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BLIND SPOTS AND SIGHT LINES:
VISION, IDENTIFICATION, AND THE NARRATOR FUNCTION

By

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A DISSERTATION

Submitted to
Michigan State University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

English

2009

ABSTRACT

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Although narrative theory has moved away from a strictly structural analysis of narrative, it often retains a tendency to place structural elements of a narrative (characters, narrators, plot elements, etc.) into a dynamic system, rather than regarding these elements themselves as dynamic functions operating within a larger system. This dissertation argues for an understanding of the narrator as an effect produced by the operation of narrative dynamics. The dynamics of the narrator function correspond to what Lacan refers to as the “effect of retroversion.” That is, the illusion of a narrating entity is produced out of a textual dissonance that also produces the illusion that the narrator somehow preexists the narrative; the narrative thus seems to be created or communicated by the narrator rather than vice versa.

In this effect of retroversion, the narrator reveals itself to be structured like the subject—a dynamics without origin that appears nonetheless to emanate from a stable site. This dynamics operates via the instantiation of relationality: when textual utterances delineate differing ranges of knowledge, the illusion of a narrating entity whose own knowledge corresponds to one of those ranges emerges out this epistemological dissonance. In four American novels from the mid-twentieth century—Ralph Ellison’s *Invisible Man*, Walker Percy’s *The Moviegoer*, Patricia Highsmith’s *The Talented Mr. Ripley*, and Paul Brodeur’s *The Stunt Man*, these dynamics play out in tandem with the

dynamics of the Lacanian gaze. As a process of establishing and negotiating difference (inside and outside, self and other), the mechanisms of the gaze highlight the similarly relational operations out of which the narrative produces the illusion of its own narrator. The homologous dynamics of the subject and the narrator thus suggest that the reader's relation to and engagement with fictional narrative is a question of intersubjectivity.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank everyone who has supported me through the years (and years) that it took to produce this dissertation: my parents, for their emotional, moral, and financial support; my grandmother for letting me turn her sunniest bedroom into a messy office; my sister, who took me to the used bookstore where I stumbled on an old copy of *The Moviegoer* and fell in love; Judith for being an all-around excellent adviser; Renee and Bethany, for showing me how the other half lives (money! vacations! kids! real jobs!); all the wonderful friends I made in graduate school (you know who you are), without whose continual support and commiseration I couldn't have pulled through; Michelle, for always being willing to have a serious discussion about *Buffy*; and especially Shel, Brian, and Lance, who read lots of drafts, mixed lots of drinks, and humored me even when I vowed to pack it all in and move to a remote island in the South Seas. I couldn't have done this without you.

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Introduction

The very act of telling, of narration, proceeds then from the potentially infinite repercussion of an *effect of reading*; an effect that, once produced, seeks to reproduce itself as an effect yet to be produced—an effect whose *effect* is an effect to produce. Narrative as such turns out to be the trace of the *action* of reading; it is, in fact, *reading as action*.

—Shoshana Felman, “Turning the Screw of Interpretation,” p. 126

To be fooled by a text implies that the text is not constative but performative, and that the reader is in fact one of its effects.

—Barbara Johnson, “The Frame of Reference,” p. 501

The understandings of narrative dynamics that underpin contemporary narrative theory are little reflected in the ongoing debates and analyses about the narrator. In the 1970s and 1980s, Lacanian psychoanalysis and Derridean deconstruction helped move narratology away from its structuralist roots. Although these theories have had profound effects on our understanding of how literary narratives operate, the terms in which narrators are discussed remain largely structuralist. The narrator may be understood as a narrative construction, but scholarship about the narrator fails to look in any sustained way at the creation and operation of that construction. Typologies categorize the narrator and examine its place in the narrative and relation to other narrative elements (characters, plot, temporality, etc), but they do not address how the narrative—this dynamic thing that “emerges out of the turns of its frame” (Felman 127)—actually goes about *producing* the illusion of its narrators.

Instead of looking at the narrator, then, my dissertation examines the operation of what I call the “narrator function.” The narrator function is a dynamic operation that produces the effect (of a voice or storyteller or consciousness or conveyer of knowledge)

that we take to be the “narrator.” The narrator function, moreover, is the source of the illusion that the narrative is being created or communicated by the narrator, rather than vice versa. Via a group of mid-century American novels displaying a reflexivity that treats the narrator as a dynamic narrative process, I argue that narrators are enacted in literary narratives through the delineation of dissonant ranges of knowledge. Whether this knowledge seems to result from sensory, visual or intellectual observation, the epistemological dissonances at work in these texts produce the effect of a narrator, as well as the retroactive illusion of the narrator as the site from which knowledge emanates.

Structural Narrators in a Post-Structuralist World

In 1977, in a special issue of *Yale French Studies* devoted to literature and psychoanalysis, Shoshana Felman and Barbara Johnson each suggested a definition of literary narrative as a dynamic process traceable only through its effects. Their analyses, which consider narrative as productive of a slippery, self-referential meaning that embodies its own contradiction and dissolution, arise from the conjunction of Derridean deconstruction and Lacanian psychoanalysis, both of which were gaining influence in American scholarship.¹ Felman and Johnson are indicative of, if not instrumental in, a refiguring of narratological study in the 1970s and 1980s. Earlier models of narrative, which rose out of Russian formalism and French linguistics, were highly structuralist, regarding narrative as a semantic system whose component parts could be examined in search of the syntax that produces narrative meaning. In contrast, narrative theories developed in the wake of Derrida and Lacan have tended to place more emphasis on the

¹ *Of Grammatology* was published in English in 1976; *Four Fundamental Concepts* was translated into English in 1978.

dynamism of the narrative system, regarding meaning not just as constructed but as “in flight”: an effect that “take[s] place through permanent displacement, textually take[s] shape and take[s] effect” (Felman 119).

These understandings of narrative have helped produce provocative models of narrative dynamics. In that same special issue of *Yale French Studies*, Peter Brooks brings Freudian theories of desire to bear on narrative, producing a model that conceives narrative as a performance of mastery (“Freud’s Masterplot” [1977]). Deleuze and Guattari envision literature as profoundly productive and engaged in a dynamic process of deterritorialization (*Kafka* [1975]); and Teresa de Lauretis, applying psychoanalytic insights to film narrative, understands narrative as an operation of engaging, constituting, and positioning subjectivities (*Alice Doesn’t* [1984]). Paul Ricoeur suggests a model of narrative that conceives mimesis as a “configuration of action,” thereby emphasizing mimesis as narrative practice rather than representation of content (*Time and Narrative* [1983]). Ross Chambers has produced insightful studies of the way narratives demonstrate their own reading situation (*Story and Situation* [1984]) and stage resistance to power (*Room for Maneuver* [1991]). And Brian Richardson, in the 2002 collection *Narrative Dynamics*, considers theories of plot, time, character, and framing that examine the “movement” of narrative from an opening to a closing.

Despite the prevalence of broadly dynamic models of narrative, however, studies of the narrator have remained strikingly structural in both their methods and focus. Gérard Genette’s 1972 *Narrative Discourse*,² with its exhaustive typological

² Published in French under the title *Discours du récit*, *Narrative Discourse* was published in the United States in 1980.

classifications, has remained a touchstone for discussions of literary narrators. Genette's treatment of mood, voice, and focalization (how the narrator conveys what it knows) and diegesis (the narrator's apparent location in relation to the world of the story) have undergone extensive revision in the last 35 years, and Genette's classifications—or something comparable—continue to play a prominent role in narratological analyses of the narrator. The thoroughness and subtlety of Genette's work do indeed render his classificatory systems extremely useful in the description of various types of narrators: he covers the ground so effectively that most narrators can be comfortably classed somewhere in his system or in one of the assorted refinements produced over the years.³ Nonetheless, Genette's system depends on taking the narrator more or less at face value—as some sort of presence through whom the text is transmitted.

This is not to say that theorists, least of all Genette, are not cognizant of the constructed nature of the narrator. But typological approaches like Genette's implicitly regard the constructed narrator as a finished product rather than a dynamic process. To consider something “constructed” is to put as much or more emphasis on it as a finished (static) product as one does on the process of construction itself. Such approaches to the study of the narrator tend, like Genette's, to collapse all too often into an implicit treatment of the narrator as some kind of presence or representation or figure: a voice (Roy Pascal, Dorrit Cohn), a reporter (Seymour Chatman), a passer-by (Harry Shaw), a viewer (Genette), a storyteller (Matt DelConte), a speech-act (Marie-Laure Ryan), an agent (Mieke Bal), a persona (Wayne Booth), a consciousness (Ruediger Heinze), a lens

³ The influence of his system has hardly rendered Genette immune to criticism. His typology of focalization is perennially subject to revision and critique, most notably by Mieke Bal (1977, translated 1983), F.K. Stanzel (1979, translated 1984), W. Bronzwaer (1981), Shlomith Rimmon-Kenan (1983), William Edmiston (1989), Seymour Chatman (1990), William Nelles (1990), Monika Fludernik (2001), and James Phelan (2005).

(James Phelan). Studies of the narrator thus examine how the narrator, once produced, behaves and influences the text in which it operates.⁴ While this method can certainly produce valuable literary readings, it does little to address how the narrator is itself produced through the operation of narrative dynamics.⁵

When theorists ask how the narrator is constructed, what they mean—or at least the question they end up answering—is: “How does this text’s narrator perform in relation to the story it tells?” Framing the question of the narrator in this way, however, displaces our attention from the narrative process to its (apparent) components. For example, Ruediger Heinze, in his 2008 study of first-person narrators who “display knowledge that is temporally, spatially, or cognitively undisclosed to them” (270), begins with a full discussion of the constructed nature of the first-person narrator. Heinze argues that although there is no reason to presuppose a “coherent unified narrator” nor to attribute a human consciousness to any narrating agent that might exist (280), the “puzzling effects” of this sort of narration nonetheless merit study because “one of the most prominent effects of a first-person narrative (and indeed of all fictional narrative) is exactly the projection of a human consciousness” (281). From this promising start, Heinze proceeds to rework Genette’s definition of *paralepsis* to produce a typology of

⁴ Hence the assorted classificatory systems that this question generates. Narrators are dissected according to what they know (omniscient and limited narrators); what they see (focalizations, point of view, and perspectives); the voice in which they speak (grammatical person); their relation to the consciousnesses they narrate (psychonarration, free indirect discourse, etc.); or their relation to the story (homo-, hetero-, intra- and extradiegetic). Many of these typologies retain a clear awareness that the narrator is a construction and acknowledge that this constructed narrator can shift categories in the course of its narration. They do little, however, to explain how the narrative produces the illusion of an entity that can “see” the story’s action, “speak” in its own voice (or the character’s or the author’s), or appear located inside and/or outside the story.

⁵ The best of these readings utilize narrator typologies to explore how the narrator extends or reflects the narrative’s themes or investments, or how the construction of the narrator implicates readers’ responses to the text. See, for example, Robin Warhol’s analysis of how gender and affect is produced by the narrator of *The Color Purple* (“How Narration Produces Gender”) or how the “engaging” narrators of nineteenth-century novels evoke the sentimental response desired of readers (“Engaging Narrator”).

paralepses through which to read the first-person texts in question. Along the way, he detours through critical conversations about representation (in order to examine how narration might represent a human voice or agent), referentiality (in order to establish the fictional and real-world epistemological framing that the concept of *paralepsis* might require), and functional design (in order to determine what thematic import epistemological violations might bring to bear on a text). In spite of his early reference to the projection of human consciousness as an *effect* of fictional narration, however, Heinze grounds his analysis in an assumption that the narrator is more or less *mimetic* of human consciousness. For this reason, he claims, we require a theory of *paralepsis* in order to explain how *paraleptic* “human” narrators can know what they know and still seem human.

Heinze’s article is typical of analyses of the narrator in two respects. First, the circularity of his argument (wherein the assumption of an agential narrating entity underpins the structural model meant to investigate that assumption) collapses the distinction between the narrator as a narrative process and the narrator as structural element. Second, the analysis undergoes a symptomatic displacement from the discourse of narrativity into discourses of referentiality and representation, which serve to reinforce the assumption of the narrator’s “existence” even as they purport to critique it.⁶ What

⁶ For example, Heinze’s examination of how “first-person narrative projects an agential human consciousness” gets sidetracked by the question of “*paraleptic* compared to what?” (282). In other words, since the concept of *paralepsis* implies two different sets of knowledge (what the narrator “should” know and what it does know), *paralepsis* must be examined in relational terms. Heinze explores this relationality in terms of the relation between the fictional and real worlds, arguing that readers require a real-world frame of reference in order to determine what a first-person narrator “should” know. In terms of narratological inquiry into the narrator, I would suggest that the real point of interest in this formulation lies in how the narrative goes about producing two different sets of knowledge that suggest the presence of a narrator who knows “too much.” By detouring into the arena of referentiality, however, Heinze assumes the unproblematic existence of a narrator who represents a human consciousness and deflects the force of his analysis onto the question of how readers understand and interpret fictionality, rather than narration.

neither Heinze nor most studies of the narrator do, however, is explain how the texts in question produce the effect of a narrating entity. Rather than asking how the narrator is constructed, then, we might better ask how narrative generates the effects that we take to be evidence of a narratorial presence. If narrative theory is to take seriously the insights that psychoanalysis and deconstruction bring to bear on the production of meaning in narrative, then it ought to explore how the effects that readers take to “mean” the narrator are produced in and by narrative.

The Case Against the Narrator

Discomfort with the way that studies of the narrator tend to collapse the narrator function into a “structural essence” and to displace discussions of narrativity into the language of reference and representation has generated a small but steady stream of work intended to sidestep these pitfalls. In a 1997 article entitled “Who Is the Narrator?” Richard Walsh critiques the concept of the narrator on the grounds that “the narrator's promotion from representational accident to structural essence has occurred specifically in response to the qualities of fiction, not narrative per se” (496). According to Walsh, treating the narrator as a separate agent (rather than as a character when represented in the text and as the author when not) obscures the fictionality of the narrative. The idea of the narrator enables critics and readers to “read [the narrative] as something known rather than something imagined, something reported as fact rather than something told as fiction” (499). In other words, imagining the presence of a narrator serves to bracket fictional narratives in such a way that the content of the narrative can be read as reported knowledge rather than fictive enunciation.

The urge to conceive narrative in this manner both emerges from and reinscribes critical difficulties. In Walsh's view, the concept of the narrator is necessitated only by theoretical and philosophical assumptions about the relation between the author and the representational act. Considering narrative as authorial enunciation raises the problem of distinguishing between the fictiveness of that enunciation and the sincerity with which it is offered,⁷ as well as the difficulty of situating authorial intention in relation to the production of signification.⁸ Critical difficulties posed by conceiving narrative as fictional utterance can thus be ameliorated by utilizing the narrator as a theoretical construct—but, as Walsh points out, this conceptualization creates its own problems. Critical interpretation, Walsh argues, “indulges too far in collaboration with the fiction's own rhetoric of representation” (496). To conceive of the narrator as a continuous narrating agent is to “treat a represented instance of narration as ontologically prior to the language that does the representing” (507) and to thereby obscure the rhetoric and fictionality of narrative (511).

In Walsh's view, then, the kinds of problems that Heinze's analysis suffers (both the tendency to treat the narrator as a represented entity and the digression into discussions of reference and representation) stem precisely from his use of the narrator as

⁷ Fictional utterance fits poorly into the schema of speech-act and referential theories. Fiction is neither a true statement nor is it a falsehood. This problem can be somewhat resolved by evaluating the enunciations of a narrator (who is represented as either reliably or unreliably conveying “factual” information) rather than those of the author. Walsh, among others, is highly skeptical about whether attributing enunciative acts to a narrating entity generates a useful understanding of fictionality. And Carole Taylor has disputed the application of philosophies of reference to fictional narratives on the grounds that literary critics have not acceded to the “first principles” from which philosophers have constructed referential theories.

⁸ As Walsh point outs, Wayne Booth negotiates this difficulty in part through the notion of the implied author, which imagines a productive agent situated between author and narrator—thus sidestepping problems of authorial intention and biography while avoiding the awkwardness of assigning productive agency to the narrative itself. Genette, however, disputes the introduction of additional agents, insisting that the narrator is adequate as a conceptual source of narrative agency. Chatman, in contrast, situates productive agency in the text itself, contending that the text serves as the implied author. (See Walsh 508-511 for a full discussion of the matter.)

a critical construct—that is, his problems arise from the very object of his analysis.

Walsh's survey of the critical problems occasioned by the use of the narrator as theoretical concept thus helps explain why analyses like Heinze's are so pervasive in typological studies of narration. To approach the question of the narrator through the lens of a typology is to take the narrative's representational frame at face value and to risk reproducing that frame in one's analysis.⁹ And attempts to avoid doing so tend, as with Heinze's analysis, to sidestep the question of representational production in favor of other aspects of representation and reference.¹⁰

Walsh's call for the abolition of the narrator has been taken up in one form or another by other scholars.¹¹ Most rely on something akin to the representational grounds of Walsh's argument, and most end up committing the same critical sins that Walsh details in his article. For example, Dan Shen (2001) contends that the act of narrating is either made accessible within the text by means of its representation there, or it is not. If it is not, then "narrating" is really writing and should be treated as such. The "real" process of narrating thus always lies outside the scope of the text, because the "real"

⁹ The prevalence of diegesis as a typological category illustrates this risk almost literally, for diegesis conceives literary narrative in terms of frames and classifies narrators according to whether they are represented within this frame (as is often the case with first-person narrators) or exist outside it (as with third-person "omniscient" narrators). Analysis of literary diegesis thus takes the represented frame as its object of study, rather than the mechanism by which the narrative constructs the illusion of such a frame.

¹⁰ The difficulty (if not impossibility) of escaping this tendency can be seen in narratological deployments of cognitive studies and fictional-worlds theories. Both approaches consider the construction of the narrator as a function of readers' interpretative models rather than narrative operation. Thus, such studies often invoke typological models of the narrator but focus attention on how readers construct and relate to different kinds of narrators (cognitive studies) or create referential links between the "real" world and the fictional world in order to comprehend the narrator in terms of human consciousness. See Marie-Laure Ryan's *Possible Worlds* for more on fictional worlds, and Dixon and Bortolussi for an example of cognitive studies in narratology.

¹¹ Walsh is not the first to criticize the narrator as a critical concept, but he is perhaps the first to do so on representational grounds. Käthe Hamburger (1957, trans. 1973) and Anne Banfield (1982) have made similar arguments on linguistic grounds.

narration is equivalent to the author's act of writing (123-25). Fictive narrating, according to Shen, is only accessible to the reader when it becomes an object of narration (125): "If readers try to look behind the words for the narrating process, they will find only the writer's writing hand, and the fact that the disembodied voice [of the narrator] is merely a fictional illusion" (126).

Shen is right to note the illusory nature of the narrating voice, but her insistence on the transparency of the language that creates that illusion renders the author the sole producer and arbiter of meaning. If writing and narrating are one and the same and exist unproblematically "behind" the words of the narrative, meaning is evacuated from language and narrative and situated solidly in authorial intention and readerly interpretation. Shen's concern with the constructed narrator, then, causes her to posit a firm boundary between a static narrative object and the "real narrating process" (127)—precisely the boundary that Walsh tries to render permeable by removing the barrier of the narrator. While Shen recognizes the illusory nature of the narratorial voice, she overlooks the artificial nature of the divisions she creates in order to exclude that voice from the purview of the narrative language. As is so often the case in analyses of the narrator, Shen's interest in refining typological terminology results in an analysis that fails to acknowledge the dynamism of narrative itself.

Monika Fludernik (2001) critiques precisely the sort of linguistic transparency that Shen assumes, arguing that a communicative model of narrative is limited by the "constraint to find a narrator's voice behind the linguistic surface structure, to impute existence to a fact of diction." Fludernik prefers an interpretive model of the narrator, contending that "the insistence on the presence of a speaker constitutes an interpretive

move, in which the reader concludes from the presence of a narrative discourse that somebody must be narrating the story and that therefore there must be a hidden narrator (or narrative voice) in the text” (622). As a reading strategy, the hypostasizing of a narrator persona can be a valuable move, insofar as it helps the reader to “project real-life parameters into the reading process and, if at all possible, treat the text as a real-life instance of narrating” (623), but such hypostasizing is by no means a theoretical necessity.

Like Shen, however, Fludernik strips away some artificial boundaries only to erect others. Fludernik considers the Genettian distinction between voice and focalization to be spurious because both are inferred from the same linguistic evidence. In other words, the language of the same sentence can be interpreted as indicative of either a speaker or a viewer whose “presence and existence seem to be vouchsafed by the stylistic features of authorial diction” (623). Both voice and focalization, Fludernik argues, impose inadequate models (communicational schema or visual metaphor) on the narrative, are “based on illusionistic presuppositions,” and “attempt to extrapolate a consistent real-world schema from the textual surface structure” (635). To both secure and celebrate our freedom from these restrictive models, Fludernik analyzes what she considers to be a completely new kind of narrator, one that “works without invoking the parameters of voice or focalization” (636). Her reading of George Garrett’s *The Death of the Fox* concludes that the “narrator” demonstrates “no personal stance, no stylistic or deictic situating [...] except for the tautological conclusion that there must be a source for this discourse” (630). Imagining such a source is precisely the sort of “illusionistic presupposition” that Fludernik criticizes models of voice and focalization for making, but

that is precisely how she conducts her analysis of Garrett's text. For each passage that she examines, Fludernik imagines a possible speaking/viewing situation that might produce such narration and then demonstrates its incompatibility with the typologies of voice and focalization that she has already dismissed as inadequate. Despite her acknowledgement of the illusory nature of the narrator and her critique of typological assumptions, Fludernik performs her analysis by positing the same illusory narrational source. Fludernik's argument that Genette fails to account for the "mimetic illusion generated by the 'voice' factor" (623) is thus undercut by her own tendency to read Garrett's text in search of representations of a mimetic, narrating entity. Small wonder then, that instead of an investigation of how Garrett's narrative creates the effects she analyzes, Fludernik produces only a call for a new typological category, to describe narration that seems to escape the bounds of earlier typologies (636).

Contending that Fludernik, in focusing on a third-person narrator, has sidestepped the problem of applying the no-narrator theory to personal narration, Henrik Nielsen (2004) introduces the "impersonal voice" as a means of solving the enunciative problems of the fictional "I." In doing so, however, Nielsen commits the critical error that Walsh warns against: he takes the representational frame of the narrative literally. In Nielsen's view, there is no way to know if the speaker of the "I" in first-person fiction is really the narrator, as happens "whenever something is narrated that the 'narrating-I' cannot possibly know" (133).¹² The assumption here is that because the narrating-I *represents* a person, we can infer what that "I" should or should not know. As Walsh demonstrates, this kind of assumption subordinates narrative logic to representational logic; it places the

¹² The go-to examples for Nielsen and others tend to be the passages in *Moby-Dick* in which Ishmael appears to narrate others' thoughts, of which he can logically have no knowledge.

representation in a position of priority over the language that represents. Nielsen then utilizes this faulty assumption as evidence that we require another narrative construct—the impersonal voice—to solve the epistemological problems posed by the narrating-I who knows too much. Working against conflicting theories of enunciation and fictionality that would seem to imply that “the narrating-I creates itself by referring to itself,” Nielsen argues that, in fact, “this person, like all the other elements of fiction, is created because the impersonal voice of the narrative refers to it” (145). In his efforts to combat readings of the first-person narrator that compromise its fictionality by attributing to it the creation of the fictional world, Nielsen thus displaces narratorial agency into a theoretical construct that is still bound up in the representational logic that necessitated its creation. An impersonal voice—itself a textual representation (as Walsh would have it) or an interpretive short-cut (as Fludernik would contend)—does not create the fictional world; the voice is itself produced or enabled by narrative language, not vice versa.

Jonathan Culler, in a 2004 argument against the notion of narrative omniscience, identifies this very inversion—in which the narrator is understood as the producer of narrative—as a consequence of conceiving the narrator in representational terms: “the underlying motivation for the postulation of omniscience is our inclination to recuperate textual details or effects by attaching them to the consciousness of a person, *who becomes their source*” (28, emphasis mine). Narrators, in Culler’s view, are hardly omniscient; rather omniscience has been floated as an explanation for narrative effects that are incompatible with our understanding of human consciousness. Like Walsh and Fludernik, Culler contends that the failure to acknowledge the representational nature of this conception of the narrator occasions critical misdeeds. Culler argues that readings of

omniscience as “the literary agent of panoptic discipline and control, linked to the policing power of narrative” stem from misreading a diverse set of narrative practices as reflective of omniscience. Culler thus proposes the abandonment of a “critical vocabulary that does no service to us or narrative” on the grounds that the fantasy of omniscience, culled from our tendency to naturalize narrative as a representation of human or quasi-divine intelligence, “oppresses at the same time as it obfuscates the narrative effects that lead us to posit it” (32).

Heinze, Walsh, Shen, Fludernik, and Culler all reject (or at least question) the notion of a continuous narrating entity on similar grounds. Their problems with the use of the narrator as a critical concept generally stem from a sense that such a concept helps perpetuate critical misunderstandings of how narrative works. Narrative typologies repeatedly render their users overly complicit with “the fiction’s own rhetoric of representation” (Walsh 496)—but even among those who, like Shen and Fludernik, try to dodge the trap, the problematic structural and representational assumptions of narrator typologies only reassert themselves. And while Walsh and Culler offer savvy critiques of the representational morass in which studies of the narrator find themselves, neither offers a solution.

Culler’s approach to omniscience, however, suggests a way forward. In order to enable his dissection of the concept, Culler asks, “what are the effects that people have sought to describe through the dubious notion of omniscience?” (26). The contention that the concept of the narrator ought to account for narrative effects is useful insofar as it focuses attention on those effects. In trying to filter out the idea of omniscience, however, Culler’s formulation of those effects—which include authorial narration, impersonal

narration, and the third-person narration of interior mental states—embeds the assumption of a narrating entity into his argument. Culler thus falls victim to the same circularity and inconclusiveness that characterize other interventions in the realm of the narrator.

I propose reworking the terms of Culler's question to capitalize on Walsh's and Fludernik's insights (which Culler himself acknowledges) that "narrators" can be (and often are) intermittent rather than continuously existing.¹³ In other words, there is no reason to assume that a narrator is present even when it is invisible or reticent. Narrative theory requires a narratorial understanding that resists projecting intention, agency, knowledge, or action onto what is, in the end, a function of narrative operation. To that end, a more appropriate question would ask *how* narrative effects lead us to posit the existence of a narrator.

The Narrator Function

Instead of introducing another typology or advocating the abolition of the notion of the narrator altogether, my dissertation proposes the term "narrator function" to identify the narrative operation that produces the illusion of a narrating agent or entity. I use the term "function" more or less in its mathematical sense: as "a variable quantity regarded in relation to one or more other variables in terms of which it may be expressed or on which its value depends" (*Oxford American Dictionary*). In other (slightly less mathematical) words, the narrator as function is created out of and in relation to the

¹³ Culler, among others, makes this argument in response to the notion of the "covert" or "reticent" narrator, which is meant to explain why an all-knowing narrator might choose to withhold information. This formulation requires that one posit that a narrator is always present, even when it fails to convey the kind of information that would alert a reader to its presence.

narrative it purports to narrate. I argue that this relationship is expressed narratively via dissonant ranges of knowledge; thus when a narrative statement invokes a distinction between two or more sets of knowledge, the narrator is retroactively constituted, via that distinction, as the illusory site from which narrative knowledge emanates. This retroactive constitution marks the operation of the narrator function. For example, in a statement such as “I thought at the time that she was wrong,” the illusion of a narrator is constituted by and in relation to the distinction between what the narrating-I knows now and what the narrated-I thought in the past (not to mention what “she” knew or didn’t know). Out of a statement that enacts dissonant ranges of knowledge, then, comes a retroactive construction of the delusive narrator as the originary site of narrative knowledge. Thus, in keeping with Felman’s and Johnson’s understandings of narrative as visible only in its effects, I argue that the narrator *is* one of those narrative effects. To conceive of the narrator as a function is to privilege the process by which the illusion of a narrator is produced out of the operation of the narrative dynamic.

Articulating such a dynamic process without reinscribing the stasis of a structural model, however, is an inherently difficult endeavor—most likely an impossible one. Lacan characterizes such an undertaking as a “kind of teaching [that] is a refusal of any system. It uncovers a thought in motion—nonetheless vulnerable to systematization, since it necessarily possesses a dogmatic aspect” (*Seminar I*, 1). Insofar as language involves inscription into a symbolic system, putting an idea into words requires to a certain degree that one fix its location, stop its motion. In other words, the language necessary to describe “a thought in motion” threatens to strip that thought of its constitutive movement, to “systematize” something whose meaning coheres in its own

flight and contradiction. Lacan's psychoanalytic teachings are designed to bring his students to the brink of an understanding whose articulation would unravel its meaning: "The master does not teach *ex cathedra* a ready made science; he supplies an answer when the students are on the verge of finding it" (1). Lacan's seminars, then, attempt to articulate an analytic structure without producing a science that is unduly "entangled in language" (2).

As Felman's and Johnson's readings illustrate, this Lacanian resistance to systematization is of tremendous use in the attempt to articulate a dynamic understanding of literary narrative and the narrator function. Insofar as Lacan explicates systems (of subjectivity, of identification, of transference, etc.) without stifling their operational dynamics, Lacanian thought can help to identify and investigate similar dynamics in/of narrative. Consequently, I rely heavily on Lacanian theory to illuminate the operation of the narrator function. Of particular use is the "effect of retroversion" demonstrated by Lacan's models of subjectivity and identification. Žižek glosses this effect as "the transferential illusion according to which the subject becomes at every state 'what it already was': a retroactive effect is experienced as something which was already there from the beginning" (*Sublime Object* 104). Lacan's elucidation of the effect of retroversion in his theories of subjectivity provides a conceptual model by which to understand the retroactive production of the narrator as narrative's delusive originary site.

Blind Spots and Sight Lines

My analysis of the narrator function proceeds from an examination of four American novels from the mid-twentieth century—Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* (1952), Walker Percy's *The Moviegoer* (1961), Patricia Highsmith's *The Talented Mr. Ripley*

(1955), and Paul Brodeur's *The Stunt Man* (1970). These novels have in common an interest in the process of identification, which they represent as an imaginative projection into the position of an "other" that underpins the production of subjectivity. This interest in identification is manifested both thematically and structurally—thematically in conjunction with tropes of visibility; and structurally via modes of narration that, in highlighting the distinction (whether temporal, stylistic, or epistemological) between the narrating subject and the subject of narration, invite consideration of the narrator function. My dissertation proposes that an examination of identification in these narratives yields insight into the nature and operation of the narrator function.

I find that the identificatory process that produces the illusion of narrative subjects (or subjects in narrative) in these novels is broadly analogous to the narrative process that produces the illusion of the narrator. The narratives' characters are retroactively produced as subjects by an identificatory process that positions them in a system of intersubjective relations. Similarly, the illusory narrators of these texts are produced by a narrative process that retroactively positions them in relation to other textual elements (the "content" of the narration, including characters, events, and other "facts" of the fictional world) that are themselves produced out of their apparent relation to the narrator. Narrators appear to be narrators, then, only in relation to the objects of their narration: any narrative statement that invokes a dissonance between the subject and objects of narration generates the illusion of a narrator from whom that statement then appears to originate.

The narrator-functions in these mid-century texts operate alongside a thematic exploration of vision and blindness. The identificatory processes of characters,

moreover, are structured by an investment in seeing the self from the position of the other. Lacan's work on the gaze thus provides an effective analytical tool, for the Lacanian theory of the gaze helps elucidate the degree to which "seeing the self being seen" is a constitutive component of subjectivity. Additionally, Lacan identifies a scotoma or blind spot that subsists in the structure of the gaze. I contend that this blind spot finds its narrative corollary both in the operation of identification—which produces an illusion of knowledge that blinds the subject to what it does not know (or what it does not know it does not know)—and at the illusory site of the narrator.

My readings thus explore how this blind spot is constituted in fictional narratives of the midcentury and how the blind spot functions, in turn, to enable the illusions of characters, narrators, and other "autonomous" subjects that are produced in and with narrative dynamics. The novels I examine are all products of post-World War II American society and, in their construction and representation of both narrative and subjective processes, display many of the preoccupations of existentialist philosophy: the tenuousness and emptiness of self, the possibilities for freedom and responsible action, the nature of the relationship between self and other, and the role of the gaze in the constitution of the self. They also straddle the somewhat awkward dividing line between modernism and postmodernism, and in the operation of their narrator functions display an incipient metafictional self-reflexivity of the sort that has come to characterize the postmodern novel. This reflexivity ranges from first-person musings on story-telling in *Invisible Man* and *The Moviegoer*, to what J.M. Tyree calls "rais[ing] the issues of metafiction without metafiction" in *The Talented Mr. Ripley*, to *The Stunt Man*'s

depiction of a blind film director whose stunt man attributes to him a narrator-like mastery over the “story” of the stunt man’s own life.

