Laughter and Madness
in Post-war American Fiction

by

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Declaration

This thesis is entirely the work of the author and is intended only for submission in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in English Literature at Warwick University. None of the material included in this thesis has been published elsewhere.
Abstract

Two philosophical positions seem evident in post-war American fiction: one realist, one anti-realist. Using the terms ‘revelation’ and ‘apocalypse’ to reflect the former, and ‘entropy’ the latter, this thesis proposes that distinctions between the two can be made by analysis of a text’s treatment of the nexus between laughter and madness.

After an Overview that identifies and defines key terms, the Introduction considers various theoretical treatments of laughter from which its function can be ascertained as being both to reinforce stability within social groups and to explore new alternatives to existing modes of thought. Madness being defined as an inability to balance the opposing forces of system and anti-system, laughter is therefore vital to maintain sanity. The Fool emerges as a crucial figure in this process.

Chapter One explores, with reference to Heller’s *Catch-22*, Kesey’s *One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest* and Kerouac’s *On The Road*, the Laughter of Revelation: a laughing relationship between a Protagonist who is trapped within the system of an Institution and a Fool who communicates to the Protagonist (through laughter) a means of escape. Chapter Two then discusses, with reference to Blatty’s *The Exorcist*, King’s *It*, Morrison’s *Sula*, and Nabokov’s *Lolita*, the Laughter of Apocalypse: a laughing relationship in which the Fool’s laughter (as mockery) is potentially destructive of both the Protagonist’s sanity and the stability of the Institution. Chapter Three explores, with reference to Vonnegut’s *Slaughterhouse-5*, Ellis’s *American Psycho*, and Heller’s *Closing Time*, the Laughter of Entropy: the failure of the laughing relationship that obtains when the dialectic between Institution (as system) and Fool (as anti-system) collapses.

The concluding remarks reflect the metafictional implications of the foregoing analyses. It is suggested that, with the collapse of this dialectic (expressed by the Laughter of Entropy), the traditional relationship between Author and Reader becomes problematic.
Abbreviations

After initial footnotes in which the full publication details are given, subsequent references to the primary texts are cited within the body of the thesis as follows:

C-22 Catch-22
CN One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest
OR On The Road
Ex The Exorcist
It It
Su Sula
Lo Lolita
S-5 Slaughterhouse-5
AP American Psycho
CT Closing Time
OVERVIEW

The soul is the perceiver and revealer of truth. We know truth when we see it, let skeptic and scoffer say what they choose. Foolish people ask you, when you have spoken what they do not wish to hear, 'How do you know it is truth, and not an error of your own?' We know truth when we see it, from opinion, as we know when we are awake that we are awake [...]. In the book I read, the good thought returns to me, as every truth will, the image of the whole soul. To the bad thought which I find in it, the same soul becomes a discerning, separating sword, and lops it away. We are wiser than we know.¹

American literature has a history of focusing the cultural and philosophical concerns of its European counterpart. Ideas whose origins are in other countries are rapidly incorporated into American culture and appear with extraordinary clarity in its literature. The sense of Man's 'manifest destiny' to control and organise the material world that dominated nineteenth-century America, for example, is indicative of an abiding confidence in the view of a human-centred universe whose truths are accessible and meaningful. This post-enlightenment view is reflected even in the essentially anti-materialistic thought of Transcendentalists such as Emerson, whose confidence in a clear, structured metaphysical world from which we can learn and grow is evident in the quotation that begins this overview. Both attitudes, the materialistic and the spiritual, are essentially realist (in the philosophical rather than the literary sense) in that they display the same confidence in the existence and accessibility of a 'world as it exists in itself', independent of human perception and thought, leading to a feeling of being a part (some would say, the most important part) of a much larger, but still coherent, system.

¹ Ralph Waldo Emerson, 'The Over-Soul', in Self-Reliance and Other Essays (New York: Dover, 1993), pp. 51-64 (p. 57).
In America as in Europe, however, this confidence has become increasingly unsteady as ever more violent social upheavals, coinciding with a widespread loss of faith in the dogma of established religion and the linearity of established science, have led to the development of a world view that doubts the existence not only of a coherent external reality, but even of the self. The move from humanism to solipsism to nihilism, from a trust in cosmos to an embracing of chaos, is reflected in American literature, especially in novels published since the Second World War, where all these world views appear in the work of different authors within a relatively short space of time.

A popular method for exploring such large philosophical issues in fiction is to examine the latter’s representation of madness. What is seen to be mad shifts as the cultural world view shifts, instances of madness in literature thereby providing clues to the underlying assumptions that inform them. Of particular interest in this context is the role that laughter plays in association with madness. By analysing the form that this laughter takes (who is laughing, and about what?) it is possible to reveal the dynamics that occur among diverse and often competing representations of madness in a given text, from which conclusions about that text’s position on fundamental philosophical questions can be drawn. It should be noted here that I shall be dealing exclusively with the overt occurrence of laughter in the text, rather than with the issue of whether or not a given work is ‘funny’. Although a great deal of critical thought has been applied to such notions as the social function of literary comedy or the psychology of, for example, wit and irony, these issues are treated as having only peripheral relevance to the main argument of this thesis.

Madness is, of course, a perennial theme not just in American literature but in all literatures, and throughout the history of storytelling. Laughter also is a word of
such widespread, indeed invasive, occurrence and multiplicity of meaning that it may
in itself seem either mad or laughable to try to combine the two in a limited arena. It
should therefore come as no surprise that I shall be talking here about specific uses of
these terms, and, more importantly, about a particular relationship between the two
that, I shall argue, sheds light on some of the major phenomena of post-war
American fiction. I make no claims for a complete exposition of the many theories,
psychological, social, or literary, that involve questions of sanity or laughter,
although I shall indicate relevant source materials where questions of space or clarity
forbid more lengthy description. This is especially true of theories relating to
madness, since the primary focus of attention in this thesis is laughter. Neither do I
make any claims for the relationship I suggest being unique to the chosen place or
period. Nevertheless, I will show by the analysis of several post-war novels that
American literature in the last half of the twentieth century deals with longstanding
questions in a unique way.

To give context and structure to the treatment of this relationship between
laughter and madness, it is necessary to clarify certain key terms that will recur
throughout this thesis: ‘revelation’, ‘apocalypse’ and ‘entropy’. David Ketterer notes
the frequent occurrence of biblical imagery in American literature, citing R.W.B.
Lewis and Charles Feidelson Jr. as providing the authoritative texts on the theme of
an American Adam inhabiting ‘an unfallen Eden in the New World’.² Feidelson in
particular deals with the theme in terms of the influence of Puritan thought which led

² 'The Apocalyptic Imagination, Science Fiction, and American Literature', in New Worlds for Old,
David Ketterer (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1974), pp. 3-14 (p. 3); Lewis, The
American Adam: Innocence, Tragedy, and Tradition in the Nineteenth Century (Chicago: University
of Chicago Press, 1955); Feidelson, Symbolism and American Literature (Chicago: University of
in the nineteenth century to the confidence in manifest destiny mentioned above. As America proved not to be the Promised Land anticipated by the original Christian settlers, however, other books of the bible began to seem more appropriate as source material for its literature. Exodus, for example, provides a convenient parallel for the increasing number of Americans who feel disadvantaged or marginalised, while, particularly since the country's Civil War, American literature has abounded with Christ-figures (Ketterer, pp. 3-4).

Increasingly, as Ketterer notes, it is the Revelation of St John the Divine that has become the primary biblical source-text. While 'shades of the Apocalypse have colored literature at least from Chaucer onward' it is in twentieth-century America, and especially under the threat of modern global warfare, that the theme appears as a regular and persistent influence (Ketterer, p. 4). The Greek word *apokalupsis*, which provides an alternative title for the Book of Revelation, is defined by T.F. Glasson as implying 'an unveiling, either, (a) of future events, or (b) of the unseen realms of heaven and hell'. In this book St John experiences a series of visions that reveal to him the future of the world, in which plagues and disasters herald the three-and-a-half-year reign of the Antichrist. Following the defeat of Satan by Christ at the battle of Armageddon, a thousand-year period of heaven on earth takes place (the millennium), after which, during the brief reappearance of Satan, the world is destroyed by fire and the Last Judgement occurs. With chaos ended, a new heaven and a new earth appear (the 'new Jerusalem').

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3 Introductory to *The Revelation of John*, ed. by T.F. Glasson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1965), p. 1. It should be noted that while St John's is the most fully realised version of the myth, it is simply the best known of a large number of similar works, many of them pre-Christian in origin (see Ketterer, p. 5).
Clearly, then, the original myth (of which St John’s is the best-known version) involves the idea of the apprehension of destruction and regeneration as part of an ongoing process (as do, for example, Egyptian and Norse mythologies). However, while the two words describe the same mythical events or processes, they have become separated in the popular imagination, so that ‘revelation’ has come to mean simply an enlightening experience of a positive, creative, sort, while ‘apocalypse’ is almost invariably considered to be synonymous with ‘catastrophe’ (see Ketterer, p. 7). While I shall (in Chapters One and Two respectively) consider revelation and apocalypse in a way that reflects these popular usages, underlying this treatment of the two as separate terms is the recognition that they are, at root, the same. Functioning as different aspects of the same eternal cycle, both concern the apprehension of a truth, thereby reflecting the realist position that such truths exist independently of Mankind and are accessible to human thought. As Ketterer says, ‘the term apocalyptic allows for a dialectic, conflict, or tension of oppositations – and a dialectic, conflict, or tension of opposites is the stuff of literature’, seeing this as part of ‘a larger American literary dialectic, such as that abrupt oscillation between the pragmatic or the material and the speculative or the transcendental’ (Ketterer, pp. 7-8).

