰ “The Talk of the Town,” *The New Yorker*, July 13 1968, p.24

Rudofsky²¹, and an interview with Aleksei Parshchikov²², to list only the conscious sources). The writing which interests me most contains a *density of style*, the prose equivalent, perhaps, of Genoa's Via Nuova, which was intended solely as a public promenade and from which, although more than twice the width of other streets, vehicles were banned as both its ends were sealed:

“It is a street without perspectives,” the historian Mario Labò writes; “there is no other way to enjoy it but to walk through it, step by step; the dimension of time is essential; the full experience is attained only in a *promenade architecturale*.”²³

My favoured prose style similarly does not hasten the reader from the beginning to the end of the sentence, but encourages him or her to linger among the clauses, the ‘digressions,’ or the sudden, startling juxtapositions of images. As the marble palaces (designed by Galeazzo Alessi, a pupil of Michelangelo's) on the Via Nuova inform pedestrian experience of the latter, so the individual narremes, or units of narrative information, inform the reader's passage through the texturally-dense sentence. But it is not the whole story. The pedestrian shapes the street as much as the street shapes the pedestrian (a street may be regarded either as the concrete expression of the way of life of its users or as the *imposition* of a way of life on them). Furthermore, the pedestrian responds to his/her animate as well as inanimate surroundings—that is, to other pedestrians. Is it labouring the analogy to suggest that the secretion of implied meaning(s) in what I have called a texturally-dense sentence initiates a similar dialogue with the reader? The reader is not processed uncritically through time, as happens more often in a non-reflexive, “linear” mode of prose narrative, but *expands* the original sentence, and is thereby ‘empowered’ in turn. The reader posited by this approach is a collaborator or co-author, rather than a consumer of *a priori* “expertise”. I should like to develop a prose style analogous to the experience of wandering through the nocturnal side streets of an unfamiliar city. Central to both models of navigation would be the interplay of suspense and curiosity:

²¹ Bernard Rudofsky, Streets for People: A Primer for Americans [Doubleday & Company Inc., New York, 1969]

²² “To depict reality spring from the language of which we are in command, or springing from the symbolism reality provides us with, is very complicated. In order to describe one world, you have to use a language of a contrary world—of course.” From “An Interview with Aleksei Parshchikov” by John High, Mapping Codes: A Collection of New Writing from Moscow to San Francisco [*Five Fingers Review*, San Francisco, 1990], p.39

²³ Cited in Rudofsky, *Op. cit.*, p.66

“In times of terror,” Benjamin writes, “when everyone is something of a conspirator, everyone will be in a situation where he has to play detective. Strolling gives him the best prospects of doing so. Baudelaire wrote: ‘An observer is a *prince* who is everywhere in possession of his incognito.’ If the *flâneur* is thus turned into an unwilling detective, it does him a lot of good socially, for it accredits his idleness. He only seems to be indolent, for behind this indolence there is the watchfulness of an observer who does not take his eyes off a miscreant. Thus the detective sees rather wide areas opening up to his self-esteem. He develops forms of reaction that are in keeping with the pace of a big city. He catches things in flight; this enables him to dream that he is like an artist.”²⁴

In exploring the novel/city, the ‘textual detective’ also gains access to different forms of language-use.

iii) Language

"The novel...is associated with the eternally living element of unofficial language and unofficial thought."

Bakhtin²⁵

“Learn the script, for Christ's sake!” he hisses.

Word of Mouth, Chapter Eight, p.119

A novel, of course, is an exploration of language—in fiction and in its multiple social uses—and my *re-writing* of “English Heritage” accordingly incorporated a critique of the desire to preserve a certain form of language-use. How is “expertise” established through language? What are the linguistic and performance codes of authority? What is “unofficial thought” and “unofficial language?” Earlier drafts of the novel featured more extended passages of dialogue, through which I

²⁴ Walter Benjamin, Charles Baudelaire: A Lyric Poet In The Era Of High Capitalism, trans. Harry Zohn, [Verso, London, 1989], pp.40-41

²⁵ Mikhail Bakhtin, “Epic And Novel: Toward a Methodology for the Study of the Novel,” The Dialogical Imagination: Four Essays by M.M. Bakhtin, ed. Michael Holquist, trans. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist [Austin, Texas, University of Texas Press, 1981], p.20

was seeking to undermine the assumptions behind a stable or 'correct' use of English. At one stage I considered making the novel consist *entirely* of dialogue with unspecified speakers (along the lines of Victor Sorokin's The Queue). I sought opportunities for my characters to display their capacities for verbal defamation. This was to be a society in transition, in which all forms of expression were under negotiation, and a measure of 'semantic disorder' would therefore be inevitable:

“Any elision, truncation or convergence of prevailing linguistic and ideological categories can have profoundly disorienting effects. These deviations briefly expose the arbitrary nature of the codes which underlie and shape all forms of discourse. [...] Notions concerning the sanctity of language are intimately bound up with ideas of social order. The limits of acceptable linguistic expression are prescribed by a number of apparently universal taboos. These taboos guarantee the continuing 'transparency' (the taken-for-grantedness) of meaning.”²⁶

"[E]very revolution, in its beginnings, seeks to end the seduction of appearances."²⁷

When considering the nature of language within the context of the city-theme, I encountered a formal dilemma, one ably expressed in Raban's Soft City:

"Language codifies an order, a hierarchy, a stable view of the world, which is grossly exceeded by the reality of the modern city."²⁸

I was tempted to abandon altogether the limitations of linear narrative and instead write a novel in the form of an encyclopaedia, allowing the reader to construct meaning by the active juxtaposition of different 'entries' and thereby eliciting an active process of sense-construction, an analogy to that adopted by the hapless city-dweller amidst the maze of competing signs and symbols. I believe that the city is the site foremost in exposing what Baudrillard calls "a fundamental

²⁶ Dick Hebdige, Subculture: The Meaning of Style [Methuen, London, 1983], p.91

²⁷ Jean Baudrillard, Seduction, trans. Brian Singer, [Macmillan Education Ltd., London, 1990], p.1

²⁸ Jonathan Raban, Soft City, [Hamish Hamilton Ltd., London, 1974], p.38

mutation in the ecology of the human species,”²⁹ and that this in turn calls for reconsidering our approach to its representation. One of the ways forward may be in analysing sets of relations, rather than substance:

“When we decide that something is unreal, the real it isn't need not itself be very real, indeed, can just as well be a dramatization of events as the events themselves—or a rehearsal of the dramatization, or a painting of the rehearsal or a reproduction of the painting. Any of these latter can serve as the original of which something is a mere mock-up, leading one to think that which is sovereign is relationship—not substance.”³⁰

A related line of inquiry involves examining the ways by which we *narrate* ourselves, the process of selecting and composing past experience in order to impose order and coherency on our present. Because of my interest in oral storytelling (and the paradox of exploring orality in written form), this theme recurs throughout my novel, but is dramatized most explicitly in Chapter Five, during the midnight gathering in the Post Office Social Club:

“It was a fishmonger who had burns called 'Wrap it up Charlie!' who sold fish. From the Great War, poor man.”

“Come on! He'd cut you nice big chunks of a whopping great fish and then shout 'Wrap it up Charlie!' and that was his particular gimmick.” Cod reached for the remaining wings of cold chicken, but the younger woman slapped his hand without looking up from her script. “It was a lovely parcel of nutritious fish which would make a tasty supper for next to nothing. Make an effort!”

“He had a lovely springy board. He would slip us extra on the side.”

“It was a gimmick, love.”

“He wasn't only money, Charlie.”

“A gimmick.”

“He believed in helping the needy.”

“It was all a gimmick.”

²⁹ Jean Baudrillard, “Consumer Society” (1970), in Baudrillard, *Selected Writings*, ed. Mark Poster, [Polity Press, Cambridge, 1989], p.29

³⁰ Erving Goffman, *Frame Analysis* [Penguin Books Ltd., Harmondsworth, 1975], pp.560-561

“And he had style with it, a touch of the actor. At the end of the day-”

“Gimmick.”

“He didn't want no more than what he needed to continue. The rest-”

“It was all a gimmick. A gimmick. Sales gimmick.”

“Leave her alone!” Cod said. “What do you know about it?”

Both women glanced at him momentarily, then the older woman lowered her eyes and clasped her hands together in her lap.

“It was all a sales gimmick, I suppose,” she sighed. “But it was something nice, something interesting. That was our enjoyment. I never went anywhere.”

Word of Mouth, Chapter Five, pp.63-64

Here oral history, with its causal slippages, digressions and attention to detail, is doubly co-opted; firstly by the representative of the Addleton Tourist Board (who *edits* her subject's recollections and thereby erases the inherent drama—and, perhaps, ‘authenticity’—of the oral form), and secondly, of course, by the author of Word of Mouth. Although presented comically, this is one of the key scenes in the novel; through it, we see the inflexibility of a society bent on appropriating and reifying all forms of expression. The theme is echoed two pages later as the caretaker makes a despairing appeal for the validity of the experiences and memories of his generation:

“The real people in this city are on the rapid decline. A generation is being culled. We want to talk while there is still time. It's one hundred per cent as-lived experience that you stand to lose. You cannot replace us by actors with scripts.”