I begin with an investigation into identificatory dynamics and the production of an illusory, narrative subjectivity in *Invisible Man*, which takes the identifications of its protagonist as both a structural and thematic motif. Chapter 1, “Regarding Invisibility: Desire and Identification in *Invisible Man*,” situates my discussion of identification in the context of psychoanalytic and literary studies and develops the notion of a blind spot that is constitutive to the identificatory and narrative process. I argue that *Invisible Man* presents an understanding of identification as a relational operation that works through the enactment of delusive knowledge and non-knowledge of the Other. Such identification is enabled by a blind spot constituted by a misrecognition of the delusive nature of the “knowledge” the identificatory process seems to produce; the obverse of this delusive knowledge is the illusion of readerly non-knowledge (of interiority, subjectivity, or motivation) that constitutes fictional characters and narrators.

Chapter 2, “In the Eye of the Beholder: Narrative Knowledge and the Identificatory Gaze,” explores the dynamics of the narrator function in tandem with those of the gaze. The functioning of the gaze in *The Moviegoer* suggests that the structure of the narrative blind spot implies a necessary misrecognition of the blindness it provokes. Binx, the narrating protagonist of Walker Percy’s *The Moviegoer*, dramatizes this blindness in his (mis)understanding of the gaze’s implication in the circuitry of identification. Binx’s narration is structured by his belief that, if only he can occupy the position from which the gaze originates, he might stand outside his own identificatory process. Using Lacan’s theory of the gaze, I argue that Binx’s fantasy of controlling the

gaze by inhabiting the delusive site of its origin produces a textual deconstruction of the narrator function. Binx's misrecognition of how the gaze functions parallels the narrative effects enabled by the narrator function, which produces an illusory narrator who appears to be both within and without the narrative, to "see" the narrative without itself being seen. As putative narrator of his own story, then, Binx "narrates" his own blind spot—the misapprehension that he can "see" himself in his own narrative.

In Chapter 3, "Through a Glass Darkly: Identification and Narrative Point of View," I argue that the illusion of narrative point of view in *The Talented Mr. Ripley* is generated by the constitution of the unobtrusive "narrator" in relation to what it appears to narrate. The narrator function is operative at moments of narratorial dissonance, when Tom Ripley's knowledge is at odds with what the illusory narrator appears to know. The apparent ontological priority of narrator over narrative is thus bracketed by the narrator function, which flickers in and out of operation. The ontological instability of the narrator is both mirrored and enabled by Tom Ripley's existential uncertainties, which arise out of a faltering visual identification with Dickie Greenleaf that permits (or is occasioned by) Tom's momentary glimpse of his own blind spot. The blind spot is thus revealed as a constitutive product of both subjectivity and narrative operation, a sort of absent center around which both dynamics establish themselves.

My fourth chapter, "Celestial Surveillance: *Trompe l'oeil* and Narrative Displacement," argues that, in its thematization of the role of the blind spot in narration, Paul Brodeur's *The Stunt Man* both dramatizes and deconstructs the critical problem posed by the narrator. The narrator function in the novel is continually displaced onto narrating characters—in particular the blind film director, Gottschalk, who is believed by

the protagonist, Cameron, to be controlling—which is to say, narrating—Cameron’s life “story.” Cameron’s insistence on the blind director’s position of narrative mastery engenders a literal enactment of the delusive nature of the narrator function. Gottschalk, a blind man occupying a blind spot, is invested with the same kind of illusory control and narrative origination as the novel’s own illusory narrator. In addition, the dynamics of the text and narrative render an examination of the narrator function exceedingly difficult: much as critical conversations about the narrator result in a discussion of representation, an analysis of the narrator function in *The Stunt Man* runs the continual risk of displacement into an examination of the narrative’s representation of Gottschalk as narrator. The narrative’s blind spot is thus revealed to be a critical blind spot as well.

The trajectory of these chapters traces an increased attention to the delusive nature of the narrator embedded within the narratives themselves. In their thematic concern with vision and identificatory dynamics, each of the above texts engages in an consideration—with varying degrees of explicitness—of the nature of narrative blind spots. As with a vehicular blind spot, narrative blind spots involve a certain illusion and *trompe l’oeil*. By its very nature, a blind spot operates such that you can’t see your own blindness: the blind spot in a car’s rearview mirrors, for example, is dangerous because it enables the illusion that the driver can see the whole road beside and behind her. If the driver could see that she couldn’t see, then the spot would not be blind. Similarly, the narrative blind spot—which these novels locate at the illusory site of the narrator—is tricky because it works to suggest that we see most clearly that which is hidden. In other words, we see the narrative representation of a narrator and believe that we see the narrator function.

The treatment of the blind spot in these texts introduces a certain degree of reflexivity into the operation of the narrator function. The identification of the narrative blind spot with the site of the narrator enables an interrogation of how the illusion of that site is produced by the narrative. This interrogation, however, is necessarily compromised by the very blind spot that enables it in the first place: as *The Stunt Man* demonstrates, the more overt the thematic treatment of the narrator and blind spot becomes, the harder it is, critically speaking, to pin down the narrative slipperiness that comprises the narrator function. In this sense, the narratorial difficulties posed by these novels prefigure the critical bind in which scholars of the narrator find themselves: theorists of the narrator continually turn out to be talking about the representation of the narrator when they meant to be talking about the narrator function that produces that representation.

Chapter One
Regarding Invisibility: Desire and Identification in *Invisible Man*

All my life I had been looking for something, and everywhere I turned someone tried to tell me what it was. I accepted their answers too, though they were often in contradiction and even self-contradictory. I was naïve. I was looking for myself and asking everyone except myself questions which I, and only I, could answer. It took me a long time and much painful boomeranging of my expectations to achieve a realization everyone else appears to have been born with: That I am nobody but myself. But first I had to discover that I am an invisible man.

—Ralph Ellison, *Invisible Man*, p. 15

The transparency of the identity claimed by the nameless narrator of *Invisible Man*—that he is nobody but himself—is belied at every turn by who (or what) he claims to be. To be an invisible man is to imagine an identity that depends on an other, insofar as invisibility is the reflexive effect of not being perceived by that other. More precisely, to believe oneself invisible is to structure one’s own identity according to what one believes the “other” doesn’t see. Thus, while the narrator may have shed his boomeranging expectations that others can provide him answers, he cannot shake a fundamental dependence on the idea of an other to establish a source of self and identity. In some respects the invisible man’s belief that he is only himself is exactly right—for who else could he be? A sense of self is created out of what he imagines another sees (or doesn’t see) in him—which is to say, his self is really self-created in relation to an imaginary other. But in other respects, the invisible man is exactly wrong, because the *idea* of the other—the persistent question of if and how an “other” sees him—is always central to his concept of who he is. His relationship to the other may be imaginary, but it is also an integral part of the system of functions by which the narrator’s speaking “I” maintains a sense of unity.

This imaginary relationship to the other lies at the heart of the question of identification. Identification is conditioned by the question of who one is in relation to the other's desire: what does one desire of the other and what does the other desire of one, and how do those questions and their answers come together to create the provisional person one thinks one is? This particular understanding of identification—which derives from psychoanalytic theories of the identificatory process (most notably those of Freud and Lacan)—emphasizes the centrality of desire to any discussion of identification.^{1,2} In *Group Psychology and Analysis of the Ego*, Freud works hard to

¹ Most psychoanalytic definitions of identification consider identification to be a mechanism of identity formation that is founded on some notion of commonality or similarity. LaPlanche and Pontalis define identification as the “[p]sychological process whereby the subject assimilates an aspect, property or attribute of the other and is transformed, wholly or partially, after the model the other provides. It is by means of a series of identifications that the personality is constituted and specified” (205).

In Freud, identification is fundamental both to ego formation and to the development of identity: the (male) child identifies with its father on the basis of what it wants to be (like the father) and what it wants to have (the father's unrestricted access to the mother). Freud further considers group membership and cohesion to be a function of identification, based on the group's perception of a shared quality in each individual's bond with the leader (*Group Psychology*, Chapter 7).

Melanie Klein develops the notion of projective identification, in which qualities that we dislike in ourselves are projected onto another. We thus come to dislike that other person, in lieu of disliking ourselves. Our hatred of the other, moreover, can be introjected by that other, such that he or she comes to hate him- or herself in our stead (181-86).

All of these understandings of identification have in common their attempt to explain the development of identity in terms of the relationship to the other. Lacan refigures Freud's theories of identification to emphasize the self-reflexivity of that relationship. In Lacan's theory, our identification with another arises not from any quality intrinsic to either ourselves or the other, but by our beliefs (and desires) about how we are seen by the other. When we identify with another, then, we are trying to fulfill our own desires by imagining ourselves in relation to the desire of another. The other's desire, and even the other's existence, however is purely imaginary, a construct that enables the self-reflexivity that engenders a subject's being.

² Most other definitions of identification derive from or preserve some elements of the psychological understanding of identification; such usages often invoke the concept of identification as a means of describing how people interact psychologically with cultural constructs such as literature, film, pop culture, and mass media. In his study of audience identification with cinematic characters, Martin Barker suggests that identification presents itself as an explanatory concept, one that provides a causal rationale for a variety of psychological, cultural, and literary effects, including sympathy, empathy, interest, engagement, absorption, influence, and emulation (356-58). In cultural and media studies, identification is invoked as a mechanism of consumer motivation in order to help explain fads, fashions, group behavior, and social movements; in film studies it helps explain how viewers create and enter a narrative world through visual images. In theories of communication, identification is thought to help a speaker appeal to his or her audience; in literary studies, it helps explain sympathetic characters and engaging narrators; and in reader-response criticism, it determines whether and how readers engage with and respond to a text. In discussions of film, television, and literature in general, identification tends to be the mechanism invoked to explain how and why readers and viewers become invested in fictional worlds, characters, and situations.

distinguish identification (what one wants to be) from desire (what one wants to have), with limited success. His own analysis of the Witty Butcher's Wife in *The Interpretation of Dreams* effectively demonstrates the degree to which identification and desire depend on one another, and his conception of the Oedipal complex—in which the child's identification with the father conditions his desire for the mother every bit as much as his desire for the mother conditions his identification with the father—hints that the two terms cannot really be separated.

Identification and desire are both dynamics, processes rather than things, relational (figurative) movements rather than static concepts. Like forces, they can be discerned only in their effects—in what they achieve or produce or short-circuit or enable—and never in their action or operation. The interaction between the dynamics of identification and the dynamics of desire constitutes the self, whether that self is understood to be ego, subjectivity, or identity. And of course in Lacan's work, subjectivity is itself a dynamic, a changing movement, a process; it is continually enacted, never stable, nor unified, nor complete. Desire and identification, then, are processes that can never quite be pinned down or isolated; as Freud's own writing demonstrates, attempts to define and describe the dynamics of desire often end up invoking the dynamics of identification and vice versa. The oscillation of these two

For discussions of identification in relation to popular culture and media, see Diana Fuss, Jonathan Cohen, Noel Carroll, Murray Smith, and R.J. Warren Zanes. For discussions of identification's role in cinema, see Christian Metz, Teresa deLauretis, Inez Hedges, and Donald Larsson. See Kenneth Burke and Gary Woodward for more on identification in communication. For treatments of identification in literary studies, see Robin Warhol, Mary B. Wiseman, Suzanne Keen, and Aviva Briefel. See Judith Roof and Teresa deLauretis for identification and its relationship to narrative. And for an overview of the role of identification in reader response criticism, see Kuiken, Miall, and Sikora; Hans Jauss; Els Andringa; Gerald Cupchik; and Keith Oatley.

dynamics, wherein an exploration of one somehow becomes an examination of the other, suggests that they are two sides of the same process.

In this sense, they are like the two sides of a Möbius strip, in which one side always turns into its opposite. Insofar as the dynamics of subjectivity arise from the interaction of desire and identification, subjectivity might also be conceived as a Möbius strip, something whose nature can only be understood by tracing its path, tracking the oscillations of its single double-side, the movement between identification and desire, between two dynamics that are one, one dynamic that is two.

And as *Invisible Man* demonstrates, the dynamics of subjectivity and identification are inextricably bound with those of narrative. Through tropes of blindness and vision, *Invisible Man* sketches the contours of an identificatory mechanism that operates in and through the production of imagined knowledge and disavowed non-knowledge of the Other. This operation suggests similar mechanisms at work in the narrator function of *Invisible Man*, which produces the narrator and protagonist via the blind spots of the identificatory process. An examination of the invisible man's identification as dynamic process thus enables an understanding of the narrator function as a narrative dynamic.

Desiring Identification

Invisible Man's focus on the mechanics of the protagonist's identificatory process is both enabled and made visible by the way the narrative turns desire against identification. In Ellison's novel, desire is bent back on identification: identification itself becomes the object of desire. The narrator-protagonist's progress through the novel

takes the form of a series of identifications with people he admires and wishes to emulate: the white elite of his hometown; the black president of his college, Dr. Bledsoe; the white college trustees and northern business leaders; his employers; the socialist leader, Brother Jack; and finally the pimp-preacher-gambler Rinehart, whose identity the invisible man briefly assumes. These identifications are accompanied, as well, by a series of anti-identifications with those to whom the invisible man doesn't wish to appear too similar, including the incestuous Jim Trueblood, the subservient Lucius Brockway, the vet at the Golden Day, and his own grandfather; in these instances, the invisible man is usually trying to set himself apart from black men whose behavior or ideas he believes confirm a racial stereotype that he has set himself to combat.³

The nature of these identifications and anti-identifications suggests a desire for success, a desire to be a black leader, a desire for dignity and honor and respect and freedom; and, indeed, the invisible man's desires are often read as such.⁴ However, the means by which the invisible man desires these things is far more complex. He appears to desire and identify in a particularly Freudian way: his desires seem to lead him to certain identifications and his identifications seem to produce certain desires, but whether he desires as he does because of his identifications or vice versa is impossible to say.

³ Both identifications and anti-identifications serve the invisible man as aids to a series of identity formations and rejections. The various identities assumed by the invisible man have been discussed by numerous critics; for a nice examination of these identities in relation to the theme of illusion, see Thorpe Butler's article "What Is To Be Done? Illusion, Identity, and Action in Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*."

⁴ For example, Edward Griffin describes the invisible man's desires as goals that have been assigned to him—along with a formula for attaining them—by a social system that posits a fixed relationship between blacks and whites (130). Richard Yarborough argues that the invisible man's goals are manifestations of his desire for access to the American Dream, defined by Yarborough as a nexus of freedom, money, power, and mobility. Thorpe Butler characterizes the invisible man's desire as the wish to "be somebody," someone who is seen as prestigious, powerful, and important (317), and Philip Harper contends that the invisible man wishes to establish his own identity by extricating himself from the unindividuated mass of the black community (685).

However, the invisible man also wants his desires to align with the desires of those around him. That is to say, he wants others to desire what he desires (for and of himself) and vice versa, such that he becomes both the vector of another's desire and its means of satisfaction. Ultimately, such a desire is a desire to occupy the position of the other, the position from which the invisible man himself can both direct and fulfill that other's desire. In this sense, the invisible man does not merely desire freedom or success or dignity, he desires that another also desire these things—such that, in attaining his own freedom, he also satisfies the desire of another. He desires, in short, a Lacanian sort of identification in which he can occupy the position of a desiring other in relation to himself: “[M]an's desire,” says Lacan, “is the Other's desire [and] it is qua Other that man desires” (*Ecrits* 690). The invisible man's identifications are thus mightily complex, because they depend upon the illusion that his desires can be satisfactorily aligned with someone else's.

Both the invisible man's desires and his identifications are conditioned by the cultural reality of American race relations, as well as the school he attends, where students are encouraged to help the cause of African-American freedom by imaginatively occupying multiple positions in the struggle for freedom. This mode of identification is outlined by the Reverend Barbee, a civil rights activist and old friend of both Dr. Bledsoe and the college's revered Founder, who speaks at evening chapel the night before the invisible man's expulsion. Barbee's address to the students, which retells the story of the Founder's rise to power, opens multiple and shifting points of identification to its listeners. At times Barbee encourages them to imagine themselves in the Founder's position, while at others he asks them to imagine themselves accompanying the Founder

in his flight from persecution. Often, these two stances blend together ambiguously (“‘You awakened when he awakened, rejoiced when he rejoiced’” (121)), while at others the two positions seem to oscillate, each one offered at different points in the same sentence: “‘And *you* left *him* on the morning, hidden in a wagonload of cotton, in the very center of the fleece, where *you* breathed the hot air through the barrel of the emergency shotgun; the cartridges [...] held fanwise and ready between the spread fingers of *your* hand. And *you* went into this town with *him* and were hidden [...]” (122, emphasis added). The first “you” here seems to refer to both the audience and the Founder’s allies—perhaps those who flee with him, perhaps those who sheltered him the night before—while the reference to the “him” who is left hidden delineates the Founder. The second “you,” however, immediately subverts that delineation, suturing the audience back into the Founder’s position, hidden in a wagon. And once again, the following sentence places the audience back in a position relative to the Founder (rather than *in* his position), allying Barbee’s listeners with those who accompanied the Founder into town.⁵

A couple of sentences later, the proffered identificatory positions enact a sort of semantic slide,⁶ as Barbee links the Founder’s freedom to black freedom to the students’ freedom:

⁵ The rapid oscillation of identificatory positions is accompanied by a sometimes staggering amount of indeterminacy. It’s almost impossible, at any point, to pin down exactly who the “you” really refers to, because there are always multiple possibilities: the Founder himself, those who accompany him, those who shelter him at night, those who help him during the day, and those who are currently listening to Barbee’s speech.

⁶ Michel Fabre argues that a similar semantic slide is enabled by *Invisible Man*’s prose in general, noting that Ellison’s tendency to arrange clauses into “binary or ternary patterns where antithesis and duplication remain only partial” creates a connotative gap that “allows meaning to be constructed and pass from one element to the next as it changes” (“Looking” 129). Fabre examines the incident with the blonde stripper just before the Battle Royal, noting that the structure of Ellison’s language enables a referential shift such that the narrator, the other black men, and the naked blonde are all allied by similar descriptive words and structures. Daniel Kim makes a similar point, arguing that this similarity of description promotes an identification in which the white men play out their own arousal by projecting it onto the ten black youths.

‘But mostly it was our own who aided [the Founder], because you were their own and we have always helped our own. And so, my young friends, my sisters and brothers, you went with him, in and out of cabins, by night and early morning, through swamps and hills. On and on, passed from black hand to black hand and some white hands, and all the hands molding the Founder’s freedom and our own freedom like voices shaping a deep-felt song. And you, each of you, were with him. Ah, how well you know it, for it was you who escaped to freedom. Ah yes, and you know the story.’ (123)

By placing some of his pronouns in the plural and rendering the referents of those pronouns indeterminant, Barbee opens up multiple identificatory possibilities. In the first sentence of this passage alone, Barbee refers to the Founder/audience as both “you” and “him”; to the black race as “their own”; and to what is presumably the entire black race, including himself and the audience, as the all-encompassing “we” and “our own.” The students are encouraged to imagine themselves not just in the Founder’s position or in the place of those who aided him, but more and more in the position of a sort of generalized black humanity, one whose freedom is inextricably linked with the Founder’s freedom. Barbee thus sets in motion a sliding set of signifiers, which enables him to equate one individual’s freedom with an entire race’s freedom with his audience’s freedom.⁷

who are thereby forced into an erotic display analogous to that of the blonde (314-316). Fabre and Kim both note, as well, that the protagonist’s reaction to the blonde demonstrates his identification with her position with regard to both the white and black men.

⁷ In so doing, Barbee calls on a long tradition of creating a group identity out of the rhetorical positioning of an audience. As Janet Lyon’s study of manifestoes argues, the manifesto serves to “link one’s voice to the countless voices of previous, perpetual struggles” (20) and in so doing, to “crystallize” an audience via the “formulat[ion] and perform[ance] [of] a future audience’s experience of and response to oppression”

In this respect, Barbee's speech is illustrative of what Cynthia Chase identifies as a fundamental characteristic of the relationship between language and identification. Chase begins with the common understanding of identification as founded on a process of rendering things similar.⁸ This understanding of identification is embedded in the etymology of the word itself, which incorporates both the sense of making or treating something as identical to something else and the sense of determining what something is (its identity) by comparing it to a notional or ideal concept (*OED*). These two senses come together in some psychological definitions of identification, which posit that an individual identifies with another on the basis of perceived shared traits and fashions his or her identity out of that identification. In Chase's view, identification operates, like language, as a form of substitution of one thing for another, initiated by a comparison to a third term (1001). To identify a college student with the college Founder, for example, one must introduce a third term (freedom) by which the substitution of one person for another (both psychologically, in his audience's response to Barbee's speech, and grammatically, at the level of pronouns in the sentence) can occur. According to Chase, the ambiguity of the term *identification* lies in its relationship to the system of

(28). Barbee's speech thus creates his current audience as an activist constituency by the rhetorical invocation of a past struggle and future freedom.

⁸ This notion of similarity as the foundation of the identificatory process appears repeatedly as the basis of various definitions of identification. Freud considers identification to be based on the perception of a shared trait or desire, while hysterical identification manifests as a shared symptom. Kenneth Burke argues for identification as a rhetorical strategy, in which a speaker or author makes her appeal by portraying herself as sharing a motive or interest in common with the audience. Kuiken, Miall, and Sikora liken identification to a form of metaphor, wherein the reader is compared to the narrator or character. Joseph Harris finds that early modern French thinkers regarded identification as a tremendously varied set of phenomena, all based in similarities—preexisting, desired, perceived, or nascent—between spectators and the actors or characters (156). Pierre Force contends that in La Rochefoucauld, identification is a consequence of self-love, which “makes us see our own fears and desires in others” (50). Even where the importance of similarity isn't highlighted, it is often implied. In both “The Girl I Never Want to Be” and *Come As You Are*, Judith Roof outlines the various ways such similarities are mobilized. She insists, however, that identification's apparent preoccupation with similarity occults its true process, which is the management and disavowal of difference.

substitutions: identification can work within an existing system of substitutions or it can be the initial act that enables substitution and comparison in the first place.⁹ In this latter sense, identification “makes up the very possibility of the *institution* of the system of substitutions that constitutes language as a signifying system” (1001).

This close relationship between language and identification is more than hinted at in the identificatory model that Barbee outlines in *Invisible Man*. In his speech, identification is enabled, literally, through words, through the possibility that his listeners can project themselves into the positions opened for them by Barbee’s shifting pronouns.¹⁰ The entry into this identification is, moreover, specifically narrative. Barbee enacts and enables the student’s identification by telling the Founder’s story, but he also suggests the narrative itself as a point of identification. Just as the Founder’s freedom is substituted for the students’ freedom, so too does the *story* of the Founder’s freedom substitute for the story of the students’ own freedom: “‘You have heard [the story] and it—this true story of rich implication, this living parable of proven glory and humble nobility—and it, as I say, has made you free’” (120).

Invisible Man, then, consciously explores the linkages between the operations of identification and those of narrative and language. Barbee’s speech performs a dual

⁹ This particular aspect of identification’s ambiguity is one that, as Chase notes, both Freud and Lacan must deal with. Freud differentiates between primary and secondary identification, with primary identification being the original Oedipal identification that helps institute the development of the ego and enables all other, later, secondary identifications. In Lacan’s analysis, that which in Freud is a primary identification marks the creation of the subject in language and, at times, the creation of the language system itself. For more on this, see the Chase’s article “The Witty Butcher’s Wife: Freud, Lacan, and the Conversion of Resistance to Theory,” which provides a fine analysis of both Freud’s and Lacan’s work on identification.

¹⁰ Robert Genter makes a similar argument when he claims that Ellison’s use of multiple discourses—his blend of the language of Western philosophy with literary allusion, folk vernacular, and blues speech—is evidence of a Burkean attempt to reorient the social by providing opportunities to exploit differences and form new identifications. Quoting Burke, Genter argues that the friction caused by the proximity of conflicting modes of discourse marks an “attempt to ‘coach’ the transference of words from one category of associations to another” (203).

function—it models a method of identification for its audience even as it performs a linguistic and narrative identification. Barbee’s audience is both *taught* to identify by assuming the position of those with whom they identify (here, the Founder, his helpers, his people) and *positioned narratively* so that they can and will identify—with Barbee, with Bledsoe, with the Founder, with the struggle for freedom, and with the narrative itself. Barbee’s speech thus provides to the students in general and the protagonist in particular a model for identification, one that works via an individual’s projection of him- or herself into the position of another and thereby into a pre-existing narrative. The students, moreover, are encouraged explicitly to construct their own lives and identities according to the model provided by Dr. Bledsoe (“Pattern yourselves upon him,” exhorts Barbee (133)) and to thereby create their own narratives modeled on the life narratives of Bledsoe and the Founder: “Legends are still to be created,” claims Barbee, by the students he addresses (133).

To the extent that Barbee’s model of identification hinges on the relationship between his audience and his narrative, his model can also be read as suggesting the importance of identification to the reader/audience’s experience of a narrative text. This importance is implied by Chase’s contention that language itself is indebted to identificatory substitutions for its operation, and the imbrication of narrative and identification is further elucidated by numerous theorists. Working with film, Christian Metz argues that any kind of understanding of the fictional, filmic world depends upon a primary cinematic identification with pure perception embodied in the location of the camera. This primary identification is constitutive of secondary identifications with the human figures and “looks” represented on screen (Chapter 3). Teresa de Lauretis argues

that “subjectivity is engaged in the cogs of narrative and indeed constituted in the relation of narrative, meaning, and desire.” As such, the operation of narrativity is to engage the subject in “certain positionalities of meaning and desire” (106). This engagement of the subject is itself identification. While de Lauretis does not imply that identification can only happen in or through narrative, she does suggest that narrative requires identification. Insofar as narrativity is the process of engaging the subject in certain positionalities, identification is the mechanism by which that engagement occurs (141).

While de Lauretis indicates that narrative depends on identification, Judith Roof contends that identification is also fundamentally narrative in nature. Identification and narrative always work in tandem and according to the same logic, and the conjunction of the two produces more identification and more narrative (*Come As You Are* 158-160). *Invisible Man* provides a nice illustration of this assertion insofar as the narrator’s story is the story of a series of identifications, each of which produces only the opportunity for (and the story of) a new identification. Roof argues, moreover, that identification is “the mode of joinder that brings narrative and life together” and that identification is “assumed as the mechanism by which narratives afford pleasure as narrative” (152, 153). There can thus be no identification without narrative, because we can only understand identification as a narrative (153). That Barbee’s modeling of identification for his students takes the form of a narrative is thus to be expected, for really it could take no other form.

This model of identification with and in narrative is centered on the possibility of, as Roof describes the process of identification, “self-placement in a narrative” (153). In Barbee’s rendition, the possibility for self-placement is largely limited to placement in

the position of other people (characters) based on a shared desire for freedom or progress. The invisible man, for the majority of the text, fully embraces the mode of identification suggested by Barbee. He has already spent his adolescence and early adulthood striving to emulate men like Bledsoe and the Founder, who have, through their successes, elevated blacks throughout the nation; the invisible man now, once more, adopts their assessment of what best serves the cause of black freedom. Having earlier gotten in trouble for acquiescing to a wealthy white trustee's request to visit the more unsavory areas of town, the invisible man now acknowledges that he has somehow betrayed the cause: "[O]ld Barbee had made me both feel my guilt and accept it. For although I had not intended it, any act that endangered the continuity of the dream was an act of treason" (134). Rededicating himself to following Barbee's orders to "pattern [himself] after" Dr. Bledsoe, the invisible man thus reaffirms his identification with Bledsoe, an identification based on projecting himself into Bledsoe's position as a black leader who can help guarantee "the continuity of the dream."

His attempts to do so, however, are repeatedly brought up short by the incompatibility of his desires and Bledsoe's, an incompatibility that he is forced to acknowledge time and again in the course of his various identifications. Barbee's speech suggests that sharing the same desire can enable a projection into another's position and thereby elide all the other differences that exist among individuals. Thus the students he addresses can, by sharing the Founder's desire for freedom, project themselves into the Founder's position and into his story. They become him, his freedom becomes their freedom, his narrative becomes their narrative. The very real and very substantial differences between their experiences, as relatively privileged, college-educated men and

women, and those of the Founder, a former slave whose activism helped create the very college attended by these students, are somehow disavowed, subsumed by the desire they are encouraged to believe they share.

Roof suggests that this disavowal of difference is fundamental to the operation of identification, which privileges sameness (or the appearance of sameness) as a means of managing difference (160). This disavowal, moreover, is integral to our ability to experience narrative fiction: "Identification becomes a process by which the difference between self and narrative, between self and others, between experience and fiction is disavowed" (172). Insofar as identification can bridge or elide differences, then, it is fundamental to the consumption of fictional narrative; identification is that which enables one to enter and inhabit the world of a text, to understand and experience a fictional world and its characters as somehow analogous to the "real" world and "real" people. In *Invisible Man*, however, this ready disavowal of narrative or textual difference is complicated by the way the identificatory processes of its narrator and protagonist are presented. The nature of the invisible man's desire, which always serves to reaffirm difference, works to help disable the disavowal of difference upon which identification's invisible process depends. Consequently, the identificatory mechanisms in *Invisible Man* are more visible and somewhat less naturalized than they might otherwise be.

At the novel's outset, the invisible man has already begun structuring his identifications and desires in accordance with the model that Barbee later provides. The nameless young protagonist quite deliberately sets out to fashion a life and identity modeled on those of the men he most admires, his college's revered Founder and its current president, Dr. Bledsoe. He wants to be like Dr. Bledsoe insofar as he wants to be

seen as he himself sees Dr. Bledsoe—as a powerful black man respected by white men despite themselves (101). Similarly, he wants to be seen by white men as he imagines they see someone in Bledsoe’s position: as a smart, motivated, honest, dignified black man, a credit to his race, one who is entrusted with power and responsibility. More to the point, he wants to believe that this is what white folks desire of him. To be in Dr. Bledsoe’s position, then, would be to be able to satisfy everyone’s desire, including his own: he would be a model black man, admired by the black community, imitated by young men similar to himself, and respected by the white establishment.¹¹ And having been trained in Reverend Barbee’s mode of identification, where the success of one black man accrues to the whole of the race, the protagonist can and does believe that to attain Bledsoe’s position would be to further the dream of freedom that Barbee speaks of.

He is thus appalled when apprised by Dr. Bledsoe that he has misinterpreted the power dynamic all along. White men have never hoped for his honesty, dignity, and success—nor, for that matter, has Dr. Bledsoe, though this doesn’t become clear until somewhat later. Having spent his youth trying to do what he thinks the whites want him to do, the protagonist, after a disastrous afternoon driving a wealthy white trustee around town, is informed by Bledsoe that doing what white men ask of him has nothing to do with his success. “We show them what we want them to see,” Bledsoe tells him, “Why the dumbest black bastard in the cotton patch knows that the only way to please a white man is to tell him a lie!” (102, 139).

¹¹ For an analysis of a similar dynamic—that of the creation of the identificatory narratives that surround the double desire to be both the desirer and the object of desire—see Judith Roof’s article “The Girl I Never Want to Be.”

The narrator has long resisted his grandfather's assertion that that to give white men what they want is treachery. He has refused, one might say, to identify with his grandfather, a former slave, in order to maintain the possibility of identifying with the white men of the community—to continue to see himself, through their eyes, as a credit to his race. After his confrontation with Dr. Bledsoe, however, the narrator is forced to deal with the incompatibility of his identifications with Dr. Bledsoe and the white men: he cannot hope to become (like) Bledsoe without following Bledsoe's advice to "get over" his notions of pride and dignity, to get himself "power, influence, contacts with powerful and influential people—then stay in the dark use it!" (145). The truth about Bledsoe's power is that it serves Bledsoe alone: "Negroes don't control this school or much of anything else—haven't you learned even that? No, sir, they don't control this school, nor white folk either. [...] I's big and black and I say "Yes, suh" as loudly as any burrhead when it's convenient, but I'm still the king down here"" (142).

Contrary to the identificatory narrative spun by the Reverend Barbee, identifying with Bledsoe doesn't bring the protagonist any closer to freedom or power. In fact, identifying with Bledsoe brings the protagonist face to face with the implications of his grandfather's long ago advice to "overcome 'em with yeses, undermine 'em with grins, agree 'em to death and destruction, let 'em swoller you till they vomit or bust wide open" (16). The grandfather's advice highlights the degree to which it is impossible to ever satisfy anyone's true desire, because that desire is always at odds with what the person in question believes his or her desire is. The protagonist, even in high school, perceives and is conflicted about this state of affairs. He feels guilty when he's praised for his conduct, believing that if the white folks "had understood they would have desired me to act just

the opposite, that I should have been sulky and mean, and that that really would have been what they wanted, even though they were fooled and thought they wanted me to act as I did” (17). He fears that he is acting the traitor that his grandfather wanted him to be and worries that he will be found out, that it will be proved that his good conduct, meant to impress, is precisely what the whites do *not* desire of him. But he finds himself equally afraid to act “sulky and mean,” because this behavior generates immediate proof that he has failed to fulfill white desire.