Several critics, a large proportion of whom are concerned with analyses of American literature, employ the idea of apocalypse, and they too show a tendency to take the word in either its positive or its negative aspect. Those critics who argue from the positive position include William Blake, Ralph Waldo Emerson, Northrop Frye and Frank Kermode. As Ketterer argues, ‘the American and French revolutions were interpreted [by many] as the premillennial upheavals prophesied in the Apocalypse’, and therefore heralded not ‘catastrophe but […] triumphant social
transformation' (Ketterer, p. 10). Blake’s philosophy, for example, portrays ‘what M.H. Abrams has termed “apocalypses of imagination” that celebrate a compensatory grand new world’, while Emerson uses the analogous term, ‘the apocalypse of the mind’ in *Nature* (Ketterer, p. 10). Frye presents three archetypal images for the apocalyptic world – the city of Jerusalem, the Arcadian garden, and the sheepfold – which are set against the demonic (i.e. negative) world of ‘dark cities, forests and wastelands, and beasts’ (Ketterer, p. 11). Kermode, whom Ketterer considers to provide the ‘ultimate extension of the positive implications of the term apocalyptic’, argues that ‘throughout recorded time man has always thought of his own age as the dark before the dawn’ (Ketterer, p. 11).

More often, however, perhaps because of ‘the popular equation of the apocalyptic with the catastrophic’, critics have had a tendency to apply a negative connotation to the term (Ketterer, p. 7). Among these are D.H. Lawrence, who ‘sees the Revelation quite simply as the product of the spiteful wish fulfillment of the underprivileged’, Alvin Kernan and R.W.B. Lewis, who see apocalypse in terms of satire, and Ihab Hassan, whose interpretation is so negative as to equate apocalyptic

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literature with what he calls 'the literature of silence' (Ketterer, pp. 8-9). As Ketterer describes it, Hassan’s argument is that

    apocalyptic or silent literature [...] involves a sense of outrage at the void and an expression of the nullity or chaotic fragmentation of human experience. The ultimate critical negative extension of the word apocalyptic, then, connotes chaos or non-meaning. (Ketterer, pp. 9-10)

This argument actually has more in common with the third (or, taking revelation and apocalypse to reflect the same outlook, the second) position to be examined in this thesis; that is, entropy. The term originally derives from the second law of thermodynamics, proposed in the nineteenth-century by French engineer Sadi Carnot and later developed by German mathematician and physicist Rudolf Clausius. This law concerns ‘the irreversibility of processes’, and states that ‘it is impossible to produce work by transferring heat from a cold body to a hot body in any self-sustaining process’. The result of this inability of heat (energy) to pass from a cold to a hotter body is a gradual, and inexorable, cooling of the system, until it is in a state of total stasis and disorder (work being obtainable only from order). In other words, heat will eventually become uniformly distributed across the system with the result that, on the one hand, change is no longer possible (thus the system is static) and on the other, that complex structures, being the product of exchanges of energy, can no longer exist (thus the system is disordered). Entropy being a measure of the disorder

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of any given system, the argument is thus that, in any organised structure, entropy will always increase (see *Modern Thought*, p. 275, p. 378). Taken to its logical conclusion, this concept has been interpreted as suggesting that the universe as a whole (which, being infinite, must act as a closed and self-sustaining system), will therefore, eventually, become both static and disordered. Obviously, this theory is completely at odds with the regenerative, constantly cycling view to be found in religious mythology, and the word has come to be used in more general terms to express the idea that all things are coming to an irrevocable end. Once a system is static, it will exist in this state indefinitely providing no new energy is introduced, so that ‘end’ in this context means the end of work, of the creation of complex structures, rather than the actual destruction of any matter.

Many contemporary thinkers seem to employ the idea of entropy in their interpretation of the human condition, suggesting that this combined state of stasis and disorder, rather than being the result of a teleological process, is an ever-present predicament that renders human endeavour exhausted (in the sense that John Barth uses the term). The years after World War Two produced a large number of books from many different disciplines that reflect this view. In 1959, Henry Farnham May wrote of *The End of American Innocence*, Daniel Bell wrote of *The End of Ideology* in 1960, while Martin Heidegger wrote of *The End of Philosophy* in 1973.

This sense of ending, of everything tending towards total disorder, leads in turn to the view that life is ultimately chaotic and meaningless, in much the way that Hassan’s argument describes. It seems significant that such a theory should arise, and catch the public imagination, at just the moment that confidence in an ordered universe is crumbling. Moreover, because of the theory’s basis in the behaviour of closed systems, it has proved a popular analogy to describe the results of a loss of
faith in the existence of a meaningful external reality, beyond the ‘self-sustaining process’ of individual thought.

Using the terms ‘revelation’, ‘apocalypse’ and ‘entropy’ as a theoretical framework, I shall initially take a realist position and define madness as being loss of balance, or, to put it another way, the inability to recognise or accept the continuous cycle that, overall, maintains balance between cosmos and chaos, between system and anti-system. Madness can therefore be described as follows: from the perspective of the individual, a mad personality is one in which either the impulsive, unstructured anti-system or the rule-based, structured system holds sway, to the detriment of the personality as a whole. In the former instance this might appear in the form of uncontrolled, frenetic behaviour, in the latter as obsessive repetition of a pattern or act. Similarly, from the social perspective, a mad society is one fallen entirely into anarchy or one in which the controlling conventions are so strong as to prevent change. Both extremes, from both perspectives, lead to stasis, either through there being so rigid a structure that no movement is possible or through there being no structure at all, giving no point from which to move in any meaningful direction.

Where the concept of an independently existing reality becomes important, in this model, is in the means by which balance or orientation may be regained. Seeing solipsism as essentially a closed system (and thus static), and nihilism as a chaotic anti-system (and thus disordered), this realist definition of madness suggests that transcendence of the self, or of the conventions of society, is essential to balance, to sanity. I shall analyse examples in literature of unbalanced personalities who, through a relationship with a character who exceeds norms of behaviour and offers new perspectives. new truths, are enabled to develop in a meaningful way.
In the Introduction, with this framework in mind, I shall outline the various theories that have been put forward over the centuries to explain the phenomenon of laughter. I shall argue that there are two basic approaches to laughter, one primarily social, the other conceptual. The first concerns collective behaviour and pertains to such issues as group identity, bonding, and group defence. The second deals more with the way the individual sees the world and is affected by it, and encompasses issues such as incongruity and ambivalence. In both cases, I shall argue, laughter serves an essentially orientating function, helping individuals to maintain balance within themselves and find their place in either community or universe. Clearly, then, laughter is closely linked to madness as it is defined above.

Of particular importance in this context is the laughter of the Fool. Being dependent on society while at the same time exceeding its norms, the Fool has both access to new truths and the means of communicating them to others, thereby serving as the main orientating force. It will be suggested that, in this, the Fool has much in common with the Artist, conceived of as one whose independence from convention enables him or her to see things as they really are, unmediated by everyday constraints. The social nature of laughter is essential to this, as it is through shared laughter (what I shall call a ‘laughing relationship’) that such truths are communicated. As I shall discuss in the Introduction, the Fool may take many forms, some creative, some destructive. To explore this idea further, I identify two types of laughing relationship, Laughter of Revelation and Laughter of Apocalypse, which I shall examine in Chapters One and Two. The Introduction, therefore, serves a double purpose. First, it sets out the background material relevant to the analysis (in Chapters One and Two) of texts that support, through their use of laughter, a realist
stance. Second, it identifies issues that distinguish the crucial differences between these texts and those that suggest an entropic outlook (analysed in Chapter Three).

In Chapter One I shall look at three examples of a relationship where a character, trapped within the conventions of a society that are shown to be inhibitory to or destructive of the self, is shown a way out by the laughter of a Fool. This laughter provides a sudden insight into an alternative way of seeing the world, and to this end I shall refer to it as the Laughter of Revelation. In all three instances the emphasis is on escape from rather than destruction of society (although the escape in itself serves to undermine its control), and Laughter of Revelation can therefore be seen as expressing the idea of transcendence as an open system that encourages creativity and growth. While the parallel between the Fool and the Artist is clear in these examples, an alternative view of the Artist as Author appears that concerns the teller of the Fool’s tale. The character whose escape is facilitated by the Fool’s example, in two out of the three novels under discussion in Chapter One, is the narrator, suggesting that the telling is at least of equal significance to the revelation itself.

In Chapter Two I shall explore examples of a laughing relationship in which the Fool is destructive rather than creative. Here the Fool is a direct threat both to society and to the individual, his or her laugh occurring in the form of mockery, and the laughter response is defensive or protective. Revelation is still important, but in these examples the revelation is typically that of characters’ own weaknesses, fear or guilt. The Fool as demon tries, by the mockery of these hidden weaknesses, to destroy both individual sanity and a sense of community, and it is only when characters are able to accept responsibility, defeating the Fool’s destructive intent, that they are able to escape his or her influence. The demonic Fool also acts as a
personification of a society's sins, so that, in destroying the Fool, that society is cleansed. This, then, I shall call the Laughter of Apocalypse, in that it describes transcendence in terms of the destruction of a corrupt or static system in order, ultimately, to create a better world. Again, the parallel between the Fool and the Artist is apparent, particularly if one thinks in terms of the function of satire (which, as we have seen above, is how both Kernan and Lewis use the term 'apocalypse'). By breaking taboos and mocking hidden transgressions, the Fool functions, as does the satirist, rather to stabilise than to undermine society. Again, however, there exists an alternative depiction of the Artist as analogous to those characters who confront the Fool as demon and 'survive to tell the tale'.

The fundamental quality of both the Laughter of Revelation and the Laughter of Apocalypse is that they form a relationship between two (or more) vital characters. Chapter Three explores examples of novels that contain both laughter and potential Fools, but without the essential 'laughing relationship'. Where this relationship is absent, even if the other conditions I describe are present in a text, neither revelation nor apocalypse is achievable. Without the moment of epiphany that a fully realised laughing relationship achieves, in examples such as these either circularity or ambiguity emerges, both of which lack the sense of resolution that the reader may expect from a narrative. This result is analogous to the theoretical result of entropy; without the introduction of a new element into the system (in this case, the laughter of a Fool), the narrative as system becomes either static (circling indefinitely) or disordered (ambiguous and therefore without a coherent conclusion). The failure of the laughing relationship, I shall argue, indicates an underlying conviction that existence within an external reality, and even communication with an 'other', is no longer possible in any meaningful way.
The abortive or solipsistic laughter that appears in these works produces, I shall argue, the fiction that has been called Black Humour, and I shall therefore deal with this topic in Chapter Three rather than in the discussion of laughter theories in the Introduction. Given the extremely varied and often contradictory critical treatments of this subject, I shall suggest a more precise term to describe such literature: ‘Laughter of Entropy’. While many theorists use the term ‘Black Humour’ to describe literature that is, in effect, an extreme form of satire (and is, therefore, a form of Laughter of Apocalypse), Laughter of Entropy more specifically indicates the feeling of ‘things coming (or come) to an end’ that is diametrically opposed to either revelation or apocalypse as I describe them. Again it should be noted that ‘end’ here involves a final state from which no further change is possible. Although a closed system could continue to circle in its meaningless way forever, it produces nothing new, no creativity is possible. In making this distinction, I shall, incidentally, be arguing that many texts of this period that have traditionally appeared in anthologies of Black Humour do not belong there.