“We'll certainly bear this in mind.”

“The taste of tinned apricot after months of rationing, that sort of thing?”

“The honest family huddled by the urgent wireless-”

“Mustard gas. The walking wounded.”

“We have all this covered in The Blitz Experience. Of course, you've been?”

Word of Mouth, Chapter Five, p.66

Ironically, the ‘authenticity’ of experience which the caretaker claims—in language inflected by the rhythms of advertising (“It’s one hundred per cent as-lived experience...”)—is premised on a former association with artists and members of the Dada movement and his witnessing of their artistic gestures; as elsewhere in the novel, the ‘referent’ is located within another system of representation.

I have endeavoured to avoid the sentimental opposition of an ‘authentic’ history to the ‘inauthentic’ forms on display in a heritage theme park such as Addleton. In both the above examples it is the ‘texture’ of the individual (and idiosyncratic) voice which demands to be included in the dominant discourse, rather than any authorial claims (or nostalgia) for the *content* of such speech-acts. The meeting at the Post Office Social Club, centrally placed in the novel, presents to the reader the manipulation and commodification of memory (“memory was the commodity-fetish retailed in the arcade,” Benjamin wrote³¹) by exposing the processes by which history is converted into myth. This (Brechtian) technique of historicizing myth-making has been identified by Buck-Morss in the caricatures of Honoré Daumier:

“Not only architectural tastes were dominated by neoclassical aesthetics in the nineteenth century. Bourgeois theater enthusiastically restaged the ancient Greek tragedies, defining ‘classics’ as those works, the truth of which was untouched by historical passing. In the genre of caricature (more receptive to the new technologies of lithographic reproduction due to its lower status as an art form) the artist Honoré Daumier produced images of his own class which, in making the bourgeois subject their object, lent to his visual representations ‘a sort of philosophical operation.’ His humor provided the critical distance necessary to recognize the pretensions of the bourgeois cloak of antiquity. Daumier showed neoclassicism to be not the recurrence of an eternally valid form, but a peculiarly bourgeois style of historical distortion. He depicted the bourgeoisie *depicting* antiquity, in a way that articulated the former’s transiency, not the latter’s permanence.”³²

³¹ Cited in Friedberg, *op. cit.*, p.49

³² Susan Buck-Morss, *The Dialectics of Seeing*, [MIT Press, London, 1991], p.147

The counterpoint to the oral/text movement during the meeting is, of course, Danny/Danielson's appropriation of Icelandic sagas in his beguiling panegyric to Kveldulf, a figure who is barely mentioned in the sagas (thereby allowing the speaker, as he says of the Dark Ages, "improvisational possibilities.") Danielson, as the reader may have noticed, has scant regard for textual authority:

"Preposterous!" shouted an elderly woman with pince-nez.

"There is no evidence for any of this. Utter twaddle! Kveldulf was at least two generations in advance of the first viking settlers in Addleton."

"Be quiet," Danielson said, "unless you have photos to prove it."

"You, Sir, are in no position to talk about evidence. You have evinced nothing whatsoever to support this absurd and rather distasteful fairy tale- "

"The evidence is coming," Danielson said. "You're putting me off. You're fucking up my rhythm."

Word of Mouth, Chapter Six, p.90

iv) Music

Linked to the theme of orality in the novel is that of music. Emerson voiced the romantic suspicion of reified art when he argued that true art was "never fixed, but always flowing". Books accordingly represented "the death of literature" - if life is flux, then fixity is death. In music, improvisations and folk genres are therefore the ideal forms (Bakhtin has argued that "the novel's roots must ultimately be sought in folklore."³³) Bearing in mind the importance of the city-motif in Word of Mouth, there are interesting comparisons to be made between the temporal practices of both music and language and the spatial arrangements of architecture:

"Goethe called all architecture frozen music, and Schopenhauer agreed, saying rhythm does for time what symmetry does for space. Another way of putting this would be to say that music is the architecture of time."³⁴

³³ Mikhail Bakhtin, "Epic and Novel: Towards a Methodology for the Study of the Novel," op. cit., p.38

³⁴ Evan Eisenberg, op. cit., p.23

My approach to writing has been essentially that of a musician: the initial model for Word of Mouth was that of a jazz composition—a composition, in other words, which incorporates into its structure the desire to break free of that structure by means of improvisation—and the novel repeatedly explores the theme of improvisation. Initially, I wanted to write about the experience of boredom and the daily improvisations used to pass time. The novel would examine the nature of value in postmodern society, juxtaposing the collapse of culturally-valued discourses with an examination of the status and meaning of revolt in capitalist society, a society capable of appropriating and *re-presenting* oppositional strategies and stylistic innovation as reified commodities within its emporium of styles. Adapting the compositional principles of jazz, I could conceive of a *shape* to the novel; the three musicians would be together in the first chapter, introducing the reader to Addleton and indirectly stating the theme(s) of the composition, the subsequent three chapters would trace their separate, yet simultaneous movements around the city, representing consecutive ‘solos’ in musical terms, and the fifth, final chapter would re-unite the trio (I had no designs on Ross’ life at this point). I knew, in other words, the *form* of my novel before I knew its contents; the writing would be a page-by-page improvisation in order to discover those contents.

“We have to train ourselves so that we can improvise on anything - a bird, a sock, a fuming beaker! This, too, can be music. Anything can be music.”

Biff Debris in Frank Zappa’s Uncle Meat³⁵

When I had written four chapters according to this schema, I became dissatisfied with the limitations I had imposed on my three characters. The novel’s time-frame, I felt, was constraining my attempts to more fully characterise my principle characters and so I decided to supplement the existing chapters with chapters chronicling their background and the formative events of their young lives. Freed, thereby, from the obligation to chart a chain of moments, I wrote extensively of the death of Cod’s father and his subsequent fetishization of technology, of Wax’s extensive drug-related experiences in the underground spaces of London, and of the confusion and guilt attending Ross’ gradual acceptance of his homosexuality. These chapters, which were interlaced with the appropriate “real-time” chapters, contained some of the most spirited writing in the novel and yet I began to suspect that they were a lazy solution to the problem I had set myself. The novel became

³⁵ Frank Zappa, Uncle Meat, U.S. Bizarre Records (1969) MS 2024

too static, burdened by repeated references to the past. Although I revised the chapters extensively in order to try to justify their inclusion, eventually I had to concede defeat. The effect of these chapters was to foreground character rather than the dusty surfaces and discourses of the city of Addleton. The experiment had cost me three months work and some thirty thousand words of unused material.

By including music as a system of reference, furthermore, I attempt to extend the performance qualities of my language. In other words, an awareness of the limits of articulation informs not only what I can say, but also how I say it, in words. Often I conceive of a narreme, or unit of narrative information, initially as a musical phrase or gesture, setting a ‘tone,’ rather than as a meaningful proposition in language. The ‘music’ of a sentence—its rhythm and sound—will accordingly determine the sense. DeLillo speaks in similar terms of the process of ‘sculpting’ his sentences:

INTERVIEWER

How do you begin? What are the raw materials of a story?

DELILLO

I think the scene comes first, an idea of a character in a place. It’s visual, it’s Technicolor — something I see in a vague way. Then sentence by sentence into the breach. No outlines — maybe a short list of items, chronological, that may represent the next twenty pages. But the basic work is built around the sentence. This is what I mean when I call myself a writer. I construct sentences. There’s a rhythm I hear that drives me through a sentence. And the words typed on the white page have a sculptural quality. They form odd correspondences. They match up not just through meaning but through sound and look. The rhythm of a sentence will accommodate a certain number of syllables. One syllable too many, I look for another word. There’s always another word that means nearly the same thing, and if it doesn’t then I’ll consider altering the meaning of the sentence to keep the rhythm, the syllable beat. I’m completely willing to let language press meaning upon me. Watching the way in which words match up, keeping the

balance in a sentence — these are sensuous pleasures. I might want *very* and *only* in the same sentence, spaced a particular way, exactly so far apart. I might want *rapture* matched with *danger* — I like to match word endings. I type rather than write longhand because I like the way words and letters look when they come off the hammers onto the page — finished, printed, beautifully formed.³⁶

Each of the principle characters in the novel has his own ‘music;’ Ross, for example, is associated with folk genres, Wax with rhythm, whereas Cod combines the expressive volatility of a John Coltrane with the controlled mathematical abstractions of serial music. In this way I can distinguish the characters in terms of their relationship with *time* (Ross=organic; Wax=repetitive; Cod=controlling); their stories (their ‘fates’ within the novel) can be read as an enactment of the kinds of music they embody. This, of course, is to describe Word of Mouth as a *polyphonic* novel, a concept discussed by Kundera in his *Dialogue on the Art of Composition*:

“Polyphony in music is the *simultaneous* presentation of two or more voices (melodic lines) that are perfectly bound together but still keep their relative independence. And polyphony in the novel? First let’s set out its opposite: *unilinear* composition. Now, since its very beginnings, the novel has always tried to escape the unilinear, to open rifts in the continual narration of the story. Cervantes tells the story of Don Quixote’s journey, which is quite linear. But as he travels, Quixote meets other characters who tell their own stories. In the first part there are four such. Four rifts that allow us to step outside the novel’s linear framework. [...] You’ll see that it’s not so farfetched to compare the novel to music. Indeed, one of the fundamental principles of the great polyphonic composers was the *equality of voices*: no one voice should dominate, none should serve as mere accompaniment. [...] Now, to my mind, the conditions *sine qua non* for counterpoint in the novel are: first, the equality

³⁶ Don DeLillo, *The Art of Fiction CXXXV*, The Paris Review No. 128 [New York, Fall 1993], p.283

of the various “lines,” and second, the indivisibility of the whole.”³⁷

Hence my confusion whenever I am asked what my novel is “about;” if anything, the novel is “about” the relationship between the individual, interwoven themes, motifs and narratives.