Bledsoe’s description of how he has consolidated power—by saying “Yes, suh” when it’s convenient and shrugging off worries about pride and dignity as “foolish and expensive and a lot of dead weight” (145)—rings of the treachery that the protagonist has struggled against for so long. Bledsoe, who desires power, is well equipped to take advantage of the opportunities afforded by the misalignment of his desire and that of those around him. What the protagonist desires, however, is the kind of identification that Barbee has suggested is possible—one in which an identity of desires enables or enacts an identification between disparate people. Insofar as the protagonist desires power, he desires a power derived from this kind of identification—from occupying the same position as Dr. Bledsoe in relation to himself.

This identification via positionality is also at work in the protagonist’s relationship to white men. For example, in his interactions with Mr. Norton, the white trustee he is charged with chauffeuring around town, the narrator works to align his perception of the past with Norton’s. In accordance with Norton’s tale of the college’s founding, the protagonist’s “thoughts attempted to sweep back to the times of which he spoke” and the photographs the protagonist has seen in the college library come to life:

Until now, and although I could recognize the Founder and Dr. Bledsoe among them, the figures in the photographs had never seemed actually to have been alive [...] But now I felt that I was sharing in a great work and, with the car leaping leisurely beneath the pressure of my foot, I identified myself with the rich man reminiscing on the rear seat... (39)

Once again, a shared desire for black freedom works to further an identification between two very different men—the aging white millionaire and the young black student.

Moreover, Norton's recollections of his own identification with the Founder ("I believed in his vision," says Norton, "So much so, that sometimes I don't know whether it was his vision or mine...") serve to bring the Founder to life for the protagonist. His ability to refigure his own perception of the dry and dusty college past to accord with Norton's vision of the great progress made in the early years of the school's life enables the invisible man's claim to have "identified myself" with this wealthy trustee.

For the protagonist, this identification is affirmed by Norton's wish that he enjoy a "pleasant fate" (40) and Norton's contention that the invisible man is Norton's own destiny, "involved in [his] life quite intimately, [...] bound to a great dream and to a beautiful monument" (43). Despite his confusion about exactly what Norton means by this, the protagonist is reassured by the notion that Norton desires his success and by Norton's affirmation of what he has always believed—that his own success will benefit his whole race. After the disastrous visit to the Golden Day, fearing that Mr. Norton is angry with him, the invisible man is tempted to win back Norton's esteem by demonstrating that their desires remain the same:

I wanted [...] to assure him [...] that I believed in the principles of the Founder with all my heart and soul, and that I believed in his own goodness and kindness in extending the hand of his benevolence to helping us poor, ignorant people out of the mire and darkness. I would do his bidding [...] and teach them to be thrifty, decent, upright citizens, contributing to the welfare of all, shunning all but the straight and narrow path that he and the Founder had stretched before us. (99)

In a sense, the narrator here proffers an exchange: he will view Norton as Norton wishes to be seen—as a benevolent aid to the African-American race—if Norton will allow him to persist in the belief that Norton, likewise, sees him as he wishes to see himself—as a one of the upright citizens who is capable of helping others to raise themselves to better things.

The particular nature of the invisible man's desire, which is as much about identifying with those who view him as a (potential) success as it is about actually achieving that success, makes him exceedingly vulnerable to failures of identification. Because his desire is to align his desire with the desire of another, any indication that these desires don't align causes a faltering of identification. As a result, the identity of the two disparate desires must be shored up or the attempted identification must be abandoned altogether. Here, the narrator's panicked urge to convince Norton that each sees the other as lifting the black race out of darkness serves as a way to reinstate the earlier identification with the reminiscing Norton, to disavow the differences that their divergent desires have forcefully revealed. His inability to do so is affirmed, over and over, by "the blazing white line that divided the highway," to which his eyes are drawn

inexorably every time some event or comment suggests that his identification with Norton is at best temporary.¹²

The structure of the invisible man's desire all but ensures that the pattern established with Norton and Bledsoe—emphatic affirmation of identification followed sooner or later by an equally violent rejection of this identification when it is inevitably proved that the person in question doesn't truly share the invisible man's desire—will be reiterated. Instead of disavowing the differences between himself and Mr. Norton by desiring something that he imagines they have in common, the invisible man wants the impossible experience of desiring his own desire as though from Mr. Norton's position. He wants to occupy two positions at once—his own and Mr. Norton's—and yet preserve the illusion that the desires emanating from these different positions are identical. In taking identification as its object rather than as a part of its operation, the invisible man's desire, in effect, insists on too much similarity and, in refusing to allow difference into the equation at all, prevents the disavowal of difference upon which identification depends.

In Lacanian terms, the invisible man rejects the distinction between Mr. Norton's demand and his desire. This distinction is an inevitable outcome of the processes of desire, signification, and identification that produce the subject; it expresses the subject's perception of a gap between what the subject believes the other claims to want (its demand) and what the subject thinks the other really wants (its desire). Any expression of desire on the part of the other, then, generates the suspicion that this demand is really

¹² Similarly, the protagonist recalls his grandfather's advice almost immediately after asserting that he has identified himself with Mr. Norton. He suddenly becomes concerned that his grandfather would label as treachery this identification that the protagonist so desires and wishes Norton to desire.

aimed at an object other than its stated desire (Žižek, *Sublime Object* 110-111). The invisible man, however, rejects this suspicion and its consequences. While Mr. Norton demands the invisible man's success, he desires his own self-aggrandizement as a liberal philanthropist and benefactor. The invisible man's identification with Mr. Norton, then, insofar as it serves to elide the difference between their desires, *could* serve to support the invisible man's fantasy that his own success will answer the question of the Mr. Norton's desire. But by insisting that Mr. Norton's desire match his own (i.e. that the demand and the desire be the same), the invisible man forecloses his own identificatory process—which leaves him, somewhat ironically, with so many and such large differences between him and Norton that there finally remains no point of identification.

Living in the Blind Spot

The kind of identification that Barbee's sermon proposes to the invisible man, then, is doomed to failure. The identificatory model that Barbee lays out is founded on misrecognition, on (willfully) not seeing the differences in motive, experience, and desire between the Founder and his allies and his future students. This not-seeing is made literal in the person of Barbee himself, who, the protagonist belatedly realizes, is visually impaired: "For a swift instant, between the gesture and the opaque glitter of his glasses, I saw the blinking of sightless eyes. Homer A. Barbee was blind" (133). Though he doesn't phrase it in terms of identification, the narrator's own analysis of what makes him invisible reads as an incisive description of the blindness that identification with another really implies: "I am invisible, understand, simply because people refuse to see me. Like the bodiless heads you see sometimes in circus sideshows, it is as though I have been

surrounded by mirrors of hard, distorting glass. When they approach me they see only my surroundings, themselves, or figments of their imagination—indeed, everything and anything except me” (3). What the narrator comes to see and accept in others is the degree to which, in their relations to him, they see only pieces, aspects, and reflections of themselves. The same description, however, is a fairly apt account of the way most of the invisible man’s identifications have operated: instead of seeing the truth of another individual’s desire, he has seen only his own distorted reflection, reaffirming his delusion that he can see himself from another’s position and desire what they desire.

The clarity of the narrator’s realization that he is invisible is at once demonstrated and disputed by his understanding of the implications of that invisibility. He has come to understand the delusive way others identify with him, and he has realized that his identifications with others are premised on his own delusion that they see him rather than reflections of themselves. Moreover, he has come to understand the problems of his own desire for identity with another’s desire and the consequent overabundance of similarity: “Now I know men are different and that all life is divided and that only in division is there true health” (576). There are, however, limits to his clear vision. Having decided to finally embrace his grandfather’s long ago advice, the narrator now finds it impossible know exactly what his grandfather wanted or intended him to do. In trying to express his current state of mind, the narrator says that “my mind revolved again and again back to my grandfather. [...] I’m still plagued by his deathbed advice. Perhaps he hid his meaning deeper than I thought, perhaps his anger threw me off—I can’t decide” (574). The narrator follows this with a full page of questions, each proposing a possible

interpretation of his grandfather's advice.¹³ His list of questions ultimately settles on two final queries, apparently linked only by his inability to answer either: "Weren't we *part of them* as well as apart from them and subject to die when they died? I can't figure it out; it escapes me. But what do I really want, I've asked myself" (575). Thus the narrator finally gets a glimmer of identification's operation—the negotiation of sameness and difference, separation and division, and the ever-present question of desire that plays into this relation—but he can't get much further in sorting out its complexities; he is left only with the sense that something is escaping him.

This impasse—a certain necessary blindness that can't be overcome—may well be a defining characteristic of identification's operation. Despite his assertion that "I'm invisible, not blind" (576), the narrator has only the dimmest vision of what he wants to do, how he wants to do it, or how and what his relations to others will be from here on out. He may have learned the fallacy of his earlier identifications, but he has gained no more control over how his mind—and by extension his identification—operates. His stint underground, not to mention the tale he tells, is the invisible man's attempt to "look through myself," to thereby short-circuit such "such problems as good and evil, honesty and dishonesty" which take on "such shifting shapes that [one who is invisible] confuses one with the other, depending upon who happens to be looking through him at the time" (572). But the transparency implied by the act of "looking through" oneself is itself an impossibility; insofar as the self is made possible by a reflexivity that enables it to regard itself as a object, some kernel must always remain impenetrable. Complete transparency, by making the object of the gaze transparent, would undermine the reflexivity upon

¹³ Joseph Trimmer examines the various implications of the grandfather's advice and the narrator's inability to fully understand it in his article "The Grandfather's Riddle in Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*."

which the self depends.¹⁴ And thus the invisible man finds that, “In going underground, I whipped it all except the mind, the *mind*” (580).¹⁵

His inability to completely whip the mind—which Robert Genter, quoting Kenneth Burke, argues is due to the fact that the mind, as a construct of language, is “formed by a public grammar” (201)—reveals itself in the uneasy stance that the invisible man establishes in relation to others.¹⁶ He has learned that true health depends upon division and he has learned to accept the instability of his relation to the outside world—but in looking for a means to act in the world, the invisible man runs aground once more on the question of identification. The very process of writing, dependent as it is on some notion of an audience, has lured him back into the world, back into some uncertain relationship to others: “Here I’ve set out to throw my anger in the world’s face, but now that I’ve tried to put it all down the old fascination with playing a role returns, and I’m drawn upward again. [...] But I’ve failed. The very act of trying to put it all down has confused me [...]” (579). In spite of his belief that true health lies in division, the invisible man is drawn again and again to disavow that difference in favor of similarity. He criticizes others for believing themselves different from him (“You won’t believe in my invisibility and you’ll fail to see how a principle that applies to you could apply to me” (589)) and insists on a fundamental commonality of underlying human

¹⁴ For more on this, see Chapter Two, p. 81

¹⁵ As Cynthia Chase points out, this ungraspable kernel is part of the structure of identification, which, like language, appears to grasp that for which it really substitutes. See pages 998-1001 in “The Witty Butcher’s Wife.”

¹⁶ Edward Griffin examines the evolution of this relationship in “Notes from a Clean, Well-Lighted Place.” Griffin argues that the invisible man’s understanding of the world is premised on his belief that its relationships are stable and fixed and that his final disillusionment in this regard comes in the form of a dream that leaves him with no options other than irresponsibility (130, 136). Although he doesn’t discuss the matter in detail, Griffin hints as well that the act of writing has prepared the narrator for some other kind of relationship to others (136).

existence: “But don’t let me trick you, there *is* a death in the smell of spring and in the smell of thee as in the smell of me” (580).

Even at the novel’s very end, the invisible man is still negotiating the pitfalls of identification—pitfalls, in point of fact, that look very much like the problems of liberal humanism. He wishes to affirm a common humanity, shared by blacks and whites and slaves alike, even as he wants to preserve their diversity and difference. Karen Jacobs reads this tension as an interrogation of conflicting aspects of Emersonian notions of nationalism and individuality: the black characters of the novels “display the self-determination and agency associated with the Emersonian ideal of self-reliance,” but they are limited by “the ways in which the historical situatedness of their embodiment as *African* Americans prevents their being recognized as viable representatives of national culture” (167). The mode of identification that the invisible man has experienced in the past has had little success in resolving these contradictions: he has continually felt his humanity denied and his differences forced into some semblance of assimilation, while he has repeatedly done the same to others.

Nonetheless, identification seems, at novel’s end, to be the only way to proceed. The invisible man is ready to emerge from hiding, to take up once again his efforts to play “a socially responsible role,” but how to act such a role continues to elude him. His attempt to put his history down in writing serves as his preliminary attempt, but it is an attempt that finishes by confusing him even more. The novel ends, then, on an oddly ominous note. Having been unable to figure out his next move, unable to figure out how to free himself from the traps of identification, the invisible man comes at last to confront the possibility that there is no way around identification. Having tried, by going

underground, to avoid projecting himself into another's place or being himself displaced by another's projection, the invisible man finishes his narration by expressing his fear that, in the end, such displacement is inevitable, that he cannot speak to someone without also speaking in their place. "And it is this which frightens me," he says: "Who knows but that, on the lower frequencies, I speak for you?" (581).¹⁷

Reading Identification

Invisible Man thus ends with a fairly direct confrontation of the narrator's complex relationship to audience and reader. The narrator's realization that trying to tell his story has only confused him, made his understandings about identification both less tenable and harder to evade, is symptomatic of the complicated relationship between identification and narrative. In *Invisible Man*, ruminations on the problems of identification serve in part to produce the illusion of narrator as a discrete narrative element, while an examination of the dynamics of the identificatory process enables a countervailing understanding of the narrator as a function rather than element of the narrative.

¹⁷ These lines, the final words in the novel, are frequently cited by scholars, who generally recognize them as a plea for or statement of relation another, though often without explicit explanation of what in the idea of this relations should so frighten the invisible man. Philip Harper claims that this final query marks the invisible man's acceptance that he is a part of the black masses from which he has hitherto attempted to differentiate himself; he now speaks for the group rather than to it (695). Richard Yarborough reads it as a "desperate, emotional plea for sympathetic recognition," whose "likely response is a chilling silence" (57), while Robert Genter sees it as announcement of the novel's rhetorical strategy, which the fate of the readers to that of its narrator (203). Joseph Frank contends that it addresses to a "(white) reader, who is incapable of seeing him for what he truly is but nonetheless shares with him the same tragic dilemma" (13). Simone Vauthier reads the line as an hesitant suggestion that the I and Other might be the same, arguing that this transition from the "I" of the novel's opening words to the "you" of its conclusion enables the invisible man to find an identity (78). Michel Fabre argues that to the extent the narrator's address here is made to a white audience/narratee, the narrator's fear registers "the possibility, if not the actuality, that everyone is 'invisible'" ("Narrator/Narratee" 541).

As is fairly typical of first-person narration, the apparent narrator of *Invisible Man* is split between the narrating self of the text's present tense and the narrated self of the past.^{18, 19} Most critics, however, resolve what would seem to be an inherent dissonance in this mode of narration by imputing representational criteria to the narrating instance. The distinction between narrating self and narrated self is understood as function of the novel's adoption of the form of a non-fiction autobiography, to be attributed to the additional experience and distance the writer-narrator brings to bear on his own past. The non-coincidence of narrator and narrated selves appears then as a natural result of the experiential and temporal gap between mature adult and callow youth. Dorritt Cohn, who refers to this mode of narration as self-narration, suggests that such a narrator, despite its dual nature, seems far more natural and unitary than does the narrator of those texts that elide the narrator's duality by utilizing a present-tense autonomous monologue form that proposes a "simultaneity of language and happening" (*Transparent Minds* 173). Self-narration generally incorporates a realist impulse into the narrating situation; it poses as written memoir or incorporates a frame that posits a listener or reader. Autonomous monologue "can create the illusion that it renders an unrolling thought only if it effaces the illusion of a causal link between this language and a written text" (175).²⁰

¹⁸ Vauthier makes the point that in *Invisible Man*, this split is actually three-fold: there is the narrated self of the Prologue, who has not yet written his memoir; the narrated past self of the main body of the text; and the narrated self of the Epilogue, who, with the self-knowledge gained from writing his text, is now looking forward to an extra-textual future (72).

¹⁹ For discussions of this aspect of first-person narratives, see Gerard Genette's chapters on mood and voice (Chapters 4 and 5) in *Narrative Discourse*, as well as Chapter 4 of Dorritt Cohn's *Transparent Minds*.

²⁰ For more on the narrating situations evoked by past- and present-tense first-person narration, see Chapters Four and Five of Cohn's *Transparent Minds*, as well as her article, "'I doze and I wake': The Deviance of Simultaneous Narration."

The split between narrated self and narrating self, somewhat counter-intuitively, thus serves as a means of naturalizing the narrator function, helping to occlude the fact that both facets of the narrator are constructions of the narrative rather than autonomous agents acting in or producing the narrative. This naturalization is aided by the identificatory possibilities that such a construction permits. A first-person narrator, telling the story of its past self, enables at least three different forms of identification: the narrator—by virtue of its narration—projects itself into the position of its past self, reliving experiences at least partly from that position and perspective; and the reader simultaneously projects him- or herself into the positions of the narrator's past self and into that of the narrating present self. The reader is thus provided with at least two different points of identification within the text (and almost certainly more) and his or her identification is accompanied by the narrator's own identifications.

In the case of *Invisible Man*, the represented narrator—like the Reverend Barbee—suggests possibilities for identification in part by his mode of address to his audience. The narrator's direct address to his readers is particularly notable in the prologue and epilogue, both of which are written in the fictive present tense of the invisible man's sojourn underground. His initial description of what it's like to be invisible—which begins with the assertion that "I am an invisible man"—quickly confuses the question of who is speaking and who is invisible. In the novel's first paragraph, the "I" is invisible and "they" are those who look through him. The second paragraph, however, begins with a more general discussion of "my invisibility," or "that invisibility to which I refer" which quickly shades into an sentence devoid of personal pronouns: "It is sometimes advantageous to be unseen, although it is most often wearing

on the nerves” (3). Instead of “my nerves,” there are only “the nerves,” which very shortly, as the movement of the paragraph implies, are to be interpreted as “your nerves.” The second half of this paragraph is written almost exclusively in the second person (“you’re constantly being bumped,” “you often doubt if you really exist” (4)) and aggressively so; a second-person pronoun crops up seventeen times in eight sentences. This second-person pronoun, however, does not function, as it does later in the prologue, as a direct address to the invisible man’s narratee or even the actual reader.^{21, 22} Instead, it serves as a sort of doubling or stand in for the invisible man himself. We are clearly meant to interpret these statements as describing the invisible man, but, as the continual use of “you” suggests, we—like Barbee’s audience—are just as clearly meant to imagine that the description applies to us as well.

Thus at the very outset of the novel, the line between self and other, narrator and reader is placed in question. By invoking the reading “you” and suggesting ways that one might occupy the narrator’s own position, the narrator function opens up a space of identification for the narrator. It also, however, introduces a certain reflexive identification for himself. By separating out the “you” who is constantly bumped and feels he doesn’t exist, the narrator creates a new relationship to himself, one in which he can, to a certain degree, reflect on the emotions he undergoes. The complexity of this,

²¹ Vauthier reads the Prologue and Epilogue in terms of conjunctive and disjunctive attitudes toward the narratee. In the disjunctive mode, the narrator’s address makes clear the distinction between narrator and narratee, whereas in the conjunctive mode, the “you” is generalized and can refer to the narrator and narratee simultaneously. Vauthier thus considers the above passage to demonstrate a transition from “a fairly inclusive *you* to a less inclusive one” (79). She attributes the narrative’s shifting modes of address in part to the narrator’s attempt to construct an appropriate community to hear his tale and in part to Ellison’s attempts to preclude readers’ identification with the narratee in hopes that they will identify instead with the narrator (82).

²² For a further examination of some of the complexities of second-person narration in general, see Chapter Two of Brian Richardson’s *Unnatural Voices*.

again as with Barbee's model of identification, is revealed in the way the narrator shifts between pronouns in a single sentence, moving from reflecting "I" to experiencing "you" ("And, let *me* confess, *you* feel that way most of the time. You ache with the need to convince yourself that you do exist [...]") and ending up with an impersonal summation (at the pronominal level, at least): "And, alas, it's seldom successful" (4, emphasis mine). The narrator thus sets up an extremely complicated relationship to himself, even as he does the same for his reader. In both relationships, the creation of identificatory possibilities is paramount; by opening a place for an other in the sentence, the narrator opens an imaginative place for an other (the reader, himself) in the story, in the narrative itself.

This complexity, as well, serves to make the narrator appear as some sort of autonomous person, rather than a mere narrative device. As a matter of course, we readers imbue the narrating "I" with all kinds of qualities that are hardly warranted; we think of it as a person with a distinct personality, unique experiences (including a personal history that often extends beyond the temporal purview of the text in question), and a particular voice acting autonomously to craft for us the narrative that we are currently reading. In other words, when we read a narrative in the first person, we "hear" a voice telling us a story. We may not be—and most likely are not—under the apprehension that the invisible man is a real person or that his story is true, but, within the framework of this fictional tale, we nonetheless treat the narrator as a plausible person, one who accords in general with our experience of what a person is and whom we can understand in many respects as though he were a real person. That is to say, we tend to treat fictional characters in a number of ways as though they can be understood in the

same way people of our acquaintance can be understood. Hence our tendency to talk about hidden motives and desires, character and personality; our sense that we can predict how a fictional character might respond to certain situations and our outrage when he or she behaves “out of character”; and our persistent conviction that the characters we encounter lead lives and have experiences beyond what is represented on the printed page. In the face of all evidence to the contrary—any character or narrator, after all, is a function of the narrative in which it appears and there is nothing to know about that character except what the narrative tells us is so—readers persistently respond to characters and narrators as though they were autonomous agents, acting in or producing the narrative at hand, rather than as effects or functions of that narrative.²³ This response to stories—the persistent belief that characters and narrators possess lives beyond the borders of the text itself—might, in fact, be one of the hallmarks of fictional narratives.

The intricacy of the identificatory processes at work in *Invisible Man* contributes to this sense that the narrator/protagonist possesses an existence beyond the borders of

²³ Our tendency to do so has been noted repeatedly in studies of narrative, characters, and narrators. Walter Allen describes it as a function of the character’s autonomy, “the strong sense we have that in some mysterious way it should be possible, in imagination, to walk round [the character] and inspect him from every angle, as though he were a person in life” (328). Allen also notes that when this doesn’t happen—when the novelist fails to treat his or her characters as though they are autonomous beings—characters may seem over- or underdeveloped, and when a novelist’s treatment of his characters shifts in mid-novel, we find the character implausible (329). Thomas Leitch argues that what makes a character is our ability to impute to him or her a life beyond the text. He attributes our ability to do so to the narrativity of both audience and discourse—narrativity being that which allows us to create a coherent story and sense of character out of the disparate elements and traits presented by the texts (34, 37, 161). Seymour Chatman argues for a theory of what he calls “open” characters—those who are constructed by the audience throughout their reading experience through the accretion of the traits attributed to them; this process, he claims, is analogous to the way we get to know a real person (*Story* 126-128). Such characters are endowed with an existence beyond the sum of their parts by the use of a name or pronoun which imbues them with the “quintessence of selfhood” (131). Chatman insists furthermore that a “viable theory of character should preserve openness and treat characters as autonomous beings” (119). Wallace Martin argues that study of characters must treat seriously the way we perceive their existence, claiming that “our sense that fictional characters are uncannily similar to people is therefore not something to be dismissed or ridiculed but a crucial feature of narrative that requires explanation” (120). I would suggest that, like the narrator function, the illusion of characters is a narrative effect and must be accounted for as such.

the text. The sheer complexity of all the different kinds and ways and points of identification in the text—not to mention all the different entities that appear to rely on the identificatory process (including readers, characters, narrators, and narrative alike)—helps generate the appearance that identification is essential. To the extent that identification is considered a psychologically necessary process for human interaction—and, regardless of how one defines it, it usually is—the proliferation of identifications in and around a text suggest the presence of autonomous beings within the text that require those identifications as part of their psychological existence. Thus, all the different ways and means by which the invisible man identifies—with himself, with his story, with his reader/audience, with other characters—generate the illusion that the invisible man is an independent entity who identifies, and they hide the extent to which the process of identification—like the narrative—helps create the illusion of the entity we see identifying.²⁴

Identification also works to create the illusion of a preexisting character/narrator via its mediation of the unknown. Identification is way of trying to know, or at least manage, something unknowable—the experience of existing in another’s position, seeing (yourself) through another’s eyes. Identification is founded in the unknowability of the other, even as its entire operation works to disavow that unknowability. When we identify with another, we disavow not just our difference from them, but the degree to which the true dimensions and nature of that difference are unknowable to us. Similarly,

²⁴ This same trickiness appears in psychological definitions of the identificatory processes of actual human beings as well. Identification is widely agreed to be the mechanism by which identity is created; but one’s identity is also thought to condition the kinds of identifications that are possible. When someone identifies with someone or something, then, this identification implies simultaneously an identity formed through the identification and a pre-existing identity that informs the choice of the object of identification. Cynthia Chase and Judith Roof both remark on this difficulty in the way identification and identity are conceived.

to the extent that we identify with fictional characters or narrators, we are engaged in a process of negotiating what we perceive as their fundamental unknowability. In narrative identification, however, this unknowability is actually created, rather than being simply disavowed or negotiated. We do know everything there is to know about fictional characters because their existence is limited to the printed page, but we imbue them nonetheless with an unknowability that helps render them analogous to real people. As Dorrit Cohn notes, what makes a fictional character seem real to us is the degree to which we are granted access to its innermost thoughts and psychological processes—this in spite of the fact that we *never* experience this kind of access with the actual people in our own lives (*Transparent Minds* 5). This paradox, I would suggest, is enabled by the process of identification, which creates the illusion of non-knowledge where one might well expect to find the fullness of total knowledge.

This illusion of the unknown, which bolsters our sense that certain aspects of a text and its characters remain forever beyond our grasp, is further enabled by the kinds of psychological processes and determinants implied by identification. However identification is defined, it is generally conceived as a largely individual phenomenon, dependent on the identity, desires, and history of the person identifying. The proliferation of identifications in any text—all the different ways the characters and narrators relate to one another and understand each other—thus implies that the characters in question possess the subjectivities, psychologies, desires, and identities that go along with identification. Because the invisible man identifies with Dr. Bledsoe or Brother Jack, for example, we assume that there is a plausible psychological impetus for this identification. When the nature of this impetus isn't suggested by the text or when

the causes provided don't seem sufficient (as they perhaps never can be), the reader's first response is rarely to throw up the hands in disgust at the insufficiency of the text, but rather to assume the unknown; because the invisible man identifies like a subject, we attribute to him the unknowable kernel upon which subjectivity depends. The illusion of the invisible man's subjectivity is thereby created for us out of narrative's suggestion that there is something about the invisible man that we do not or cannot know.

Thus, while identification's operation depends to a certain extent on a blind spot, the illusion of character autonomy created by narrative identification depends equally on the *illusion* of a blind spot—the belief that there exists some aspect of a character that we can't know. One might say, somewhat paradoxically, that our sense of characters and narrators as being living, breathing entities depends on the perception of this blind spot, on seeing (we think) that something remains unseen. This perception is enabled by the process of identification, which, in our relations with other people, allows us to imagine that we might know what can't be known and, in our relations with fictional narratives, allows us to imagine that we can't know something of which we necessarily know everything.

Invisible Man's treatment of identification, then, illustrates the integral relation of identificatory functions to narrative operations. The identificatory process in narrative operates through the creation of ranges of knowledge and non-knowledge; these ranges are fundamental to the production of subjects and subject positions—and thus to the creation of the illusory narrative agents (the characters and represented narrators) that appear to “possess” subjectivity. Narrative operation depends, moreover, on a constitutive blind spot, which enables the attribution of knowledge where there is none,

and non-knowledge where there is full knowledge. *Invisible Man*'s exploration of identification's role in the existential constitution of the fictional subject thus enables an investigation of the narrator as function and the concomitant conceptualization of the narrator the illusory production of a dynamic process.

Chapter Two

In the Eye of the Beholder: Narrative Knowledge and the Identificatory Gaze

It happen'd one Day about Noon going towards my Boat, I was exceedingly surpriz'd with the Print of a Man's naked Foot on the Shore, which was very plain to be seen in the Sand: I stood like one Thunder-struck, or as if I had seen an Apparition; I listen'd, I look'd round me, I could hear nothing, nor see any Thing, I went up to a rising Ground to look farther, [...] But after innumerable fluttering Thoughts, like a Man perfectly confus'd and out of my self, I came Home to my Fortification [...], looking behind me at every two or three Steps, mistaking every Bush and Tree, and fancying every Stump at a Distance to be a Man [...]

—Daniel Defoe, *Robinson Crusoe*, p. 142

I see only from one point, but in my existence I am looked at from all sides.

—Lacan, *Seminar XI*, p. 72

When a man is in despair and does not in his heart of hearts allow that a search is possible and when such a man passes a Jew in the street, he notices nothing.

[...]

But when a man awakes to the possibility of a search and when such a man passes a Jew in the street for the first time, he is like Robinson Crusoe seeing the footprint on the beach.

—Walker Percy, *The Moviegoer*, p. 89

The moment that Robinson Crusoe finds another man's footprint on the beach of his deserted island is chilling, even though nothing comes of the sighting then or for years later. Yet that moment on the beach mobilizes the same terror that suspense novels and horror movies do: the fear that *someone is watching you* when you thought you were alone. After years of isolation, Crusoe is suddenly faced with incontrovertible evidence of someone else's presence, and his immediate response is to look for the people that he is sure are looking at him. Flustered and alarmed, Crusoe searches the beach around him for more signs of human presence and retires to higher ground in an attempt to find the location his watchers are watching from. Crusoe is convinced that he is being watched

unawares, and when he cannot find his observers, his imagination supplies them. He retreats to his homestead, believing at every turn that he sees the silhouette of a man gazing back at him. And isn't this—the fear of someone looking at you while you remain oblivious—the most terrifying aspect of finding out that you're not alone when you thought you were? Crusoe devolves in a heartbeat from happily creating his own civilization—complete with livestock, crops, and habitations—to sneaking furtively around his empty island, paranoiacally convinced that someone he cannot see will see him. Crusoe is no longer the master of all he sees, but is instead mastered by what he believes sees him.

At the outset of Walker Percy's *The Moviegoer*, its narrator, Binx Bolling, awakens to the "possibility of a search" (10), which primes him to see in the people and things around him evidence of someone or something looking back—making him feel "like Robinson Crusoe seeing the footprint on the beach" (89).¹ Like Crusoe, who seeks higher ground in order to get a sense of who is looking at him from what vantage, Binx's response to the awareness of the gaze is also to move away, to get to a place where he can see the relationship between himself and whatever looks back at him. In Binx's case,

¹ Though he's quite a bit cagier about its goals, Binx defines the search itself as "what anyone would undertake if he were not sunk in the everydayness of his own life. [...] To become aware of the possibility of the search is to onto something. Not to be onto something is to be in despair" (13).

Binx characterizes the search's possibility as coming to him in a moment of extreme isolation, a time when he is so alienated from his surroundings, from his everyday life, that he feels he is—like Crusoe—a castaway on a strange island. "Com[ing] to [it]self" is thus an action reserved for the subject alienated from itself.

The search, marked by a feeling of being "onto something" that staves off despair, is a means of reconnection, a way of "poking around" a strange neighborhood that moments before had been a sign of complete isolation, part of what rendered Binx a "castaway." The possibility for this reconnecting search, however, is enabled by the very alienation, the experience of "coming to oneself," that requires reconnection in the first place.

Hence Binx's interest in the Jews, with whom he believes he "share[s] the same exile": as bearers of the same alienation that Binx experiences, the Jewish, Binx believes, hold clues to that alienation. They are thus mirrors, evidence of other (alienated) beings, where Binx thought he was alone.

For an analysis of the role of the Jew as mirror in Percy's work, see Stephen Haynes's article "Theology as Fiction and Fiction as Theology: Karl Barth and Walker Percy on 'the Jews.'"

however, this move is narrative rather than physical. Binx is embedded, always, in a four-dimensional system of interlocking, dynamic relationships—amongst his friends and family, his social circle and neighbors, his past and his memories, his beliefs about himself and others’ beliefs about him, what he sees and what sees him. His narrative, rather than evoking the experience of living in such a system, enacts Binx’s attempts to escape it: via his narration, Binx is continually trying to find a site from which—like Crusoe—he can view the whole field of these relations.