Another important effect of entropic texts is that they themselves function as closed systems; their lack of an ending or feeling of closure, in the traditional sense, disrupts the reader’s expectations. Having suggested an analogy between the roles of the Fool and the Artist in respect to the Laughter of Revelation and the Laughter of Apocalypse, I will propose that entropic literature seems to destabilise this analogy by dismantling not only the textual relationship between the Fool and another character, but also the traditional relationship between the (implied) author and the (implied) reader.

This metafictional result of the failure of the laughing relationship raises the question of the status of the role of Author in recent literature as a whole. The
traditional realist position – illustrated by Emerson’s confidence in ‘the book I read’ – provides no appropriate means to approach such texts, except negatively, and I will thus consider in the Conclusion to this thesis whether entropic literature is merely a negation of previous novelistic forms, or whether a new way of reading, a new relationship with the author that reflects the implied change in world view, is necessary to understand these novels.
INTRODUCTION

In the Overview I outlined the proposal that by analysing the nexus between laughter and madness as it appears in a novel it is possible to determine some of the fundamental philosophical assumptions that that novel represents. In this Introduction I shall look in more detail at some of the theories that have been put forward to explain laughter, in particular its combination with madness in the figure of the Fool. Two aspects of the Fool emerge, each with a separate function, highlighting an intrinsic ambivalence which is an important aspect of the Fool as a fictional character. While from the social perspective the Fool is described in terms of social control, in that by breaking rules he or she may only serve to reinforce them, from the individual perspective this figure represents, by example, the possibility of escape from the closed system of society's conventions. The two manifestations of the type, one acting as an agent of stability, the other as an agent of change, will be designated as 'Made Fool' and 'Transcendent Fool' respectively, although it should be noted that these designations are invariably externally derived interpretations of the same character (in other words, they are a function of how others see him or her). It will be argued that the Fool, by virtue of the potential expressed by his or her laughter, is a creative force, finding and communicating new ways of seeing the world. In this essentially realist model, it is proposed that the creative role of the Fool takes place through a process of enlightenment, in that a character who is at first perceived as a Made Fool (in other words, as having a place and function solely within the conventions of society) is gradually revealed to have access to truths that transcend those conventions. It is in the communication of these new truths to someone who is in a position to understand and accept them that the Fool reveals his or her
transcendence. The character with whom the Fool communicates in this way thus acts as a Protagonist, in the discrete sense of being an advocate or champion (rather than in the more general literary sense). The notion of balance between system and anti-system that I briefly discussed in the Overview can therefore only be achieved by a relationship between a character who transcends society's norms (a Fool) and a character who functions within society, but is aware that other possibilities may exist (a Protagonist).

From the analyses of theories of laughter I shall then draw together the common threads to propose definitions of two laughing relationships that exist in the novels to be discussed in Chapters One and Two between a Fool and a Protagonist: Laughter of Revelation and Laughter of Apocalypse. These definitions rely on the proposal that madness constitutes a loss of balance between the opposing influences of system and anti-system.

Theories of Laughter

For more than two millennia laughter has been the subject of heated debate, on grounds ranging from the evolutionary to the moral, and from the physiological to the literary. To identify the key elements that are common to these various approaches I shall briefly describe laughter within three frameworks in turn; the biological, the individual and the social.

Jonathan Miller, as president of 'Section X' at the 1987 British Association for the Advancement of Science Annual Meeting, introduced the theme of humour by considering it as a biological process. Comparing laughter to a cough or sneeze he says that
laughter is involuntary in the sense that we cannot start it, even though we can stop it. Laughter has to be started by putting oneself in a situation where the stimulus is provided. But the stimulus to laughter is not like the stimulus to sneeze. We do not have to be in a frame of mind in order to sneeze, we simply have to have our noses tickled. But a frame of mind is required for laughter. This is because laughter is a ‘top-down’ concept; in other words, it comes from higher, cognitive levels of the nervous system, as opposed to the other involuntary actions which attack the nervous system from the ‘bottom up’.

Evidence for the origins of laughter being sited in the ‘higher’ levels of the brain can be found in the case of a severely epileptic patient, Autumn Deaton, who underwent treatment in a Los Angeles hospital in 1998. Neurologist Itzhak Fried discovered when investigating her brain functions that when a particular part of her cerebral cortex was stimulated, she began to laugh. Moreover, he found that this was not simply a motor response since Autumn was, evidently, actually amused, and, when asked why she was laughing, was able to provide (albeit rather odd-sounding) rationalisations for her laughter.

The theory that Miller develops from his observation is a convincing one. Briefly put, he considers that ‘the value of humour may lie in the fact that it involves the rehearsal of alternative categories and classifications of the world in which we find ourselves’ (Miller, p. 11). In other words, humour enables us to practice flexibility in our conceptions about the world, an invaluable skill and one which is an essential quality of the adaptability of the human species. He continues,

when we conduct our ordinary business in the world, our practical affairs, we deal with things for the most part by rule of thumb; we mediate our

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relationships with one another through a series of categories and concepts which are sufficiently stable to enable us to go about our business fairly successfully. But if we were rigidly locked on to these categories and concepts, if we were inflexibly attached to them, we would not continue to be a successful, productive and above all socially cooperative species. (Miller, pp. 11-12)

In this he closely follows the arguments of Henri Bergson (1911), who considers that the appreciation of humour is necessarily human and essentially social. Bergson argues that not only are objects only laughable in so far as they remind us of something human, we laugh at people who behave like objects, in that they have failed to adapt to a new situation, or are (as Miller puts it)

in situations where they revert to a more automatic type of behaviour. When the herd observes a reduction in the versatility and flexibility of one of its members, it goes through loud respiratory convulsions which as it were ask the offending individual to 'pull its socks up'. A less flexible, less versatile individual endangers the biological integrity of the herd; and so the herd acts to protect itself. (Miller, p. 10)

Appealing as this argument may be, Miller’s description of laughter as a wholly ‘top-down’ reaction is misleading, and the reason why is implicit in his emphasis on social co-operation. His analysis relies on siting the initiation of laughter in the cognitive regions of the brain, which, in evolutionary terms, have developed relatively recently, yet there is strong evidence to suggest that we have been a socially co-operative species, and that laughter has formed an essential part of this, for far longer. Charles Darwin (1872) points out that there is a pattern to laughter that easily distinguishes it from a snarl of aggression or cry of distress.¹ Recent research by Robert Provine, a developmental neuroscientist, takes up this observation and,

treats laughter like any other animal 'call', looks for consistent patterns by analysing it electronically (Horizon). He has found that laughter always follows a sequence of repeated, short bursts of noise ('ha-ha-ha', or 'ho-ho-ho'), different from the more drawn-out noise made, for example, by crying (of course, this involves a degree of judgement about what constitutes a short or a long noise; as I discuss later, the precise demarcation between laughing and crying is not so clear-cut as this).

If laughter is an ancient social response, it would seem reasonable to look for evidence of its occurrence in other social mammals. Following this logic, Jaak Panksepp, another neuroscientist, has used high-frequency apparatus to record the noises that rats make and discovered that, when they are tickled, the result is exactly the same pattern of short bursts of noise (Horizon). From this he argues that there exists a primitive laughter that is an ancient response, common to all social mammals. This apparently contradicts Miller's assessment (after Bergson) that laughter is produced in the cognitive regions of the brain, these being unique to human beings so that laughter, too, should be unique to our own species.

Provine, having produced the evidence that laughter is a distinct 'call' in his laboratory, then went on to study laughter 'in the field', approaching groups of people in social situations and asking them what they were laughing about. He found that no-one he interviewed really knew why they were laughing, and when asked, they applied just such rationalisations to their behaviour as Autumn Deaton did when her cerebral cortex was stimulated. People, he discovered, laugh as part of social intercourse, very rarely at actual 'jokes' (Horizon). The public, visible and audible nature of laughter has been used to support this view that laughter is primarily to do with social interaction. It has been noticed that laughter is contagious and that eye contact is an important element of it. It has also been asserted that people rarely
laugh alone; J.Y.T. Greig (1923), for example, argues that even in small children, laughter only occurs when ‘some person is near and is apparently noticed by the infant’.

Miller mentions two examples of laughter which would be described in his terms as ‘bottom up’; giggling at a funeral and being tickled. Laughter at a funeral, he says, deserves social approbation because it is preventable, while laughing because one is tickled is merely mentioned then discounted on the grounds that the experience is not necessarily pleasurable and therefore has nothing to do with ‘real’ laughter (Miller, p. 7). Laughter as a reaction to emotional discomfort (as when facing death in the ritualised form of a funeral) is a subject I shall return to in a moment; first it is important to say something more about the activity of tickling. Many theorists have noted the importance of tickling as a form of play between adults and young children (for example, David Hartley (1749), Charles Darwin (1872), Harald Höfßding (1891), Stanley Hall and Arthur Allin (1897), James Sully (1902), J.Y.T. Greig (1923)).

Roughly, the arguments trace the following pattern: laughter initially, and instinctively, occurs as an expression of pleasure at the satisfaction of a physical need, most obviously the satisfaction of hunger during breast-feeding, but also at the feeling of safety and comfort of being held by the mother. This response to a tactile stimulus then develops as a way of forming more general social relationships. Different from, for example, cuddling, tickling is a form of physical contact which could be threatening and must therefore be performed in such a way that the child comes to recognise it not as attack but as bonding. The distinct sound that laughter makes,

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4 The Psychology of Laughter and Comedy (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1923), p. 30. It should also be noted that in those rare situations where adults do laugh alone, they have a tendency to construct a social context in which an ‘other’ is implied.
together with its accompanying facial expressions, is learned by the child to indicate that the person tickling him or her means no harm, and the child in turn learns to laugh back to indicate that he or she knows this. The possibility of threat is, however, an essential element of tickling, as it serves both as a safe rehearsal of real fighting (which may prove an invaluable skill as the child grows up), and as a way for children to establish their place in the social hierarchy (in that it is clear that an adult could hurt a child, but in this case does not). This sort of play, according to Panksepp, ‘takes you to the perimeter of your knowledge’, and in doing so, teaches children (and indeed, he would argue, the young of any social mammal) self-control, winning, losing and indeed many important aspects of social behaviour (*Horizon*).