Finally, the musicologist and philosopher, Victor Zuckerkandl, describes music as “temporal art in the special sense that in it time reveals itself to direct experience”:

“Music prevents the world from being entirely transformed into language, from becoming nothing but object, and prevents man from being nothing but subject.”³⁸

Music therefore represents a further opposition to the process of reification and appropriation of speech-acts in Addleton; as a motif, it signifies a refusal to participate in forms of expression which are perceived as already fossilized. Improvisation is additionally a thematic counterpoint to the “structured fantasy” of organised tourism, and a methodological principle of composition which guaranteed a measure of imaginative freedom within the potentially self-censoring context of writing a first novel as part of a Ph.D.

v) Space

“[I]f it is true that a spatial order organizes an ensemble of possibilities (e.g., by a place in which one can move) and interdictions (e.g., by a wall that prevents one from going further), then the walker actualizes some of these possibilities. In that way, he makes them exist as well as emerge. But he also moves them about and he invents others, since the crossing, drifting away, or improvisation of walking privilege, transform or abandon spatial elements. [...] [T]he walker transforms each spatial signifier into something else. And if on the one hand he actualizes only a

³⁷ Milan Kundera, *Dialogue on the Art of Composition*, from The Art of the Novel [Faber & Faber, London, 1988], pp.73-76

³⁸ Cited in Dialogue and Technology: Art and Knowledge, Bo Göranson and Magnus Florin (Eds.), [Springer-Verlag, Berlin Heidelberg, 1991], “The Dialogue Seminar,” Bo Göranson, Magnus Florin, Pehr Sällström, pp.22-23

few of the possibilities fixed by the constructed order (he goes only here and not there), on the other he increases the number of possibilities (for example, by creating shortcuts and detours) and prohibitions (for example, he forbids himself to take paths generally considered accessible or even obligatory). He thus makes a selection. ‘The user of a city picks out certain fragments of a statement in order to actualize them in secret.’³⁹

By now it should be clear that many of the themes and motifs in Word of Mouth are worked out through a principle of opposition. We might say that it is through conflict, or contradiction, that arguments have their life. The same holds true for my treatment of space in the novel. Against the chartered space within the city walls is set a counter-cultural space, most noticeably in the caravan site and the building site where Ross is killed. Their status *outside* official representations of the city (including those generated by Nihil Tours, which parodies the ethos and practices of other tour groups but still presents an aestheticized series of ‘snapshots’ of urban squalor) is repeatedly emphasized:

They had now passed beyond any familiar surroundings. The footpath was cracked, the litter faded by the passing of seasons, and the river was screened by a bank long abandoned to the waving grasses and weeds. A last refuge for those from the city in search of privacy. Here lovers could bed down among the stinging nettles without fear of spectators. Here, equally, anonymous acts of violence could be perpetrated without anyone being any the wiser. This was a wilderness which legislation could not reach.

“Where are we going?” he asked again, but the wind carried his words through the trees and scattered them on the lapping ripples of the river.

Word of Mouth, Chapter Two, p.22

He drove at a steady speed, his powerful arms guiding the bike around the contours of the streets. Through deserted neighbourhoods on the outskirts of Addleton they sped,

* R.Barthes, quoted in C. Soucy, *L'Image du centre*, p.10

³⁹ Michel de Certeau, “Walking in the City,” trans. Steven Rendall, The Practice of Everyday Life, [University of California Press, Berkeley, 1988], p.98

witnessed only by desolate rows of terraced housing. They entered an industrial estate and drove through a network of pitted roads lined with windowless, square buildings, distinguishable only by the small printed signs on the driveways. The units were perhaps twenty years old and already seemed to belong to a different era, an age of freely-flowing concrete, municipal monuments, functional decay. They were far from the Addleton of the tourist board maps. Danny seemed at ease in the margins of the city, crumbling regions whose ruins sported no sky-blue heritage plaques. This journey was less an excursion along chartered streets than a dawn raid on the unknown; less tourism than terrorism, with Danny at once silent guide and grinning kidnapper.

Word of Mouth, Chapter Seven, pp. 101-102

I have already suggested one possible interpretation of Ross' death (his "organic" relation to time). We might also read his *movements* within the novel as being a contributory factor; his journey with Ella along the riverbank footpath takes him outside the known "text" of the city and into a region where principles of causality do not apply (and behaviour therefore cannot be predicted). He goes, in this sense, *against the grain* of reading practices elsewhere in the novel/city. I am now supplying interpretations for a murder which was intended to be *without* motive (or motivated by impulses so obscure as to be not readily discernable to the reader). Is this the rage of a violent man who refuses to acknowledge his homosexuality? Or does the fate of Ross address the question of our belief in either myth (in which fate is imposed on humans) or history (in which people are capable, in principle, of determining events) as the determining factor in our lives? In this case, a death occurs within a schema by which the reader is encouraged to think of the characters as in control of their destinies, a murder without meaning which seems therefore pre-ordained. These are examples of what I earlier referred to as *retrospective* readings; at the time of writing, I had no idea that Ross would die until moments (or sentences) before the murder.⁴⁰ Perhaps the lesson from this

⁴⁰The scene on the building site was originally intended to be a grotesque parody of meeting one's boyfriend/girlfriend's parents over dinner. When I realised that Ross was thinking his last thoughts as he waited by the motorcycle I was genuinely shocked. I mourned him for a number of hours, but then I felt a tremendous sense of relief. By killing him (I realised) two thirds of the way through the novel I would be relieved of the necessity of continuing with his presence in the remaining third; the novel could accordingly become more focussed on the principle surviving characters. I attribute his death, therefore, to the formal structure I imposed on myself at the outset

is that it is impossible, despite one's best efforts, to banish meaning from a literary text; interpretations will always press on the events and characters described.

Foucault writes:

"The space in which we live, which draws us out of ourselves, in which the erosion of our lives, our time and our history occurs, the space that claws and gnaws at us, is also, in itself, a heterogeneous space. In other words, we do not live in a kind of a void, inside of which we could place individuals and things. We do not live in a void that could be coloured with diverse shades of light, we live inside a set of relations that delineates sites which are irreducible to one another and absolutely not superimposable on one another."

Offering examples of sites of temporary relaxation (cafes, beaches, cinemas) and of closed or semi-closed sites of rest (the house, the bedroom, the bed etc.), Foucault argues that, among all such sites, there exist sites related in a way that neutralizes or inverts the set of relations that they designate, mirror or reflect. These, he claims, are of two main types: utopias and what he terms heterotopias;

"Utopias are sites with no real place. They are sites that have a general relation of direct or inverted analogy with the real space of Society. They present society itself in a perfected form, or else society turned upside down, but in any case these utopias are fundamentally unreal spaces.

"There are also, probably in every culture, in every civilization, real places - places that do exist and that are formed in the very founding of society - which are something like counter-sites, a kind of effectively enacted utopia in which the real sites, all the other real sites that can be found within the culture, are simultaneously represented, contested, and inverted. Places of this kind are outside of all places, even though it may be possible to indicate their location in reality. Because these places are absolutely different from all the sites that they reflect and speak about,

of the novel, and the exuberance with which Danny sets about his work may be an indication of authorial glee at breaking this particular 'frame.'

I shall call them, by way of contrast to utopias, heterotopias.”

Heterotopias have an implicit function in relation to all outside (non-heterotopian) space:

“Either their role is to create a space of illusion that exposes every real space, all the sites inside of which human life is partitioned, as still more illusory (...). Or else, on the contrary, their role is to create a space that is other, another real space, as perfect, as meticulous, as well arranged as ours is messy, ill constructed, and jumbled. This latter type would be the heterotopia, not of illusion, but of compensation.”⁴¹

A novel, according to this distinction, corresponds to the heterotopia of both illusion and compensation.

In all but the final draft of the novel, my characters started their journeys from the same central location—the Pork and Spittle public house near the Cathedral. Over the ensuing twenty four hours—the temporal frame of the novel—one of the characters (Wax) walks in a loop to the suburbs and back again, another (Cod) does not leave the city centre even though, as the only one to have access to a car, he is potentially the most mobile of the three, while the third (Ross) proceeds on a trajectory away from the city centre and, of course, does not return. The action of the novel starts and ends in a site of “temporary relaxation”—a public house, with its strictly legislated opening hours—suggesting the monotonous circularity of life in a provincial town despite the upheavals described in the novel. Public spaces—streets, squares, footpaths—effectively ‘stage’ the novel’s action, and a major battle is fought over the public use of private property (although the Trinity Towers Car Park, we are led to believe, was constructed by a socialist council originally as a *public* utility). Against these spaces are contrasted closed sites where political power resides—Kobal-Heath’s Georgian mansion, for example, or the Post Office Social Club. Between (metaphorically) this public/private opposition is located the heterotopian space of the caravan site; although, technically, a public space and open to all, it becomes *in use* a private locus due to the interdictions one might set oneself about going there.