Binx’s narration consequently operates according to dynamics of position and gaze. He narrates as though he were observing from afar, rather than living his own experiences—inhabiting, as it were, not his own body but rather the point of view of a camera’s gaze trained on his life. As a result, Binx finds movies to be more vivid than his own life—for movies provide him with a camera’s point of view. Similarly, his descriptions of other people try to encompass the world as seen from their perspectives, rather than depicting those people as seen from Binx’s own point of view. In describing his Uncle Jules, for example, Binx says, “I see his world plainly through his eyes and I see why he loves it and would keep it as it is” (31). This formulation simultaneously highlights Binx’s investment in seeing from someone else’s position and redefines identification as the process of seeing as if from the vantage of another. *The Moviegoer* thus translates the positional logic of identification in *Invisible Man* from the dynamics of desire to the operation of the gaze. Binx identifies according to a logic of positionality, looking to find out not what it would be like to desire from another’s position, but what it would be like to see (himself) from where that other stands.²

² Most often and most consistently, this “other” is cinematic in nature: much of Binx’s time is spent in movie theatres, aligning his own gaze with that of the camera and occupying the point of view expressed by

Binx's attempt to get outside the web of relationships that constitute his subject position is structured by his misunderstanding of the gaze. When watching a film, Binx's identifications operate in accordance with Christian Metz's analysis of filmic identification: he identifies with the location of the camera (Metz 49) and he appreciates movie-going for its ability to let him look at others (on-screen) even as he "look[s] at [him]self looking at the film" (52). Binx, however, misrecognizes the site of the camera as the site of the gaze; he imagines that in occupying the location of the camera, he might effect his escape from an intersubjective circuit of gazes and gain access to a "true," global perspective. Consequently, the moments when Binx believes that he has attained this external perspective (which he identifies with "seeing clearly") are also the moments at which he is most blind.

Binx's mode of identification helps bring to light the paradoxical nature of narratorial construction. His attempts to see himself from the position of the other produce a first-person narration where the divide between the telling narrator and the narrated character—usually somewhat effaced, if not invisible—is made manifest. The subject and object of a first-person narration never completely coincide, but, in many narratives, their lack of coincidence is subsumed by the illusion that we are receiving intimate access to a subject's interiority.³ The Binx-narrator's continual effort to get

the filmic gaze. However, this interest in occupying another point of view extends beyond film, imbuing Binx's relationships to others and to his narration itself.

³ As Dorrit Cohn points out, this lack of coincidence is most commonly expressed by the use of the past tense, which invokes a temporal distance between the narrating self and its past self. Depending on the stance that the narrator takes toward this earlier self, this distance can be quite distinct, as with the clear, insightful eye Proust's narrator turns on the younger Marcel, or quite unobtrusive, "renouncing all cognitive privilege," or, indeed, at varying points in between. The temporal distinction between narrating and experiencing selves, however, is largely naturalized by its resemblance to "the temporal continuity of real beings" (143-158). The move to self-narration in the present tense, as in *The Moviegoer*, has often been undertaken specifically to avoid the retrospective distance invoked by the use of the past tense, but

outside his own story—to reach a place from which he might *see* himself telling his own story—makes the disconnection between narrator and narrated ramify throughout the narrative in a thread of alienation, detachment, and psuedo-objectivity that undercuts the illusion of intimacy. In its treatment of Binx’s identificatory mechanisms, then, *The Moviegoer* exposes the narrator as a narrative function based in the production and (apparent) limitation of knowledge. And Binx’s conflation of the imaginary site of the gaze with a delusive narratorial externality allies *The Moviegoer*’s blind spot with the illusory narrator.

Identification and the Circuitry of the Gaze

Binx’s fascination with movies lies in their relationship to reality. He finds movies more compelling than his own life because something about the camera’s gaze imbues the world with a different kind of reality, one that gleams and shines. Where the rest of the world leads a shadowy, tenuous existence, film has the power to certify and solidify things, to make them more stable, more real, more there.⁴ Binx’s primary interest lies in this effect of the filmic gaze on the objects it observes. Binx’s movie-going—which, as the novel’s title suggests, is central to his character—stems both from a

as Cohn’s analysis demonstrates, when first-person narration “approaches monologue, narration sheds its narrative characteristics en route” (174). The temporal dissonance of past-tense narration is thus replaced by a sort of cognitive dissonance occasioned by the loss of narrative conventions that normally structure our understanding of the putative circumstances under which the narrator in question has produced the text we are currently reading.

⁴ “Reality” and “existence” are both Binx’s terms and seem to refer to the state of those things that have been ratified, actuated, or authenticated by the gaze of the Other. “Reality” is thus the world as filtered through and constituted by the intersubjective circuit of gazes in which Binx himself is embedded. Things and people that possess a “resplendent reality” have been ratified by the (cinematic) gaze of the Other, while those that have not are cursed with what Binx terms a “tenuous existence,” as though they are in danger of slipping from their positions in the world/intersubjective grid.

scientific interest in film's effects on reality and an urge to align himself with the gaze that produces such astonishing effects.

Nowhere is this more evident than in Binx's interest in and relationship to movie stars. Binx is "attracted to movie stars but not for the usual reasons. [...] It is their peculiar reality which astounds me" (17). A (more or less) chance observation of William Holden provides Binx with a dual opportunity to observe the aura of Holden's "peculiar reality" and to project himself imaginatively into the all-seeing position of the camera that accords that reality. En route to a luncheon at his aunt's house, Binx finds himself walking half a block behind Holden as Holden passes a young couple, whom Binx pegs as honeymooners from the northeast. They are not happy, these honeymooners: the young man believes, Binx believes, that their honeymoon is too conventional and he feels threatened and reproached on all sides. When they see Holden, "[t]he boy perks up for a second, but seeing Holden doesn't really help him. On the contrary. He can only contrast Holden's resplendent reality with his own shadowy and precarious existence" (16). When Holden pauses to ask a group of housewives for a match, and to be fussed over when they recognize him, the boy casually and "without a flicker of recognition" offers Holden a light: "The boy has done it! He has won title to his own existence, as plenary an existence now as Holden's, by refusing to be stampeded like the ladies from Hattiesburg" (16).

The solidification of the boy's shadowy existence occurs through a complex intersubjective exchange between him and Holden, as witnessed by Binx. As Binx portrays this exchange, the boy's existence appears to be actuated by his contact with Holden; the mere fact of Holden's recognition seems sufficient to solidify a subjectivity

that is impossibly tenuous and uncertain. Just as importantly, however, the boy believes that Holden sees him as he wishes to be seen—or more precisely, the boy is able to attribute his own gaze to Holden. Because the boy worries that his honeymoon is too conventional, he imagines that others believe it to be so as well, and thus “[e]ach stranger he passes is a reproach to him” (15). In his encounter with Holden, however, the boy succeeds in seeing himself as he wishes to believe he is—but he can only do so by believing that it is in actuality Holden who sees him in this light. Having spoken briefly with Holden and having refused to be “stampeded like the ladies from Hattiesburg,” the boy becomes a “citizen like Holden; two men of the world they are. All at once the world is open to him.”

In refusing to adulate Holden, the boy attempts to settle the question of whether he is a fan or a peer. At least in part, his refusal to act like a flustered fan is an answer to the question, “What am I to the other?”. This question, according to Žižek’s gloss of Lacan, lies at the heart of subjectivity, delimiting the split that allows the subject to gaze at itself (and to believe that gaze comes from another) (*Sublime Object*, Chapter 3). In a slightly different version, however, that question seems to lie as well at the heart of identification. The boy asks not only what he is to the other, but what the other wants him to be: Does Holden desire adulation or anonymity? Shall the boy give him what he wants? What is it like to be Holden seeing the boy?

To ask the question of the other’s desire requires an identificatory projection into Holden’s position. In order to pose the question, much less answer it, the boy must regard the world through (what he imagines to be) Holden’s eyes. No matter how well the boy might succeed in seeing from Holden’s position, however, he still retains the self-

interest of his own position.⁵ The final version of the question the boy asks, then, is this: If I were in the position of the other, how would I see myself? And who would I be, being seen? These questions, asked over and over, form the backbone of the identificatory process in *The Moviegoer*, engendering a complicated circuit of gazes whose dynamic is that of recursive distancing, a continual stepping outside the self in order to see from the position of an other.

The boy's performance of disinterest has a dual objective: it is meant to give Holden what the boy presumably thinks he wants (the freedom to stroll unmolested down the street) and to present the boy as he wishes Holden to see him (as a worldly, confident fellow, above the indignity of fawning over a hero—that is, like Holden himself). This second objective, however, requires a third vector of the gaze, one that regards the interaction between Holden and the boy from the outside. As with the gaze that the boy believes comes from Holden, this third gaze is largely imaginary: "Clearly he would like nothing better than to take Holden over to his fraternity house in the most causal way. 'Bill, I want you to meet Phil. Phil, Bill Holden,' he would say and go sauntering off in the best seafaring style" (17). In Binx's rendition, the boy imagines what his interaction with Holden would look like to another, in this case a fraternity brother. His solidified existence as a "man of the world," conferred by Holden's gaze, must also be affirmed by another, more external gaze. As with the gaze he believes comes from Holden, this imaginary outside gaze is ultimately the boy's own, his projection of what he believes the

⁵ In part this self-interest is manifested in terms of power. Neither the boy nor (through him) Binx wish to occupy the position of the desirer, whose very desire acknowledges a lack. They are both then invested in identifying with Holden's position as the object of desire, sufficient unto itself and in no way dependent on the desirer for its existence. Thus part of the identificatory projection undertaken by the boy is meant to shore up his belief that Holden wants an equal rather than an adorer—for that is what the boy wants to be.

other sees when it looks at him. It is his own gaze as seeming to come from another position.

The existential solidity that the boy garners from the gaze thus comes from what appears as two different sources: that which is enmeshed with his in the exchange of gazes (that is, Holden) and that which stands outside this circuit and regards from afar (that is, the imagined fraternity brother). For the boy then, as Binx understands it, the solidification of existence depends upon that step back, a removal from the primary circuit of gazes which thereby renders him (the boy) a visible object in the field of perception.

This second gaze is essentially cinematic insofar as it represents an imaginary, objective point of perspective that provides the boy's mind's eye a picture in which the boy himself appears. Holden's gaze—coming as it does from someone possessed of a “resplendent reality” of the sort that Binx identifies with movie stars who are themselves objects of the cinematic gaze—helps confer a “plenary” existence on the boy, an existence whose fullness is in part dependent on the boy's ability to step outside himself, to occupy another's position and to see himself as he believes Holden sees him and as he believes he and Holden are seen by that other. And all of this, of course, is as seen and imagined by Binx. In Binx's telling of this stepping outside the self, the attempt to withdraw from the circuit of gazes becomes literal. After the imaginary introduction of Holden to his brother Phil, the boy “go[es] sauntering off,” relieved of the burden of participating in the network that renders his existence plenary. Such withdrawal, however, is always only partial. Even as he saunters away from Phil and Bill, traces of

the boy's presence endure in the sentence that describes his move away; the boy remains always the subject of the sentence.

This recursive step outside the circuit of gazes, however, hardly ends with the boy. Though Binx's rendering of the boy's imaginary interaction with another places the fraternity brother in the position of the cinematic other, Binx too occupies this position both in relation to Holden and the boy and in relation to the fraternity brother. For Binx is standing outside, observing the circuit of gazes binding the boy to Holden. As Binx sees it, Holden's presence highlights for the boy the precariousness of existence, even as the gaze that the boy attributes to Holden, coming as it now does from someone possessed of a particularly glittering reality, offers a remedy, albeit a temporary one, to that precariousness. This remedy, which produces the boy's sense of self, is bound up in the question of identification. The solution that Holden's gaze offers to the boy occurs with and through the offer of new (and multiple) identificatory positions.

The remedy that this interchange supplies for Binx, however, occurs through a much more conscious participation in an analogous circuit of gazes and identifications. By aligning himself with the gaze of the cinematic other, Binx becomes a part of the mechanism by which the boy's existence becomes solidified, his reality resplendent. This second-degree observation, in which Binx observes the boy observing Holden and the boy observing himself being observed by Holden, is similar to the way Binx watches movies: Binx's fascination with film lies not in a voyeuristic access to other people and places, but rather in his enduring interest in the way that access operates and, most importantly, with the possibilities inherent in aligning his own gaze with the cinematic gaze that imbues objects with resplendent reality.

Via his narration, Binx is continually removing himself from the circuits of gazes in which other characters are embedded. In his observation of Holden and the boy, Binx's examination of the way the boy identifies with Holden's position and gaze deflects attention from the myriad ways in which Binx performs similar identificatory moves. His narration is comprised of a series of identificatory projections: what would Binx see if he were in the boy's position? in Holden's? in the frat brother's? In many ways, Binx's rendition of this incident is little more than an answer to each of these questions. That Binx ends up imaginatively projected into the most distant of these positions—that of the distanced, observing, objective, cinematic other—is no accident. His entire mode of narration is built on an identificatory process that requires this recursive distancing. Binx is always trying to attain a place from which he can view the whole system of relations between self and other(s). As such, he always identifies with the position of the cinematic other, which always re-embeds him, in a slightly different way, in the circuit of gazes, and thus always requires another attempt at stepping outside the circuit. Thus the pattern of Binx's identifications in his description of the boy: he begins with the boy, pulls back to the frat brother observing the boy, and finally ends as Binx-the-narrator, telling the story of Binx-the-character watching the (imaginary) frat brother watch the boy watch Holden watching the boy. Binx is as outside the circuit as he can get, but still entirely bound up in it. Because his narration is the originary point of all the gazes' vectors, Binx always remains at the center of the circuit, no matter how far outside it he seems to get.

Existence and identification in *The Moviegoer*, then, operate according to much the same dynamics: both depend upon a circuit of gazes in which the subject is

inextricably embedded and from which the subject is nonetheless driven to continually (attempt to) remove itself. The resulting narrative takes the form of a recursive loop that operates much like a Möbius strip. Binx is continually stepping outside the circuit of gazes, searching for a vantage from which to see the whole field, and, in so doing, is reinscribed in a slightly different version of that circuit. There are always at least two (or perhaps four) Binxes in play—a Binx who sees and one who is seen, a Binx who narrates and one who is narrated.⁶ Binx thus skates along the singled-sided edge of a Möbius strip, sliding with each recursion of the loop between seer and seen, narrator and narrated.

Tenuous Existence and the Certification of Reality

That both Binxes (and the novel's other characters) seem like people of any kind to us should be a continual source of amazement—they are, after all, no more than text on a page—and yet part of the process of reading a narrative involves the misapprehension that the narrator has somehow produced the text rather than having been produced by it. In many ways, *The Moviegoer* takes this existential slipperiness of its narrator as its primary subject. Binx (character and narrator) is consumed by the vagaries of existence (his own and others'), and this consumption produces a narrative whose structure mimics the vagaries that Binx explores. Binx's fortune, or perhaps misfortune, is to understand the fragility of existence that movies help elide. For the honeymooning boy, winning title to his existence entails an opening of the world before him. For someone whose subjectivity flickers beneath a faltering gaze, however, the world closes off: "There is a danger," Binx says, "of slipping clean out of space and time. It is possible to become a

⁶ For the sake of simplicity, I will generally refer to this Binx-narrator-character complex as "Binx."

ghost and not know whether one is in downtown Loews in Denver or suburban Bijou in Jacksonville” (75). The danger of becoming a ghost is here linked to a pervasive anonymity of place and being which provokes a despair and emptiness that, in most, are half-felt and little understood.⁷ A movie, however, has the power to certify a location and stave off the despair of its inhabitants:

Nowadays when a person lives somewhere, in a neighborhood, the place is not certified for him. More than likely he will live there sadly and the emptiness which is inside him will expand until it evacuates the entire neighborhood. But if he sees a movie which shows his very neighborhood, it becomes possible for him to live, for a time at least, as a person who is Somewhere and not Anywhere. (63)

Movies here reify the gaze as the gaze of the cinematic other, a gaze that can reestablish the (imaginary) boundaries of a subjectivity that has been evacuated by emptiness. The power of movies to certify, stabilize, and authorize subjective existence draws Binx’s attention, and he regards with scientific interest the existential fluctuations that occur in the presence of movies. He has developed a lexicon—including terms such as “malaise,” “repetitions,” “rotations,” and “certifications”—meant to identify and describe the different experiences of existence, and he occasionally conducts experiments in inducing or staving off these existential states.⁸ In his experiments, Binx makes good use of

⁷ As the novel’s epigraph, a quote from Kierkegaard, puts it, “...the specific character of despair is precisely this: it is unaware of being despair.” Mary Grabar argues that this epigraph applies to Binx as well, contending that his analytic and psychological insights serve only to obscure from Binx the degree to which he too is sunk in despair (126).

⁸ “A repetition is the re-enactment of past experience toward the end of isolating the time segment which has lapsed in order that it, the lapsed time, can be savored of itself and without the usual adulteration of events that clog time like peanuts in brittle” (79-80). In other words, a repetition is a re-living of an experience that collapses (or neutralizes) all the events that have occurred in the intervening years. A

movie-going, closely observing film's power to certify a location or induce a repetition and carefully noting his own emotional and mental responses to that power.

For Binx, then, movies are less compelling as an entertainment to be viewed than as a phenomenon whose effects on existence are to be observed. His own narration functions in much the same way, for Binx is not so much telling a story about his life as he is relating the experience of watching his own existence. Binx's acute awareness of the tenuousness of existence requires a constant vigilance and attention to prevent him from "slipping clean out of space and time." Binx's narrative serves much the same purpose as his movie-going: it gives him an apparatus through which he can rationally and self-consciously train his own gaze upon himself—much the way the honeymooning boy's cinematic imagining of his interaction with William Holden enables him to imagine this interaction as if from afar. In relating to his readers the ins and outs of his daily existence, Binx renders himself an object of observation and inquiry and, as Lacan himself might have observed, this observation and inquiry make Binx a subject who does indeed appear to exist, even if only for the moment.

Binx's day-to-day subjective existence is thus one that entails quite a lot of work. Just as locations need certification by the filmic gaze, Binx's own existence requires a certain attention and affirmation. He takes comfort in the accoutrements of modern life—identification cards, library cards, birth certificates, insurance papers—that "certify

rotation, on the other hand, is "the experience of the new beyond the expectation of the experience of the new. For example, taking one's first trip to Taxco would not be rotation, or no more than a very ordinary rotation; but getting lost on the way and discovering a hidden valley would be" (144). It will be no surprise that Binx induces his experiments by going to see movies he saw years ago or seeing new shows in theaters he remembers from his childhood. Or that his most successful such experiment was with a movie that actually depicted its characters going to a movie: "In the movie Thomas Mitchell and Merle Oberon live in a decaying mansion in a Louisiana swamp. One night they drive into the village—to see a movie! A repetition within a rotation. I was nearly beside myself with rotatory emotion" (144).

[...] one's right to exist" (7), but he is also deeply invested in preserving the "wonder" of his own existence. For Binx, spending time camping or drinking or playing cards with friends—the normal stuff of a young man's life—brings on a despair and depression that he finds hard to shake. What he wants is to live in an anonymous apartment on a busy but anonymous street in New Orleans, "solitary and in wonder, wondering day and night, never a moment without wonder" (42). When his former friends stop by on their way to an evening of music and prostitutes in the French Quarter, Binx "wish[es] them well. As for me, I stay home with Mrs Schexnaydre [his landlord] and turn on the TV. Not that I like TV so much, but it doesn't distract me from the wonder. That is why I can't go to the trouble they go to. It is distracting, and not for five minutes will I be distracted from the wonder" (42).⁹

For Binx, this wonder is means of training his own gaze upon himself. Like the man living in a location uncertified by movies, Binx is continually at risk of being overtaken by emptiness and despair. However unlike his friends and relatives, for whom the despair goes largely unrecognized and is easily drowned out by a good card game or a night on the town, Binx is cognizant of both his own (and others') despair and the existential risks of distraction. Of hiking the Appalachian Trail with friends years ago, Binx remarks that the more fun they seemed to be having, the more depressed he got: "The times we did have fun, like sitting around a fire or having a time with some girls, I had the feeling that they were saying to me: 'How about this, Binx? This is really it,

⁹ Richard Pindell considers Binx's ability to maintain wonder to be his signal achievement, that which inoculates him against Romantic expectations gone awry. Regarding the verbal excess of Binx's description of a gas station he is considering buying—an excess which, in its virtuosity and wit, is all out proportion with its object—Pindell parses the humor as follows: "It is funny that so keen an observer is enamored of the things of this world; funny that so ironic an observer can unabashedly seek the consolations of melodrama; but not so funny that he can find no object, in Fitzgerald's wonderful phrase, 'commensurate to his capacity to wonder.' But his achievement is that he wonders anyway" (223).

isn't it, boy?', that they were practically looking up from their girls to say this. For some reason I sank into a deep melancholy" (41). Binx here is acutely aware of his friends' need to distract themselves and, more importantly, of their need for someone else to see and affirm for them their successful distraction.

Much of Binx's depression stems from his inability to identify with his friends' positions. Unlike later in life, when Binx is able to appreciate the very different priorities and life of his Uncles Jules by "see[ing] his world plainly through his eyes," here Binx is stuck in his own position and point of view. He wishes to make his friends happy, but his awareness of their despair and its causes separates him definitively from the positions they occupy. He can serve the function of the cinematic other for his friends, but he is able neither to see himself through his friends' eyes nor to remove himself sufficiently from the circuit of gazes to regard himself from a distance.

Binx's descriptions of his family and acquaintances in general take one of two tacks. Binx tends to depict the personalities of his closest relatives in large part by their reaction to and opinion of himself. His Aunt Emily, we are told, believes that Binx has flair for research, his mother that he possesses an analytical mind, and his Uncle Jules that Binx has a knack for making money. In all instances, Binx's narration suggests that his relatives are mistaken, but that they evaluate him according to what they themselves value. Binx thus makes them happy by letting them believe what they will. In any case, much of what we learn of his relatives we learn via Binx's understanding of what it must be like to have him for a nephew, son, or cousin; in other words, we learn what it is like to see Binx seeing himself through his relatives' eyes.

Alternatively, in describing his relationships to others, Binx will paint himself,

often vividly, into a static scene, narrating his relationship to the person in question at least partly in terms of the view his physical body presents to those around him (or to an imaginary other). Thus, his rather lengthy description of how his friend Walter helped get him into a fraternity ends—not as it started, with a characterization of Walter—but with a snapshot of how Binx accounted himself in the fraternity: “As it turned out, I did not make them a good man at all. [...] When the annual came out there was nothing under my picture but the letters $\Delta\Psi\Delta$ —which was appropriate since I had spent the four years propped on the front porch of the fraternity house, bemused and dreaming, watching the sun shine through the Spanish moss, lost in the mystery of finding myself alive at such a time and place [...]” (38). As with many of Binx’s depictions of those around him, this one is strikingly visual and is finally much more about depicting the ocular observation of Binx than about anything else. By the end of the passage, the visual representation of Binx bemused and dreaming on the front porch has taken priority over any description of Walter.

In portraying his friends on the Appalachian Trail, however, Binx limits his description to their behavior (eyes turned to him, looking for affirmation) and his own increasing melancholy. There is no discussion of what his friends might think of him, nor is there a physical description of Binx’s place in the scene, as with his depiction of Walter. Instead, we have only Binx’s farewell words: “‘My dear friends,’ I said to them. ‘I will say good-bye and wish you well. I think I will go back to New Orleans and live in Gentilly’” (41-42). Where Binx’s usual methods of description involve seeing himself projecting himself into another’s position, imagining how his relatives see him or what he might look like (slouched on the fraternity house’s porch, for example) to an external

observer, here he is unable to step outside himself enough to attain such a view. The despair and melancholy he feels with his friends stem from the fact that they are looking at Binx, but Binx cannot see what they see.

Binx's solution is to devote his life to ensuring that such a thing never happens again. Leaving his friends on the trail, Binx returns to New Orleans and parlays his awareness of despair and its operation into a continual self-witnessing: Binx makes sure that, if nothing else, he can always see himself through his own eyes, from the position of another Binx who exists in a somewhat removed relationship to himself.¹⁰ He lives a quiet life designed around a capacity for wonder, for rapt contemplation of his subjectivity's very existence. And as with his interest in the existential effects of movies, Binx is unusual in his understanding of the connection between existence and despair. Despair is a disconnection from the world, one that reveling in anything—sex, drink, parties—is meant to stave off. For Binx, then, wonder serves a mechanism for reconnection, for finding a way to be in the world.

The threat of disconnection—or at least his awareness of it—dates from a time in Binx's life when he was engaged in an academic study of the world. "During those years," says Binx,

I stood outside the universe and sought to understand it. [...] The greatest success of this enterprise, which I call my vertical search, came one night when I sat in a hotel room in Birmingham and read a book called *The Chemistry of Life*. When I finished it, it seemed to me that the

¹⁰ In the final analysis, Binx's narration itself enables this relationship, providing him with a split between narrated self and narrating self and thus always with another position (or an other's position) from which to see himself.

main goals of my search were reached or were in principle reachable [...]
The only difficulty was that though the universe had been disposed of, I
myself was left over. There I lay in my hotel room with my search over
yet still obliged to draw one breath and then the next. (69-70)

Having severed himself from the world, Binx finds himself in the awkward position of the leftover, the one thing that has not been studied and remains unknown. In the absence of a search, of the connection to the world, his existence has been transformed into a burden, an obligation to “draw one breath and then the next.”

This burden of existence bears its own relation to the melancholy and despair that afflict Binx on the Appalachian Trail. In both instances, he finds himself inadvertently in the position of one who sees others, but cannot see himself. On the Appalachian Trail, a failure of identification renders him unable to see himself through the eyes of his friends; here, in the course of his search, he has disposed of the universe, leaving himself with no external point from which to observe himself. At both moments, he is brought up sharply against his own fundamental alienation; the inability to see himself from the position of the other marks a breakdown in the circuit of gazes and identifications that the establishment and preservation of Binx’s subjectivity require he be part of. Binx is ultimately dependent on the Other, and his realization of this reveals the emptiness that lies at the heart of the self.

In both moments of alienation, Binx turns to a search as remedy. His life in Gentilly, created in the wake of his experience on the Appalachian Trail, is a search for wonder, and, after dispensing with the universe, Binx embarks on another kind of search as a way of forging a connection to the world. In the context of this new search, Binx’s

own observations of and interactions with the world, rather than books, become significant: “What is important is what I shall find when I leave my room and wander in the neighborhood. Before, I wandered as a diversion. Now I wander seriously and sit and read as a diversion” (70).

Reincorporating the Gaze

The Moviegoer’s narrative begins some years after either of these searches, on a morning when Binx is newly awakened to the possibility of the search. This possibility represents a stirring of desire, aroused by Binx’s new perception of the objects around him—and of their separateness from him. As he is dressing in the morning, depositing an assortment of belongings into various pockets, Binx suddenly notices his possessions:

They looked both unfamiliar and at the same time full of clues. [...]

What was unfamiliar about them was that I could see them. They might have belonged to someone else. A man can look at this little pile on his bureau for thirty years and never once see it. It is as invisible as his own hand. Once I saw it, however, the search became possible. (11)

In their new unfamiliarity, the objects of Binx’s everyday life—wallet, keys, handkerchief, etc.—take on a greater weight and density. In the same way that the reality of objects seen in a film is denser, more resplendent, so too now are the objects of Binx’s own life. As with filmed objects, the reason for this lies in the gaze: in the way of Lacan’s sardine can, Binx’s everyday objects represent the gleam of something other, something severed from himself, something that gazes back at him and arouses his desire. These objects, which Binx carries on his person, close to his body, and which were once

so much a part of him that they were “invisible as his own hand,” have now been cut off from him. They are extimate objects, no longer a part of him, and as such, they provoke long-dormant desires in Binx. They represent the Lacanian *objets a*—imbued with the gleam of desire, marking the split that constitutes the subject.

According to Lacan, the *objet a* is “something from which the subject, in order to constitute itself, has separated itself off as organ” (103). The *objet a* appears in the moment that the infant realizes that it is not coterminous with the world around it. An *objet a* acts simultaneously as a mark of the individual’s separateness from the surrounding world (and thus as a condition of self-consciousness) and as a remainder of a lost mother-child unity. In the latter sense, *objet a* is the portion of the mother’s desire that the child cannot satisfy. It marks the contours of the Other’s desire and presents itself as that ungraspable thing that can render the individual full and whole. The *objet a* sustains the fantasy that the subject, by possessing it, might ignore or overcome its own division (Fink 86).

Wishing to return to the (imaginary) time when it was sufficient unto its mother’s desire and its mother was sufficient unto it, the child attempts at once to conform itself to the shape of the mother’s desire and to use her desire as a model for its own; indeed the child desires the mother’s desirousness itself. The individual desires not only *what* the Other desires, but *how* the Other desires. *Objet a*, as the leftover piece of a lost fullness and unity, is thus the condition and cause of desire (Fink 86). In seeing anew his everyday pile of possessions, Binx glimpses a gleam of desire. His sudden separation from his possessions presents Binx with the possibility of repossessing them, of attaining the union and fullness that appear only when wholeness is definitively lost. Binx is

suddenly a desirer: from being steeped in the everydayness of his own life, he is awakened and alive and alert to the possibility of a search. From here on, he is a seeker, he is curious, he is questing; he is in search of something that has been lacking from his life, something that until now he neither missed nor desired.

This awareness of the search comes at least in part from a dream-memory of an earlier arousal of curiosity, an earlier awareness of the possibility of a search. In the midst of the Korean War, Binx is, for the first time, awakened to his own alienation and simultaneously turned on to the possibility of a search that might remedy that alienation: “I dreamed of the war, no, not quite dreamed but woke with the taste of it in my mouth, the queasy-quince taste of 1951 and the Orient. I remember the first time a search occurred to me. I came to myself under a chindolea bush” (10). Binx comes to himself—meets or approaches himself, as it were—in a single shining moment, one that has neither past nor future, but which is stitched into his present-day understanding of what it means to see everyday objects anew. This moment marks Binx’s awareness of the fundamental split, the constitutive alienation, that renders him a self-reflexive being: a being with a self that is aware and a self to be aware of.

This self-awareness coincides with the sudden presence of desire, expressed here as an “immense curiosity,” a desire for knowledge, for study, for a quest: “My shoulder didn’t hurt but it was pressed hard against the ground as if somebody sat on me. Six inches from my nose a dung beetle was scratching around under the leaves. As I watched, there awoke in me an immense curiosity. I was onto something” (10-11). In his war-time memory, Binx’s perception of the world is limited to a small field, six inches in front of his nose, in which a dung beetle crawls through leaves. Pinned to the

ground as though someone were sitting on him, Binx has nothing to do but gaze at the beetle.

Binx's wartime experience is analogous to the founding moment of subjectivity: immobilized by his injury, Binx is split from himself (a split that allows him to "come to" himself") and cut off from his surroundings. His only possible connection to the beetle is his gaze, which serves both as connection and a mark of separation. Unable to close the gap between himself and the world, Binx is left filled with desire, "an immense curiosity" that aims to fill the lack inaugurated by his separation from the world.

Binx's self-awareness is thus enabled and constituted by the presence of something external to Binx. The presence of the dung beetle, a moving blot in the field of leaves before Binx's nose, is inextricable from the constitutive split that renders Binx self-aware and desiring. In Lacanian terms, the dung beetle is the stain, an external, uninterpretable mark. As Žižek explicates Lacan's theory, the stain is produced by self-consciousness or self-awareness. The place of the stain must remain separate from the place of the self, for, as Žižek puts it, "I am aware of myself only insofar as outside of me a place exists where the truth about me is articulated." Self-awareness requires an ungraspable kernel, the truth of the self, in order to exist. Were the self to occupy the same place as this kernel—which is to say, if the self were knowable or transparent to itself—self-awareness would cease to exist. The stain is thus external evidence of self-awareness, the location of the unconscious thought. As such, the self is unable to recognize its own unconscious in the stain; the stain must remain opaque and meaningless in order for the self to remain consistent (*Tarrying* 66-67).

Binx's separation from the dung beetle must thus be enforced—as it is by his immobility—and he must misrecognize the beetle. In part, he does so by not remarking the significance of the beetle, which is described as simply another feature of a very limited landscape. Where Binx can discuss ad nauseam the relevance of movies to his existential state and self-awareness, he has nothing to say of the dung beetle beyond that it was there. Moreover, in a later evocation of his wartime memory, Binx substitutes a completely different creature for the dung beetle: “There I see her [his cousin Kate] plain, see plain for the first time since I lay wounded in a ditch and watched an Oriental finch scratching around in the leaves” (206). The slippage between the dung beetle and the Oriental finch—two oddly specific and incongruent memories to mix up—highlights the degree to which neither the beetle or the finch, as such, matter. They are there simply as a mark of Binx's self-awareness and evidence of the externality of that self-awareness to the self.

That Binx ties both creatures to issues of the gaze is telling, for, according to Žižek, the gaze is “the point of view from which the stain can be perceived in its ‘true meaning’” (*Tarrying* 66). In this sense, the gaze is the *objet a*, the remainder or leftover of self-consciousness. The gaze as *objet a* is a point of self-awareness; if the self were able to occupy this point, it would exist and think in the same “place,” thus abolishing the stain that acts as evidence of the externality of self-consciousness to the self. Thus, the gaze is the outside position that Binx is always trying to get to. As Lacan puts it, the subject is determined in the register of the visible by the “gaze that is outside” (*Seminar XI* 106). However, to occupy the site of that gaze—the “outside” to which Binx aspires—would entail the dissolution of the subject and its self-awareness.