In biological terms then, the evidence argues for two sources of laughter; as a primitive physical response to pleasure that is common to all social mammals and in a more recently developed, cognitive form that is closely linked to abstract thought and is, apparently, unique to human beings. It is argued that primitive laughter exists to create a basic level of social interaction serving, initially through tickling, to bond children to their social group, and also to teach them how to establish their place within that group. The cognitive form then develops from this, enabling, especially through language, more subtle modes of behaviour which allow the flexibility of response and interaction that are essential to the development of the human species.

Moreover, while laughter is distinct from other emotional reactions, it is closely related to them, enabling each member of a social group to adjust his or her own behaviour, or recognise an outside threat, according to the reactions of the others. It
has been noticed (by W. Preyer (1892), for example⁵) that children only laugh when being tickled if they are contented. In other words, tickling is only pleasurable (and so produces laughter) when the child knows he or she is safe. As David Hartley (1749) observes, ‘if the same surprise, which makes young children laugh, be a very little increased, they will cry’.⁶ This phenomenon indicates not only the existence of an emotional continuum, with laughter at one point and tears at another; it suggests that, depending upon the situation of a subject, the same stimulus can provoke laughter or fear. Laughter therefore involves a degree of emotional flexibility as well as social or conceptual flexibility. William Hazlitt (1870) considers laughter and tears to be closely associated, arguing that tears are

the natural and involuntary resource of the mind overcome by some sudden and violent emotion before it has had time to reconcile its feelings to the change of circumstances: while laughter may be defined to be the same sort of convulsive and involuntary movement, occasioned by mere surprise or contrast (in the absence of any more serious emotion) before it has time to reconcile its belief to contradictory appearances.⁷

Of course, what constitutes ‘serious emotion’ is entirely relative and may not be at all clear cut, so that not only is it impossible to generalise about whether a particular event will make an individual laugh or cry, it will not always be clear to that individual which response is the most appropriate. Hazlitt considers that ‘the essence of the laughable […] is the incongruous, the disconnecting one idea from another, or the jostling of one feeling against another’ (Hazlitt, p. 6). This assumes

that the contrast between ambivalent feelings will always provoke laughter, but if the strength of these mixed emotions is not always clear, neither is it always clear that laughter will be the reaction to them. Thus there exists a fundamental ambivalence in laughter, not only in that its focus is the association of two disparate ideas or emotions, but also in that the reaction to the perception of this association is often mixed.

Of the physiological accounts of laughter, the one most cited and developed by later theorists is Herbert Spencer’s release of ‘surplus nervous energy’ theory (1860). Briefly put, his proposal is that excess nervous energy builds up in the body and needs to find an outlet, which is provided by the physical exertion and expression of laughter. The pleasure of laughter is thus due to relief at the return of the body to its normal state. Sigmund Freud (1916, 1928) proposes a similar (and equally influential) theory, arguing that laughter allows the indirect release of forbidden sexual or aggressive behaviour in a form that expends the least psychic energy. Although some critics (for example, Donald Hayworth10) have suggested that there are plenty of other ways in which the body could release such excesses of energy, there exists much empirical evidence to support such views. Darwin, for example, observed that soldiers, after ‘exposure to extreme danger, were particularly apt to burst into loud laughter at the smallest joke’ (Darwin, p. 209). Also, to return to Miller’s example, if one is in a situation that involves strong emotions (for example

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one’s feelings about death, and particularly the death of someone one knows), but
one’s opportunity to express these emotions is repressed by the social etiquette of
(English) funerals that requires very formal behaviour, the urge to giggle can be
explained in Spencerian terms as the necessary release of the repressed nervous
energy.

These two aspects of laughter, ambivalence and relief, may be seen as
manifestations of what Miller would call ‘bottom up’ laughter in the individual. James
Beattie (1776), like Miller, discounts as relatively unimportant the primitive (which
he calls ‘animal’) laughter that is due to tickling or pleasure and ‘unnatural’ or
nervous laughter which he describes as being the equivalent of a boy whistling as he
passes a graveyard. Instead he concentrates on what he calls ‘sentimental’ (Miller’s
‘top-down’ or cognitive) laughter, that is, the appreciation of ludicrous ideas. Beattie
considers that

laughter arises from the view of two or more inconsistent, unsuitable, or
incongruous parts or circumstances, considered as united in one complex
object or assemblage, or as acquiring a sort of mutual relation from the
peculiar manner in which the mind takes notice of them.11

Arthur Schopenhauer (1819) considers that the importance of incongruity in
laughter is that it highlights the limitations of the concepts we develop to describe
and organise experience. Our initial relationship with the world is, he argues,
mediated through our sensory experience, from which we then form generalisations
and categories which tend, on further experience, to prove inadequate. Conceptual
knowledge, he continues, approximates to sensuous, or perceptual, knowledge ‘as

mosaic approximates to painting’ and laughter consists in the recognition of the resultant anomalies.\textsuperscript{12} This makes us laugh, argues Schopenhauer, in celebration of our ability to overcome inadequate concepts and remain true to what we perceive. Perception, he says, being ‘the original kind of knowledge inseparable from animal nature, in which everything that gives direct satisfaction to the will presents itself’, we therefore get pleasure from the ‘victory of knowledge of perception over thought’.\textsuperscript{13}

Bergson takes this a step further by considering the world as it really is, unmediated by our sensory experience. Ralph Piddington paraphrases Bergson’s long discussion on the subject as follows:

the selective nature of our consciousness prevents us from attaining a full appreciation of the reality and individuality of any object. Our perceptions are determined by the utilitarian considerations of life.\textsuperscript{14}

Implicit in Bergson’s argument is the view that, being aware that our sensory experience is of a world that has its own existence separate from our perception of it, we are able to intuit (conceptualise) things as they exist in themselves. The Artist, he argues, is detached from such utilitarian considerations and therefore stands between nature (the world as it exists in itself) and life; ‘the practice of his art enables us to attain a better appreciation of the individual reality of things, which in the practical


affairs of life we classify in accordance with conventional needs’ (paraphrased by Piddington, p. 193). This view is very similar to Miller’s observation that humour enables us to practise flexibility, rather than relying entirely on ‘rules of thumb’, and significantly, Bergson argues that comedy stands in a similar relation to us as does art, that is, between nature and life. It is in this interpretation of humour, which relies on the concept of the possibility of a relationship between an individual and an external reality, that laughter and artistic endeavour are both intrinsically linked to creativity. The artist and the humorist both mediate between a particular aspect of external reality and their ‘audience’, creating a new concept, a new truth, in the mind of that ‘audience’. By arguing that our perceptions are, in fact, limited by ‘utilitarian considerations’, Bergson therefore undermines Schopenhauer’s sense of a ‘victory of knowledge of perception over thought’, proposing instead a relationship with an extraordinary individual whose freedom from everyday convention allows him or her, as it were, to have a foot in both worlds. This, of course, when applied to the role of the Artist, reflects a long history of critical thought which considers that the artist, the author, the genius and so on, hold a privileged position in society due to some special facility or vision which the rest of us lack.

J.B. Baillie (1921) develops Bergson’s proposal by arguing that, since we cannot directly apprehend the ‘world as it is’, unmediated by the categories we create to make sense of it, it is perceived as chaos, and thus any incongruity we come across for the first time can be described as an instance of that chaos. Face to face with the problem of how to deal with the incongruous, we adopt a mental attitude to it (humour) in order to avoid chaos, and the delight evident in laughter is because we have ‘triumphed over the incoherent, we have kept our belief in the end which holds
its own, and we have preserved ourselves in face of the incongruous. Again, this argument is based on the assumption that the incongruous (the hitherto unknown) only appears chaotic because we have not yet assimilated it. Peter Jones points out that this ability of laughter to assimilate and so triumph over chaos has an emotional as well as a conceptual aspect. Writing in the context of humour during warfare, he says

in a mad world, laughter is the only feasible response [...] George Santayana notes that the comic response can handle situations too bleak for tragedy. Humor offers a safety valve for pressures that might otherwise unbalance reason.

While Schopenhauer argues that laughter celebrates our ability to maintain flexibility in our concepts by trusting our sensory experience, Baillie argues that it celebrates our ability to assimilate and therefore overcome the perceived chaos of the ‘world as it is’, irrespective of how it strikes our senses, and thus apprehend new truths. Similarly, Jones argues that when one’s immediate surroundings (rather than the full weight of the universe) appear chaotic, laughter can become a method of assimilating the experience and thus retaining (or regaining) one's balance (sanity).

From the point of view of the individual, then, laughter can be seen in terms of ambivalence, relief and incongruity. Each of these accounts fundamentally concerns orientation. On the one hand laughter enables the individual to orientate him or herself emotionally, working through mixed feelings to question the appropriateness


of his or her reactions, or promoting, through the release of stress, a return to a more balanced frame of mind. On the other, laughter allows us to explore our relationships not only with others, but with the ‘world as it is’, enabling us to assimilate new experiences and so grow conceptually. Greig, as we have seen, considers that an ‘other’ is essential to laughter, and Bergson argues that this ‘other’ holds a similar position to the Artist, mediating between an apparently chaotic reality and our ‘conventional needs’ in order that we may develop. The underlying argument in all these accounts is that this process of orientation is not possible for one individual alone, and that a relationship with something (-one) outside the self is essential to laughter.

The Fool

It would seem obvious to suggest at this point that the ‘other’ necessary to laughter can be found within a community of individuals working together. The problem, however, is that, just as an individual behaves for the most part according to conventional needs, so too does society. Although much social laughter has to do with reaffirming and stabilising these needs, in order to introduce any truly new element (and thus guarantee that particular society’s continued development) society’s conventions must also be transcended. Here the role of the Fool becomes important, since his or her very function is to break society’s rules. William Martineau divides the sociology of humour into three groups: joking relationships (‘the creation and reinforcement of a sense of solidarity and intimacy within groups’),
intergroup conflict, and intragroup control, which he calls 'fool making'. In the first of these, laughter serves to bond the members of a social group together by mutual recognition of common knowledge, pleasure and affection, as evidenced by the laughter within a group that is not 'about' anything except the social dynamics of that group (as Provine's research indicates). The boundaries of such bonding are mediated by the links between humour and distress; one member of a group will always know if he or she has 'gone too far' by the response of the others.