⁴¹ Michel Foucault, *Of Other Spaces*, [diacritics/spring 1986], pp.23-27

Two years after starting the novel I spent a night in York on my way home from Scotland. I was startled by the resemblance of the city to that depicted in my novel; York had become a three-dimensional representation of my fiction. I visited the municipal fountain (outside the City Art Gallery), the riverbank footpath leading to Danny's caravan site (Fulford), the Post Office Social Club (Monkgate), the ill-fated "Cathedral" (and collected newspaper cuttings of the 1984 Minster fire), and, of course, the "Pork and Spittle" (to my surprise, "Bixie" was still serving behind the bar and greeted me familiarly, thereby erasing the five years since my last visit). I saw "Wax" dozens of times on the city streets, once even with "Synovia". At the end of a feverish twenty-four hours, I left the city, thereby unwittingly replicating the intended time frame of my novel.

Clearly, I was projecting my fictional world onto the City of York. I saw what I wanted to see. York existed merely to confirm the 'accuracy' of Addleton. I searched each street for traces of the novel's action; I filtered the faces in crowds for a glimpse of the features of my characters. Although the novel was still two years from completion, and the identity of Addleton would go through a number of revisions, each time removing it further from the topography of its model, I had written a series of events, characters, and settings which (regardless of the fate or the worth of my work) were now an inescapable part of my experience of York. My imagination had colonised an existing space, re(de)fining in the process the usual order of seduction.

vi) Time/History

"The novel, from the very beginning, developed as a genre that had at its core a new way of conceptualizing time."

Bakhtin ⁴²

In the nineteen eighties, the question "How many hours did you put in for Thatcher last night?" was used among the unemployed to ask 'How many hours did you sleep last night?' (A variant, used within earshot of one or more employed person, gleefully equated enforced idleness with repose; "How many hours did you put in for Thatcher *today*?" meaning 'How late did you sleep this

⁴² Mikhail Bakhtin, "Epic and Novel: Toward a Methodology for the Study of the Novel," op. cit., p.38

morning?') My generation grew up with unemployment as an ever-present reality. For many, whose lives had not been timetabled since the registers and bells of school, unemployment instilled an attitude to time which might best be described as *leisurely* (and, at worst, *deadening*). A culture emerged involving variations on *passing time*, often collectively in the public spaces of a city centre or, more recently, in the *virtual* public space of the privately-owned shopping mall. Favoured fashions advertised to passers-by the non-productive status of these descendants of Nineteenth Century *flâneurs*. Recession produced a culture of spectatorship. The main characters in my novel are either unemployed or workers in the oxymoronic "entertainment/leisure industries." But if they are contemporary *flâneurs*, it is significant that their *flânerie* takes place mainly at night, when the shops and related sites of consumption are closed; economically, they are denied access to many public forms of self-expression and gratification.

Writing of the petty bourgeoisie to which Baudelaire belonged, Benjamin comments:

"The very fact that their share could at best be enjoyment, but never power, made the period which history gave them a space for passing time. Anyone who sets out to while away time seeks enjoyment. It was self-evident, however, that the more this class wanted to have its enjoyment *in* this society, the more limited this enjoyment would be. The enjoyment promised to be less limited if this class found enjoyment *of* this society possible. If it wanted to achieve virtuosity in this kind of enjoyment, it could not spurn empathizing with commodities. It had to enjoy this identification with all the pleasure and the uneasiness which derived from a presentiment of its own destiny as a class. Finally, it had to approach this destiny with a sensitivity that perceives charm even in damaged and decaying goods."⁴³

Word of Mouth also hints at another significant shift from modern to post-modern attitudes to consumption. No longer is shopping a form of erotic foreplay; sex itself is now foreplay to the more fulfilling pleasures of shopping. Failing to have

⁴³ Walter Benjamin, Charles Baudelaire: A Lyric Poet In The Era Of High Capitalism, trans. Harry Zohn, [Verso, London, 1989], p.59

sex in Chapter Three, therefore, Wax and Synovia take a window-shopping stroll the following morning and, appropriately enough, fail to purchase anything.

My desire to explore spatiality through narrative simultaneity, rather than linear sequence, led me to make rapid decisions concerning the form of the novel—the most important being the decision to restrict the action within a twenty-four hour framework. My cue to "tamper with the familiar modalities of time, to shake up the normal flow of the linear text to allow other, more 'lateral' connections to be made" came from Soja:

"For at least the past century, time and history have occupied a privileged position in the practical and theoretical consciousness of Western Marxism and critical social science. Understanding how history is made has been the primary source of emancipatory insight and practical political consciousness, the great variable container for a critical interpretation of social life and practice. Today, however, it may be space more than time that hides consequences from us, the 'making of geography' more than the 'making of history' that provides the most revealing tactical and theoretical world."⁴⁴

A view of a landscape (or a novelist's 'inner picture' of an imaginary city) is simultaneous, whereas language unfolds sequentially; no two statements can occupy the same space on the page. In my novel I attempted to avoid the "linguistic despair" arising from this inescapable opposition by juxtaposing time-scales within consecutive chapters; thus the narrative sequence is momentarily 'frozen' by action occurring simultaneously in different parts of the city, and thereby delaying the overall passage of the twenty-four hours. Much of the work in revising the novel has been to effect a compromise between the necessity of engaging and sustaining the reader's interest through narrative suspense and the deliberately pedestrian pacing of the action, intended to convey a sense of boredom (and its creative possibilities) and to represent "significance" in *other* terms, within the context of a seemingly monotonous chain of moments.

⁴⁴ Edward W. Soja, Postmodern Geographies: The Reassertion of Space in Critical Social Theory [Verso, London, 1989], p.1

vii) Character

"[I]n the city personal identity has been rendered soft, fluid, endlessly open to the exercise of the will and the imagination. [...] The price of maintaining an identity is cheap; appearances come ready-made and packaged, do-it-yourself kits. It sometimes seems as if one might flip over the edge into a deliriously fragmented confusion of postures and roles. In this maelstrom of possibilities, it is a pressing problem merely to find out who one is - to tease out at least the semblance of a nature from this heap of masks and rejected scraps of artifice."⁴⁵

"We can imagine that each individual feels unique while resembling everyone else: all we need is a schema of collective and mythological projection - a model."⁴⁶

I include the above quotations in order to contrast two of the creative possibilities facing me in my depiction of character in the novel. In an early report to the graduate studies committee I had no doubt that my characters were destined to drift through a world of heaped commodities:

'Despite - or perhaps because of - the proliferation of inanimate agencies in the novel, the function of character will be a central sphere of inquiry. I wish to progress beyond the modernist foregrounding of consciousness and the postmodernist foregrounding of text by attempting to re-establish a series of relationships between the human subject and the external object world in which desire has become reified in specific forms of commodification. I would view such a state of affairs as a potentially productive interplay between animate/inanimate, rather than as cause for a reiteration of existing humanist anxieties. [...]
Character will therefore be constructed in terms of an individual's varied and disparate component parts -

⁴⁵ Jonathan Raban, *Soft City* [Hamish Hamilton Ltd., London, 1974], p.61

⁴⁶ Jean Baudrillard, "The System of Objects," from *Selected Writings*, ed. Mark Poster [Polity Press, Cambridge, 1989], p.11

individuality regarded in terms of the creative juxtaposition of external influences.'

In my reading of literature, I have tended to be more satisfied with the caricature than the concept of the 'rounded' character, the boldly-executed exaggerations of type, rather than detailed representations of psychology. The former subverts the realist mode by continually reminding the reader of the imaginary nature of these ideational constructs, whereas the latter's mimickry of 'real-life' observation tells us little beyond the preoccupying sentiments of the author. The experience of urban life teaches us to classify strangers according to 'type,' to 'read' external details—a person's posture, gestures, clothes etc.—and thereby fit them into a set of existing assumptions:

“[I]n a community of strangers, we need a quick, easy-to-use set of stereotypes, cartoon outlines, with which to classify the people we encounter. [...] To be merely grey, especially subtly grey, in a city, is not to be seen at all.”⁴⁷

In early drafts of Word of Mouth the characters were essentially passive, observed from the outside and thereby denied the complexities of an inner life and, more importantly, the capacity for contradiction and change. Gradually, my curiosity about these characters overtook their comic possibilities.