Binx thus necessarily misrecognizes the significance of his gaze upon the beetle/finch/stain. He associates this gaze with truth and clarity—with seeing something “plain”—when, in fact, he experiences just the opposite. This moment when Binx comes to himself under the chindolea bush does not grant him the ability to see himself “plain,” but rather the awareness of (and perhaps ability to plainly see the fact of) his own self-reflexivity. The gaze as *objet a*—that which seems to have (once) been a part of Binx and yet is unutterably separate¹¹—both enables the externalized self-consciousness that creates Binx as an object of his own reflection and definitively prohibits him from ever “seeing plainly” that self-consciousness. Indeed, Lacan considers “seeing oneself seeing oneself”—which is the form of self-awareness that Binx enacts throughout the novel—to be an illusion in which “an avoidance of the function of the gaze is at work” (*Seminar XI* 74).

In constructing opportunities, narrative and otherwise, to see himself seeing himself, Binx thus evidences his own confusion about and misrecognition of the gaze’s function. As an *objet a*, the gaze promises the same possibility of fullness and completeness that Binx’s extimate objects do. Binx thus wants (unconsciously) to reincorporate the gaze; in so doing, his machinations suggest, he will finally occupy a position from which he cannot be seen. When Binx is able to occupy the site of the gaze, his Crusoe-like awareness of others’ gazes upon him will be laid to rest. There will be no further need for a portion of Binx’s awareness to hover outside him, testing the view from different sites as Binx tries to find the sight-lines along which he is visible to others.

¹¹ As with other *objets a*, the significance of the gaze is based in its separation from the individual. The gaze is perceived as being part of the body (embedded somehow in the eye), and yet it is irrevocably separate and consistently misrecognized.

Inevitably, however, Binx misunderstands the fundamental paradox of the gaze: there is no way to occupy the position from which you are seen. When he tries to locate the gaze by occupying the position from which he is seen, Binx confuses the site of seeing with the gaze itself.¹² The gaze thus always and necessarily eludes him, duplicating the relationships that lie along its circuitry, pushing Binx to different viewing positions that inscribe additional loops in a recursive chain. Binx's observation of William Holden and the honeymooning boy plays out in precisely this way: each iteration of the relationship between Holden and the boy reinscribes Binx in a different position in relation to the two of them (walking behind them on the street, imaginatively projected into each of their positions, observing them in the persona of the frat brother, and finally as cinematic other), but does nothing to allow Binx to retain possession of the glittering reality, the fullness of presence, that attracts him to Holden in the first place.¹³ All the different ways in which Binx attempts to see himself seeing himself thus serve only to fragment the gaze, to expand the circuit of gazes outward rather than hemming it in.

Binx attempts to recuperate this fragmentation by looking for a physical location from which he cannot be seen. In the face of familial obligations and expectations—moments when he must deal with the multiple, often conflicting gazes of his relatives—Binx often retreats to movie theaters, where he takes great comfort in a narrative form that provides a clear focal point from which to regard a picture than he does not occupy.

¹² In this sense, Binx attributes the fullness he himself lacks to the other he believes is watching him. In order for the other and its gaze to occupy the same location, the other must have already achieved (or have never lost) the incorporation of the gaze.

¹³ This glittering reality is evidence of the gaze itself. What glitters is not Holden himself, but a Holden who has been subject to the gaze of the other and who retains the gleam of desire that the gaze both finds in him and imparts to him.

Similarly, years after his first wartime awakening to desire, when his pile of extimate objects take on the gleam of desire and become *objets a*, Binx's response is to try and recuperate them by reincorporating his own gaze.

Binx's extimate objects represent the presence of a external gaze, one that is not contained by Binx. In its externality and separateness, this gaze, itself an *objet a*, provokes both desire and the sensation of being looked at. As Antonio Quinet phrases it, "a spot of light can represent the object, cause of desire, as a presence that makes one feel gazed at" (144). In this fashion, Binx's pile of objects is analogous to Lacan's sardine can, which always looks at Lacan even if it does not see him: "It was looking at me at the level of the point of light, the point at which everything that looks at me is situated" (*Seminar XI* 95).¹⁴ Faced with the evidence of an external gaze, this time in the form of *objets a* that represent that gaze, Binx responds as he does when viewing films: he attempts to step into a physical position where he might see without being seen. Binx moves behind a makeshift lens, "sighting though a hole made by thumb and forefinger" seeking to occupy the place of the camera's gaze, the place where all perspectives are collapsed into one focal point (11).

This move to reconsolidate the gaze by occupying its (apparent) focal point is the flip-side of the same misrecognition that encourages Binx to try to see himself seeing himself. In attempting to occupy the focal point of the gaze, Binx tries to find the point

¹⁴ Lacan's story of the sardine can is as follows: One day, as Lacan is working on a boat with a family of fishermen, one of the fishermen, Petit-Jean, points out a sardine can floating in the waves. "You see that can?" Petit-Jean says, "Do you see it? Well, it doesn't see you!" (95).

In considering this incident, Lacan determines that the sardine can may not see him, but that—since both seeing and failing to see something imply looking toward that something and either perceiving it or not—it looks at him nonetheless. The sardine can thus becomes representative of the gaze, a gleam of light that embodies but does not contain a gaze that is turned toward a subject (Lacan) who likewise does not contain it.

For Lacan's discussion of the sardine can, see "The Line and Light" in *Seminar XI*.

from which he is looked at and to gaze, from that location, on those things, his *objets a*, that might yield to him the truth of the self. The structure of the gaze, however, insists that this truth elude Binx's grasp. Binx can never see the kernel from the site of the gaze, where its truth would become visible, nor can he ever see the gaze from the site of the kernel, where Binx would become transparent to himself.

The self that Binx is trying to see is always somewhere else. When Binx tries to escape the circuit of gazes, the self is always displaced, moved to another almost-external location around which the circuit recenters itself. At the moments when he tries to occupy the point of focalization and thus remove himself altogether from the picture, the self remains always in the picture in the form of a screen or stain. For Lacan, this is the final significance of the sardine can. In looking back at him, the sardine can marks the ways in which the gaze exceeds the physics-based, "geometral" understanding of the relationship between the subject and perception. "I am not," Lacan says,

simply that punctiform being located at the geometral point from which the perspective is grasped. No doubt, in the depths of my eye, the picture is painted. The picture, certainly, is in my eye. But I am not in the picture. [...] And if I am anything in the picture, it is always in the form of the screen, which I earlier called the stain, the spot. (*Seminar XI* 96-97)

Every time Binx attempts to step out of the picture, to remove himself from the field of gazes, he insinuates himself nonetheless in that field, in the form of the screen. In viewing films, this screen is quite literal; it is the movie screen upon which the filmed picture that Binx does not occupy is projected. Despite his efforts to see only what the camera sees, the screen is always visible to him and thus always marks the Binx's

misalignment with the gaze. When, faced with his extimate objects, Binx tries to move again to the focal point by “[standing] in the center of the room” and “sighting through a hole made by thumb and forefinger” (11), traces of his physical body must remain in the scene, in the form of the fingers he uses to delimit the field of vision.

The duration for which Binx can imagine himself to occupy the focal site of the gaze is thus necessarily limited, for that occupation never resolves the problem—the feeling of being gazed at—that it was meant to solve. The instability of his solution is evident in how quickly he shifts from one mode of operation to another. Binx’s makeshift viewfinder is at most a temporary response to the awareness of the gaze engendered by his new *objets a*; by the time he has “bathed, shaved, and dressed carefully,” Binx has moved on to a different approach: “[I] sat at my desk and poked through the little pile in search of a clue just as the detective on television pokes through the dead man’s possessions, using his pencil as a poker” (11). Binx here once again implies, though more metaphorically, both focal point and (television) screen. In comparing himself to the detective, however, Binx aligns himself as much with the object of the viewer’s gaze as with the viewer. Binx’s attempt to consolidate himself as the (sole) viewer by creating a viewfinder has thus already, five sentences later, fractured him into seer (television viewer) and seen (television detective). Binx’s reaction is to attempt another reconsolidation of himself as viewer, albeit in a very different way. By the end of the next paragraph, Binx is already on his way to lunch at his aunt’s, via a detour through the Place d’Armes, where he hopes to “catch a glimpse” of William Holden. Binx thus reverts to his alternate solution to the problem of the gaze: he begins

to examine the circuitry of gazes between him and Holden and the honeymooning boy with an eye to getting himself altogether outside the circuit.

Narrating Knowledge and Knowing Narrators

The dynamic between Binx's two methods of reconsolidating the gaze—stepping outside the circuit and stepping to the center of the circuit—defines the Möbius structure of *The Moviegoer*. The same dynamic—the move from focal point to external point—is at play in the novel at the level of narration as well as content. Even as Binx returns physically to movie theaters in an effort to reconsolidate a fragmented gaze, the narration will often pause at those moments to relate the plot or highlights of a movie or TV show, providing a narrative description of a story that does not contain Binx. Similarly, the narrator will often provide a cinematic description of a scene without locating himself in or in relation to the scene. After his encounter with Holden, for example, when Binx's attempts to step outside the circuit of gazes have resulted in the recursive expansion of the circuit, the narrative reconsolidation of the gaze takes the form of a lengthy description of a street scene that begins simply, "It is lunch hour on Canal Street" (19). There is no indication here or later of where Binx—who was not on Canal Street at the end of the previous paragraph—actually is in relation to the scene. Binx might be in Canal Street, he might be near it, he might be coming up on the intersection of Canal and Royal; the narrative, which up to this point has been most precise in tracing Binx's route through the city, does not say. Because the narrative is in the first person, we assume Binx is in the vicinity—but his narrative presents as much as possible a picture in which

he is not present, just as in movie-going he attempts to view a picture in which he is not present.

The evacuation of the character's presence in the scene suggests that in some degree the narrator is absent, or further removed, as well. This distancing effect is augmented by Binx's narrative attempts to see himself seeing himself. Because he constructs his narrative from the outside in, rendering his internal states through an external lens, the narrative requires the displacement of Binx's own gaze onto another—in this instance to both a Binx-narrator (as distinct from a Binx-character) and the implied reader to whom he relays his narration.

As a narrator, Binx enacts the same existential balancing act—between engagement and disengagement, connection and disconnection—that the character attempts in his own life. As a result, the narrative style remains intimate and compelling even as it is tonally disintricated, detached, and precise:

For some time now the impression has been growing upon me that everyone is dead.

It happens when I speak to people. In the middle of a sentence it will come over me: yes, beyond a doubt this is death. There is little to do but groan and make an excuse and slip away as quickly as one can. At such times it seems the conversation is spoken by automatons who have no choice in what they say. [...] Lately it is all I can do to carry on such everyday conversations, because my cheek has developed a tendency to twitch of its own accord. (99-100)

Despite the potentially horrific aspects of the encroaching conviction that everyone in the world is dead,¹⁵ the narrator's description of the situation is dry and unemotional. The content of the passage is both affective and intimate—we are given the impression of direct access to the thoughts and fears of a first-person narrator. The tone, however, is anything but affective. Binx relates most of his impressions with a sentence structure that is not-quite passive voice (“the impression has been growing,” “it will come over me,” “there is little to do but...”); nowhere in the passage is Binx the subject, and most sentences are constructed such that the primary subject is displaced into the position of indirect object (“the conversation is spoken by automatons”). The sentence structure, then, displaces the affect of the narrative. Moreover, at the only point at which the character/narrator's horror is articulated (by the groan that escapes during conversation), the narrator slides into the third person altogether, thereby adding an additional element of distance and deferral into his description (“There is little to do but groan and make an excuse and slip away as quickly as one can”). We are finally left with a barometer of the character/narrator's internal state that is presented by the narrator as if it were a completely external function: his cheek, he tells us, has begun to twitch “of its own accord.”

Those moments where Binx-the-character's emotional responses to the situation are most visible to the reader are related as though Binx were watching himself. Rather than describing how he feels or how the world appears as filtered through an affective

¹⁵ This conviction itself stems from Binx's awareness of the despair and disconnection suffered by most people. His belief that the despairing and disconnected are dead picks up on his notion, repeated multiple times, that in becoming disconnected from the world (or slipping out of space and time), one becomes a ghost: “What is the malaise? you ask. The malaise is the pain of loss. The world is lost to you, the world and the people in it, and there remains only you and the world and you no more able to be in the world than Banquo's ghost” (120).

experience, the narrator describes how the character looks and acts. As readers, then, we are left to assume that Binx is indeed horrified at the idea of the world being filled with dead people because he tells us that his cheek twitches and he groans aloud. The narrative thus walks a line between the description of interiority and exteriority, portraying an inside as though seen from the outside. The narrative, however, doesn't actually describe interiority and exteriority so much as it produces the *illusion* of interiority by enacting knowledge that appears limited by the boundaries between inner and outer. We assume that Binx has an interior because the narrative constructs him in a way that forecloses knowledge of certain aspects of his internal life—thereby paradoxically reaffirming the conviction that that internal life does exist.

Just as interior and exterior are narratively delineated by the boundaries imposed by knowledge, narrators bring themselves into being by enacting the limits of their fictive knowledge. As Jonathan Culler has convincingly demonstrated, even an “omniscient” third-person narrator doesn't know everything; rather, such a narrator, by placing limits on what it knows and conveys, constructs both itself and the diegetic space in which it appears to be omniscient. Thus, literary point of view—or what Gérard Genette, with more precision, calls “narrative mood”—equates to a certain range of knowledge presumed by literary convention.¹⁶ In the case of a typical first-person narrator, the locus of knowledge is the character/narrator complex that is being narrated. In the case of a third person narrator, the locus is likely to be one or more of the characters; the narrator is

¹⁶ Genette's terminology acknowledges the crucial importance that knowledge plays in the construction and function of any narrative. Genette invokes the term *mood* in a pseudo-grammatical sense, as referring to a formulation that conveys degrees of information, attitude, or point of view. He vigorously opposes the tendency to collapse issues of mood (*i.e.* knowledge and information) into issues of voice (*i.e.* who speaks), as happens in the common conflation of narrative person with point of view. For more on mood and voice, see chapters four and five of *Narrative Discourse*.

much more likely to present itself as the conveyor of a range of knowledge that centers on other characters or events, rather than as itself partaking of that range. In both cases, however, what and how the narrator knows is infinitely flexible and completely constructed.

The site of focalization—that is, the location that appears to determine the narrator’s range of knowledge—is fundamentally imaginary, created by the very knowledge that appears to originate or vanish at that site. It also constitutes the narrative blind spot, that which must remain unseen and unknown in order to lend the appearance of wholeness and continuity to the illusory narrator. Though the specifics of the term *focalization* have been much debated, it is generally considered to encapsulate the limitations to which the narrator’s knowledge is subject.¹⁷ The narrative construction of any given focalization, then, occurs through the delineation of a limited range of knowledge that is necessarily at least marginally different than the range of knowledge by which the narrator has been constructed. In a typical first-person narration, the narrator is constructed in part via the range of knowledge that corresponds to focalization through the past self. The site of focalization is a by-product of the narrator function and enables the production of a narrative effect that makes the narrator appear to be the point from which the story emanates. In the case of *The Moviegoer*, the narration is structured by the narrator’s attempts to invade that focal site. Put another way, *The Moviegoer*’s narrator attempts to verbally occupy the site of the gaze and thereby the imaginary focal site of the narrator as persona. This is ultimately a doomed project, for the narrator is

¹⁷ In Genette, these limitations are psychological—that is, determined by the psyche of the character in relation to whom the narration is filtered at any given moment. Other theorists situate the limits in relation to other aspects of narrative structure. See Edmiston for a cogent overview of and intervention in the major theories of focalization.

produced as an enactment of knowledge emanating from a site that doesn't exist (or perhaps only exists retroactively). Narratorial consistency depends upon a similar dislocation from the site of the gaze/knowledge. If the narrator coincided completely with the range of knowledge it enacted, there would be no need to enact that knowledge—and therefore no narrator.

Knowledge, Identification, and the Creation of Subjectivity

The narrator-function thus always entails a slippage of knowledge. What the narrator knows (the range of knowledge that enables it to create a diegetic space) and where it appears to know from (always outside that diegetic space) can never coincide. Further, the fictive source of knowledge produces itself as source via the knowledge with which it must seem not to be coterminous. In *The Moviegoer*, the slippage between knowledge and position plays out at the level of content in Binx's treatment of the question of identity.

In describing a photograph of his uncles and father, Binx uses the language of non-coincidence to describe his father (and by extension, we are led to believe, himself): "He looks different from the brothers. [...] It is hard to say why. The elder Bollings—and Alex—are serene in their identities. Each one coincides with himself, just as the larch trees in the photograph coincide with themselves" (25). Binx ultimately views his father's non-coincidence of identity in terms of the same referential dissonance—the gap between what is said or presented and what is meant or understood—invoked by irony: "His eyes are alight with an expression I can't identify; it is not far from what his elders might have called smart-alecky. [...] Again I search the eyes, each eye a stipple or two in a blurred oval. Beyond a doubt they are ironical" (25). What Binx finally seems to be

talking about here is not just an identity that doesn't coincide, but an awareness of this non-coincidence. This awareness—and the dry amusement that he seems to take in it—distinguishes Binx's own non-coinciding identity from the slippages of identity experienced by other characters.

Binx's narration constructs its characters by building them into a grid of gazes (of self, family, society) that creates them as subjects who are located in particular positions, in particular relations to those around them. Consequently, the characters struggle to maintain themselves in the positions they believe they belong and suffer crises when the slippages between where they place themselves and where others place them become apparent. The Bolling family's longtime servant, Mercer, for example, demonstrates a fairly typical negotiation of his positioning, weaving a careful course between how others see him—as the family's long-time, well-loved retainer—and how he sees himself: as “a remarkable sort of fellow, a man who keeps himself well-informed in science and politics” (24). The narrator regards Mercer's investment in inhabiting the positions created for (and by) him ironically, reducing in a couple of well-turned phrases Mercer's difficulties to a balancing act between two modes of intercourse with the family and noting the degree to which this balancing act restructures, without seeming to, the power dynamic inherent between master and servant: “My main emotion around Mercer is unease that in threading his way between servility and presumption, his foot might slip. I wait on Mercer, not he on me” (22). When Mercer's image of himself falters, this failure inspires in him both a despair and a desperate attempt to shore up his belief in who he is:

I hate it when his vision of himself dissolves and he sees himself as
neither, neither old retainer nor expert in current events. Then his eyes get

muddy and his face runs together behind his mustache. Last Christmas I went looking for him in his rooms over the garage. He wasn't there but on his bed lay a well-thumbed volume put out by the Rosicrucians called *How to Harness Your Secret Powers*. The poor bastard. (24)

Even as he describes the physical effects wrought by Mercer's dissolving identity (muddy eyes, face running together) and invokes the desperation of Mercer's turn to mysticism for aid, the narrator undercuts the sentiment by an additional invocation of sympathy ("the poor bastard"), that serves at least in part to emphasize both the narrator's own empathy with and distance from this mode of being.

In expressing his acute awareness of how subject positions are constructed by the gaze, Binx's narration renders him distinct from characters such as Mercer—and even more so from his aunt and uncle, whose visions of themselves align quite nicely with the positions sketched out for them. Binx's Aunt Emily's gaze is particularly strong, and those around tend to acquiesce to the positions she assigns them: "They become," says Binx, "what she sees them to be" (49). For Binx, however, the need to occupy the site of the gaze makes imperative his resistance to this kind of positioning. Rather, in his occupation of the delusive site of the gaze, Binx positions himself as non-belonging. In his relationships with his family, he has perfected a sort of passive resistance, wherein he simply does not allow their beliefs about who he is to affect him. His Aunt Emily, for example, believes his indifference to the family's name and history to be feigned, that Binx's lackluster existence and mundane career are the result of misdirection and lack of ambition rather than the very conscious choices that they are. When she makes plans for Binx, he nods and smiles and continues on his path; he rarely lies to her, yet neither does

he disabuse her of her beliefs. In most cases, Binx amicably does as his aunt asks, leading her to believe that in some respect he shares her ideas about his life's purpose.

Binx's endless move outside the grid of gazes, his continual attempts to step outside the circuit that constructs him as a subject, renders moot the question of whether he coincides with the positions mapped out for him. The fact that he doesn't consider himself in any way bound to these positions ultimately serves to sever Binx almost completely from those around him, though it's not quite enough to sever him from the circuit itself. To the extent that observation of the gaze's operations provides evidence of differing ways to exist in the world, Binx takes a rather scientific and detached interest in his family's struggles, while they (his family) for the most part have no inkling that there might be any way of proceeding other than trying to position themselves under the gazes of those around them.

By the end of the novel, however, both Binx's Aunt Emily and his cousin Kate have been brought up sharply against Binx's disconnection from their own modes of being, and for both, this disconnection renders Binx fundamentally inhuman, suggesting that the normal human mode of interaction is based in a complicated subjective interchange that Binx is foreclosing. Emily, when she finally comes to terms with how little Binx resembles the nephew she thought she had, casts his attitude and behavior as a violation of thousands of years of human tradition. In all of human history, Emily claims, people have acted recognizably: "[P]eople who found themselves in difficult situations behaved in certain familiar ways, well or badly, courageously or cowardly, with distinction or mediocrity, with honor or dishonor. They are recognizable. They display courage, pity, fear, embarrassment, joy, sorrow, and so on." Binx's discovery, according

to Emily, is that one need not respond in any of these ways. Instead of acting recognizably, “[o]ne may simply default. Pass. Do as one pleases, shrug, turn on one’s heel and leave. Exit. Why after all need one act humanly?” (220).

Whereas Emily disparages this non-response that has rendered Binx so foreign to her, Kate focuses on the self-sufficiency that it engenders. Kate’s anguish over her own subject position is founded in the disconnection between being and identity; she is elated in the moments when she can believe herself to be nothing and devastated when she begins to “overtake” herself. Her final resolution of this seemingly insurmountable disconnection is to become religious, a believer: “ ‘What I want to do is believe in someone completely and then do what he wants me to do. If God were to tell me: Kate, here is what I want you to do [...] – you think I would not do it? You think I would not be the happiest girl in Jackson, Mississippi?’ ” (197). In God’s absence, Kate selects Binx to tell her what to do: “ ‘You can do it because you are not religious. God is not religious. You are the unmoved mover. You don’t need God or anyone else—no credit to you, unless it is a credit to be the most self-centered person alive. I don’t know whether I love you, but I believe in you and I will do what you tell me.’ ” (197)

What Emily and Kate both evince here is a (more or less) sudden inability to identify with Binx. He has managed to so distance himself from them—from their understanding of what it means to be human—that they are forced to completely restructure their relationships to him. Kate’s association of Binx’s position with that of God is appropriate, for that is the very position that Binx wants to occupy and cannot. As narrator, he tries to be the unmoved mover, the external site from which the tale emanates. Binx’s attempts to move outside his own tale, like his attempts to move

outside the circuit of gazes, are doomed to failure. As narrator he is produced in the production of his own narrative, just as his character's subjectivity is produced by its own gaze; what appears as the point of origin, in both instances, is constructed as origin by that which seems to originate from it.

Emily's solution to her sudden inability to identify with Binx is to simply cut him out of her life, to treat him with a distant courtesy that Binx recognizes as a dismissal: "She [...] smiles up at me, a smile which, more than anything which has gone before, marks an ending. Smiling, she gives me her hand, head to one side, in her old party style. But it is her withholding my name that assigns me my new status" (227). In refusing to name him, Emily denies not just Binx's status as a favored nephew, but also his status as member of the same human race to which she belongs. In a different move that has much the same effect, Kate compares Binx to God, thereby underlining his complete inaccessibility to those around him: like Yahweh, he is that he is, (apparently) sufficient unto himself. For both Kate and Emily, Binx has become so different, so other that they can no longer understand his existence in human terms.

Kate and Emily are both right and wrong. While Binx certainly operates in a mode of disconnection, his entire narrative is about a reconnection of sorts: everything we know about Kate and Emily, we know through Binx's eyes, which are themselves produced by a narrative enactment of what Binx does and doesn't know. More specifically, we know what we know because Binx attempts throughout the narrative to occupy their positions, see through their eyes, to know what they know. Even at the novel's end, when Emily is accusing him of inhuman behavior, Binx is still trying—now with a touch of desperation—to see himself from her position: "I try as best I can to

appear as she would have me, as being, if not right, then wrong in a recognizable, a right form of wrongness” (222).

This dynamics of identification, which helps enact the limited knowledge that produces Binx as narrator, is the very thing that creates the illusion of Kate and Emily’s subjectivity. Narrative identification is a subject-producing process, one based in an understanding of the positions available to other people and enabled by the production of both knowledge and its limits. What Binx says of his Uncle Jules at the novel’s beginning is true as well of every other person he depicts: “I see his world plainly through his eyes” (31). This assertion of knowledge retroactively produces Binx as a narrator who appears as narratorial origin. *The Moviegoer* thus operates, as much as anything else, as a deconstruction of the narrator. In producing a first-person narrator who is palpably separate from the character he narrates, the novel enables an understanding of the narrator as a dynamic function—rather than static construction—of narrative.

Chapter Three

Through a Glass Darkly: Identification and Narrative Point of View

Slowly he took off his jacket and untied his tie, watching every move he made as if it were somebody else's movements he was watching. Astonishing how much straighter he was standing now, what a different look there was in his face.

—Patricia Highsmith, *The Talented Mr. Ripley*, p. 12

Like Binx, the protagonist of Patricia Highsmith's *The Talented Mr. Ripley* (1955) is deeply invested in watching himself from the position of the other. *The Talented Mr. Ripley* portrays Tom's identification as a mode of performance for an audience from whom Tom is unable to shed his dependence. Tom has wormed his way into the life of Dickie Greenleaf, whose upper-class entitlement and privileged existence Tom desperately covets. Tom befriends Dickie, forging an identification based in the belief that he and Dickie think alike and that Dickie has become so dependent on Tom that he will continue to share his life and fortune. When a falling out with Dickie demonstrates that he doesn't really know Dickie at all, Tom suffers an identificatory crisis, a threat to his subjective integrity brought on by the sudden apprehension that he cannot know Dickie and that Dickie does not know—does not really “see”—Tom. Tom resolves this crisis by killing Dickie and assuming his identity, thereby ensuring that he knows “Dickie” every bit as well as he knows himself. Tom thus shores up a wavering subjectivity by embodying his own audience: when he looks in a mirror, he affirms his own existence by seeing “Dickie” looking back.

Tom's existential instability—played out via his continual performances for his own gaze and the imagined gaze of the other—mirrors the ontological uncertainty of the novel's narrator. The novel's narrator function only intermittently produces the effect of

a distinct narrating entity; for the most part, Tom's point of view (itself an illusory construct) seems to be the only one there is. The narrating entity appears to coalesce at precisely the times that Tom's own subjective status is in greatest doubt—in other words, at those moments when Tom's artificially constructed view of himself (through Dickie or another) vanishes. *The Talented Mr. Ripley*'s treatment of Tom's identification helps reveal narrative point of view to be an illusory construct implicitly bound to the same delimitation of knowledge that produces the illusion of a narrating entity out of the operation of a narrator function.

The Failure of Identification

Tom Ripley's murder of Dickie Greenleaf and his assumption of Dickie's identity read as a particularly literal kind of identification: Tom *becomes* Dickie; he steps into Dickie's life, wears Dickie's clothes, travels with Dickie's money, assumes Dickie's position in European society as a wealthy American expatriate, and occupies Dickie's place in a network of social and familial relationships. And in so doing, Tom manages to retroactively refigure his relationship with Dickie into what he always wanted it to be: as Dickie, Tom can demonstrate, for himself and others, both how similar he and Dickie are and how close their relationship is.

This literal identification—an occupation of someone else's position that is a little less imaginary than usual—comes only after Tom is confronted with the failure of a much more typical mode of identification. From the first, Tom identifies with Dickie intensely and he does so primarily by projecting himself into Dickie's life—both in imagination and, to a degree, in reality. He envies Dickie's carefree existence and pities

himself for his own hard-scrabble life; both his envy and self-pity are founded in his perception of what his life might be like if it were Dickie's. And when he finally meets Dickie in Italy, Tom is overwhelmed by a desire to be liked by Dickie. Insofar as he is successful, Tom achieves access to this life he finds so appealing: he stays in Dickie's home, sails on Dickie's boat, and accompanies Dickie on whirlwind adventures to nearby cities. After only a short time, Tom is convinced that Dickie's life might as well be his: "By the time his money ran out, Tom thought, Dickie would probably be so fond of him and so used to him that he would take it for granted they would go on living together. He and Dickie could easily live on Dickie's five hundred a month income" (74).

Tom's identification with Dickie's lifestyle quickly collapses into an identification with Dickie himself. Tom has set out to make himself indispensable to Dickie, taking great pains to prove himself an amusing companion—one who can provide more excitement and more adventure than the placid Marge, Dickie's friend and the only other American living in the small town of Mongibello. The close bond that Tom imagines he and Dickie share is largely based in Tom's apparent similarity to Dickie. Although Tom notes their physical similarities—they are built alike, with similar features and the same long, bony hands, and Tom sometimes is taken aback by how closely he and Dickie can resemble one another—he places greater stock in their like-mindedness, imagining that he and Dickie understand one another, have the same opinions, and are interested in the same sorts of activities. The degree to which this might be true is difficult to determine, since Tom is working so hard to be the kind of friend he thinks Dickie wants and needs, but at base, Tom's confidence in his and Dickie's like-mindedness is founded in Dickie's lifestyle: because Tom so appreciates the manner in

which Dickie is living, he can't conceive that their opinions might be divided by much else.

Similarly, Tom's admiration for and envy of Dickie require that Dickie be worthy of the admiration, that he be an exceptional young man. Tom is thus discomfited by evidence that Dickie might be quite an average young man. He "wince[s] with an almost personal shame" (60) the first time he sees one of Dickie's amateurish paintings and is "waiting for something profound and original from Dickie" who *looks* "so unusual" (65). Tom is attracted to Dickie but will not admit to the attraction being either sexual or romantic, though an undercurrent of repressed sexuality runs through the narrative. In many ways, this attraction is aesthetic—Tom admires Dickie's fine features and tan body in much the same way that he appreciates beautiful objects, fine food, tasteful décor, and Dickie's tailored, expensive clothing.¹ Above all, Tom covets and admires Dickie's confidence and entitlement—regardless of where he is, whom he's with, or what he's wearing, Dickie is always in charge and always casually self-assured of his place and authority. Of course, these very qualities practically guarantee that Tom will always be subordinate to Dickie, that he can gain proximity, but never access, to the power and privilege and attitude he desires. Tom's role in perpetuating the Tom-Dickie bond, then, must always be a double one: to support his own vision of who and what Dickie is, as well as his own sense of bearing a unique relationship to Dickie and his attributes.

¹ Edward Shannon contends the queerness that critics locate in Highsmith's novel stems not from sexuality but from Tom's (Marxist) fetishization of objects. Tom understands Dickie's clothing and possessions not as tools of impersonation, but as Dickie's identity itself. Shannon provides the death of Dickie's friend, Freddie Miles, as an example: when Tom is forced to resume his own identity, he finds relief from his guilt over the senseless murder because "it was 'Dickie'—that is to say, Tom wearing Dickie's clothing and jewelry—who killed Freddie. Tom the fetishist attributes to possessions a power to create identity that is almost supernatural" (24). *The Talented Mr. Ripley*, argues Shannon, is hardly a novel about "the physical, sexual, or emotional desire of one human being for another. Tom's sexual longing is reserved for the objects he associates with Dickie and an American dream he feels has been denied him" (26).

So long as Dickie doesn't assert his own understanding of their relationship, Tom seems to have things well in hand. When Dickie makes clear that he doesn't share Tom's sense of their unique bond, however, Tom is devastated by this failure of identification, which he experiences as an overwhelming recognition that *all* relationships are based in a interpersonal connection that will always be proven illusory. When Dickie rejects a wild plan of Tom's to gain free transport to Paris—a plan designed in part to put Tom's and Dickie's faltering friendship back on the right track by proving Tom to be a better companion than Marge—Tom is frantic to take his suggestion back, to return himself and Dickie to a prior moment when they were still in accord: “Tom wanted to explain it, wanted to break through to Dickie so that he would understand and they would feel the same way. Dickie had felt the same way he had a month ago” (88). For Tom, the shock of Dickie's demurral is not the refusal itself, but rather its clear demonstration that he and Dickie were not so much alike as he had thought.

The dissonance (or, in Binx's terminology, the lack of coincidence) that Tom senses springing up between him and Dickie is an inevitable consequence of the gaze's function. In Lacanian theory, the gaze functions as a mechanism by which the subject maps itself into a picture created—via perception—in the mind's eye. By means of the gaze, the subject comes to “possess” its representations even as, in creating those representations, the subject “extracts [it]self” as subject from “the flesh of the world” (*Seminar XI* 82).^{2,3} The dialectic between the gaze (an *objet a* that gives consistency and

² Lacan's theory is a rethinking of phenomenological studies of perception which, to Lacan's mind, overlook that which is explicitly visual in the field of perception by translating perception into spatial terms. Lacan calls this lost element of visuality “the gaze,” by which he means that element of perception that invokes and involves human subjectivity and consciousness—in other words, that which exceeds perception as a merely mechanical or cognitive function. For more on his theory of the gaze, see “Of the Gaze as *Objet Petit a*” in *Seminar XI*, pp. 65-119.

being to the subject) and the eye (a physical organ of vision) involves a fundamental dissonance; as Lacan phrases it, “*You never look at me from the place from which I see you*” and “[c]onversely, *what I look at is never what I wish to see*” (103). And so it is for Tom: When he solicits Dickie’s gaze, Dickie never sees Tom from Tom’s own position (i.e. from the position of inferiority and wanting-to-please that Tom occupies). And, conversely, when Tom looks at Dickie, he never sees the connection and reciprocity that he desires.