In the second, laughter serves to protect the group from outside threats, for example by mocking the habits or appearance of other races. In this context laughter has been seen by many as a symbolic form of aggression (for example, Horace Kallen (1911), J.W. Crile (1916), Y. Delage (1919), A.M. Ludovici (1932), A. Rapp (1947, 1949, 1951)). As Patricia Keith-Spiegel argues,

> gradually laughter and humor became a substitute for actual assault. The similarity of bodily stance (exposed teeth, contorted face, sprawling movements of the limbs, etc.) in both fighting and laughing is pointed to as evidence.

Laughter (especially as mockery) can thus be used as a weapon; as Michael Neve says in an analysis of Freud's theory of joking behaviour, it is 'a civilised version of a lethal instinct'. J.H. Burma argues that this is due to the flexibility that laughter allows, proposing, as Martineau puts it, that 'humor is well suited as a

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18 'Early Conceptions of Humor: Varieties and Issues' in Goldstein and McGhee, pp. 4-39 (p. 6).

conflict device because of its adaptability to varying subject matters and its potential for subtly conveying malice'.

The third aspect of social laughter is to serve a corrective or disciplinary function within the group in order to confirm the prevailing mores. As W.D. Wallis puts it, 'laughter is the jolly policeman who keeps the social traffic going after the approved manner'. The simplest way to do this is to turn intergroup conflict devices inwards to mock those members of the group whose behaviour and attitudes are by consensus considered unacceptable. Many theorists have noticed that laughter has a tendency to identify a victim (for example, René Descartes (1649), David Hartley (1749), A. Bain (1859), James Sully (1902), Henri Bergson (1911), L. Cooper (1922), A.M. Ludovici (1932)). While the idea that laughter arises through a feeling of superiority has adherents as far back as Aristotle (whose Poetics are the main focus of Cooper’s argument), the most famous discourse on the subject is, of course, Thomas Hobbes’s 1650 account of laughter as ‘sudden glory arising from some sudden conception of some eminency in ourselves; by comparison with the infirmity of others’. This is a powerful argument, most particularly perhaps because the idea of ‘superiority’ can be so broadly applied. Georg Hegel, for example, deals with it in terms of incongruity in contending that

\[
\text{every contrast between what is essential and its appearance, the object and its instrument, may be ridiculous [... but laughter in general is] little more}
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than an expression of self-satisfied shrewdness, a sign that [one has] sufficient wit to recognise such a fact and [is] aware of the fact.23

It is clear from this argument that Hegel, too, considers that laughter has to do with the relationship between the ‘essence’ of an object and our perception of it (its ‘appearance’). This feeling of self-satisfaction implies a tendency to laugh at those whose behaviour shows that they have not noticed such a contrast between appearance and reality. To use Camille Mélinand’s example, we might laugh at a man forcing a door that we know to be unlocked partly because of the incongruity of the idea of forcing an unlocked door, but mainly because we know it to be unlocked and he does not.24

For Harald Höffding (1891) on the other hand ‘the mere possibility of employing laughter as a weapon shows that it presupposes power’.25 He argues that the feeling of pleasure, which is the simplest cause of laughter, is from the nature of the case very often, and at a primitive stage almost exclusively, produced by impressions which satisfy the instinct of self preservation and appeal to the love of self. Life is above all things a struggle for existence. (Höffding, p. 292)

In our struggle to preserve our own existence, he continues, such self-preservation may seem threatened by those with more power than ours, and so in order to satisfy this instinct we look for faults in authority figures.


24 ‘Pourquoi rit-on?’, Revue des Deux Mondes, 137 (February 1895), [p. 612?, unclear in source].

Laughter is [therefore] not so much an expression of superior power, as an expression of deliverance [...] The bare fact of anything occurring without the consent of the controlling authority suffices to arouse the consciousness of freedom. Authorities that have almost lost their power become the natural objects of the feeling of the ridiculous. (Höfding, p. 294)

Several theorists argue that since laughter involves the freedom of ideas that is associated with play, it expresses liberty rather than constraint (for example, A. Penjon (1893), and Charles Renouvier and L. Prat (1899)). Interpreted in political terms, this shows that laughter, as well as reinforcing social rules, can be used to criticise those rules, to break free from the strictures of authority and celebrate the individual. Thus the very victim identified as suitable for punishment by mockery for the good of society can at the same time be seen as a hero whose eccentricities deliver us from rigid convention.

It is in this context that the Fool becomes an important figure. Martineau, considering the social functions of laughter, offers the following analysis of O. Klapp’s observations about fool making:

To the group ‘the fool represents values which are rejected by the group: causes that are lost, incompetence, failure, and fiasco.’ His position is lowly, yet valued, and he serves as a scapegoat, butt of humor, and cathartic symbol of aggression. He has the social license to depart from the group norms of propriety, which are ordinarily subject to sanction. Through the ridicule of his behaviour, he acts as a control mechanism (i.e., a negative example) enforcing the very propriety which he violates. Klapp’s reference to fool making as a social process, however, appears to have even broader and more significant implications. He suggests that there is a continuous, collective process of ascribing the role of fool to people as a means of enforcing conformity, pressuring for status adjustment, or simply eliminating the deviant. Klapp’s contribution integrates humor with a general understanding of participation in the process of social organization.26

The Fool displays faults that are exaggerations of our own, thus reminding us of the proper way to behave. This role, which Martineau sees as essential in any society, has, of course, a specific instantiation in the medieval figure of the jester. For example, in a sermon given by Philip Cradelius in 1619 at the funeral of court jester Hans Miesko, 'the preacher exhorted his congregation to treat such creatures kindly and use them as looking-glasses for their own weaknesses'.

How the mentally or physically abnormal came traditionally to take this role sheds light on the second role, that of hero or saviour, that is indicated above. Noting the widespread use of small figures of grotesques of various kinds as protection against evil, Enid Welsford suggests that 'live' grotesques were kept by rich families for much the same purpose (Welsford, p. 61).

A fool or dwarf was naturally lucky and might transfer his good luck to you while you transferred your bad luck to him. Now, this lucky-unlucky creature would be valuable as a permanent inmate of a household, and particularly in request as a safeguard for the King. He would also be very much in request to ward off the Evil Eye from the priests who were performing important ritual acts by parodying their rites and ridiculing their sacred persons. But here he would be on very dangerous ground. He might have to do this as a duty and yet have to be punished for his irreverence, or again, if the central rite was the solemn slaying of the King himself, he might prove a very convenient substitute. At this point he would be drawn into the ritual and so become the type of scapegoat who was periodically excommunicated or put to death. (Welsford, p. 74)

It thus becomes clear why those 'too stupid or helpless' to defend themselves, or be of other use to society, were used for this purpose (Welsford, p. 67). Another widespread superstition exists, however, that considers the mad to have supernatural powers.

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The lunatic is an awe-inspiring figure whose reason has ceased to function normally because he has become the mouthpiece of a spirit, or power external to himself, and so has access to hidden knowledge – especially knowledge of the future. (Welsford, p. 76)

In Arab culture an example of this belief can be found in tales of possession by *djinns*, supernatural beings who give knowledge but also bring madness. One such tells of Buhlul-al-Madjnun (or Buhlul the ‘Djinn-inspired’), a ninth century court adviser to the Caliph Haroun-ar-Rashid, whose name came in time to be used as a noun meaning ‘a kind of fool-saint who was apt to express himself by great bursts of laughter’ (Welsford, pp. 80-81). Not only is the madness itself a sign of unusual knowledge, the possession of this knowledge is expressed by laughter, which, as has previously been argued, is also linked to the ability to perceive things inaccessible to the rest of us.

A significant shift is detectable between the position in court of the jester Miesko and that of the advisor Buhlul. Where the former merely serves as a mirror for our existing behaviour (i.e., as a Made Fool), the latter is in a position to teach us new things (in other words, he functions as a Transcendent Fool). The Fool, ‘in the paradoxical position of virtual outlawry combined with utter dependence on the support of the social group to which he belongs’ is at liberty to experiment with the mundane in ways that the rest of us are not (Welsford, p. 55). Because of our biological urge constantly to develop, we can therefore delight in the skill of such eccentricity as is displayed by the music hall clown Grock in his autobiography when he says that

all kinds of inanimate objects have had a way of looking at me reproachfully and whispering to me in unguarded moments: ‘We’ve been waiting for you ... at last you’ve come ... take us now, and turn us into something different.’ ... To use onions for nothing but frying and making into sauce ...
how humdrum ... how unimaginative! [...] This mastering by will-power, this transforming the little, every-day annoyances, not only overcoming, but actually transforming them into something strange and terrific [makes his, he claims, the best job in the world]. (Quoted in Welsford, pp. 309-10)

The value of this ability to see ordinary things in an extraordinary new light lies not only in its ability to entertain, but also in its great creative potential. Henry David Thoreau acknowledges in his journals the necessity sometimes to take a holiday from serious endeavour and inject a note of chaos into one’s thinking. He argues that this does not just take the form of a release of pressure, it also provides insights that would otherwise not occur.

By spells seriousness will be forced to cut capers, and drink a deep and refreshing draught of silliness; to turn this sedate day [Sunday] of Lucifer’s and Apollo’s, into an all fools’ day for Harlequin and Cornwallis. The sun does not grudge his rays to either, but they are alike patronized by the gods. Like over-tasked school-boys, all my members and nerves and sinews petition Thought for a recess, and my very thigh-bones itch to slip away from under me, and run and join the melee. I exult in stark inanity, leering on nature and the soul. We think the gods reveal themselves only to sedate and musing gentlemen. But not so; the buffoon in the midst of his antics catches unobserved glimpses, which he treasures for the lonely hour. When I have been playing tomfool, I have been driven to exchange the old for a more liberal and catholic philosophy.28

From the social perspective, then, we see that laughter serves three purposes; bonding together members of a group, protecting that group from outside threats and acting to correct faults within the group. The activity of identifying a victim who represents these faults and is then punished on society’s behalf has been called fool making. However, because of the way laughter works from the individual perspective – that is, enabling one to come to terms with incongruities in order to expand one’s

horizons – the Fool has a second role. In representing those things that lie outside the bounds of normal behaviour, and especially, through association with madness, such knowledge of the world as is inaccessible to those of us trapped within the everyday social order, the Fool becomes a prophet. Moreover, in the communication of this knowledge to us, he reveals himself to be an Artist.