“A mobile human tapestry, continually fraying, continually being repaired.” Aragon⁴⁸

Politically, I find characters who are enmeshed in their destiny, who exist as a function of the plot that fate (or the author) has assigned them, somewhat reactionary in conception (and, for that matter, somewhat anaemic on the page). Such characters reinforce an assumption that history is made elsewhere, that complex forces govern our lives over which we have no control (and our only recourse is therefore to an elegiac wistfulness rather than political responsibility). For a writer's approach to characterization reveals his/her attitude to history. Characters personify the writer's manipulation of time and the assumptions underlying such manipulation. My initial decision to enfold the action of the novel within a twenty-four hour temporal frame indicated at the outset my intention to

⁴⁷ Raban, op.cit., pp.21-23

⁴⁸ Louis Aragon, Paris Peasant, p.50

present my characters in terms of their *depthlessness*; their past would not be explored in any significant detail, the reader would be denied the consolations of a spurious (or imaginary) causality and the characters would be ‘trapped’ in the present, their past as insignificant as their futures are inconceivable. In a character who is not “enclosed” within a unique biographical history, we may more readily recognize our own contradictions, complexities, and capacities for change. Paradoxically, this “defamiliarizing” strategy may make the characters appear more “life-like”. Part of the pleasure of reading, after all, is to supply absent details.

She gazed blankly at her blank gaze which gazed blankly
back from the bank of screens.

Word of Mouth, Chapter Eight, p.122

The characters in Word of Mouth are accordingly described with a minimum of physical detail. The reader may construct an *inner picture* of each character through the character’s actions, gestures, and, above all, speech. The clichés of (sub)cultural signification are presented ironically in an attempt to historicize fashion (Wax’s leather jacket, for example, comes with its own built-in obsolescence in cultural/literary terms) while resisting the sort of theoretical earnestness which discovers unproblematic correspondences between signifier and signified. Again, the intention is to historicize the present, to deconstruct contemporary signs and thereby subvert the ‘transparency’ of culturally-specific associations.

“Fashion,” Benjamin wrote in 1935, “prescribed the ritual
by which the fetish commodity wished to be
worshipped.”⁴⁹

The attitudes and preoccupations of the characters in the novel, particularly the younger characters (Ross, Wax and Synovia), are equally informed by the dictates of fashion. In this way the reader is again reminded of the *transitoriness* of the historically specific setting of the novel. Buck-Morss writes:

“The spring rites of fashion celebrated novelty rather than
recurrence; they required, not remembrance, but
obliviousness to even the most recent past. In the Hades of
Greek and Roman mythology, the river Lethe caused those

⁴⁹Cit. in The Dialectics of Seeing, p.98

who drank of its waters to forget their former life. The effect on collective historical memory of satisfying the thirst for novelty through fashion was not otherwise.”⁵⁰

The character of Danny Zimms, as usual, dramatizes this anti-systematic system at its most extreme; capable of endless self-invention (his power, such as it is, is conveyed largely through his ability to move between different language games), he adopts a variety of disguises throughout the novel and between costume changes returns to his plain white tee-shirt, the ‘blank canvas’ of his absent personality.

Case study: Danny Zimms

“One must remember that through the speaking subject is heard not just the voice of the teller but the voices of language, of narrative tradition, of ideology, of the whole social context.”⁵¹

Interviewer: “E.M. Forster speaks of his major characters sometimes taking over and dictating the course of his novels. Has this ever been a problem for you, or are you in complete command?”

Nabokov: “My knowledge of Mr. Forster’s works is limited to one novel, which I dislike; and anyway, it was not he who fathered that trite little whimsy about characters getting out of hand; it is as old as the quills, although of course one sympathizes with *his* people if they try to wriggle out of that trip to India or wherever he takes them. My characters are galley slaves.”⁵²

Danny was born (February 1990) of the structural necessity to inject narrative energy in Chapter Three. The previous two chapters had each explored the themes of anticipation and denial; a band arriving at a venue for a concert which has been cancelled (Chapter One), a couple walking back to the woman’s rented home for a sexual encounter which does not take place (Chapter Two). It was time for an increase in tempo and a purge of pent-up feeling; for this I needed a new character.

⁵⁰ Susan Buck-Morss, op.cit., p.98

⁵¹ Marie Maclean, op. cit., p.7

⁵² Writers at Work [*Paris Review* interviews] Fourth Series, ed. George Plimpton [The Viking Press, New York, 1976], p.96

Danny Zimms was therefore unplanned. He makes a cameo appearance at the end of an early draft of Chapter Two (published as “Refrain” in *exposure*⁵³), an archetypal urban hoodlum who bears the imprint of my enthusiasm at the time for Don DeLillo’s *Libra*. He is also present *in absentia* by means of the telephone chat-line (a device which allowed me to thread his consciousness into the very fabric of the nocturnal city). But it was not until he was presented on his own territory—the heterotopian space of the caravan site—that he took shape in my imagination. This was to be a man capable of ‘speaking-in-tongues’ within his mother tongue; to be truly unpredictable in his speech and his actions he would need to be linguistically powerful. He is therefore introduced to the reader through speech—not only as a disembodied voice abusing Synovia on the telephone chat-line, but as linguistic Master of Ceremonies in his caravan as Ross and Ella hesitate at the door:

Are you listening now? God fucked up and the world's on fire! The sky's on fire! Even the angels are burning! Well, Christ-bugger-Mary! Ha, ha! Five hundred million years to the Big Bang, huh? Oh Glory! Book early! Pump up the prices! Got your pension plan, huh? No? Well, fuck you! You're fucked! Reach for your fucking life-support! The times they's a-changin', never to return, nope, not ever. D'you hear? It's terminal. It's official. That's truly Nihil Official. Ha, ha, ha...Yo red giant! Yo white dwarf! Yowsa creepin' on us day by day. That's right! O universe, they're draggin' ya gaggin' thro' the gates of Birkenau. That's right! No, we don't talk back, wake up! Whoever you are, wherever you're from, you must've noticed by now the apocalypse has come... A hop and a skip and down you'll drop! Wise up, it's a new day. WISE UP FUCKSHIT! We're only here for the ride! Out with the party hats! Roll out the barrel! What's wrong, lost your bottle? Fucking cat got your tongue? Reach for the painkiller! Mea columba! Fucking kill her, killer! Yeah, go ahead! Club her until the tears roll down her cheeks! Have fun, fistfucker! I'm having fun! Yeah! I wanna hear the fun you're having. Eh? Huh?

⁵³ *exposure: fiction from the workshop*, [Centre for Creative and Performing Arts, Norwich, 1991]

Bang-bang big boy! Club the fuck out of her, huh? Gotcha, eh? Gotcha!

Word of Mouth, Chapter Four, p.39

If one could feed the discourses of contemporary culture into a paper shredder, in the tattered fragments in the drawer of the machine one might discern the outlines of Danny's speech. His misogyny is manifest repeatedly, and yet he berates Ross for accepting uncritically his use of the term "witch" (with its sexist applications) to describe Kobal-Heath's wife; he is not constrained, in other words, by any single framing discourse and in this respect he embodies the linguistic and ideological malleability of his society.

"The more uncanny a big city becomes, the more knowledge of human nature—so it was thought—it takes to operate in it. In actuality, the intensified struggle for survival led an individual to make an imperious proclamation of his interests. When it is a matter of evaluating a person's behaviour, an intimate acquaintance with these interests will often be much more useful than an acquaintance with his personality."⁵⁴

I gave myself the word "energy" as my brief and allowed "Danny Zimms" to dictate his terms. I usually distrust these sort of statements from writers and tend to adopt a glacial Nabokovian disdain whenever I hear them uttered. Nonetheless, the arrival of Danny changed the course of the novel. He ran amok within my formal narrative designs; he captured the centre of the novel (and of Addleton itself) and before long all other characters would be affected by their contact with Danny. He is present in each chapter of the novel and is simultaneously a bonding agent in the narrative and a frame-breaker.

"Narrative energy, therefore, like all energy, works in a delicate balance. Semantic, syntactic, and phonetic redundancy works together with audience feedback to ensure stability, to preserve the basic fabric of the text from the forces of randomness, of loss of energy, of dispersion. But the very factors of preservation, of reproduction and of

⁵⁴ Walter Benjamin, Charles Baudelaire: A Lyric Poet In The Era Of High Capitalism, [Verso, London, 1989], p.40

negentropy can become conservatism and eventually stasis. The disruptive input of anarchy, of violence, of noise, stimulates the mutation and the new growth of narrative forms and their evolution within the wider interplay of social forces.”⁵⁵

His is an imagination without restraint or moral responsibility. He peddles certainties even though he is outside any single system of belief. It is the *force* of conviction which appeals to him, rather than any inherent ideological persuasion. His influence over the impressionable Cod, and the charmed spells he casts in his grotesque reincarnations as Professor Dewey Danielson and Kirsoum Macula, present a parable of the dangers of charismatic leadership. The jaded appetite of a public forever hungering for novelty responds swiftly to his disregard for complexity and subtlety.