In contrast, Tom ought to be able to see evidence of his own subjective status, a status arising from a relation to an Other and enabled by the functioning of the gaze. In Lacanian terms, what Tom expects to see is a “picture”—that is, the image that is both outside him and yet resides “in the depths of [his] eye,” and into which he has nonetheless inscribed himself as subject under the gaze (*Seminar XI* 96). The picture always bears the mark of the subject: “a reflection, in short, of the pupil behind which is situated the gaze.” This is the place of the central screen, the spot that, in the visual field, marks the presence of the subject (108).⁴ By means of the gaze, then, the subject is always inscribed as screen or stain in that which it regards. To look at something and see the screen or stain is to see external proof of one’s subjective existence.

However, when Tom gazes into Dickie’s eyes, looking for their lost connection and like-mindedness, he finds this screen missing. The screen performs the same function as the Lacanian stain: it is the ungraspable truth of the self, an externalized and

³ Lacan attributes the phrase “the flesh of the world” to Maurice Merleau-Ponty. He regards Merleau-Ponty’s *Le Visible et l’invisible* (1964) as a being a preliminary phenomenological step toward grasping the visual element of perception.

⁴ This visual field—that of the gaze—stands in contrast to the geometral plane, which elides the subject in front of the picture (*Seminar XI*, 108).

opaque kernel upon which self-awareness depends. What Tom looks for in Dickie's eyes, then, is what Binx sees when he regards the dung beetle: external evidence of the self's existence. Tom looks to Dickie expecting transparency, believing that he will "see the soul through the eyes, [see] love through the eyes, the one place you could look at another human being and see what really went on inside" (89). Instead, he finds that Dickie's eyes are "shining and empty, nothing but little pieces of blue jelly with a black dot in them, meaningless, without relation to him." Rather than turning himself into a picture under the gaze, Tom is left in the field of what Lacan calls representation, in which perception is conceived geometrically rather than visually and the subject is thereby elided. In Lacan's schema of the gaze, the subject must see and be seen; this doubled position of the subject (that which sees / that which is seen) enables the subject to write itself into its own picture (as the screen) and to thereby exist in relation to what it sees and what it is seen by. Absent this relation, the self ceases to exist.

The relationship thus brought into being under the gaze is marked by scotoma and misrecognition: "things look at me, and yet I see them" (*Seminar XI* 109). In other words, the subject is given to see precisely so that it will not see that it is being looked at. When Tom looks into Dickie's eyes expecting to "see the soul," he appears entirely unaware that he might be seen in return. The price for the illusion of seeing into Dickie's soul is Tom's own blindness with regard to who and what sees him. Of course, this does not mean that Tom is never aware of being looked at; rather, his awareness of being seen is always filtered by his own identificatory process. In other words, when he performs for Dickie, Tom knows that Dickie sees him because he imagines what he (Tom) would look like if he were to see himself from Dickie's position. When his identification with

Dickie falters, however, Tom loses his ability to loop his awareness of being a visual object through his own position as a visual subject. And thus in this particular moment, Tom is neither seen nor seeing subject; instead of windows to the soul, he sees only “pieces of blue jelly” that obstruct his view of Dickie and Dickie’s view of him. Dickie’s no-sight renders Tom blind in his own right, and in that moment the intersubjective tangle of the gaze unravels. Tom has eyes that he might not see that Dickie is looking at him, and when Dickie is no longer looking, Tom can no longer see himself as subject.

Logically, then, Tom understands this unraveling as a comprehensive loss of relation, one that grants him insight into the “truth” of the identificatory process.

It struck Tom like a horrible truth, true for all time, true for the people he had known in the past and for those he would know in the future: each had stood and would stand before him, and he would know time and time again that he would never know them, and the worst was that there would always be the illusion, for a time, that he did know them, and that he and they were completely in harmony and alike. (89)

The double-blindness of Tom and Dickie somewhat ironically grants Tom a clear vision of identification’s own blind spot, the delusive assertion of sameness instead of difference, and knowledge rather than non-knowledge. But this clarity of vision—which to Tom presents as “a horrible truth, true for all time, true for [all] people”—is itself covering over the register of truth that Lacan situates at the foundation of subjectivity, “where the subject can grasp nothing but the very subjectivity that constitutes an Other as absolute” (*Ecrits* 13). In other words, what Tom *might* take away from his encounter

with Dickie is a comprehension of Dickie as (unknowable) subject. In failing to recognize Dickie as subject, however, Tom can no longer recognize himself as subject.

Tom's inability to see himself "in the picture" when he looks into Dickie's eyes and his failure to recognize Dickie's subjectivity are both consequences of the same intersubjective dissolution. As Lacan's schema L demonstrates, the subjectivity of the subject and the subjectivity of the Other are utterly interconnected and interdependent. In the schema L, the subject is constituted by four terms: its own existence, its *objets a*, its ego, and the Other, "the locus from which the question of [its] existence may arise for [the subject]" (*Ecrits* 459). Because the subject's existence is articulated in and through the Other, Tom's perception of a lack of relation between himself and anyone else places in question his own subjectivity—not to mention Dickie's. And Tom's solution to this impasse thus depends upon reestablishing some sort of relation to an other.

Because Tom has failed to know the one knowable thing about Dickie—the fact of Dickie's subjectivity—it makes a certain ironic sense that Tom re-institutes his relation to the other by cutting the actual Dickie altogether out of the loop. (And this, too, makes a certain Lacanian sense, since the relationship to the Other is always an imaginary one anyway.) Tom's solution is to reinvent his relationship to Dickie such that its imaginary nature is foregrounded: Tom murders Dickie, assuming his identity and thereby encoding his relation to Dickie in and on his own body. By wearing Dickie's clothes and rings, traveling with Dickie's passport, money, and luggage, and bleaching his hair to match Dickie's, Tom literally incorporates the object of his identification. Faced with the horror of no relation—and its concomitant threat to the self—Tom becomes Dickie and becomes his own relation. It is an imaginary Dickie, to be sure—even more so than the Dickie that

Tom believed to be his friend— but the more imaginary the relationship, the more control Tom has and the more authentic he feels. And, ironically, he feels most authentic when he is impersonating Dickie.

The Reflexive Mirror

Although Tom's sensation of non-relation and its concomitant threat to his subjective status reaches its greatest intensity when Tom confronts Dickie and sees nothing in his eyes, it by no means originates in Tom's faltering identification with Dickie. In Dickie's eyes—those “meaningless” black dots that are “without relation to him” (89)—Tom sees “nothing more now than he would have seen if he had looked at the hard, bloodless surface of a mirror” (89). Such a comparison implies that the nothingness, the lack of relation that Tom suddenly glimpses in Dickie, is a familiar sight to him when he looks into his own eyes. In the past, he has disliked his face, seeing in it “the world's dullest face, a thoroughly forgettable face with a look of docility that he could not understand, and a look always of vague fright that he had never been able to erase” (34). His reaction to his own face demonstrates a striking degree of dissonance: he dislikes the mirror as much because it reflects things he does not wish to feel as because it reflects things that he doesn't recognize himself as feeling. This is the same Lacanian dissonance that Tom later experiences when looking at Dickie: the sensation that Tom never looks at himself from the place from which he wishes to see himself (his reflection gazes at him from a place of docility rather than confidence) and that what he sees (the look of fright) is never what he wishes to see.

And as with his later confrontation with Dickie, Tom's experience of this dissonance opens up into an experience of non-relation. Just as he looks into Dickie's eyes and fails to see himself in the picture (that is to say, fails to see evidence of his subjective existence in the form of a screen or stain), Tom looks at his reflection in the mirror and sees only a "hard, bloodless surface" rather than what he seeks—evidence of his own subjectivity. His identification with Dickie, in addition to forging a relation to Dickie, gives Tom a means of establishing a relation to himself that evades the dissonance (the occasional moment of non-relation) he sees in the mirror. In constructing himself as an entertaining young man, worthy of Dickie's friendship, Tom gets to imagine himself as seen through Dickie's eyes, "estimating how high his stock was shooting up" (58), performing amusing pantomimes, and taking comfort in the fact that "[o]bviously Dickie was enjoying his company" (71).⁵ And when he loses his sense of relation to Dickie—the connection he expects to feel when looking into Dickie's eyes—he loses as well his relation to self. Tom is left with the bloodless mirror, which either fails to reflect him at all or reflects only a Tom he can't (or won't) recognize.

In resolving identification's failure by assuming another's identity, Tom combines the solutions utilized by the narrator-protagonist of *Invisible Man* and by Binx in *The Moviegoer*. Like the invisible man, Tom is interested occupying another's position and, like Binx, he wants to be able to see himself as though from another's position. More particularly, he wants to *see himself in* another's position. His impersonation of Dickie thus allows Tom to turn the mirror against itself. Dressed as Dickie, Tom no longer fears

⁵ This mode of relating to self and other is nothing new to Tom. An inveterate liar, storyteller, and performer, Tom's life has consisted largely of acting roles; in New York, he pretended to be in therapy so as to recount amusing tales to enthralled audiences at parties, and on the ship to Italy, he begins playing the role of a "serious young man with a serious job ahead of him" (34) and imagines with pleasure the speculations his reserved, aloof performance must engender in his fellow passengers.

a glimpse of himself in the mirror, but instead relishes it, for it shows him to be someone else (Dickie) as from the viewpoint of a third party (himself, looking at his/Dickie's reflection). Tom can thus see himself in Dickie's position. He becomes an apparently self-sufficient manipulator of the Lacanian gaze: under the gaze of the other (Dickie's image, which gazes at Tom from the mirror), Tom turns himself into his own picture (of Dickie), as a subject under that gaze. And in the doing, the mirror is converted from bloodless surface to screen—evidence of Tom's own existence as self and subject. Such positioning permits Tom the illusion of control over the web of identification and identity that his relationship with Dickie comprises.

This illusory control depends upon closing the circuit of the gaze, stemming its endless recursivity (the recursivity that so plagues Binx) by making Tom both subject and object of the gaze and thereby eliminating the place of the Other in the circuit. Tom gazes upon himself and in so doing retroactively constitutes himself as a seeing subject; the emergence of Tom's subjectivity no longer appears to depend upon his relation to the Other's gaze. By delimiting the gaze's circulation to two terms that are really one (Tom and Tom-as-Dickie), Tom seeks to master and control the gaze, much as Binx does by trying to occupy the location of the gaze. Like Binx, however, Tom is doomed to failure: the closed circuit of the gaze *always* invokes its own other, its own third party, its own audience.

In the case of the relation between Tom and Dickie, this third party is initially Marge. The unacknowledged flip-side of Tom's identification with Dickie is a secondary identification with Marge's position in relation to Dickie. From the start, Tom is contemptuous of Marge; he sees her simultaneously as his primary rival for Dickie's

attention and as a pathetic hanger-on, nursing an unrequited devotion to Dickie. The contradictory nature of Tom's understandings of Marge—that she is at once a viable threat and an easily dismissed encumbrance—demonstrates Tom's anxiety over his own position in relation to Dickie. Tom sees Marge both where he *wants* to be—at the center of Dickie's life and attention—and where he *fears* he is—in a position of inferiority and dependence, insisting on a relationship that Dickie is too polite to break off. Thus Tom's relationship to Dickie, from the start, bears the shadow of Marge's presence—and of Tom's identification with her. Despite his unwillingness to countenance the possibility that he has anything in common with Marge, Tom pays very close attention to her, evaluating his own relationship to Dickie through her eyes. When he and Dickie first grow close, Tom is thrilled to have their new friendship confirmed by what he reads as Marge's jealousy: “She seemed to know that Dickie had formed a closer bond with him in twenty-four hours, just because he was another man, than she could ever have with Dickie, whether he loved her or not, and he didn't” (69). This single statement highlights both Tom's deliberate identification with Dickie and his unacknowledged identification with Marge, from whose position he views his new bond with Dickie.

And when he adopts Dickie's appearance and cuts the actual Dickie out of the identificatory circuit (which he does for the first time some weeks before he actually kills Dickie), Tom keeps Marge with him—this time in the form of a specular presence. Upset with Dickie, whom he has just spied kissing Marge, and jealous of Marge, whom he thinks is interfering between him and Dickie, Tom retreats alone to Dickie's house, where he “becomes” Dickie for the first time, donning a new suit of Dickie's clothes and

styling his hair to match Dickie's.⁶ In Dickie's voice, he speaks into the mirror—watching himself as Dickie, but speaking to an imaginary Marge, defending his own relationship to Dickie and saying the words he had hoped Dickie would say:

'Marge, you must understand that I don't *love* you.' [...] 'Marge, stop it!'

Tom turned suddenly and made a grab in the air as if he were seizing Marge's throat. He shook her, twisted her, while she sank lower and lower, until at last he left her, limp, on the floor [...] 'You know why I had to do that,' he said, still breathlessly, addressing Marge, though he watched himself in the mirror. 'You were interfering between Tom and me—No, not that! But there is a bond between us!' (78-79)

As he speaks, Tom marvels at how much he looks like Dickie—the shape of his face and nose, his parted lips, which look “like Dickie's lips when he was out of breath from swimming” (78), even “his eyebrows if he held them right” (79). His initial experience as Dickie thus gives Tom an unprecedented level of satisfaction: he finally gets to treat Marge as he really wishes to; he can assure himself in the doing that Dickie would also treat her so; he establishes in Dickie's own voice and words that his and Tom's

⁶ Already frustrated at an odd tension that has sprung up between him and Dickie, and somewhat irrationally worried that Marge has told Dickie something shameful about Tom, Tom is horrified by the sight of Dickie and Marge kissing. Having simultaneously convinced himself that he has replaced Marge in Dickie's affections, that Dickie is only humoring Marge, and that Dickie couldn't possibly harbor any physical attraction to Marge, Tom is both angry and devastated to discover that he may have been wrong on all counts. And, of course, he has been wrong because his entire assessment of Dickie's relationship to Marge is based in Tom's own desires: Tom wants an exclusive relationship to Dickie, one that precludes female companionship even if it doesn't explicitly include a homosexual relationship, and he evinces no interest in pursuing a physical relationship with any woman. He therefore requires that Dickie feel the same way: any interest that Dickie shows in Marge undercuts both the exclusivity of Tom's relationship to Dickie and Tom's belief that he and Dickie equally prize their male bond over female companionship. When he sees Dickie embracing Marge, Tom thus feels doubly betrayed, for Dickie has both betrayed his bond with Tom and demonstrated himself to be fundamentally different than Tom: where Tom wouldn't look twice at Marge, Dickie clearly has. This reaction has a correlate in the Tom's own investment in art and aesthetics; his interest in Dickie is largely aesthetic rather than physical, and Tom is revolted by evidence of Marge's physicality. In seeing Marge and Dickie kiss, “[w]hat disgusted him was the big bulge of her behind in the peasant skirt below Dickie's arm that circled her waist” (77).

relationship is, indeed, as close and significant as Tom imagines; and, through it all, he is able to both be Dickie and to watch Dickie—and, in watching Dickie, to watch himself as well.

Just as importantly, Tom here imagines his and Dickie's (imaginary and idealized) relationship as seen through Marge's eyes. In his imagination, Marge is present to see him being Dickie, and even after he has pretended to kill her, Tom continues to address her. Marge thus serves as an odd sort of audience for Tom's impersonation; she is there only in imagination—and is imaginarily dead for much of the interlude—but Tom nonetheless continues, through his address, to invoke her presence. In this scene, Marge acts as a manifestation of the Other's presence, which Tom had meant to eradicate by assuming Dickie's position. Because Marge, in this moment, is imaginary, as well as being physically dominated by Tom, her presence can be read as Tom's means of replacing an autonomous other—the actual person of Marge—with a version of himself—a construct of his own imagination.⁷ But this substitution institutes much the same recursive identification that Tom is trying to foreclose in the first place: Tom replaces Dickie-as-other with a version of himself, and then must immediately do the same with another being.⁸ In converting the mirror's bloodless surface to a

⁷ Although the fact that Tom feels it necessary to “kill” Marge even as he continues to address her suggests that he feels less control over his imaginary constructs than one might suppose.

⁸ Although Tom doesn't envy and admire Marge as he does Dickie, he certainly identifies—however unwillingly—with her position in relation to Dickie. As Tom's rival for Dickie's affections, Marge occupies—or threatens to occupy—the very position in Dickie's life that Tom covets. (And at moments when Tom believes himself in ascendancy, she occupies the position of the jilted lover that Tom is terrified to identify with.) In this particular scene, Tom performs Dickie's rejection *for Marge*—which implies that even in this moment he identifies with her position. To stage a scene for Marge's benefit (especially such a deliberately hurtful one) suggests that Tom has considered, however unconsciously, what it would be like to occupy the position of the one for whom the scene has been staged.

subjectivity-affirming screen, then, Tom remains unable to avoid the necessity of the Other's presence.

Indeed, Tom's hidden identification with Marge highlights the degree to which Marge's gaze—rather than Dickie's—is the primary locus of Tom's identification. According to Slavoj Žižek, identification is always a performance on behalf of the Other; we must then always ask “which gaze is considered when the subject identifies himself with a certain image” (*Sublime Object* 106). Žižek argues that we do not always identify ourselves with the obvious and admirable qualities of others, but more often with that which is hidden and unglamorous, with concealed weakness and guilt (105-06). Thus, Tom's deliberate and self-conscious identification with the glamorous Dickie is accompanied and offset by an unconscious identification with Marge, whom he reviles. Tom's identification with Dickie is meant to remove him from his position of inferiority and uncertainty, but it can only do so when Tom continues to identify with that initial position of inferiority: he needs to view and envy his own success from the position he was in when he desired that success. Marge thus serves as a stand-in for the past Tom that required the identification with Dickie in the first place; Tom stages his identification with Dickie for his own benefit (he wants to see himself both in relation to and as Dickie), but he can only do so by sustaining an identification with Marge. Tom requires an audience from whose position he can view his successful occupation of Dickie's position.

The Performance of Identification

Marge serves this purpose, especially in the beginning, because Tom imagines her to be closely aligned with the needy, obsequious relation to Dickie that Tom struggles to disavow. As he gains more confidence playing the role of Dickie, however, Tom relies increasingly on the admiring gaze of a less specific audience. Considering himself to be in the throes of a perpetual performance, Tom now feels “that everyone was watching him, as if he had an audience made up of the entire world [...] It gave his existence a peculiar, delicious atmosphere of purity, like that, Tom thought, which a fine actor probably feels when he plays an important role on a stage with the conviction that the role he is playing could not be played better by anyone else” (137). With a built-in audience, one that must now see in Tom the same qualities he admired in Dickie, Tom takes on an apparently self-contained duality—“He was himself and yet not himself” (137)—that lends him a feeling of detached mastery.⁹ Tom is able to occupy the position of the other, to watch himself as the other, and to watch himself watching himself be other—plus he acquires the agreeable sensation that he is always on stage, the focus of a worldwide audience that can only marvel at how well he’s playing his part. As long as he gets Dickie’s habits, appearance, voice, and posture correct (which Tom is certain he will), nothing can sever Tom’s relation to Dickie, for that relation is now even more purely imaginary and self-contained than ever. And so long as Tom continues to play the

⁹ This self-containment, though illusory, is apparent in Tom’s new-found appreciation for solitude. Tom no longer minds being alone, for it allows him “the opportunity to concentrate on being Dickie Greenleaf” (134). Indeed, he feels that “[i]t was impossible ever to be lonely or bored [...] so long as he was Dickie Greenleaf” (122). At a party in Paris, Tom considers himself to have finally accomplished “the real annihilation of his past and of himself” as, for the first time, he feels “completely comfortable, as he had never felt before at any party that he could remember. He behaved as he had always wanted to behave at a party” (127). As Dickie Greenleaf, then, Tom manages to be self-sufficient person that Tom Ripley always hoped to be.

part of Dickie flawlessly, he is confident in his control over his audience—and able to ignore the degree to which he is dependent on its continued credulity. Consequently, the real test of Tom's mastery over the gaze becomes his mastery over his audience, his Other.

In his attempt to foreclose the recursivity of the circuit of gazes, Tom strives to limit its terms—thereby reducing the dyad of Tom-Dickie to the self-reflexivity of Tom-Tom. Tom ends, however, by merely displacing the locus of his own identification, doubling rather than foreclosing his identifications. Although he continues to focus on his relation to the now-absent Dickie, the more important relation—one that the narrative increasingly emphasizes—subsists between Tom and his audience. This is evident when Tom is finally forced to abandon his impersonation of Dickie. The notion of returning to his own identity frightens Tom, until he learns to conceive it just as he conceived his assumption of Dickie's identity: as a virtuoso performance for an admiring audience.

As the police begin to suspect that the missing Tom Ripley—who disappeared when Tom assumed Dickie's identity—has been killed by Dickie Greenleaf, Tom starts to panic. Feeling the law close in on Dickie, Tom suspects that his only means of escape will be to resume his own identity. This realization, however, is accompanied by a crack in the facade of his Dickie-performance, one that frightens Tom inordinately:

He caught sight of himself in the mirror, the corners of his mouth turned down, his eyes anxious and scared. He looked as if he were trying to convey the emotions of fear and shock by his posture and expression, and because the way he looked was involuntary and real, he became suddenly twice as frightened. (191)

Instead of seeing himself playing Dickie in the mirror, Tom loses the protective doubling that being Dickie allows him; instead of Dickie and Dickie's emotions, Tom sees only himself. This glimpse back into his old life renders Tom reluctant to return to his own identity: He hates the idea of being Tom Ripley "and feeling that people looked down on him and were bored with him unless he put on an act for them like a clown, feeling incompetent and incapable of doing anything with himself except entertaining people for minutes at a time" (192). But Tom has learned something from being Dickie Greenleaf: "If you wanted to be cheerful, or melancholic, or wistful, or thoughtful, or courteous, you simply had to act those things with every gesture" (193).¹⁰ Dickie thus becomes entirely extraneous to the circuit of gazes and identifications: there is only Tom, the role he is playing, and the audience for whom he performs.

And so a new Tom Ripley is born, one who continues to play the role of the urbane and wealthy American expatriate. Having intercepted Dickie's remittance checks and learned to act like Dickie, Tom can now travel as Tom Ripley, but "with Dickie's money, Dickie's clothes, Dickie's way of behaving with strangers" (180). Insulated from his old feelings of inadequacy by the knowledge that he is only playing a part, Tom now takes pleasure in acting the role of Tom Ripley, "overdoing almost the old Tom Ripley reticence with strangers, the inferiority in every duck of his head and wistful, sidelong glance" (194). He has found a new way to be "himself but not himself." And when, at the novel's end, Tom succeeds in gaining access to Dickie's trust fund, his reaction emphasizes the continued doubleness of his day-to-day experience: "It was his! Dickie's

¹⁰ Tom's mode of being, then, has not substantially changed: he still performs for others as a matter of course. The difference, now, is that Tom performs the part he wishes to play and is confident in his own ability to direct and control his audience's reactions.

money and his freedom. And the freedom, like everything else, seemed combined, his and Dickie's combined" (289). Even without Dickie, then, Tom has discovered a way to preserve the identificatory benefits of his impersonation: insofar as he can imagine himself as a combination of Dickie's life and his own, Tom carries with him always the possibility of both occupying another's position and—through the ever-present audience— watching himself do so. He has discovered the solution to the no-relation of failed identification by embodying for himself his own relation—and by identifying less with the person he emulates and more with the audience for whom he performs.

The Illusion of Narrative Perspective

The narration of *The Talented Mr. Ripley* further promotes the doubled, displaced identification that Tom establishes in the course of the novel—Tom's projection of himself into Dickie's position and into a location from which he can see himself in Dickie's place. The third-person narrator, which is created by the enactment of a range of knowledge that aligns almost completely with Tom's consciousness, provides an additional doubling, a narrative stance from which to regard Tom's actions. Just as Tom playing Dickie is "himself but not himself," *Ripley's* narrator is focalized through Tom, but is not quite congruent with Tom. Point of view in *The Talented Mr. Ripley* is thus both literal and metaphorical. Tom looks repeatedly into the mirror and sees himself, but not quite, while the narrative is focalized such that it provides a view of Tom that is not quite aligned with Tom's own perspective on himself—as, for example, in the rare moments when narration indicates that Tom has done something "unconsciously." And

that subtle difference between what Tom sees and what the narrator sees creates the illusion of “point of view” in the narrative.

Point of view in narrative is necessarily a somewhat delusive concept, because the notion implies a particular location (whether “outside” the narrative, as with an omniscient narrator, or “inside” the narrative, as when the narrative is in the first person or focalized through one or more characters) from which the action of the narrative is viewed and reported. However, the action and the “point” from which that action is viewed are produced simultaneously in the operation the narrative. That is, the point of view has to be somehow outside of or separated from the narrative (in order to provide a view of the narrative), but is also a by-product of narrative dynamics and therefore can’t exist “outside” the narrative. This structure is similar to that of self-awareness, which requires an externalized opacity (the Žižekian kernel) in order to establish the reflexivity that constitutes consciousness. In other words, in order to be aware itself as self, consciousness requires that its unconscious be an external, unrecognizable object of reflection; similarly, Tom’s subjective status depends upon his ability to produce an external view of himself to reflect upon. Narrative performs a similar sleight of hand, enacting different ranges of knowledge that produce the illusion of a narrative point of view from which events and characters are watched and evaluated.¹¹

¹¹ Although narrative point of view is a perennial bone of contention in narrative theory, it is usually debated in typological terms, as theorists attempt to classify narrators and their relation to the narrative. Although these classifications utilize differing terminology (point of view, perspective, focalization, voice, and person being perhaps the most common), they tend to implicitly index different relationships to knowledge. The question of who perceives what is, at base, a question about who knows what, and how. Genette recognizes this when he designates distance (the relationship of the narrator to the story it tells) and focalization (the perspective the narrator takes of that story) as the “chief modalities” of mood, which he defines as “the regulation of narrative information” (162). For an analysis of the difficulties of typologizing knowledge and point of view, see Lorente’s “Blurring Focalization.”

In *The Talented Mr. Ripley*, these ranges of knowledge are almost completely congruent; because the narrative is internally focalized, the content of the narration is limited almost exclusively to Tom's conscious perceptions and reflections.¹² Thus, any moments when the focalization shifts—making visible the distinction between what the narrator knows and what the character knows¹³—take on all the more importance, for the narrator function depends for its illusion upon some differential or dissonance between its knowledge and the character's knowledge. Just as Tom manufactures an external place (Dickie or Marge's position) from which to regard himself, the narrator function, in producing the effect of a narrating entity, creates as a well the illusion of an external stance or perspective. The narrator is thus manufactured from the same kind of reflexivity that produces Tom as subject—an externalization that permits a reflection of the self.

These shifts in focalization, in which the narrator emerges as an apparently distinct entity, are rare and subtle in *The Talented Mr. Ripley*.¹⁴ They are usually marked by adjectives or adverbs that express a lack of awareness of Tom's part—or more frequently, a possible lack of awareness. The most definitive of such usages occur with

¹² "Internal focalization" is Genette's term for a narrative situation in which "the narrator says only what a given character knows" (189). Dorrit Cohn refers to this sort of narration as "consonant psycho-narration," which she describes as the narration of fictional consciousness in which it is difficult to fully separate the narrative voice from the subject of its narration. (Whereas *dissonant* psycho-narration establishes an authorial voice and persona that is decidedly distinct from the consciousness it narrates.) Despite the variance at work in the metaphors of their choice—Genette insists on the visual metaphor, claiming that "who sees" must be distinguished from "who speaks," while Cohn's use of the aurally-inflected terms *consonance* and *dissonance* emphasizes the narrator as voice—both theorists ultimately use their terms as a shorthand to express differential registers of knowledge.

¹³ Genette refers to such situations, in which the narrator knows more than the character, as "nonfocalized narrative" or "narrative with zero focalization" (189).

¹⁴ In Genette's lexicon, such shifts are called "alterations," though Genette has little to say about how or why they operate, concluding only that "[n]arrative always says less than it knows, but it often knows more than it says" (198). Genette thus acknowledges narrative's implication with differing ranges of knowledge, while overlooking the way these differentials enable a narrative to appear to be "saying" anything at all.

the word “unconsciously,” which marks a conclusive departure from Tom’s perspective to that of the narrator; both uses of the word occur, moreover, when Tom is particularly agitated and feels his relationship to Dickie is being threatened.¹⁵ Shortly before Tom witnesses Dickie kissing Marge, when he is worried about Dickie’s moodiness after an argument with Marge, Tom is described as having “unconsciously” adopted Dickie’s slouching gait (76). This intrusion enacts a sort of continuum of narratorial presence: “Dickie wouldn’t be acting like this only because Marge had behaved coolly, Tom thought. Dickie walked in his slouching, downhill gait that made his bony knees just out in front of him, a gait that Tom had unconsciously adopted, too” (76). The first sentence of this sequence is clearly marked (via the addition of “Tom thought”) as being focalized through Tom. The first clause of the next sentence, however, is somewhat more ambiguous: Tom may be noticing Dickie’s gait, but there is no clear indication here that (only) Tom’s perspective is being described. Instead, the second clause, whose “unconsciously” definitively indicates the narrator’s perspective rather than Tom’s, casts a retrospective ambiguity over the first clause, which might just as well convey the narrator’s perspective as Dickie’s—or perhaps both at once. After this brief emergence of the narrator, the focalization moves back through several ambiguously focalized sentences, before returning to a definitive focalization through Tom, marked by several phrases that indicate the filtration of events through Tom’s awareness: “Tom saw,” “Tom supposed,” and “Tom assumed.”

Although the narrative quickly reinstates the focalization through Tom, the narrator re-emerges only a short time later: after Tom has seen the kiss and retreated to

¹⁵ They thus coincide as well with Tom’s escalating appreciation of Marge as a serious rival.

Dickie's studio, we are told that he "unconsciously" avoids looking at Dickie's bad painting (77). These narratorial intrusions, in a text that is otherwise focused very consistently through Tom, are significant in their timing: Tom's careful identification with Dickie has just taken its first major blow, and Tom has not yet discovered that witnessing himself be Dickie will help restore that identification (although he will do so within the hour). Thus, for a few moments, Tom falters, having no audience for his identification and being temporarily unable to supply one for himself. And so the narrator, hitherto all but invisible, suddenly coalesces, enacting a range of knowledge—of Tom's own unconscious behavior—that is momentarily misaligned with Tom's own knowledge and thereby creating a perspective that is briefly distinct from Tom's own perspective. In so doing, the narrative supplements Tom's view of himself with another view altogether, providing Tom with the audience he temporarily lacks (and will soon recreate in the person of an imaginary Marge).

Although the dissonances between Tom and his narrator are often less pronounced than these instances, they usually coincide with moments in which Tom faces some existential uncertainty that can only be resolved by a reflexive view of the self. When Tom first meets Dickie's father, for example, he mistakes Mr. Greenleaf for a pursuing detective who has seen through Tom's facade of respectability and uncovered the mail fraud Tom is engaged in. As he tries to evade his pursuer in a neighborhood bar, the narrative describes Tom as "automatically" scanning the crowd for faces he recognizes (3). Similarly, at the novel's very end, when he alights in Greece fearing that he will be met by police officers who have finally wised up to his impersonation of Dickie, Tom "automatically" follows a porter toward customs (287). In neither case is

the narratorial intrusion quite so definitive—it's possible, if not likely, that Tom is conscious of doing something automatically—but neither is Tom's crisis. In these moments, Tom risks being found to be something he pretends not to be, whereas his faltering identification with Dickie threatens his very being. But at these times of existential uncertainty, when Tom is threatened with some kind of dissolution—whether through identificatory failure or faltering performance—the narrator seems to solidify, to become visible, to provide a perspective of Tom that Tom himself can no longer maintain.

In addition, the novel is peppered with more uncertain moments that, in signaling a possible shift in focalization, reaffirm Tom's position as the object of an audience's gaze. These shifts often appear sandwiched into sentences that are otherwise limited to Tom's perceptions, and their degree of dissonance is frequently ambiguous. For example, when Tom—newly aboard a ship to Italy, relishing his new life of luxury, and imagining the glories his future holds—remembers his abusive Aunt Dottie and “the skinny, snivelling wretch” he used to be, the narration tells us that “Tom writhed in his deck-chair as he thought of it, but he writhed elegantly, adjusting the crease in his trousers” (39). This is, again, a moment in which Tom is faced with the gap between the person he wants to be (the cosmopolitan young gentlemen) and the person he fears he always will be (the weak, dependent boy who couldn't free himself from a cruel aunt). His involuntary writhing threatens to betray his performance of cosmopolitanism by revealing the snivelling wretch that Tom fears underlies all his performances. Tom's writhing—a presumably involuntary and potentially unconscious movement—is

emphasized as such (and thus as a likely narratorial description) by its subsequent modification, with the phrase, “but he writhed elegantly.”