We have seen in the foregoing arguments that, complex as the phenomenon of laughter is, several key elements emerge that serve to define its function. These are: its importance for social orientation, its place on an emotional continuum that closely relates it to other emotions such as fear or anger, and the role of incongruity in enabling the individual to rehearse new and different ways of seeing the world.

Laughter, whether discussed in terms of biology, philosophy, sociology or literature, has therefore to do with boundaries, with the limits of what is knowable or doable. In this there are strong links between laughter and madness, which is also concerned with the limits of thought and behaviour and those who exceed those limits, a position characterised by the figure of the Fool.

Laughter of Revelation and Laughter of Apocalypse

Technical distinctions between sanity and insanity have historically proven problematic, chiefly because the apparently simple notion of ‘normality’ is so difficult to quantify. It is clear, however, that there exists a pragmatic conception of normality against which one may judge situations and behaviour. The easiest way to show this is by looking at the everyday language used to describe madness. The mad
are ‘cracked’, ‘unhinged’, ‘unbalanced’, they have gone ‘to pieces’ or ‘out of their minds’, they have suffered ‘collapse’ or ‘breakdown’, they are ‘disturbed’, ‘deranged’, ‘upset’. What is obvious immediately is that these metaphors can be divided into the broader thematic groups of unity and balance, the normal individual being both ‘wholesome’ and ‘well-balanced’. Further, one talks of the mad as being ‘away with the fairies’, ‘out to lunch’ and ‘round the bend’. Where being ‘out of one’s mind’ or ‘beside oneself’ indicate an unhealthy separation within the individual, such metaphors further intimate a separation from community, an ‘apartness’, that highlights the fact that this ideal balance is social as well as personal. It also, incidentally, indicates (‘away with the fairies’) the long association of the mad with the supernatural.

What is particularly interesting in the context of the present discussion is that the metaphors used to describe laughter follow exactly the same pattern. One ‘falls about’ laughing, laughs one’s ‘head off’, ‘cracks up’ with laughter. One loses control of oneself to the extent that people talk of ‘pissing themselves’ laughing, of ‘going into fits’ of laughter. Given this similarity between madness vocabulary and laughter vocabulary, it is therefore no surprise that one may also laugh ‘like a loon’, or ‘like a maniac’. Indeed, the fundamental link between the two is indicated by the stock playground response to a claim that something is funny: ‘do you mean funny-ha-ha or funny-peculiar?’

Clearly, ideas of rationality and irrationality have much to do with these descriptions. By associating the rational with the controlled, systematic and organised and the irrational with the chaotic, metaphors of breakage or loss of balance express an anxiety of disintegration into chaos, of loss of control. It seems clear that, particularly in post-Enlightenment Europe, society is constructed around the ideal of
a rational, responsible adult who goes about his or her business in a logical manner while in constant danger (both internally and externally derived) from the forces of chaos. Probably the earliest expression of the idea that normality constitutes such an ideal state can be found in Aristotle’s *Ethics*, in which he describes virtue as

a purposive disposition, lying in a mean that is relative to us and determined by a rational principle, and by that which a prudent man would use to determine it. It is a mean between two kinds of vice, one of excess and the other of deficiency; and also for this reason, that whereas these vices fall short of or exceed the right measure in both feelings and actions, virtue discovers the mean and chooses it.\(^{30}\)

Aristotle sees his ‘doctrine of the mean’ as entailing, ‘as the Pythagoreans represented it, [that evil] is a form of the Unlimited, and good of the Limited’ (*Ethics*, p. 101). He therefore seems to argue that virtue entails system, while manifestations of anti-system are necessarily evil. The Pythagorean distinction between the Unlimited and the Limited can, however, be taken to represent a more general distinction between chaos and cosmos, where human virtue (wisdom, normality, sanity) is the touchstone by which we keep our bearings, both socially and in the world as a whole. Evil then can be described as simply ‘losing one’s way’ (as indeed in many cultures it is). In this context, it seems unsurprising that the mad and the evil are often depicted as emissaries of chaos and as coming from ‘outside’.

‘Sanity’ is here conflated with ‘virtue’. Aristotle is describing the position that the ‘prudent man’ would naturally take, balanced in all circumstances between two possible extremes, both of which are vices. The ‘rational principle’ and the ‘prudent’

man that applies it have their opposites in the ‘irrational’ and the ‘foolish’ – both of which, of course, are as closely associated with madness as they are with evil.

Bertrand Russell has argued that, should such a ‘prudent man’ actually exist, he would be a phenomenal bore, and that this definition of virtue makes all powerful emotions and displays of creative genius evil. As he says,

the [Ethics] appeals to the respectable middle-aged, and has been used by them, especially since the seventeenth century, to repress the ardours and enthusiasms of the young. But to a man with any depth of feeling it is likely to be repulsive.31

Aristotle does allow in his theories for the needs of the individual, saying, for example, that what would constitute gluttony in an unfit person would be proper appetite in an athlete, which may undermine somewhat Russell’s remarks about the different needs of the middle-aged and the young. What Russell means by ‘depth of feeling’, however, implies the ability we have seen in the Artist or Fool to look beyond the ‘prudent’ and is more akin to the sudden, uncontrolled and unpredictable emotions that are experienced in moments of inspiration, epiphany or revelation than to any putative steady state. Given the foregoing suggestions about the links between madness and laughter, Russell’s criticism of the Aristotelian mode of thought could therefore be equally well expressed by saying that the ‘prudent man’ has no sense of humour. An important aim of this thesis is to argue that this is no small problem, as laughter, especially shared laughter, is fundamental to both creativity and development.

While Aristotle does argue that one should 'kill [one’s] opponents’ earnestness with jesting and their jesting with earnestness', Russell’s criticism still holds, as the former’s observation only applies within the rules of society and more specifically within the rules of rhetoric, a highly ritualised form of contest for contest’s sake. As we have seen, the value of the Fool’s laughter is that it is creative in that it works outside the normal rules. Joseph Addison also argues that laughter restores balance, asserting that ‘a man should not live as though there were no God in the world; nor, at the same time, as if there were no men in it’. By ‘God’ (in this context) I take Addison to mean something more like the ‘world as it exists in itself’ in the realist sense, than, for example, the Church as an Institution. By introducing this idea of God into the argument, Addison takes us outside the sphere of the world of Men, thus addressing the problem inherent in the Aristotelian view. Balance is important, however, because, as Hartley argues in a similar approach to that later used by Schopenhauer, laughter gets at the reality of things by examining incongruities. Consequently,

persons who give themselves much to Mirth, Wit, and Humour, must thereby greatly disqualify their Understandings for the Search after Truth; inasmuch as by the perpetual hunting after apparent and partial Agreements and Disagreements [...] whilst the true Natures of the Things themselves afford real Agreements and Disagreements, that are very different, or quite opposite, a Man must by degrees pervert all his Notions of Things themselves, and become unable to see them as they really are.

(Hartley, p. 440)


33 Addison, The Spectator, 598, quoted by Piddington, p. 160.
Höffding, in his discussion of the relationship between laughter and the sublime that was touched on earlier, argues that we establish our position in the universe by orientating ourselves between these two extremes.

The feeling of the ridiculous, then, depends, like the feeling of the sublime, on a contrast. But the two feelings stand, besides, in a relation of contrast to one another. They both rest on one and the same fundamental relation, on the relation between greatness and insignificance, looked at from opposite sides. For man's real position is this, that he must bring his force to bear on his surroundings, must overcome and crush resistance, while at the same time he must feel his insignificance in face of the great powers of nature and history. (Höffding, pp. 297-98)

This observation highlights a philosophical problem that also explains much of the ambivalence towards madness that is evident both in everyday life and in literature. This problem is the simple yet universal one of the position of the individual. While desiring to belong to a community, we struggle to maintain our identity within it. While wishing to understand the workings of the Universe, we are unable to because the very acts of perception and cognition that might allow us to do this keep us separate from it. While acknowledging our resemblance to the rest of the animal kingdom, we inevitably feel that we are not quite like other animals.

These contradictions are present in us even without such things as illness, damage or stunted development. The free thinker can be admired for his or her individuality; the person who sees visions seems to be in touch with parts of the Universe that are inaccessible to the rest of us; someone who howls like a wolf may seem in touch with some important instinct that the rest of us have lost. On the other hand, the anarchist is a threat to the fabric of society; the visionary makes no sense and is therefore mad; the wolfman has lost his facility for rational thought and can
therefore hardly be seen as human at all. The Fool is a figure that has long been used to describe this problem to ourselves, as Welsford points out.

Fundamentally the clown depends, not upon the external conflicts of hostile groups, but upon a certain inner contradiction in the soul of every man. In the first place we are creatures of the earth, propagating our species like other animals, in need of food, clothing and shelter and of the money that procures them. Yet if we need money, are we so wholly creatures of the earth? If we need to cover our nakedness by material clothes or spiritual ideals, are we so like the other animals? This incongruity is exploited by the Fool. The Fool is an unabashed glutton and coward and knave, he is – as we say – a natural; we laugh at him and enjoy a pleasant sense of superiority; he looks at us oddly and we suspect that he is our alter ego; he winks at us and we are delighted at the discovery that we also are gluttons and cowards and knaves. The rogue has freed us from shame [...] We laugh to find that we are as natural as the fool, but we laugh also because we are normal enough to know how very unnatural it is to be as natural as all that.