At a time of cultural fragmentation and uncertainty, the appeal of totalizing systems, Grand Narratives, or a privileging of myth over history becomes evident. Danny is therefore able to recruit disciples for a cause he has yet to define. In principle, he embodies a metaphysics of malevolence; in practice, his life is an opportunity to promote a festival of death:

“Lately,” Danielson said, his voice hoarse after its recent exertions, “I have heard talk about the death of the museum.” He rubbed his hands over his face, inhaling deeply. The room gradually fell silent. When he looked up his face was drawn, his lips twitched, and a blue vein was pulsing on his left temple. “I prefer to speak of a museum of death.” He stepped off the stage and moved slowly between the tables, looking closely at the guests. “They say that this time doesn’t want to know death, that death is ‘out of fashion’. But, ladies and gentlemen, what is fashion if not death and reincarnation? We are not talking of transient fads here, we are arriving at the truth of transiency itself. I see a long, snaking procession filing through our turnstiles. And they are talking, ladies and gentlemen. They are excited by something that previously silenced them. The magic and mystery of the corpse will draw visitors from far

⁵⁵ Marie Maclean, op.cit., p.4

and wide. We shall guide them through a permanent exhibition of decay. We shall rig-up models of rivers and underworlds. The catering has enormous novelty potential. The merchandizing will be explored from every angle. Books, clothing, calanders and clocks. Self-help packs. Salbjorg mint cake. Kveldulf's visions on video. Spear a deer in the privacy of your bedroom! Squat in an easee-fit coffin in the comfort of your own home! It ain't a seasonal demand this time. We're talking mail-order to keep up. We're talking job-creation on a politically significant scale. All buses will deliver visitors directly to our doors. All trains will drive directly through our gates. Who is not fascinated by death? Death crosses cultures, countries, languages. We'll corner the market! We'll make a killing! We're trading tonight in the universal currency, the universal language! Stake your claim while you can! Death, ladies and gentlemen, is our sole heritage!"

Word of Mouth, Chapter Six, pp.97-98

In Word of Mouth I aimed to equate the aestheticization of history and politics with a creeping fascism. Photographs of Hitler Youth have become a masturbatory aid (Chapter Two, pp.13-14). The charismatic Danny identifies the death-impulse informing Addleton's reification of the past and has the vision to describe the process at a later stage of development with his projected museum of death, the first "meta-heritage" complex, whose organization, appropriately enough, is described in terms reminiscent of a Nazi death camp ("We shall guide them through a permanent exhibition of decay. We shall rig-up models of rivers and underworlds. [...] All buses will deliver visitors directly to our doors. All trains will drive directly through our gates.") Addleton already has a thriving initiative in Nihil Tours, a company dedicated to the aesthetics of poverty and industrial decline. Nothing is exempt from this system of representation, which has its origins in the armchair tourism of television; the poor must enact their poverty, the elderly must exhibit their age, the malcontents must express their refusals in staged acts of vandalism; everything becomes potential product as pure spectacle.

Postmodernity, according to Jameson, involves "the disappearance of history, the way in which our entire contemporary social system has little by little begun to lose its capacity to retain its own past, has begun to live in a perpetual present

and in a perpetual change that obliterates traditions.”⁵⁶ Cod’s sexual desire for a shop mannequin is another illustration of this process of reification:

“Reification, once it has extended its empire across the whole of social reality, effaces the very criteria by which it can be recognized for what it is and so triumphantly abolishes itself, returning everything to normality.”⁵⁷

Thus we become alienated from our own alienation until the concept itself can be made to vanish. The tourist similarly becomes an inversion of Baudelaire’s *voyeur*; a spectator, certainly, but one whose imagination does not engage with the detritus of contemporary history in his or her surroundings. Instead tourism offers a form of *televsual* voyeurism through the pre-programmed narratives of Addleton. And television and cinema, as Foucault reminds us, represent “effective means...of reprogramming popular memory”:

“people are shown not what they were but what they must remember having been... Since memory is a very important factor in struggle...if one controls people’s memory, one controls their dynamism.”⁵⁸

The apparent paradox of Addleton, therefore, is that in its accumulation of fetishized artefacts from the past it confirms the *depthlessness* of the present. This is an environment prepared for the formal consolations of fascist ideology, with its appropriation of history as a linear narrative premised on a Darwinian “selection” of race, and its ability to confer significance in the midst of cultural uncertainty and insecurity.

“Either you continue to chase the short-term buck [...] through new offices and cinemas and souvenir shops, or you tear up their concrete floors and see what lies beneath. It is a choice between anxiety or mastery.”

Word of Mouth, Chapter Five, p.73

⁵⁶ Frederic Jameson, “Postmodernism and Consumer Society”, Postmodern Culture, ed. Hal Foster, [Verso, London, 1985] p.125

⁵⁷ Terry Eagleton, “Capitalism, Modernism and Postmodernism,” in New Left Review, No. 152, July/August 1985, p.61

⁵⁸ Michel Foucault, “Film and the Popular Memory,” trans. Martin Jordan, in Foucault Live, ed. Silvère Lotringer (New York, Semiotext(e), 1989), p.92

3. Paranoia

“Allegory is in the realm of thought what ruins are in the realm of things.”

Benjamin⁵⁹

In Word of Mouth I wished to avoid the seductive intimacy of first-person narration in favour of the eighteenth century device of the omniscient narrator - but modified in order to limit the information made available to the reader. The characters in my novel therefore dramatize the reader’s sifting of information in search of meaning. Key events in the novel take place outside the text; contracts are struck, battles are fought, and the machinations of power remain, effectively, concealed. The same characters who are stifled by the dead weight of history are not present when an event of historical significance occurs within their home town. The plight of the reader is thereby contained within that of the characters - we are all engaged on the same quest for meaning through the labyrinth of clues and allusions, and if the narrator is omniscient, he is rarely forthcoming with his information. (In earlier drafts of the novel Danny was first introduced to the reader at the moment of terminating a telephone conversation with a particularly manipulative character called “Rolf”.)

Theoretical discussions of paranoia commonly agree on certain main features—that it is a psychotic state of alienation for example, a psychosis of systematic interpretation;

"Ce délire constitue une sorte de folie raisonnée, dans ce sens qu'il obéit à un besoin, varié à une manie de tout expliquer, de tout 'déchiffrer,' conformément à un système fondamental de signification." ⁶⁰

Hofstadter argues along similar lines, but extends the paranoid compulsion for interpreting external events (the reader's role) to include projections of the paranoiac's state of mind onto external reality (the writer's role). The paranoiac becomes God-like in the excesses of his/her fabrications;

⁵⁹ Cit. Buck-Morss, p.165

⁶⁰ Henry Ey, Manuel de Psychiatrie, Henry Ey, P. Bernard & Ch. Brisset [Paris, Masson et Cie, 1967], p.517

"The distinguishing thing about the paranoid style is not that its exponents see conspiracies or plots here and there in history, but that they regard a "vast" or "gigantic" conspiracy as the motive force in historical events. History is a conspiracy, set in motion by demonic forces of almost transcendent power...The paranoid spokesman sees the fate of this conspiracy in apocalyptic terms - he traffics in the birth and death of whole worlds, whole political orders, whole systems of human values." ⁶¹

S/he does not merely produce and process fictions, but stars in all the major roles—as victim, as seer, and even—Hofstadter argues—as Enemy since that enemy seems to be a projection of both the "ideal" and the "unacceptable" aspects of the paranoid self, a Mephistophelean persona whose enviable omnipotence is offset by his evil designs;

"...a free, active, demonic agent. He wills, indeed he manufactures, the mechanism of history himself, or deflects the normal course of history in an evil way. He makes crises, starts runs on banks, causes depressions, manufactures disasters, and then enjoys and profits from the misery he has produced." ⁶²

Seen in these terms, we may historicize the paranoid reflex in post-war consumer society and discover interesting analogies between the average cheque-book-wielding citizen and the (so-called) paranoiac. Marx's discussion of value is pertinent here;

"Value does not have its description branded on its forehead; it rather transforms every product of labour into a social hieroglyphic. Later on, men try to decipher the hieroglyphic, to get behind the secret of their own social product: for the characteristic which objects of utility have of being values is as much men's social product as is their language."⁶³

⁶¹ Richard Hofstadter, The Paranoid Style in American Politics and Other Essays [Albert A. Knopf, New York, 1966], p.29

⁶² Hofstadter, op. cit., p.32

⁶³ Karl Marx, Capital, trans. Ben Fowkes, [Penguin, Harmondsworth, 1976], Vol. I, p.167

The ordinary consumer attempts to "decipher the hieroglyphic" of the multitude of appealing and seemingly life-enriching products available to him/her on the market, in the same way as all Seekers after Truth must decipher their chosen hieroglyphics. The paranoiac is deemed to be one who has experienced a loss of necessary limits to his/her interpreting activities, one who imposes a coherent and internally logical totality on the excess of random detail competing for attention in capitalist society. Freedman follows this train of thought in his construction of a Marxist theory of paranoia, which I feel is worth quoting at length;