The mention of Tom’s elegant writhing and the adjustment of the crease of his trousers is in keeping with the internal focalization: Tom can be expected to be aware of both actions, and the narration does not report them from an explicitly external viewpoint. The initial reference to writhing (“Tom writhed [...] as he thought of it”), however, emphasizes Tom’s momentary lapse of control and awareness of his performance, and thereby suggests a narratorial intrusion. The contrast between involuntary writhing and “writhing elegantly” recuperates Tom’s floundering performance in part by emphasizing Tom as the focal point of multiple (but illusory) perspectives (his own, the narrator’s, the reader’s). Thus, once again, at a moment of vulnerability, Tom is supported by an additional perspective on himself, one that subsists until Tom takes over, converting his involuntary reaction to a performance of elegance.

The illusion of these multiple perspectives is produced much the same way that the illusion of the narrator is produced: via the enactment of incongruent ranges of knowledge. The dichotomy of knowledge in the description of Tom’s writhing—the first clause implying an narratorial awareness of what Tom doesn’t know (his own writhing), the second attributing to Tom an adjustment of his performance (to one of elegance) that suggests his awareness of his writhing—serves to create the illusion of at least three distinct points of view: the narrator’s view of Tom; Tom’s view of himself; and reader’s “view” of Tom and the narrator (and the narrator viewing Tom). These differentials in knowledge, then, produce the illusion that there are two distinct entities (Tom and the narrator) possessed of that knowledge and two distinct and stable locations (Tom’s

perspective and the narrator's perspective) from which that knowledge emanates. Like Tom's identification, which enacts an ever-widening circuit of gazes, the narrator here (not to mention Tom himself) is produced in tandem with a recursive instantiation of various points of view. Just as Tom creates audience after audience to witness his identifications, the narrator function produces multiple (apparent) points of view from which to witness the narrative. Tom's identifications produce various characters' points of view (as, for example, when he imagines how Marge or Mr. Greenleaf might see him); Tom's perspective is brought into relief by the illusory narrator's slightly different perspective; and, in producing these perspectives, the narrator function produces as well the assorted perspectives a reader might take of the narrative. And the reader's perspectives are themselves recursive and interlocked, comprised of (among others) the narrator's view of Tom's view of himself watching himself watch Dickie from the position of his audience.

The narrator's uncertain ontological status is thus revealed and explored in the same terms that Tom's subjectivity and self are: both are framed as questions of seeing and being and are not so much stabilized as repeatedly and retroactively brought into being, as effects of narrative and psychological processes. In emphasizing the role of an imagined audience's imaginary gaze in its protagonist's construction, *The Talented Mr. Ripley* produces a narrator function that creates both narrator and narrative point of view as a retroactive function of the delimitation of incongruent ranges of knowledge. The degree to which this delimitation mimics the operation of identification (which produces the illusion of complete knowledge where there is none, and scotomizes knowledge where it exists) illustrates the indispensability of psychoanalytic thought to

conceptualizing the operation of narrative. The narrator's stance with regard to Tom—aligned with Tom, but not the same as Tom— helps reveal the relational mechanics of Tom's delusory identification, even as it suggests its own delusive nature.

Chapter Four

Celestial Surveillance: *Trompe l'oeil* and Narrative Displacement

“But it’s a giveaway. [The film will] show everything!”

“Everything? No, that would be much too literal. In the end, one never shows or tells everything, does one? [...] But then, my point is simply that all our stories require deletion.”

—Paul Brodeur, *The Stunt Man*, p. 67

“But will we fool the chief?”

“My dear young fellow, it isn’t a question of fooling the chief. He’s no man to underestimate, but rest assured, when he goes to the movies he’s simply another spectator who not only wants to be deceived, but who will assure his own deception by suspending his disbelief and reacting to illusion.”

—Paul Brodeur, *The Stunt Man*, p. 233-34

The slight dissonance that *The Talented Mr. Ripley*’s narrator bears in relation to the subject of its narration exposes the degree to which a narrator is constituted by its relation to what it appears to narrate. Paul Brodeur’s 1970 novel *The Stunt Man* thematizes this relation via a plot that explicitly poses the question of the narrator’s relationship to (and place in) the rest of the narrative. Just as Gottschalk, the novel’s mad film director, deceives a willing audience with a filmic narrative composed via illusion and deletion, the novel produces its deceptive narrator out of omission and *trompe l’oeil*. *The Stunt Man*’s narrator is all but invisible, suggested by omitted knowledge rather than narratorial intrusion, and its narratorial function operates so as to continually displace itself onto narrating characters such as Gottschalk.

This disappearing narrator narrates its own displacement via the novel’s protagonist, Robert Cameron, a man increasingly unsure of who is creating the narrative he finds himself living. He works as a stunt man for a scriptless and amorphous movie,

whose ending has not yet been written (or decided) and whose writer produces the script day-to-day in response to the director's capricious decisions about the next twist of the movie's plot. Cameron is alarmed to see the events of his own life appearing in the film narrative, while his own actions are increasingly dictated by the constraints of narrative and film convention. Convinced that Gottschalk is dictating his options and actions by narrating a new story for him, Cameron embarks on a series of evasive maneuvers and aggressive tactics designed to wrest control from Gottschalk. Cameron conceives this struggle largely as one of perspective and position; feeling that the director commands a God's-eye view of Cameron's life, Cameron attempts to evade Gottschalk's narrative by getting outside of it, by attaining a position that is, as it were, closer to God's than Gottschalk's.¹ Cameron's misunderstanding of Gottschalk as the point from which the narrative emanates exposes the delusive nature of the novel's own narrator, which also appears as narrative's originary site even as it is produced retroactively by the very process of relating the story of Cameron's misunderstanding.

Cameron's troubles stem, more or less, from his misconception of the identificatory process. Recently drafted and headed to boot camp, Cameron is deputized to find a phone and call for help when the bus he is aboard breaks down. Seizing the opportunity presented by the lack of supervision, Cameron deserts. In the midst of his escape, he stumbles unwittingly into the filming of a movie scene, in which a stunt man, filmed from a helicopter, is supposed to drive his car off a causeway. Cameron, however, misinterprets the scene before him, believing initially that the helicopter and car have been sent by the Army to return him to his unit. After apprehending that neither the

¹ The capricious nature of this God-like demonstration of narrative control is evoked by Gottschalk's name: *Gott* is the German for "God," while *Schalk* translates to "rogue" or "joker."

car nor the helicopter are Army envoys, he further misinterprets the situation by believing that the car's stunt driver—now headed toward him at high speed—is trying to kill him. Fearing for his life, Cameron throws a rock at the car and goes sprawling face down in the road. When he again looks up, the car is gone—and Cameron reluctantly concludes that the car has gone off the bridge and sunk into the river below, taking its occupant with it and rendering Cameron an inadvertent killer.

Having heard the thud of the rock but not the splash of a vehicle landing in the water, Cameron is desperate to believe that the car simply drove away unnoticed while he was sprawled in the road. Only the sight of bubbles frothing to the river's surface convinces him that the car has indeed gone into the water, and Cameron's acquiescence to this conclusion is still unwilling and only partial. For the duration of the novel, Cameron takes comfort in the fact that no one—including him—knows for certain what actually happened, and he undertakes multiple mental revisions of what the bubbles "really" mean or—better—don't necessarily mean. From almost the beginning, then, Cameron is invested in the notion that "reality" and the lived events of his life are malleable and manipulable.

Cameron is thus inclined to "rewrite" the story he tells people about his experience on the causeway, and he is predisposed to welcome Gottschalk's assertion that narrative order and causality are subject to revision. Dazed and confused, Cameron manages to make his way to a nearby beach resort and applies for work at a local hotel, thinking to hide himself among its staff. When he makes his application, however, it emerges that he is speaking not to a hotel manager, but to the film's director, Gottschalk, whose cast and crew are using the hotel as a residence. Having been in the helicopter

that witnessed the accident on the causeway, Gottschalk is happy to enlighten Cameron about what really happened—that Cameron had stumbled into the midst of a stunt rather than an attempt on his life. Though he points out the holes in Cameron’s heavily edited story of the incident, Gottschalk treats Cameron’s story as a malleable narrative, explaining that, as a director, he avoids the “constrictions” of “stories with a beginning, middle, and end” in favor of “fragments and the order in which I choose to put them” (41). Intrigued by the possibility of altering a narrative that ended in a death and relieved by the idea of relinquishing control over his story to Gottschalk, Cameron agrees to Gottschalk’s proposal that he conceal himself amongst the film crew by assuming the stunt man’s position. Like Tom Ripley, then, Cameron’s identification with another appears strikingly literalized: rather than an imaginative projection into another’s position, Cameron actually steps into that position, standing in for the dead stunt man in all the movie’s action sequences—including, at the novel’s end, a stunt in which he drives a car off the causeway and into the river.

The literality of Cameron’s identification, however, is deceptive in much the same way the novel’s narrator function is. The narrative’s overt concern with the story (of Cameron’s escape) that Gottschalk may or may not be narrating or authoring deflects attention from the novel’s own narrator. In the same way, Cameron’s occupation of the stunt man’s position (as well as a variety of other positions in relation to those around him) deflect attention from the continual displacement of the circuits of identification. Although Cameron assumes the stunt man’s position and even comes to recognize the similarity of their positions with regard to Gottschalk,² he does not, strictly speaking,

² Cameron appreciates Gottschalk’s willingness to manipulate events and question reality insofar as Cameron is thereby permitted to believe that the stunt man’s death doesn’t really matter. If, as Gottschalk

identify with him. For Cameron, the stunt man's position is a means to an end; while he occupies the stunt man's place, he does not, as Tom does with Dickie, imagine himself as either seeing himself in or being seen from the stunt man's location. In fact, Cameron identifies with everyone but the stunt man, imagining over and over how he might be seen (in the stunt man's place) from everyone else's perspective: Gottschalk, the pursuing police, the lead actors, the makeup artist, the cameraman, and the audience members who watch his stunts. While Cameron might literally occupy his predecessor's place, his identificatory mechanisms—the imaginative projection into another's position by which identification operates—occur in and through all these bystanders, whom Cameron imagines to be watching him successfully assume another identity. Cameron's identifications operate by means of displacement and *trompe l'oeil*, appearing located in places (the narrator, the stunt man's position) other than where they operate. Similarly, the narrator function appears localized in narrating characters when, in fact, it operates through the syntax and grammar of the narrative.

The Displacement of Identification

For Cameron, this *trompe l'oeil* begins with his own face. Having assumed the stunt man's position and appearance, Cameron quickly comes to believe that his new face masks a new identity. Once his physical appearance has been altered to match that of the actor for whom he's doubling, Cameron finds it surprisingly easy to put his past life and

claims, only art is real, then the stunt man's death—which Gottschalk obligingly edits right out of the film's rushes—never happened. Such reasoning, however, renders Cameron's own life terrifyingly uncertain—for if the previous stunt man's death doesn't really matter, then neither would Cameron's own. Cameron's conviction that Gottschalk intends for him to die while performing the same stunt that killed the first stunt man is thus based in his belief that Gottschalk values Cameron's and the stunt man's lives in the same way—which is to say, not at all, except insofar as they affect the film.

self behind him. When he first sees his new face, he thinks, “I’m transformed [...] I’m another person” (54). And when, shortly thereafter, Cameron is seduced by the makeup artist, any hesitation or guilt provoked by the thought of his live-in girlfriend—whose devoted love letter he was sentimentally rereading just the day before—is so faint and ephemeral that it seems to belong to another person: “[She] was a fleeting, almost subliminal memory. His new face assured his anonymity and obviated any thought of restraint or regret” (57). With each new position he assumes in relation to those around him (army recruit, deserter, fugitive, stunt man, leading man, hero, lover, voyeur), Cameron believes himself to assume a new identity, eradicating who he was before in favor of who he is now. Cameron thus misunderstands the identificatory process by conflating it with identity formation: he imagines that where he is dictates who he is.

Via this conflation, *The Stunt Man* illustrates the contingent, provisional, highly constructed nature of identity, even as its characters imagine themselves to be possessors of their own identities—fluid identities, to be sure, but coherent nonetheless. Cameron’s understanding and manipulation of his own identity operates in its own right as a sort of narrative *trompe l’œil*, producing a proliferation of relational positionalities that masquerade as identities even as they serve to strip identity away from the narrative’s subjects. The displacement of identification in *The Stunt Man* thus helps to divest its subjects of their identities.

The opening lines of the novel, for example, place Cameron in a network of identificatory relationships with the other passengers on the bus: “There was no doubt that his fellow passengers welcomed the interruption of the journey, but Cameron was anxious to be under way again” (3). The whole first chapter traces his shifting

relationship to the other young soldiers—he is distanced and reserved because he’s older, but his unwillingness to “participate in the false hopes raised by the failure of the bus engine” is really a backwards way of admitting that they are “all in the same boat and bound for the same destination” (4). Once he decides to desert and steps from the road into the concealment of the forest, Cameron is preoccupied instead with the sergeant who sent him on his mission; he is convinced at every turn that the sergeant must know what Cameron has decided, and he takes fright at a loudly chattering squirrel whom he imagines has alerted the distant sergeant to Cameron’s location. The only evidence we have of a Cameron who predates this set of military relationships is his girlfriend’s letter, left behind on the bus. For all intents and purposes, however, this relationship is long over, for Cameron conceives the letter as a tie to “a future in which a succession of letters would inevitably become the most important events in an endless string of dreary days” and determines that it will be best to “leave her letter where it was—a bookmark in a mystery he had no desire to finish—and, having closed that story, look to another future” (8). Cameron’s position in relation to the sergeant and the other soldiers thus determines the narrative he occupies; when he changes that relationship, he not only enters a new story, but (he imagines) alters who he is and erases his past connections to boot.

Cameron’s identity is a delusion of wholeness thematized in relation to whatever context the individual is in. Because he changes contexts so often in the course of the novel, Cameron can thus imagine himself the possessor of “whole” identity that is nonetheless alterable. Whereas a moment ago, Cameron was a recruit, now he is a deserter. In the next chapter, when he meets a toll collector manning an isolated toll booth, Cameron will be a hitchhiker. When he enters town a chapter after that, he will be

a tourist, and a couple chapters later, when he meets Gottschalk, he will be a stunt man. The context that gives rise to this illusion of whole identity, however, is the context determined by Cameron's network of identificatory relationships.

Cameron's conceptualization of his past and future life as a succession of narratives among which he can transfer both raises and deflects the question of the narrator. Since Cameron places responsibility for the orchestration of these narratives with other entities—first the Army, which has pulled him from his life as a graduate student; the sergeant whose final words (“Take off”) Cameron willfully misconstrues as an order to desert; and eventually Gottschalk—he seems to imply a “narrator” to go with each “narrative.” In so doing, however, the narrator of the novel itself—a third-person narrator focalized almost exclusively through Cameron—is displaced (for the first of many times) and, like *Ripley*'s narrator, rendered largely invisible. To the degree that the novel explicitly contemplates the question of who narrates, its own narrator function is difficult to discern.

In this first chapter, for example, the only hints of a narratorial knowledge distinct from Cameron's are quickly repudiated. For example, an initial description of the bus's location (“too far inland to be bathed by the salt smell of the sea, yet too close to shore to benefit from the shade of real trees” (3)) appears as a potential invocation of narratorial knowledge—Cameron has been reading and, in the absence of markers to the contrary, might be presumed not to be engaged in suppositions about the bus's precise distance from the sea—only to be recuperated a few pages later by the assertion that Cameron has indeed been considering the location of the sea. Looking at a map proffered by the drill sergeant, Cameron “noticed that the highway [...] was nearer to the sea than he had

imagined" (6). What is initially presented as the narrator's knowledge is thus soon demonstrated to be compatible as well with Cameron's own range of knowledge.

Similarly, descriptions that initially appear in (presumably) the narrator's voice are often retroactively reconstituted as Cameron's own thoughts. Lost and directionless in the woods, for example, Cameron almost misses the glimpse of the clearing that will lead him back to civilization: "How on earth he had overlooked the sheen of light directly ahead of him he would never know. Perhaps the squirrel, triggering off his fear of pursuit, had distracted him. Or perhaps it was not a clearing he saw at eye level through the trees, but the illusion of it" (11). The initial description of this near miss, with its invocation of what Cameron will "never know," suggests itself as narratorial commentary. The two explanations (squirrel fear and illusion) that follow appear so as well—until the next sentence, complete with interjections and markers of Cameron's thought process, retroactively suggests that the possibility of illusion has formed part of Cameron's conscious consideration and is thus in keeping with the sort of knowledge implied by a strictly internal focalization: "No, there was a clearing, all right, and, judging from the amount of light, a large one" (11). In both instances, the delineation of narratorial knowledge and Cameron's knowledge is exceedingly difficult to discern; the shifts in focalization constituted by these differential ranges of knowledge, then, are so subtle and so ephemeral that they might not be shifts at all. The narrator produced by the shifts is itself highly ephemeral, flickering briefly into visibility before collapsing back into the narration of Cameron's consciousness. The novel's narrator is thus produced by its ever-so-slightly dissonant relationship to that which it narrates—that is, by two ranges of knowledge that appear momentarily non-congruent—even as its function appears

displaced onto other “narrators” (Gottschalk, et al.) by its own narration of Cameron’s interest in those narratives and narrators.

Similarly, Cameron’s understanding of his identity as contiguous with the narrative position in which he finds himself serves to constitute Cameron as subject in relation to those around him, even as it displaces the question of subject-position onto a delusive conception of identity. Thus, Cameron interprets the network of gazes and positionalities that constitutes him as subject as a determination of *who* he is. When he initiates an affair with Nina Mabry, the film’s lead actress, Cameron assumes the dual positions of actor and film hero because he has seen her as an actress “as if through a view-finder” and as a film heroine, as though projected on the screen of a “private theater” (123). How Cameron sees Nina dictates in turn how he sees himself in relation to her—“standing alone in a land of make-believe [...] wait[ing] to resume acting out a story” (129)—and how he sees himself, as trapped fugitive/actor “shouting his defiance [...] toward a camera” (130). Out of this network of real and imagined gazes (the director’s, the camera’s, Cameron’s own), Cameron establishes a set of relations to Nina (lover, leading man, hero) that he imagines constitute his identity, but serve only to displace the dynamics of identification onto the question of identity.

In contrast to Cameron’s largely unshaken faith in the equation of position and identity, the narrative displacement of subjectivity onto identity serves to actually divest the characters of their identity. In a sense, Cameron takes identity so literally that it ceases to operate: Cameron and Nina are limited to the roles they choose to play and the relation of those roles to one another—but instead of producing a dynamic identity, their performances serve to strip them of identity. Thus on the afternoon that Cameron and

Nina consummate their relationship, Cameron finds that the mask of his new face (that of the lead actor, Lee Jordan) conceals neither a new identity nor his old one. He stares at his face in the mirror “as if he were confronting the actor himself” (145)) and, uncomfortable with whom he now believes Jordan to be, looks for an earlier identity: “Cameron hesitated before the mirror as if searching for some memory of himself beneath the bold beach boy’s countenance[...]; then, quickly, he turned away” (146). In place of the delusory security of identity, Cameron is left only with a subjective existence guaranteed by what Cameron thinks he sees and what he imagines sees him.

In seeing his own face made up as Jordan’s in the mirror, Cameron—who has recently had an unsavory encounter with the lecherous Jordan—now identifies with Jordan, instead of believing himself to have assumed Jordan’s position/identity. Rather than a mask denoting actor or hero, Cameron now sees the similarities between himself and Jordan: “instead of reflecting the happy, confident narcissism of a man anticipating love and anxious to please,” the mirror reveals a face “in which lust stood surrogate for love” (145). In other words, Cameron sees himself as he now sees Jordan and as he fears others see him (as Jordan). In place of an identity that is coextensive with position, Cameron is left only with an intersubjective network of gazes that sustains him as subject even as it evacuates his identity.

The slippage that collapses the networks of identification and subjectivity into identity operates in tandem with a similar misdirection and displacement of the narrator function. With only one exception, the narration in this scene is rigidly focalized through Cameron: everything is narrated through his consciousness and is often explicitly marked (by phrases such as “he realized” or “he wondered”) as being so. Only

at the moment when Cameron's conception of positional identification falters does a narratorial consciousness distinct from Cameron's appear: "Cameron hesitated before the mirror *as if* searching for some memory of himself" (145, emphasis mine). The "as if," by marking an external view of an interior knowledge, suggests the presence of a narrating entity distinct from Cameron. Here—in the precise moment that the narrative's subjective displacement breaks down—the rigidly internal focalization admits an external perspective dissonant from Cameron's own.

This brief coalescence of the narrator is rapidly displaced onto the novel's narrating characters. Almost as soon as he sees Nina, Cameron begins to consider Gottschalk's role as a "narrator" of Nina's story. He has already started to suspect that his fate might be the same as that of the film's fugitive and has begun to worry that Gottschalk, as presumptive narrator of Cameron's new story, will let Cameron live or die according to the as-yet-unscripted conclusion to the film. Rendered suspicious by the correspondences between Nina's personal history and the film roles Gottschalk assigns her, Cameron begins to think seriously here about Gottschalk's motives and level of control over the various narrative threads he holds. At the moment, about to sleep with a woman to whom Gottschalk has been romantically linked, Cameron feels cocky and sure that he will be able to wrest (narrative) control from Gottschalk: "Nothing mattered now. He would supplant all her lovers past and present" (147).

Only a few hours later, though, over dinner with the film's writer (who admits freely to having ceded all control of the narrative to Gottschalk), Cameron finds himself once more preoccupied with Gottschalk's narratorial status: "How curious that Gottschalk seemed to be putting each of them into his own story! But what did it mean?"

(151). This time, though, Cameron is less sure of his ability to combat the narrative that Gottschalk has planned: “If only I could get a look [at the script], he was thinking. Just to keep a scene ahead...” (151). Cameron thus conflates his own life with that of Gottschalk’s script, displacing his own story onto the ever-evolving film narrative which he in turns displaces onto the script itself. Similarly, the narrator function here displaces itself from within the narrative (where the narrator had briefly coalesced in the previous scene) onto Gottschalk, who is accorded narrative control by the various characters (though they themselves are constructions of the narrative that has produced a narrator that disappears behind Gottschalk). Meanwhile, in trying to recuperate narrative control from Gottschalk, Cameron furthers this displacement by attempting to vest either himself or the hapless screenwriter with narrative control.

All of this, of course, constitutes a large scale displacement of the question of the narrator: Narrative control is itself illusory, created by the narrative as a part of the very narrator function that produces the narrator in the first place. Thus, in seeming to directly address the function of the narrator via Cameron and Gottschalk, *The Stunt Man*’s narrative serves to actually divert attention from it. Using the tale of the painters Zeuxis and Parrhasius, Lacan reads this sort of dynamic as a form of *trompe l’oeil*. In a contest, staged between the two artists, Zeuxis unveiled a painting of grapes so luscious that the birds themselves were deceived, flying down to peck at the grapes. Confident in his triumph, Zeuxis then challenged Parrhasius to remove the curtain covering his own painting—at which point, Parrhasius revealed that the curtain itself was a painting. According to Lacan, the example of Parrhasius illustrates that in order to deceive a man, one must present “something that incites him to ask what is behind it” (*Seminar XI* 111-

12). *The Stunt Man* then, in creating Cameron as a man convinced of the narrational control underlying Gottschalk, produces as well a *trompe l'oeil* that encourages us to look behind Gottschalk for the illusory site of narration.

The Displaced Narrator Function

The novel's assorted displacements—of the dynamics of identification, identity, and narrator function—are articulated within *The Stunt Man*'s narrative as a series of doubled narratives and positionalities. In describing these doublings, Gottschalk invokes duplication, even as his description evokes the cascading displacement enacted throughout the narrative: "You'll have become another person—a stunt man doubling for an actor who, in turn, is playing a role. In fact, the role of a fugitive" (49). In Gottschalk's rendition, then, Cameron's new identity occasions a set of displacements that result in a grammatical slide—from subject of the sentence (the "you" with which Gottschalk's statement begins) to object of a phrase ("fugitive")—that mimics Cameron's personal translation from army deserter to movie fugitive. Cameron begins and ends a fugitive, but in the shift from military fugitive to stand-in for a filmic fugitive, Cameron has also shifted subject-positions between two intersecting narrative economies—that of the army and that of Hollywood.

Cameron performs this kind of shift throughout the course of the novel, sliding between narrative economies—economies of sex, art, performance, power, and voyeurism—and often occupying one or more at a time. The intersection of these economies involves a multiplication of narratives: the story of the film's fugitive; the story of Cameron's own flight from the army; the story of Cameron's love affairs; the

tale of the power-struggle between Cameron and Gottschalk; the fragmented plot-line of the director's next film; and a pornographic film scripted and shot by the main film's cameraman. When the various economies collide, Cameron and other characters might change the subject-positions they occupy—but more often, they end up occupying multiple positions at once. Like Cameron, Gottschalk conceives Cameron's assorted positions as a matter of identity, but he rightly insists on their simultaneity, comparing them to a double-exposure: "You're like the pictures in a roll of film that never gets turned," he tells Cameron. "Each time the shutter clicks, there's another image of you superimposed on the one that was before" (106). Gottschalk encourages Cameron to consider himself in a doubled relation to his own narrative—"How better," Gottschalk asks, "for a fugitive to go undetected than to be simultaneously an actor in and a spectator at the unfolding of his own story?" (74)—but in truth, Cameron bears a similarly doubled and displaced relationship to all the novel's narratives, as well as to several others.

For example, when Cameron begins his affair with Nina, he does so immediately after she has been filmed in a love scene with Lee Jordan, for whom Cameron is doubling. Jordan wishes to take Nina to lunch; she refuses in favor of Cameron, who tells her that he sympathizes not with Jordan but with his predicament—that is, with his interest in the unimpressed Nina. Thus, by purporting to share Jordan's position in relation to her, Cameron replaces Jordan at Nina's side for lunch; and though Nina prefers him to Jordan, Cameron begins to regard his relationship to Nina as somewhat foreordained, since she is the leading lady and he now stands in for the leading man. For her part, Nina is caught between and tormented by the two roles Gottschalk has assigned her—one as the love interest of the current film's fugitive hero and one in his next

unscripted film, which Gottschalk has already begun shooting, as the widow of an astronaut lost in space. Her filmic roles double those that Nina plays in her own life, for Nina herself serves as Cameron's love interest in the novel's narrative as well as the love interest in the movie she and Jordan are filming. And Nina is known for having been the mistress of a man who was shot in her presence; like the widowed astronaut's wife, Nina is famous largely for the tragic death of someone close to her.

This continual doubling of fact and film, art and reality, extends to the jetty where Cameron and Nina share lunch—Nina has been there before, with the director who was scouting locations for his film fugitive to make his final escape. Once he's learned this, Cameron has trouble remembering that the jetty is not a set: he feels suddenly that "the granite blocks that surrounded them seemed false, as if fabricated from cardboard," and must remind himself that "[t]he sea and its sound effects are real" (128). Cameron is similarly unable to think of Nina as fully "real"—he envisions her instead in a montage of scenes from various films—and he feels a pressure to kiss Nina that is filmic in origin: he imagines the two of them first as actors between takes and then himself as the hero to her heroine. In addition, he thinks of himself as the film's hero, and he conceives Nina as the widowed heroine of the Gottschalk's next film. Their first kiss, as result, is simultaneously the film coupling of hero and heroine, the union of an actor and actress coming together between takes, and the merging of characters from two separate films who have "speed[ed] up the projector" (130) in order to bring their two narratives together.

In this scene, then, Cameron serves as a quilting point at the intersection of multiple narrative registers. At any given point, he occupies one or more positions in one

or more of these registers, and the ultimate effect is as much of displacement as of doubling. Inasmuch as Cameron slides between multiple narrative economies, he appears continually displaced from others: he may be both lover and leading man and stunt man and filmic fugitive and army deserter, but he is also unable separate those various roles. He may still be a fugitive, but he is now also a fugitive in both Hollywood and the “real” world, and has thus to a certain extent been displaced from the narrative economy—that of military power—in which he began. And that both Cameron and Nina are constructions of *The Stunt Man*’s narrative produces an additional reflexivity: Cameron’s meditations on his status as hero/stunt man/actor beg the question of his status as the novel’s protagonist even as, in pitching this status as a matter of occupying a certain position within a narrative, the text sidesteps the issue of just how Cameron is produced as protagonist. That is, the narrative once again displaces the narrator function onto the narrated contents of the narrative itself.

The displacement of the narrator here undergoes an additional iteration, as Cameron begins to simultaneously equate the camera and Gottschalk with the locus of narrating power. As he and Nina discuss the potential endings that Gottschalk might have planned for the characters, Cameron imagines himself clinging to a beacon “shouting his defiance [...] toward a camera made invisible” by the beacon’s light (130). In Cameron’s mind, Gottschalk thus becomes allied with the place of camera as the point from which the narrative emanates. This alliance is all more powerful in that the novel’s own narrator remains focalized through Cameron throughout the scene. Thus while the narrator appears deflected onto Gottschalk and the camera (and even onto Cameron, to the extent that he defies the camera), the narrator function continues to produce a narrator

so closely linked to Cameron that the third-person pronoun with which it narrates remains the only trace of its presence.

Cameron's equation of the power of the camera with the power of narration crystallizes during yet another narrative doubling. The film's cameraman, Bruno da Fé, has witnessed Cameron's tryst with the makeup artist, Denise, through a keyhole. This event inspires the plot of a pornographic film that Bruno plans to shoot in the hotel: Bruno conceives a film that opens on a wife who, catching her husband spying through a keyhole on a couple having sex in the next room, is irresistibly drawn to peer through the keyhole as well. After failing to convince Cameron and Denise (as well as Nina) to star in his film, Bruno goes ahead with other actors—but during filming, Cameron and Denise have sex in the wardrobe room, while watching the shoot through a keyhole. They thus enact the earlier film sequence even as a later sequence is being shot—and Cameron thereby becomes again “an actor in and a spectator at the unfolding of his own story.”

At this nexus of sex and voyeurism, Cameron becomes not just actor and spectator, but camera and screen as well.³ In peering through the keyhole, Cameron assumes precisely the position that Bruno, who has already provided a verbal rendering of his pornographic narrative, imagines for his own camera in the opening shots of his film. The sexual scene that Cameron sees when he looks through the keyhole does not contain a visible camera; instead Cameron (via the novel's narration) is there to record the scene. Cameron experiences his and Denise's climaxes “as if camera and screen had become interchangeable, and her body a prism refracting the fierce desire which the cameraman insisted was everyone's deepest wish,” and “he heard a soft, muffled cry that.

³ As with Gottschalk's, Cameron's name here becomes highly significant, evoking as it does the camera, which Cameron has mistakenly identified as the locus of narrating power.

repeated over and over, echoed deep inside him with accusation, in acclimation, and as an aphrodisiac" (172). Bruno, in fact, has called the camera itself "our deepest wish" (99) and Cameron, in feeling desire refracted within him as a calling voice experiences himself—in a synaesthetic layering that conflates vision, physical sensation, and aural stimulus—as both camera and screen, actor and spectator. At this intersection of narratives (Cameron's narratives of stunt man, lover, and voyeur, and Bruno's verbal narrative of the porn film's narrative), Cameron occupies multiple, shifting positions that repeatedly coalesce and separate. Like those of a narrator, these positions all exist in relation to the narratives themselves, as well as in relation to other characters. When he becomes actor, spectator, voyeur, camera, and screen, Cameron is shifting both between various economies (sex, power, vision) and from being the focal point of the narrative (as its protagonist) to existing at its periphery (as the focalizer of a scene that does not contain him)—and he very often occupies all these positions at once.

The moment when Cameron conceives himself most strongly as camera is also the moment in which he is most clearly the focalizer for the relation of Bruno's narrative, which is related explicitly in terms of what Cameron sees when he looks through the keyhole. In both cases, the metaphors of camera and focalization suggest that Cameron is being looked through by some other entity—that he is a lens of sorts which serves to focus or capture the scene before him. Such formulation begs the question of who or what is operating the "camera" that is Cameron, and it also helps to conflate the position of narrator (whom many theories of narrative consider to be focalized by the character through whose consciousness narrative events are transmitted) and filmmaker, who wields a camera in order to capture and create a film narrative. Neither assessment is

completely accurate—the narrator is created out of its focalization and not vice versa, and the construction of a film narrative requires not only direction and shooting (themselves usually two separate functions), but also an editor to assemble fragments of film into a coherent narrative. Cameron, however, who powerfully experiences himself here as simultaneously occupying multiple positions and fulfilling multiple functions, reads that multiplicity as arising from the agency of a singular entity. Just as his conception that the multiplicity of “everyone’s deepest wish” emerges from the singularity of Denise’s prism-like body, Cameron understands the multiplicity of his positioning as stemming from a single source, a distinct entity that stands with the camera and directs the course of Cameron’s life.