(Welsford, p. 318)

The situation is further complicated by the nature of the community in which an individual finds him- or herself. Being an artificial structure, any society is open to criticism and is unlikely (particularly since it will always be composed of individuals) to be universally seen as perfect. The need for structure, the fear of anarchy and chaos that most of us feel, however, leads us to cling to whichever set of rules we find ourselves born into. In some (usually those in power, who have a vested interest in maintaining the status quo) this becomes so entrenched that it can be easily forgotten that the structure is artificial. Morals and attitudes whose origins have been forgotten are taken as absolutes and transgressors are seen, not as social critics, but as dangerous and subversive voices from the void. Madness, indeed, whether or not
one is seen to be mad at all, is therefore fundamentally linked to the society in which one finds oneself. Welsford continues,

pitted against Leviathan, against the system that his group has created, the individual is almost as helpless as he is when pitted against the laws of Nature — and here, too, there is an inner contradiction. The normal man wills the existence of Leviathan because it is essential to his self-preservation, but the normal man has also a latent, subconscious antagonism to Leviathan because it is always threatening to swallow him whole, it thwarts, opposes and limits him, both as a ‘natural’ and as an original personality. (Welsford, p. 318)

Clearly, what are being described here are the contradictions inherent in the human condition expressed from the individual and the social perspectives. What is interesting is Welsford’s observation that the role of the Fool is primarily to orientate the individual as regards his or her place within either ‘Nature’ or society. Taken alongside the previous observation that the function of laughter is to exercise flexibility in our conceptions so as not to become trapped by conventional thinking, the Fool then comes to represent the possibility of escape from the closed system that ‘Leviathan’ creates.

I have defined madness, in its broadest terms, initially as nothing more than deviancy from the norm. The common-sense perception of this norm is supported by the metaphors of breakage or disorientation used in everyday language and can be defined by Aristotle’s ‘doctrine of the mean’. However, as Russell’s criticism of this doctrine shows, creativity must by necessity deviate from the norm. Since such creativity, as we have seen in the foregoing arguments about the function of laughter, is essential to the adaptability of the human species, deviancy must also be interpreted

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as an essential aspect of human behaviour. I have also shown that madness as an idea appeals to us because it touches on the contradictions inherent in our position in society and in nature (the world as it exists in itself) that are a universal condition of humanity. Since this is an ongoing and vital process, a second definition of madness emerges that concerns not deviancy, but stagnation. Because adaptability is so crucial to our long-term existence, becoming entirely grounded in automatic behaviour or ritualised social habits can also be defined as mad.

In order to clarify these issues I shall consider madness from three perspectives. The first of these, which I shall call ‘Institutional’, describes a society so bounded by ritual and rule-systems that it has reached a point of stagnation. The Institution is a closed system, with no means of interpreting the world other than through its long-established (and often inappropriate) rules. Anything it experiences that falls outside these strict boundaries is, therefore, seen by the Institution as either meaningless or threatening.

The second perspective from which madness can be viewed is the point of view of an individual who, although he or she exists within an Institution, finds him- or herself unable or unwilling to comply with the rules of the system, and who is thus in the liminal position of recognising the madness (as limitation) of the Institution while being perceived as mad (as deviant) by that Institution. Typically, such characters, the Protagonists, initially have a role within the Institution, and only gradually come to realise the dangers inherent in its restrictions. Despite this recognition, however, the Protagonist by him- or herself is unable to escape the Institution’s influence to achieve a more open and balanced existence. This can only be accomplished through a laughing relationship with a character whose transcendence of the Institution can teach the Protagonist new ways of seeing: the Fool.
The third perspective concerns the madness of the Fool. Existing outside the structured system of the Institution, the Fool represents madness as chaotic anti-system. Resisting definition, containment within the structures of language, the Fool is an ambiguous figure whose limitless potential can be misleadingly identified with chaos or meaninglessness. It is crucial, therefore, that such figures should first be perceived by the Protagonist in terms that are bounded and meaningful (though limited). Because they initially function within the Institution, the Protagonist first understands the Fool in terms that are meaningful to the Institution: as Made Fool. Then, due to the Protagonist's own liminal position, he or she is open to a broader understanding of what the Fool represents, who is then revealed as Transcendent. By learning just enough from the Transcendent Fool's laughter to re-orientate him- or herself, the Protagonist can thus escape the stagnant Institution without committing him- or herself fully to chaos.

Seen from these three perspectives, madness emerges first as being stuck in the inflexibility of a closed system, second as ineffective struggle against that system, and third as the potentially chaotic yet at the same time potentially creative force that can reveal a way out of the system and so make the struggle meaningful and directed. As I have suggested above, it is the relationship between the second and third interpretations of madness that creates meaning rather than chaos, and it is this relationship that I will now define.

Laughter, as I have argued, depends upon the assimilation of new experiences or ideas in concert with an 'other'. Thus the essence of the function of laughter can be seen as entailing a 'laughing relationship' between someone who is prepared to assimilate such experiences and someone who has access to them and can therefore communicate them. I shall identify two types of laughing relationship that, while
exhibiting the same basic dynamics, produce different results. The first of these concerns what I shall call the Laughter of Revelation, examples of which are analysed in Chapter One. It involves an individual’s recovery or growth assisted by a Fool. The Fool transcends the Institution with its problems and restrictions and either enters another him-or herself or, by example, allows another to enter. Another way of describing this movement is to see it as escape. Crucially, it is the laughter of the Fool, and the understanding of it by the Protagonist, that communicates this possibility. In this way, revelation can be described as ‘getting the joke’. The communication of this revelation, this ‘joke’, to the reader leads to the designation of the Protagonist as advocate or champion of the Fool’s message.

The second type of laughing relationship (which is analysed in Chapter Two) I call the Laughter of Apocalypse. Typically, the Fool in these examples appears as a demon, and his or her laughter takes the form of mockery. The apocalyptic Fool’s aim is, or is perceived to be, destructive both of the individual and of social bonds. Institutional, or closed, thinking, because of its lack of flexibility, is ill-equipped to deal with the threat that this type of Fool poses. The Protagonists, therefore, emerge as those characters who are imaginative or creative enough to understand the Fool’s laughter and respond to it with a balancing, defensive, laugh. Thus while the sense of Protagonist as advocate for the Fool’s message to the reader still holds, there is also a sense in which the Protagonist acts as champion for his or her community, defending it against the Fool as demon. The Laughter of Apocalypse therefore takes the form not of a relationship in the sense described in Chapter One, but of a battle between two opposing forces, both of which are often destroyed.
CHAPTER ONE: LAUGHTER OF REVELATION

Introduction

In this chapter I shall explore three examples of the laughing relationship that constitutes the Laughter of Revelation. The novels discussed here illustrate the pattern I described in the Introduction, in which a Protagonist, trapped in the closed system of an Institution, is shown a way out by the laughter of a Fool. In each case, the Protagonist (who in all three of these examples is male) comes to realise that his situation is untenable, although he is initially unable to understand why, or to do anything about it by himself. This puts him in a liminal position that enables him to understand the alternatives that the Fool represents.

To distinguish between the perception of the Fool from the point of view of the Institution and from the point of view of the Protagonist, I shall refer to him (again, all three of the Fools discussed in this chapter are male) as either a Made Fool (resulting from the notion of ‘fool-making’ described in the Introduction) or as a Transcendent Fool. In this way, the same character, seen by an Institution in terms of fool-making, and therefore as having a strictly limited function, may also be seen by the Protagonist (and thus revealed to the reader) as a Transcendent Fool, with a much broader creative potential. Transcendence here implies an existence outside the closed system of the Institution, although it is important that the Fool is first perceived as ‘made’ because, in order for the Protagonist to understand the revelation, he must first understand the Fool in the terms of the Institution in which he is trapped. The Laughter of Revelation is therefore a process of enlightenment, in which a Protagonist who has already rejected an Institution but has, as yet, no means
of finding new terms on which to live, is gradually enabled, through recognition of
the transcendence of the Fool, to accept a more open existence.

*Catch-22*

When Joseph Heller created his vision of the American Air Corps, and by analogy the
state of American society in the years following the Second World War, he produced
an image so powerful, and so familiar, that the title phrase rapidly entered the
language as a way to describe the ultimate in closed systems. *Catch-22* (1961)
describes the life of several Air Corps squadrons based on the island of Pianosa off
the coast of Italy towards the end of a war that has, to all intents and purposes,
already been won, and the actions of the Institution, in this case the American war
machine, although originally meaningful, have become little more than an exercise in
self-perpetuation. Realising that the missions they fly, while still threatening their
lives, no longer serve any purpose other than to increase the glory of officers who
stay on the ground writing memoranda to one another, many of the men begin to feel
trapped in a pointless and dangerous circle over which they have no control.

It is in this context that we follow bombardier Captain John Yossarian’s
apparently chaotic progress through the narrative. When asked in interview which
aspects of the novel were the most important, Heller replied,

> the theme of insanity accepted without any eye-blinking, the feeling of
> frustration – of impotence, actually – a succession of scenes where the
> characters just can’t *do* anything, physical or mental […] The truth – the
dangers – are so obvious and so simple, yet [Yossarian] can’t make himself
understood […] I want to keep this sense of injustice – the element of the
tribe – the judges waiting to judge, having this tremendous amount of power of force behind them.¹

Although much of the narrative centres around those characters who rebel against the system, the cycle of meaningless and arbitrary action becomes so powerful that eventually even those officers who generate this self-perpetuation are at its mercy. The prime example of this is when Generals Peckem and Dreedle, who battle one another for bureaucratic supremacy throughout the novel, are suddenly both ousted by the promotion of Scheisskopf, an officer so out of touch with the realities of warfare that his one ambition is to create the perfect parade.

The more the Institution becomes divorced from its original function of waging war, the more it becomes a creature of language, detached from anything that the language could be said to signify. Heller has created a world where he can play out, as Sanford Pinsker puts it, his ‘dark, satirical conviction that language is power, that language is what passes for reality, and that the Real and the Rational have, at best, a slim chance for a hearing’.² Gary Davis argues that language is always discontinuous with reality, and that the importance of Catch-22 as a novel is that it overtly expresses this, thus demythologising our everyday assumptions about discourse. Quoting Eugenio Donato, Davis says that interpretation ‘is nothing but sedimenting

¹ Paul Krassner, ‘An Impolite Interview with Joseph Heller’, in A Catch-22 Casebook, ed. by Frederick Kiley and Walter McDonald (New York: Crowell, 1973), pp. 273-93 (p. 293). Although retrospective analyses by authors of their own work can be problematic, this seems a valid summary of the novel.
one layer of language upon another to produce an illusory depth which gives us the temporary spectacle of things beyond words.\textsuperscript{3}

The Army's \textit{sic} entire administrative procedure arises from this ability to put purposeless, self-reflexive discourse into action within its field of activity. Ultimately its self-contained organization and action define a closed world whose 'illusory depth' becomes its inhabitants' only 'reality'. (Davis, p. 70)

To manipulate this 'reality', and thus keep its inhabitants permanently trapped in illusion, the Air Corps need apply only one rule; the linguistic conundrum of Catch-22. Early in the novel, Yossarian asks the squadron medic, Doc Daneeka, to relieve him of duty and is told that for this to be possible Yossarian must be certified insane. Pointing out that his tent-mate, Orr, \textit{is} insane, Yossarian argues that he should, therefore, be grounded. Perhaps, concedes Daneeka, but there is a catch.