"Paranoia [...] is no mere aberration but is structurally crucial to the way that we, as ordinary subjects of bourgeois hegemony, represent ourselves to ourselves and embark on the Cartesian project of acquiring empiricist knowledge. [...] But what is it in the workings of capitalism that interpellates individuals as paranoid subjects? If, as we have seen, paranoia operates by a hermeneutic logic, what is it in bourgeois society that we are compelled to interpret? Capitalism is definable as generalized commodity production, which, as Marx shows, necessarily encompasses generalized commodity fetishism. But the secret of the commodity itself - the basic distinction between the commodity and the non-commodified object of traditional societies - is its dual aspect, its status as both a use value that satisfies some human need and an exchange-value that renders it an interchangeable atom in the total system of exchange and that mystifies its origin in human labor. Furthermore, use-value, though indispensable to the commodity, is also, paradoxically, irrelevant to its status qua commodity: capitalism constitutes the hegemony of exchange-value (or simply "value", as Marx more often calls it). I suggest, then, that the commodity as bearer of value - both the basic economic "cell" of capitalism and a mystifying signifier - is the ultimate object of paranoid hermeneutic by the historical subjects of bourgeois society. *If we are economically constituted as capitalists and workers who must buy and sell human labor that is commodified into labor-power, then we are psychically constituted as paranoid subjects who must seek to interpret*

the signification of the objects - commodities - which define us and which, in a quasi-living manner, mystify the way that they and we are defined. [my emphasis] ⁶⁴

How, then, do we set about 'de-mystifying' the commodities that surround us? I suspect that we each have our own means of assimilating into a private universe of meaning the daily collage of information concerning commodities. This need not be a conscious process of translation, but it involves skills integral to our identities as, simultaneously, narrators and narratees of capitalism. "At the basis of paranoia," Lacan writes, "there reigns the phenomenon of the Unglauben," which he defines as "the absence of one of the terms of belief, of the term in which is designated the division of the subject."⁶⁵ Paranoia (and, arguably, consumerism) fills this absence of belief and offers the comforting illusion of an undivided subject. Perceiving a unifying order behind the apparent chaos, the paranoid becomes an accomplished weaver of narratives. But paranoia is a 'closed narrative;' necessarily self-referential, it can sustain only a solitary, solipsistic hero against the multiplying forces in the imagined plot:

"Paranoia is the illness which surmounts the absence of individuality; it is, therefore, a hatred of individuation, and that is why it is the model of all power." ⁶⁶

There is clearly a relation between the degree of autonomy permitted the individual by society at any given stage of its development, and the 'reflex' of paranoia as a desperate bid to preserve a sense of self, a sense of autonomy, when otherwise denied. Hofstadter argues that paranoia 'flourishes' in times of "social conflicts that involve ultimate schemes of values and that bring fundamental fears and hatreds, rather than negotiable interests, into political action. Catastrophe or the fear of catastrophe is most likely to elicit the syndrome of paranoid rhetoric."⁶⁷ [The post-AIDS panic rhetoric in the Krokers' "Body Invaders" and "Panic Encyclopaedia" is perhaps an interesting example of this]. Within the social conditions Hofstadter describes, paranoia is a withdrawal from political action into "fundamental fears and hatreds".

⁶⁴ Carl Freedman, "Towards a Theory of Paranoia: The Science Fiction of Philip K. Dick" [Science Fiction Studies, Vol. II, March 1984], pp.17-18

⁶⁵ Jacques Lacan, The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psycho-Analysis, trans Alan Sheridan [Harmondsworth, Penguin, 1977] p.238 (cited by Freedman, op. cit., p.17)

⁶⁶ Francois Roustang, "How Do You Make A Paranoid Laugh?" [Modern Language Notes, Sept. 1987], p.717

⁶⁷ Hofstadter, op.cit., p.39

In Addleton, the economic exploitation of the environment has become the psychic exploitation of the individual by external representation. Public space—hitherto defining a set of non-commodified relations—has become another fetishized commodity, prompting the individual to reify his/her feelings and desires in real or imagined forms which depend for their seductive power on their being unattainable. Thus Ella's quest for the mythical lover in the unlikely shape of Kobal-Heath may be a search for the vestiges of human love to counter the entropy of commodified society, an attempt to distance herself from the all-consuming consumerism which absorbs those who can afford to participate, while relegating those who are neither producing wealth by their labour, nor purchasing the products of others' labour, to the status of non-beings. The organization of her community suggests that such economic "non-beings" will find their own cult symbols and rituals to define their 'otherness' in what is, paradoxically, both a parody and a reaffirmation of the social values from which they are excluded. Ella's capacity for imaginative manipulation of her surroundings, furthermore, increases alongside her marginalization from the city's sites of power and public expression. This is a society in which, as Williamson writes of contemporary British society, "the majority of people have no control whatsoever over their productive lives: no security, little choice in work if they have work at all, and no means of public expression. In this society, consuming is, for those who can afford it, a major form of cultural and social activity and at the same time a central feature of the economy which is imposing such frustrations in the first place. The production of an ever-increasing range of consumer goods is crucial to modern capitalism while the consumption of those goods is crucial not only to the economy but to the ideology which supports it."⁶⁸ In seeking to break out of this circle, Ella alternates between the solipsistic consolations of paranoia, and a yearning for, paradoxically, an active life *by proxy* as the mistress or wife of the city's Member of Parliament. Each alternative is an expression of political powerlessness.

Dented electric heaters with plastic log fire surrounds were tossed onto the white slabs of freezers and refrigerators; cookers and car fendors provided the ballast for angle-poise lamps jutting at crazy angles; office swivel chairs, junked televisions, bicycle frames, crutches, rusting plugs by the score, Moulinex with shattered bowls, tumble driers,

⁶⁸ Judith Williamson, *op. cit.*, p.230

flowery three-piece suites with stuffing erupting, window frames, flex galore, buckled wheels and seized-up jacks, toasters, splintered vinyl, black sacks, combs, spectacle frames, shelf units, shower units, kitchen units, sacks of plaster, threadbare carpets, coshed slot-machines, watches, paperbacks, paperclips, flakes of dandruff on torn donkey jackets; a million shards of history shed by a thousand shattered families, stacked and glistening in the rain-washed starlight.

“This is it,” Ella said. “Home sweet home.”

Word of Mouth, Chapter Two, p.24

Paranoia, then, serves as a useful metaphor for the relationship between the politically-marginalised individual and the political manipulation of history, the Thatcherite fabrication of an "Enemy" within and without, and an increasing centralization of information and political power. Continued ideological hegemony in Addleton, indeed, may depend on the undeclared legitimization of paranoid principles.

Given suitably threatening conditions, paranoia may, on the other hand, be a measure of mental health - Ken Kesey's "One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest" provides evidence in this respect. It offers a means of inverting established values to expose the workings of the prevailing ideological hegemony; paranoia, according to Dali, is "a force and power" allowing the mind to "systematize confusion and thus to help to discredit completely the world of reality":

"The desperate activity of these new images [ie. those generated by the paranoid mind] may also contribute simultaneously with other surrealist activities, to the destruction of reality, and so benefit everything which, through infamous and abominable ideals of all kinds, aesthetic, humanitarian, philosophical, etc... bring us back to the clear springs of masturbation, exhibitionism, crime and love."⁶⁹

⁶⁹ Salvador Dali, "The Stinking Ass," trans. J. Bronowski, Dadas on Art, ed Lucy Lippard [Prentice-Hall, Englewood Cliffs, 1971], pp.97-100

The aim is to achieve both a concentration and a multiplication of images through paranoia, which will expose the limitations of the above-mentioned “abominable ideals.” Such a formulation of paranoia has in common with other theories the location of the paranoid subject as a God-like controlling agent, as the *author* of his or her “reality”. Yet what happens when society itself seems to be engaged in the discrediting, or systematic dismantling, of reality? This is the dilemma faced by Wax on his release from prison:

The prison psychologist had warned him that his pattern of offending stemmed from an inability to see people as “real”. He was therefore making great efforts to see people as real. In prison he had thought about women incessantly. He had compared men and women as regards patience, tolerance, and sense of humour. He looked at the pin-ups on the walls of the cells, the recreation room, the prison officers' staffroom, but they remained private abstractions, drained of reference to any women he knew. At night he itemized some of the activities of women; standing at bus-stops, inspecting scalps, throwing the javelin, squeezing fruit. Each time his thoughts were hi-jacked by an “unrealistic” idea - a woman “purring with pleasure”, for example, or undressing slowly before an open window - he substituted himself into the fantasy and thereby experienced the absurdity of feelings he attributed to others. It was a woman who had brought him into the world, cleaned up his shit, boxed his ears. He didn't think of her licking her lips and “purring with pleasure”. He had learned a lot inside prison, but outside was another matter. Nothing was straightforward in Addleton. According to the shrink, the moment he ceased seeing people as real he would have his collar pulled, a view endorsed by the Governor. Yet people refused to behave in a “real” way. The city was full of people pretending to be somebody else, wearing fancy dress, spouting phony words. He tried to see people as more real than they actually were. It was easier with a fistful of drugs. The unpredictable became commonplace. Anything might happen.