In collapsing the functions of camera and narrator into one, Cameron enables his own definitive attribution of narrative authority to Gottschalk. This attribution is itself a form of identification: what Cameron sees in Gottschalk is his own desire for narrative control. Cameron’s understanding of Gottschalk suggests Peter Brooks’s reading of narrative as a desire for mastery; according to Brooks, narrative repetition is a means of exerting control over events and is a product of desire. In this case, however, the desire for power is situated in Cameron rather than Gottschalk; Cameron’s interest in occupying Gottschalk’s position is thus a mechanism for filling out his own lack. Insofar as Gottschalk appears as the whole, undivided Other, Cameron desires that which he perceives himself as missing—in this case, narrative mastery.

This narrative mastery is, of course, illusory—Gottschalk is no more complete than Cameron, nor does he actually control any narrative. (Neither, for that matter, does any narrator, which is always produced by the narrative rather than vice versa).

Gottschalk does, however, seem to embody some of the ontological contradictions embedded in the “person” of the narrator. The description of Cameron’s first glimpse of Gottschalk, in fact, generates a visual mimicry of the tentative coalescence and dissolution that produces *The Stunt Man*’s own narrator: “A second later, he made out the dim outline of a man sitting at a desk behind the counter, a man whose head seemed to materialize from nowhere, disembodied, in illusory suspension, like the head of some religious masterpiece that is both the vanishing point of perspective and the focus of concentration” (37). Gottschalk thus swims into view in much the same way that the novel’s narrator does, and Cameron reads that emergence as a matter of perspective. Gottschalk is at once the focal point and the vanishing point, and in this sense he resembles Binx’s understanding of the site of the gaze as the locus from which the narration emerges.

Like Binx, then, Cameron comes to believe that if he can occupy the illusory site of the gaze—here conflated literally with the site of the narration—he can control the circuits of the gaze, identification, and displacement. This is all the more ironic in that Gottschalk, to whom Cameron attributes a God-like (or camera-like) range of vision, is slowly going blind. Gottschalk, then, becomes both literally and metaphorically Cameron’s blind spot: Cameron does not see that Gottschalk cannot see what Cameron thinks he can. Similarly, Cameron fails to distinguish Gottschalk from the all-seeing camera that he believes controls narration, nor does he distinguish Gottschalk’s role as director from Bruno’s as cameraman. Not only is Gottschalk literally blind to the narrative control that Cameron equates with sight, but Gottschalk does not even wield the camera that Cameron believes occupies the site of narration.

Gottschalk's God's-Eye View (The Rogue God's God's-Eye View)

Nonetheless, Cameron becomes convinced that Gottschalk's relation to the narratives he seems to control—an external relation, in which Gottschalk, who often films from a helicopter, possesses a God's-eye view of the events and people that constitute the “narrative”—is the relationship of narrator to narrative. In other words, Cameron believes that Gottschalk's narrative control stems from his apparent externality. Consequently, he imagines that to gain control over his own narrative requires that he remove himself from Gottschalk's narrative: Cameron should be able to reject the narrative positions the director offers him by exiting Gottschalk's story and occupying Gottschalk's position in relation to his own story.⁴

Determining to escape with Nina, then, Cameron lights out over the hotel roof, under a blazingly punishing summer sun, trying at once to evade his largely imaginary pursuers and to make his way unseen to Nina's room. On the roof, in a heat-induced moment of hallucinatory clarity, Cameron understands well and truly the illusory nature of (what he imagines to be) Gottschalk's external position: “the notion that he was leaving the director's world was simply, like the apparent daily motion of the sun, another illusion” (192-93). The delusory character of perceived positions and relations thus comes burdened by the conviction of being trapped in Gottschalk's narrative: “he

⁴ Arthur Salzman reads Cameron's entrapment as a function the interpenetration of art and reality, arguing that “Cameron's quest is unredemptive because it never pushes beyond the shadow of reality—the pointless violence of war.” Salzman thus posits an “outside” to the narrative that consists of the historical facts of the text's production (it was published during American involvement in Vietnam), but he admits that this exterior has no place in *The Stunt Man*, for “[n]o transcendence occurs in *The Stunt Man*; the dream world duplicates the real one, and art only intensifies man's awareness of his predicament.” Thus, Cameron's “attempts to subvert the script *contribute* to it” (35). Michael Birdwell also reads Cameron's inability to escape from the narratives as a function of the historical reality of the Vietnam War, “an omniverous, immortal beast” to which Brodeur's characters cannot conceive an end (228).

reminded himself that it was the earth spinning on its axis in the opposite direction that gave the sun its apparent course. I'm more in Gottschalk's world than ever, he thought dazedly, and closed his eyes" (193). Cameron thus realizes—and quite clearly—that he cannot get “outside” the narrative, but he nonetheless continues to misrecognize Gottschalk's position as narrator. In his mind, Gottschalk remains the site of narration—the site from which the narrative emanates—and his illumination regarding his own inability to get “outside” narrative doesn't change Cameron's conviction that Gottschalk's place is nonetheless the position of narrative control.

Cameron's new awareness that he cannot get outside the narrative is predictably brief, for his experience of Gottschalk's power and position has led Cameron to believe that Gottschalk *is* external to the narrative. Though from the start Gottschalk pitches Cameron's involvement with the film as way of occupying a new relation—that of spectator and actor—to his own life, Cameron doesn't fully understand what Gottschalk means until he performs his stunts before the camera. In these moments, the duality of his positioning becomes clear to Cameron, but he experiences as well a heightened sense of his own relation to Gottschalk. In each of his first two stunts, Cameron identifies at least momentarily with Gottschalk—with Gottschalk's panoramic view from above the scene—but the description of the experience, in both cases, reinscribes Gottschalk's position as the ultimate arbiter of the spectacle.

In the scene for which Cameron performs his first stunt, the filmic fugitive is chased from a building and finds himself trapped at the end of a pier. He leaps from the railing of the pier, followed by a hail of bullets from his pursuers (who, in another doubling of life and film, will be played by the town's off-duty police officers), and takes

shelter under the pier, where he works his way toward shore. As he nears shore, however, the waves threaten to crush him against the pilings, and he must leave the shelter of the pier and swim for his life. As is the case with all the stunts Cameron performs, this one is a stunt only insofar as it is performed by a stunt man; no particular provisions have been taken to ensure Cameron's safety nor does tricky camerawork provide the illusion of danger. Rather, Cameron actually lives out the sequence he is supposed to be merely enacting and barely escapes with his life. His pleas for help, as he clings weakly to slippery crossbeams under the pier are ignored, and when he expresses concern about the pounding surf, he is told only how much more terrifying it will be when the sound effects are dubbed in.

But despite the reckless disregard for his safety and well-being—and his near drowning before he is finally washed ashore—Cameron is utterly exhilarated by playing the part of the fugitive. As he stands on the railing of the pier, ready to jump and imagining the invisible crowd watching from the dark beach, Cameron finally understands and exceeds the doubled position (actor and spectator) that Gottschalk has encouraged him to occupy. This realization stems in part from Cameron's new view of the proceedings, because even as he prepares to act the role of a fugitive, he is able to watch the toll collector—the sole witness to Cameron's desertion, who has been embedded in the film crew by the police in order to keep a look out for their fugitive—scanning the crowd on the beach, looking in the wrong direction and, thinks Cameron, “for the wrong man” (78). Able thus to watch the manhunt for himself unfold even as he acts a part in a different manhunt—a part that guarantees his invisibility from those who seek him—Cameron now understands what Gottschalk has been telling him.

In the moment that he jumps from the pier's railing, however, he is no longer just a spectator to his own life, but is suddenly capable of seeing himself from an external perspective as well: "When the whistle shrieked, he reacted instantly—a moon-struck Icarus sailing out into the night, where, for two or three splendid seconds, he saw himself bathed in light, as if through the eyes of the crowd that lined the beach" (81). In the moments that he is airborne, Cameron occupies a position that Binx would envy: he has at once a bird's eye view of everything (emphasized by the reference to Icarus) and a multi-faceted view of himself through the many eyes of the crowd. Cameron experiences a particularly powerful set of identifications: he sees himself from the crowd's position, he has aligned his view of himself with that of Gottschalk, and he has attained for himself, ever so briefly, a position reminiscent of the director's. Like Gottschalk, who frequently uses a helicopter to film from above, Cameron, for a few "splendid seconds," is airborne and sailing above the watching crowd.

The power inherent in this positioning is only emphasized when Cameron performs his next stunt, in which he leaps from a Ferris wheel cart onto the chair of the nearby whip ride and is then filmed clinging to the whirling ride before dismounting onto a nearby trampoline. Earlier that same evening, Gottschalk had shown the rushes of the car stunt on the causeway to a crowd that included the chief of police and an FBI agent, both in search of clues that might lead them to Cameron. Though Cameron goes into the screening complacently assured by Gottschalk's claim to have edited him right out of the film, he becomes nervous and frightened upon hearing Gottschalk's interactions with the authorities. Gottschalk seems to be leading the authorities toward him, hinting at correspondences between the Cameron and the film fugitive that may change the

direction of the government's search. Suddenly doubting Gottschalk's loyalties, Cameron becomes convinced that he's being set up, that he can feel "the jaws of a trap" beginning to "close around his skull" (161).

Cameron's new panic lasts until his stunt later that night, when he begins to feel free again, for there was not only freedom but immense exhilaration in this absurd performance in which, tethered to the centrifugal force of the whip ride by his fingertips, he saw lights and stars flashing past him as if the r.p.m. of the universe had suddenly been accelerated to the pitch of Doomsday. For a few seconds he transcended himself. He was no longer just a stunt man. Half of him was an astronaut floating weightless in space; the other half was Ixion, who, screaming defiance, had been chained to a fiery wheel that whirled him perpetually through the sky (161).

Cameron's sense of power and exhilaration stems here from multiple, cascading sources. Cameron perceives himself to a certain degree as if at the center of the universe, with "lights and stars flashing past him." He conceives himself also as an astronaut floating in space, an overhead presence that echoes his brief moments airborne in the earlier stunt. Like his whirling position on the whip, from which the universe appears to spin around him, Cameron's position as astronaut implies as well as certain God-like centrality, for in an endlessly expanding universe, all bodies in space are center-points. But the astronaut is also a reference to Gottschalk's next film project, premised on a lost astronaut tumbling endlessly through space, whose "eerie presence overhead has proved unsettling to the public tranquility," "destroying that most vital equilibrium of all—the illusion that

we are firmly planted, that our surroundings are stationary, and that, by extension, our lives have meaning” (92). In the radical uncoupling of his life from any meaning, Cameron finds a screaming exhilaration, emphasized by the reference to Doomsday, but he also reaffirms the meaning of his own narrative by comparing himself to the mythical Ixion, condemned by Zeus to be fixed in endless rotation to a fiery wheel in punishment for seducing Hera. Cameron thus re-conceives his affair with Nina, who is also involved with the possessive Gottschalk, as not only the culmination of the relationship between film hero and heroine, but also as a union of mythic beings. In this sense, Gottschalk becomes—as Cameron has already started to feel—the god who rules their lives and provides the narrative templates for their identifications (the film narratives of a fugitive’s escape or an astronaut’s endlessly spinning death, or the mythological narrative of a god’s angry retribution). But in this moment, which reinforces Gottschalk’s power and purview, Cameron also finds himself feeling free, catching glimpses of apocalyptic upheavals that bring narrative significance to an end.

But this freedom is both temporary and illusory. Both this moment and the few “splendid seconds” of Cameron’s first stunt bear the seeds of their own collapse. The invocation of the “moon-struck Icarus” in the description of the first stunt not only implies Cameron’s eventual fall, but refers as well to a heavenly body whose all-encompassing perspective is greater than Cameron’s own. By sailing airborne into the night, Cameron may have attained something like Gottschalk’s position, but he is also placed in explicit relation to that which exceeds that position. Similarly, Cameron’s exhilaration on the whip ride may be partly based his sense of having escaped Gottschalk’s purview by means of his new access to meaningless narrative, but the

description of that exhilaration emphasizes Gottschalk's role in bringing it about. Moreover, Cameron learns afterward that Gottschalk has viewed the filming from his helicopter, thereby trumping Cameron's celestial positioning: "So [Cameron] had not been in the ascendency after all, but simply a satellite observed from above by the director, who, as usual, dominated everything" (163).

There Is No There There

Despite the revelation on the rooftop that he cannot leave Gottschalk's world, Cameron becomes more and more obsessed with escaping the director's narrative. His concern centers on the film's ending. Cameron's final stunt is to be the one that he interrupted at the beginning of the novel: he will drive a car off the causeway and, presumably, escape. But Gottschalk's interest in ambiguity and the interpenetration of art and life—as well as his proclivity for working aspects of Cameron's own story into the plot of the movie⁵—terrify Cameron, who is now convinced that whether or not he lives will be determined by whether or not the filmic fugitive does. Cameron is given a handbook to help him study the latest techniques for underwater escapes from vehicles, but when he asks for an aqualung, which the handbook authors used for their tests, the director tells him that it "wouldn't be practical for our purposes [...] [i]n terms of the film and its reality" (232). And when, on the morning of the stunt, he finally finds out that the film will close on "a stream of bubbles welling up from the depths, bursting upon the surface of the water, and then dissolving into the effervescing bubbles in a glass of Coke"

⁵ For example, the film fugitive has, over the course of Cameron's tenure as stunt man, evolved from a wrongly accused convict escaped from a police wagon to an army deserter escaped from a work detail to an army deserter who, like Cameron, goes AWOL while in transit between civilian life and boot camp.

being served by the fugitive's smiling love interest who believes (mistakenly, Bruno implies) that he has escaped, Cameron is certain that no one expects him to survive the stunt.

As Cameron plots various ways to get himself and Nina safely across the causeway and headed toward freedom, his preoccupation with the film's ending expands to include a concern with beginnings as well. When their first attempt to get through a police blockade is thwarted and Cameron finds himself seriously considering the murder of a police officer (in yet another doubling of his life and that of the film's fugitive, whom Gottschalk by now conceives as an army deserter whose flight becomes irrevocable when he inadvertently causes the death of a police officer), Cameron starts reflecting on the chain of events that has led him to this moment, trying to find an originary moment for his narrative: "But which of these was first and foremost? the arbitrary withdrawal of his deferment? His subsequent induction? The breakdown of the bus engine? The sergeant's decision to single him out for responsibility? Or could it have been the map that showed the proximity of the sea? There was no way of telling. Who could possibly tell about a game in which everything depended upon the turn of a wheel?" (219).

Like his concern with the film's ending, Cameron's sudden interest in beginnings is a means of delimiting a narrative that seems all-encompassing. Ignoring Gottschalk's professed lack of interest in beginnings and ending, Cameron wants to find a start or an end point to the narrative that he is in—for either would imply that there is an outside for him to get to. Cameron knows on some level that this is a lost cause. His reference to the "turn of the wheel" invokes a circularity that has neither beginning nor end, and he even

admits at one point that there is no point in fretting over starts and finishes when he is so patently enmeshed in a situation that has neither: “But how futile to be thinking in terms of endings when Gottschalk believed only in the kind that were endless [...] Was it possible that his own fate might consist of performing endless stunts [...]?” (226). But Cameron can’t quite bring himself to believe in a narrative with no outside; moments later, as he and Nina drive back into town after being rebuffed at the causeway, he finds himself “somehow relieved” and “not without a certain exhilaration” to be circling back to one of his many beginnings, prepared once more to make another try at an ending: “When the puzzle was completed, he would know everything. Then, if he could only get to the end of the gantlet, might he not escape from purgatory purged?” (227).

For Cameron, in the final analysis, Gottschalk represents the outside that he cannot bring himself to believe the narrative does not have. In Cameron’s every experience with Gottschalk, the director reaffirms his superior point of view, his god’s-eye view of the narrative that Cameron is living. Gottschalk always occupies a higher position than everyone else, commands a better view of the surroundings, has access to a wider panorama. He is forever rising above Cameron, observing Cameron from a literally superior position. Cameron identifies frequently with Gottschalk’s position, but his identification always collapses under its own weight. No matter how high he gets, no matter what perspective he commands—whether he’s on the causeway, on the whip ride, or on the rooftop—Cameron is bested by Gottschalk in his helicopter, who appears high overhead, like a *deus ex machina*, and manipulates the film and its actors to his heart’s content. And Cameron continues to believe that if he can only get to where Gottschalk is—or get to a place where Gottschalk can’t see him—then he will arrive also outside the

narrative, able once more to wield control over his own story. Hence the exhilaration Cameron feels in the brief moments when he thinks he has supplanted Gottschalk—when he dives like Icarus from the railing or swings wildly from the chain of a whip ride or climbs to the highest point on the hotel roof—and his disappointment to find out that Gottschalk is always watching his exploits. And so when Gottschalk tells him that it's "[a] question, you see, of accepting one's multiple roles and the infinite levels of reality by perceiving of the self and everything else in terms of double-exposure to some ultimate power," Cameron believes him and assumes that Gottschalk is that higher power.

Of course, Gottschalk is no more external to the narrative than Cameron is. But just as Binx confuses the camera's focal point with the site of the gaze, Cameron conflates Gottschalk with the site from which the narrator originates. Cameron's conviction that Gottschalk is telling Cameron's own story leads him to believe that this story *emanates* from Gottschalk. Cameron imagines Gottschalk as external to the world he directs and manipulates, and he likewise pictures a narrator who produces a narrative but is not of it. He thereby radically misapprehends the nature of the narrator function, which enacts itself as narrator even as it produces the narrative it purports to narrate.

And like Binx, whose attempts to occupy the site of the gaze result in an endlessly recursive circuit of gazes, Cameron's attempt to remove himself from the narrative results in a proliferation of narratives and narrative positionalities. When he tries to reason his way out of the web of "multiple roles and infinite levels of reality" that Gottschalk manipulations have occasioned, Cameron finds that he only reproduces and expands this web. When, after finding that Gottschalk has rewritten the fugitive's story

to include the murder of a policeman, Cameron is tempted to ensure his own escape by pushing a supervising officer into the river, he finds himself enmeshed in a series of narrative possibilities. Trying figure out why and how he, who had caused an accident but committed no crime, could be tempted to commit a terrible crime to cover up the crime he didn't commit, Cameron gets lost in an endlessly malleable chain of motive and causality. The circumstances of his presence on the causeway having changed (he and Nina were initially going to make a run for safety by pretending to prepare for the next days stunt, but have been thwarted by the chief's insistence that they be accompanied by an officer), Cameron works backwards, trying to find a reason for being there that fits with his failure either to kill the officer or make his escape: "In fact, he might just as well have returned to the bridge under the impulse of the curiosity that is supposed to attend a guilty conscience. Except that one could scarcely return to the scene of the crime if there hadn't been one. Had he returned, then, for some other reason? Out of regret, perhaps, or simply to prove that one could forget the events of a regrettable day? Yes, that must be why [...]" (218-19). In a few short sentences, then, Cameron changes his whole story from one of escape to one of regret, but he gets subsequently lost in a morass of logical inconsistencies that finally end in a choice that indicates what "some part of him had known [all] along," that his actions to date have constituted only "another step on the way to an ending of Gottschalk's choosing" (220). In trying to work his way out of the narrative, then, Cameron only expands its purview, enmeshing himself all the more firmly within it.

His final attempt to usurp Gottschalk's position comes at the very end of the novel. Cameron has inadvertently lived out much of Gottschalk's script, by accidentally

driving a car off the causeway while being pursued by the police, and has been trapped in network of creeks and drainage ditches in the river's estuary. Gottschalk's crew is busy filming the manhunt, as lines of police work their way through the swamp and the helicopter circles overhead, following Cameron's trail through the fens. Intent only on hiding himself from the airborne director's all-seeing eye, Cameron, lamenting at "[h]ow diminished his perspectives had become" (276) tries to go to ground. The helicopter, however, has tracked him down, and looking up "as if at an avenging angel" (278), Cameron sees the director looking back at him. In a final attempt at escape—or else to pull the director down to his level—Cameron leaps for one of the runner skids, and "legs dangling and arms outstretched, Cameron was plucked from the marsh, raised up, and, like Icarus in reverse, lifted higher and higher into the sky in a spiraling flight that led straight toward the midday sun into the hope and despair of whose blinding light he disappeared from sight" (278). Cameron is thus lifted almost literally into Gottschalk's position, even as Gottschalk retains his superior view of Cameron.

To a certain degree, Cameron might be said to have been lifted out of the narrative (or, more precisely, to have expanded the illusion of its framing), but he only does so by disappearing into the blind spot that constituted his own mistaken understanding of Gottschalk's narratorial position. The final words of the novel—"into which he disappeared from sight"—evoke the displaced narrator function that the narrative's construction of Cameron has repeatedly cast onto Gottschalk. In this final phrase, the disappearing narrator suddenly coalesces, produced out of a point of view that is, for the first time, utterly incompatible with Cameron's perspective. In a text that has repeatedly displaced the question of who knows and sees onto its characters and into a

multiplicity of other narratives, the final sentence produces a narrator out of the invocation of the “sight” of a blind spot.

The Stunt Man thus illustrates graphically what *The Moviegoer*’s narrative structure only suggests. Gottschalk, as the delusive sight of the Cameron’s narrative’s origin, operates as a physical enactment of the narrator function. Appearing external to a narrative that has no exterior, appearing as the origin of a narrative without origin, Gottschalk represents the illusory, self-generating phenomenon that is the narrator. The narrator creates itself by staking out an apparent position in relation to its subject, but this position is wholly illusory. The narrator can’t have a position in relation to a character or anything else, because both narrator and character are retroactively created out of their illusory relationship to one another. The narrative of *The Stunt Man* operates according to a principle of displacement and *trompe l’oeil*, which produces the illusion of a narrator by an apparent diversion of the narrator function onto narrating characters.

Cameron’s misreading of Gottschalk’s place in the narrative thus serves as a figure for the tendency of the reader to understand the effects of the narrator function as evidence of a narrating entity that originates and controls the narrative. And *The Stunt Man*’s displacement of its constitutive dynamics (identification and the narrator function) onto structures that partake of a delusory wholeness and continuity (identity and the narrator) can be read as examination of the critical tendencies surrounding analysis of the narrator. The blind spot in *The Stunt Man* is located at the position from which Gottschalk appears to exert mastery and is constituted by Cameron’s belief that when he sees Gottschalk he sees the source of his narrative. Critical discussions of the narrator tend to display this same blind spot. The critical conversation is repeatedly displaced into

the realm of narrative representation or into that of a pre-discursive “reality” (i.e. the author or the act of writing), thereby overlooking precisely the narratorial operation it purports to study. In exposing and unraveling narratorial production, *The Stunt Man* thus serves to anatomize the very critical conversation that claims to scrutinize the narrator.

Conclusion

The reflexive examination of the narrator function afforded by *The Stunt Man* is present, though somewhat less obtrusively, in each of the other texts analyzed in my dissertation. The narrator function in these novels begins to expose itself as textual dynamic, providing a platform from which to launch a critical assessment of the narrator as a retroversive effect of narrative operation. In each of these texts, the deployment of a blind spot identifies the topological place from which the narratively constituted subject relates to the fictional world. As such, the blind spot is present as well in each of the processes by which the subject performs that relation: the dynamics of the gaze, of identification, and of narrative. *Invisible Man* calls attention to the blind spot in the identificatory process, *The Moviegoer* in the structure of the gaze, *The Talented Mr. Ripley* in the conjunction of identification and the gaze, and *The Stunt Man* in the narrative itself.

The presence of these assorted blind spots helps us discern the operation of the narrator function, even as they alert us to the possibility that, as readers, we too suffer a blind spot. By virtue of the effect of retroversion, the illusory narrator appears to have always constituted the site of narrative agency and control. This delusion of mastery and origination is the narrative's blind spot—that which ensures that at the very moments when we see the figure of the narrator most clearly, we are most blind to the operation of the narrator function. This irony is perhaps the true source of the difficulties faced by scholars studying the narrator: we cannot see precisely that which we claim to observe. In our examination of the narrator—both in the creation of typological categories that profess to offer the “truth” about narration and in the impulse to overthrow those

categories—we assert the same kind of mastery displayed by the delusive narrator. This assertion of mastery places us in the blind spot, and, as Shoshana Felman says, to be in the blind spot is “to be blind to one’s own blindness; it is to be unaware of the fact that one occupies a spot *within* the very blindness that one seeks to demystify, that one is in the madness, that one is always, necessarily, in literature; it is to believe that one is on the *outside*, that one *can* be outside: outside of the traps of literature, of the unconscious, or of madness” (199).

My project is by no means immune to this difficulty: I am enmeshed in the very discourse that I would like to demystify. Perhaps unavoidably, I fall into some of the same traps as other critics. In order to talk about the narrator function as a dynamic rather than a representation, for example, I have relied heavily on the interpretation of narrative characters (themselves effects of narrative dynamics) as representations. Almost certainly, my project evinces other blind spots to which I am blind. Nonetheless, I hope that my analysis suggests a way of understanding the narrator that begins to exceed the critical binary into which work on the narrator often falls: the tendency to either take the representational nature of the narrative at face value or to evacuate representation altogether by focusing on the production or interpretation of the text. I have thus tried in my analysis to read the operation of the narrator function in the context of the represented content of the narrative while preserving an awareness of the narrator function as dynamically produced.

My analysis of the narrator function concludes that the textual production of the narrator parallels the psychological production of subjectivity. Lacanian psychoanalysis has therefore been invaluable to my examination of the literary narrator. Lacan’s work is

directed toward producing a methodological understanding of subjectivity's inherent dynamism, rather than toward constructing an analytic framework that one might *apply* to subjectivity. Consequently, Lacanian theory is ideally suited to performing narrative analysis that strives to understand narrative dynamically rather than structurally. The terminology of Lacanian psychoanalysis, then, is able to describe that which the narrative typologies and reader response criticism cannot: the subjectivity that underlies the literary narrator.

The concepts of both narrator and subject turn on the production of knowledge, a knowledge that depends for its constitution on its difference from other knowledge. Thus, the narrator seems to "know" only because the text delimits other ranges of knowledge that are not coterminous with the narrator; this knowledge might be that which is (apparently) possessed by other textual figures or it might be that which is simply excluded from the purview of the narration. In either case, the operation of the narrator function hinges on the production of at least two kinds of knowledge—that which seems to be conveyed by the narrator and that which does not. The illusion of the narrator thus depends as much upon the knowledge that does not seem to "belong" to the narrator as it does upon that knowledge that only a narrating entity could know. Thus, the illusory narrator of *The Talented Mr. Ripley* is constituted as much by Tom's knowledge of his own emotional and mental states as it is by the occasional moment in which the narration conveys something of which Tom is not conscious. Both ranges of knowledge are constituted by their simultaneous existence and (apparent) mutual exclusion. That is, they emerge from the dissonance and difference inherent in the language that produces them.

Subjectivity is produced in much the same way. The narrator seems to be the originary site of some kinds of knowledge, even as its apparent coherence depends on the existence of other, inaccessible knowledge. Similarly, the subject is retroactively produced as the site of self-knowledge (consciousness) by the existence of an external inaccessible knowledge (the unconscious). Like the narrator, which emerges from the tonal dissonance of the language that creates it, the subject is produced in and out of the distinction between self and other. And as does the narrator, the subject appears retroactively as the site from which knowledge emanates. It can hardly be a surprise, then, that the mid-century texts examined in this dissertation—all of which demonstrate a particular interest in deconstructing the narrator function—also exhibit a recurring fascination with subjectivity and the portrayal of subjects deeply invested in thinking about their own subjectivity. As my analysis concludes, the multifarious dynamics at work in these novels—identification, the gaze, subjectivity, the narrator—all exhibit the same retroversive effect: the illusory point of origin is constituted as origin by that which appears to originate from it.

Indeed, this retroversive construction of an illusory origin might well be the constitutive dynamic of narrative itself. In many ways, narrative produces nothing but a recursive chain of potential sites of origin, none of which quite satisfy. Just as we can debate over whether the opening word, sentence, paragraph or chapter constitutes the “beginning” of a novel, or whether a novel’s discourse originates with the language of the narrator or the implied author or the actual author, so too does narrative seem to suggest multiple origins for narrative meaning: in the author, in the text, in the reader, in the interpretation, in the context. This continual posing of the question of origin strikes me

as a hallmark of narrative, one that emerges from the very dynamics by which narrative operates. In any reading, we assume that there is always an earlier origin to be found, an (apparently) pre-existing site or entity to which we can attribute the productive impetus. These productive sites (text, narrator, narrator function, narrative, subject, author, reader, etc.) comprise a daisy chain of attributions that circle around an absent center—creating from nothing a narrative that appears as a site of origin. The operation of narrative is thus characterized by its tendency to obscure the fact that the text has no origin.

The reader's need to locate an illusory origin appears inescapable, as the persistence of the literary blind spot attests. The blind spot is what we fail to see when we misrecognize something as the site of origin. The narrator as blind spot thus marks our failure to see that the narrator is not the site from which the narrative emanates. Similarly the subject's blind spot is always the subject itself; as subjects, we can never see ourselves, yet our own consciousness gives us cause to misrecognize the self as the site from which that consciousness emanates.

The homologous dynamics of the subjectivity and the narrator function enable the persistent collapsing of the two that literary criticism (with only partial success) sets itself to combat. The changing status of the narrator in literature from the 1950s onward both interrogates and exacerbates this collapse. The rise of the New Journalism in the 1960s, including the publication of such works of literary journalism as Truman Capote's *In Cold Blood*, places the narrator at the center of cultural debates about fiction and non-fiction. If the narrator is a hallmark of fictional narrative, then what are we to do with ostensibly non-fictional texts—like Capote's—that seem to possess a narrator? Quite often, the tendency seems to be to collapse the narrator and the author into one entity: the

author's real-world existence is thus treated as a guarantor for the facticity of the fictional narrator.

This tendency has been pushed to the extreme in recent years, which have seen a number of authors criticized as fraudulent. In memoirs and autobiographical novels, the divergence of the fictionalized accounts from the facts of what “really” happened exposes the fundamental distinction between author and narrator—and the public often reacts with outrage. Most famous of these literary unmaskings is probably Oprah Winfrey’s 2006 upbraiding of writer James Frey for his memoir *A Million Little Pieces*, which portrayed events that were either fiction or falsehoods, depending on the perspective. The furor over Frey’s book, which he had written as a novel but which his publishers had marketed as a memoir, brought to a crescendo a national debate over how true a memoir has to be. The prevailing wisdom, typified by Oprah and her irate book club members, was that a memoir should be factual—which is to say, the (fictional) narrator of a memoir ought to have undergone demonstrably the same experiences as its (real-life) author.¹

The furor over *A Million Little Pieces* might be chalked up to its status as memoir, were it not for the career of J.T. LeRoy, which imploded right around the same time. LeRoy had written several novels—lauded for the gritty realism of their depiction of life on the streets—about his experiences as a runaway and transgendered child prostitute. In 2005, LeRoy was exposed as the fabrication of Laura Albert, 39-year old mother, who had written LeRoy’s novels, corresponded in his name with agents, publishers, writers, and celebrities, and arranged for a friend to impersonate LeRoy at public events. Like Frey, Albert was roundly castigated for having broken some sort of contract with the

¹ For an overview of the Frey debacle, see Evgenia Peretz’s “James Frey’s Morning After.”

reading public—for having aided and abetted her readers in their desire to conflate author and character.²

Such a conflation is enabled by the similarity between the production of subjectivity and the production of the narrator. Because the narrator is produced by the same dynamic as subjectivity, it is all too easy to collapse the distinction between a real-world subject and a fictionally-produced narrator. Many of the novels of the mid-twentieth century encourage such conflation: Henry Miller, Jack Kerouac and Norman Mailer, for example, all wrote novels that were explicitly autobiographical. All three men, moreover, were enmeshed in particularly twentieth-century cults of personality and masculinity that, to this day, tend to overshadow criticism of their work. Biographical criticism of all three authors holds sway: even serious attempts to examine their novels as literature tend to be sidetracked into discussion of their work in relation to their public personas and private lives. Mid-century novels like those of Ellison, Percy, Highsmith, and Brodeur, which are more traditionally fictional, betray the same incipient interest in the status of the narrator and awareness of the slippery subjectivity that surrounds the narrator function.

While the subjective dynamic of the narrator can promote the collapse of the real-world subjects into fictional narrators, it also suggests a new way of understanding the relationship between readers and texts. One of the enduring mysteries of literature is how readers are able to take characters and narrators to be analogous to actual people—generally without thinking twice about it. Theorists have floated various explanations of this tendency—including a variety of cognitive, interpretive, and psychological models.

² See Stephen Beachy's "Who Is the Real JT LeRoy?" for more on the elaborate layers of illusion and multiple identities surrounding the LeRoy persona.

Many of these models turn on some notion of identification, but it is generally an understanding of identification predicated on some shared quality or desire that the reader recognizes in the represented content of the narrative. To understand the narrator as possessing the same dynamic structure as the reading subject, however, suggests an alternative model of reader engagement with narrative. Instead of responding to literary representation, it may well be that what readers recognize in the narrative is their own subjectivity. We might then understand reading not as an interpretative or cognitive exercise, but as an intersubjective relationship.

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