Word of Mouth, Chapter One, p.3

Thus the theme of paranoia is of value as much for its artistic or organizational possibilities as for its contemporary resonance. It offers a frame in which character, or psychological 'depth', is subservient to the Grand Plot/plot. It opens countless metaphorical possibilities because of the paranoid's compulsion to seek point-for-point correspondences in order to confirm his/her conspiracy theory. It operates as a metaphor (for the need to find a unifying meaning in an apparently illogical and chaotic environment), and is expressed *through* metaphor - the projection of perceived analogies. Furthermore, as a structural feature of the text, it renders the novel counter-entropic in terms of critical activity; Danny Zimms, in effect, exposes the chaos and illogicality beneath the apparent order of the monologic heritage impulse. Whatever its artistic merits as a general model for postindustrial society, paranoia obviously has important political implications worthy of consideration. The quest for coherence amidst the fragmentation of consumer society may be seen as a reflex to an excess of information and uncertainty. But both writing and reading similarly seek textual coherence and may therefore be regarded as culturally-legitimized forms of paranoid activity.

4. Conclusion

“Writing is not natural. This is its drama. It is an inscription that tries to come alive, that calls for dialogue. When it becomes unstable, unsure of its ground, when there is no longer the illusion that words, sentences and phrases can by themselves, as though by their mere presence, establish a design, then language represents a collection of voices and traces, brought together into a particular mix of which the text is a record, a testimony. [...] The difficulty of contemplating writing is the difficulty of thinking the metaphor, of thinking the metamorphosis.”⁷⁰

“To great writers, finished works weigh lighter than those fragments on which they work throughout their lives. For only the more feeble and distracted take an inimitable pleasure in conclusions, feeling themselves thereby given back to life. For the genius each caesura, and the heavy

⁷⁰ Iain Chambers, Border Dialogues: Journeys in Postmodernity [Routledge, London, 1990], p.115-6

blows of fate, fall like gentle sleep itself into his workshop labour. About it he draws a charmed circle of fragments.”⁷¹

The juxtaposition of faith and paranoia further solicits the reader’s participation in the text. Both faith and paranoia share a belief in things unseen, but whereas this unseen reality will be of a beneficent nature for the faithful, it will be perceived to be malignant in nature by the paranoiac. The discussion around the destruction of the Cathedral illustrates this point; the same fire may be a message from God, a freakish natural occurrence, a flaw of engineering design or the handiwork of some shadowy ecclesiastical conspiracy. The novel itself does not resolve this enigma since the purpose of the scene is to foreground the conflict between materialism and faith in the immaterial, rather than provide a key to its resolution. The reader is thereby encouraged to consider the status of his or her own system of belief; benevolent, malevolent, or “rationalist”.

For Benjamin, the technique of montage — “the art of citing without citation marks” — had “special, perhaps even total rights” as a progressive form because it “interrupts the context into which it is inserted” and thus “counteracts illusion.”⁷² The use of “dialectical images” to capture the survival of past history within the present is also evident in Word of Mouth. The fragments of montage, intended as “interruptions” on the causal path of narrative (and to convey thereby the experience of a culture in disintegration), are incorporated over time into the weave of the story. Narrative coherence steals over successive drafts. The technique of the novel is accordingly dialogic, an effect of the motivations of the montagiste combined with that of the paranoiac.

Word of Mouth may be described as a ‘meta-historical’ novel in which the *durée* of experience consists of pre-existing moments. The detritus of the present is presented in terms of the ‘already been’—and thus the characters, alongside the reader, are trapped in an eternal past. Buck-Morss comments:

“In the beginning of an era, there is an intuitive, ‘too early’ apprehension of the future. The residues of past cultural creations bear witness to it. But if the anticipatory wish symbols that leave their traces on these creations have remained ‘unconscious,’ this is another way of saying the

⁷¹ Walter Benjamin, “Standard Clock,” in One Way Street and Other Writings, [Verso, London, 1992], pp.47-48

⁷² Cit. Buck-Morss, op. cit., p.67

collective is not even aware that it is dreaming—with the inevitable result that symbol turns into fetish, and technology, the means for realizing human dreams, is mistaken for their actualization. Commodity fetishes and dream fetishes become indistinguishable. When processed food appears on the shelf as if it had dropped from a Saint-Simonian sky, commodities begin their ‘theological capers,’ the wish images become a phantasmagoria, and dream turns into delusion. When mass media are seen as themselves the democratization of culture, distributed as miraculously as Christ’s multiplying food, they too become fetishes.

“The tremendous power of the new technology has remained in the hands of the ruling class that wields it as a force of domination, while appropriating the wealth it produces. In this context, dream symbols are the fetishized desires that advertise commodities. And the collective goes on sleeping. But should it awaken, the utopian symbols can be redeemed as a manifestation of truth. Essential to this truth is its transitoriness. The wish symbols, signposts in a period of transition, can inspire the refunctioning of the new nature so that it satisfies material needs and desires that are the source of the dream in the first place. Wish images do not liberate humanity directly. But they are vital to the process.”⁷³

Moral or political paralysis implies a pessimistic denial of the possibility of social change. The depiction of all the characters in a novel as living within a totalizing "system" renders them impotent, instilling in the mind of the reader awe at the scale of social constructions and an accompanying sense of powerlessness:

"[T]he more powerful the vision of some increasingly total system or logic - the Foucault of the prisons book is the obvious example - the more powerless the reader comes to feel. Insofar as the theorist wins, therefore, by constructing an increasingly closed and terrifying machine, to that very degree he loses, since the critical capacity of his work is thereby paralysed, and the impulses of negation and revolt,

⁷³ *ibid*, pp.118-119

not to speak of those of social transformation, are increasingly perceived as vain and trivial in the face of the model itself." ⁷⁴

The mystification of political relations invariably excludes the possibility of collective action and therefore, ironically, serves the interests of the ruling powers or 'controlling agencies'. Writing, on the other hand, sets contrary or contradictory 'truths' within the same frame and thereby encourages the reader to consider the enigma from *within*, by participating in the processes by which 'meaning' is framed.

"[I]t is possible to believe in writing...precisely because, legitimized by 'nothing', it legitimizes the other and ceaselessly begins."⁷⁵

Completion of a manuscript, the moment when further revisions to the text are no longer either practical or desirable, opens the possibility of dialogue around its suddenly exposed provocations and limitations. The novel, like all dialogic forms, demands collaboration in the play of possible meanings. Our attention is engaged by the drama of conflicting forces and by the tension or energy of their drive towards resolution. I have attempted to indicate some of the debates which informed my approach to writing Word of Mouth. The most interesting questions, however, are beyond the scope of this paper (or this writer); how, for example, did I know from a relatively early stage that Ella, who is not associated with light elsewhere in the novel, would die in an inferno in an electrical light shop? How does one account for the details which accrue once the novel has generated its own energy and logic—the arrival of Charles, for example, in a Robin Reliant, or the conviction that the language of "Kirsoum Macula" must be culled from the Dictionary of Archaic Words?⁷⁶ Such decisions involve an intimacy with the material of the story, an instinct for narrative opportunities perhaps, which is beyond the range of formal articulation.

By indicating some of the landmarks on the "main streets" of my novel (or some of the exhibits, perhaps, in this "permanent exhibition of decay"), I have been obliged to adopt the role of the "good guide," a role which, as we have seen,

⁷⁴ Frederic Jameson, "Postmodernism, Or The Cultural Logic Of Late Capitalism," p.67

⁷⁵ Michel de Certeau, Heterologies. Discourse on the Other. [Manchester University Press, Manchester, 1986], p.3

⁷⁶ Dictionary of Archaic Words, James Orchard Halliwell, [Bracken Books, London, 1989]

conceals more than is revealed. I have discerned connections where others might see disjunction, I have chased my audience from some of the more tempting side-streets, and yet I have tried to convince them of the comprehensiveness of the tour. I have the distinct feeling, however, that my charges are talking among themselves. This is because a novel is necessarily an open narrative, a forum for the exchange of possible solutions to problems we define ourselves (and *by which* we define ourselves as writers and readers). By exchanging stories we learn that the conflicts contained in one story/discipline engender fresh perspectives on those contained in a parallel story/discipline. It requires an effort of creative will on the part of the reader to establish imaginative correspondences. A reader who engages *actively* with the special challenges of each text — ordering information, analysing structure, exercising the imagination in the spaces between details — participates in a meaningful dialogue and is rewarded with a version of the ‘story’ relevant to his/her interests. The “tacit” dimension of writing is thus *reading* — the ability of the imagination to transpose and extend resonant symbols — for it is in the nature of stories to generate further stories.

What remains is a voice and a text—the voice of the tour guide facing Clifford’s Tower:

“Able to be carried by articulated language, spoken or written, fixed or moving images, gestures, and the ordered mixture of all these substances; narrative is present in myth, legend, fable, tale, novella, epic, history, tragedy, drama, comedy, mime, painting, stained glass windows, cinema, comics, news items, conversation... [and] narrative is present in every age, in every place, in every society... Caring nothing for the division between good and bad literature, narrative is international, transhistorical, transcultural: it is simply there, like life itself.”⁷⁷

and the manuscript of a novel entitled Word of Mouth:

“The work is the death mask of its conception.”⁷⁸

⁷⁷ Roland Barthes, “Introduction to the Structural Analysis of Narrative,” in Image-Music-Text [Fontana, London, 1977]

⁷⁸ Walter Benjamin, “Post No Bills,” (No. XIII., *The Writer’s Technique in Thirteen Theses*), in One Way Street and Other Writings, p.65

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