There was only one catch and that was Catch-22, which specified that a concern for one's own safety in the face of dangers that were real and immediate was the process of a rational mind. Orr was crazy and could be grounded. All he had to do was ask; and as soon as he did, he would no longer be crazy and would have to fly more missions.\textsuperscript{4}

The 'theme of insanity', pervaded by the illusory qualities of Catch-22, is presented in such a way as to make it notoriously difficult to make sense of the novel's narrative. Clinton S. Burhans Jr. divides the critics into two groups, those who consider the novel to be organised and methodical, and those who see it as


\textsuperscript{4} \textit{Catch-22} (New York: Dell, 1962), p. 47. Subsequent references appear in parentheses within the text.
"episodic and formless". James Nagel, Jan Solomon and Doug Gaukroger are the best known exponents of the view that Catch-22 is structured, each of them having conducted painstaking analyses of either Heller's working methods (Nagel) or of the novel itself (Solomon and Gaukroger). Of those critics who have accused Heller of formlessness, perhaps the most scathing are Norman Mailer and Joseph Waldmeir. Robert Brustein, on the other hand, while still seeing the novel as formless, sees this as a positive attribute, arguing that

[Heller] is concerned entirely with that thin boundary of the surreal, the borderline between hilarity and horror, which, much like the apparent formlessness of the unconscious, has its own special integrity and coherence.

Burhans argues that the two views are not mutually exclusive. While the structure and chronology appear chaotic, leaping without warning between incidents that happen many months apart and often returning to the same scene, the novel overall exhibits a series of tonal shifts from the superficially comic at the start, through ever more dark, disturbing and violent scenes to a denouement which, while having much tonally in common with the beginning, is, naturally, affected by what has


come in between.\(^9\) Heller has stated that it was, in fact, his intention to produce a work that combines chaos and structure in this way.

I tried to give it a structure that would reflect and complement the content of the book itself, and the content of the book really derives from our present atmosphere, which is one of chaos, of disorganisation, of absurdity, of cruelty, of brutality, of insensitivity, but at the same time one in which people, even the worst people, I think are basically good, are motivated by humane impulses […] It was constructed almost meticulously, and with a meticulous concern to give the appearance of a formless novel. (Krassner, pp. 276-77, see note 1)

That this appearance of formlessness has been meticulously constructed is evident in the way Heller has used certain key elements to indicate a sense of progress through the novel. Jan Solomon, for example, has pointed out that two important chronologies in Catch-22 are the number of missions the men are required to fly and Yossarian’s visits to hospital. Although he sees these as contradictory, Doug Gaukroger refutes this, arguing that the novel’s time scheme is ‘both plausible and logical’.\(^10\) Both chronological schemata are important because they are examples of the way Catch-22 works as a closed system as seen from both the social and the individual perspectives. Because the men can never quite reach the required number before it is raised again, Pinsker observes, ‘the bombing missions […] have the look of futile circles’; they exist only to keep the men exactly where they are. Similarly futile, he argues, are Yossarian’s attempts to escape these circles by ‘hiding out in the

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\(^9\) W. K. Thomas has produced a comprehensive mythological analysis of Catch-22 that depends largely on the idea of seasonal cycles, through which he also argues that the novel exhibits these shifts of tone; ‘The Mythic Dimension of Catch-22’, Texas Studies in Literature and Language 15 (1973), 189-98.

infirmary' (p. 32, p. 29). An important distinction does, however, need to be drawn between the two chronologies, as, while the number of missions climbs regularly and inexorably, Yossarian’s hospital visits echo the increasing violence identified by Burhans, since on each occasion he is admitted for a more serious, and finally life-threatening, complaint. Thus, while Yossarian continues to employ the strategy of ‘hiding out’ in an environment that he perceives to be safe, it is shown to be inadequate to protect him from an increasingly dangerous reality. This has crucial implications for the development of Yossarian’s character.

The novel opens with Yossarian in hospital, malingering with a fake liver complaint to avoid flying more than his 44 missions. It is here that he first meets Chaplain Albert Tappman, who clearly thinks he is dealing with a paranoid lunatic.

‘Be careful in those other wards, Father,’ Yossarian warned. ‘That’s where they keep the mental cases. They’re filled with lunatics’ […]

‘M.P.s won’t protect you, because they’re craziest of all. I’d go with you myself, but I’m scared stiff. Insanity is contagious. This is the only sane ward in the whole hospital. Everybody is crazy but us. This is probably the only sane ward in the whole world for that matter.‘

The chaplain rose quickly and edged away from Yossarian’s bed, and then nodded with a conciliating smile and promised to conduct himself with appropriate caution. (C-22, p. 14)

In these opening pages of the novel, as Morris Dickstein points out, Yossarian is a fully functioning part of the Air Corps’ lunatic system. Officers in the hospital are ordered to censor the letters of enlisted-men patients and, finding that their lives are only slightly more interesting than his own, Yossarian invents games to pass the time.

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Death to all modifiers, he declared one day, and out of every letter that passed through his hands went every adverb and every adjective. The next day he made war on articles. He reached a much higher plane of creativity the following day when he blacked out everything in the letters but *a, an* and *the*. That erected more dynamic intralinear tensions, he felt, and in just about every case left a message far more universal. *(C-22, p. 8)*

As Davis points out, this treatment of language as though it is reality *(Yossarian also destroys whole towns merely by blacking out their names)* and the reduction of everything by this means to useless universals is exactly what is involved in adhering to the principles of Catch-22 *(Davis, p. 69)*. A few pages later, however, when Yossarian leaves the hospital and returns to active duty, Heller forces the reader to reassess his status by repeating, in different circumstances, the image of the Chaplain edging nervously away from him.

Outside the hospital there was still nothing funny going on. The only thing going on was a war, and no one seemed to notice but Yossarian and Dunbar. And when Yossarian tried to remind people, they drew away from him and thought he was crazy. Even Clevinger, who should have known better but didn’t, had told him he was crazy the last time they had seen each other, which was just before Yossarian had fled into the hospital. *(C-22, p. 17)*

Although Yossarian’s absurd logic in the ensuing argument does nothing to convince Clevinger, the reader is prepared to agree with his assessment if only because, seen from his own, individual, perspective, he is absolutely right.

Everywhere he looked was a nut, and it was all a sensible young gentleman like himself could do to maintain his perspective amid so much madness. And it was urgent that he did, for he knew his life was in peril. *(C-22, p. 21)*

It is an important element of Yossarian’s apparent madness that he always acts as an individual. Although, in the early stages of the novel, his actions are recognisable as a part of the system of Catch-22, he is never homogenised within that
system. He may initially employ the same strategies, but always to preserve himself rather than the Institution, and this is perceived by its more unquestioning members as a threat. As Pinsker points out,

Clevinger's opinion is widely shared by those who come to hate and fear Yossarian's increasingly desperate efforts to survive; for them war is not only necessary, but, more important, also perfectly sane, and those who throw monkey wrenches into its bureaucratic machinery must by definition be crazy. (Pinsker, p. 19)

Indeed, Frederick R. Karl goes so far as to argue that the book appeals to readers who 'calling themselves social animals, and arguing that every individual must be part of society [...] hate society and distrust any individual who is a social animal'. While this may overstate the case, Karl does go on to refer to Yossarian as 'an open character in a closed society' (p. 138), which expresses his increasing importance, as an individual, to the other individuals trapped by the Institution. As the novel progresses, Yossarian comes to represent the interests of all the other characters who feel as trapped as he does, but are too afraid to act, so that the affirmation of his basic sanity begins to come, significantly, from characters other than Yossarian himself, and often when he is not present.

_What could you do?_ Major Major asked himself again. What could you do with a man who looked you squarely in the eye and said he would rather die than be killed in combat, a man who was at least as mature and intelligent as you were and who you had to pretend was not? (C-22, p. 106)

'He's not so crazy', Dunbar said. 'He swears he's not going to fly to Bologna.'

'That's just what I mean,' Dr Stubbs answered. 'That crazy bastard may be the only sane one left.' (C-22, p. 114)

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As Dickstein argues, Yossarian’s madness actually goes through several stages, matching the tonal shifts identified by Burhans, as his character develops. His functioning as part of the Institution in the censoring of the enlisted men’s letters is followed by a period when ‘the insanity of the system […] breeds a defensive counter-insanity of the system, a mentality of organized survival that mirrors the whole system of rationalized human waste and devaluation’ (Dickstein, pp. 140-41). During this period, when Yossarian turns up naked to receive a medal and walks backwards around the camp, brandishing a gun, we see that while he has become aware of the threat of Catch-22, he is as yet unable to escape it, indeed to do anything but react against it in its own irrationally rational terms. As Vance Ramsey points out, ‘Yossarian not only lives on the edge of the void as the others do, but lives in constant knowledge of that void’.13

This is followed by Yossarian’s realisation that it is not only his own life, his own self, that is imperilled by the system, and as despair sets in he becomes ‘the somber registrar of [others’] deaths and exits’ (Dickstein, p. 141). This shift of focus away from himself starts with the death of the young gunner Snowden on the return trip from an abortive mission to Avignon. Hit by flak in the thigh and chest, Snowden gradually bleeds to death while Yossarian vainly tries to help him. Treating the obvious, but not lethal, thigh wound, Yossarian feels he has gained control of the situation but cannot understand why Snowden does not improve and indeed says nothing but ‘I’m cold’. It is at the moment that he notices the second, more serious wound, which on investigation sends Snowden’s guts spilling across the floor of the plane, that Yossarian realises that he has no control, that death is arbitrary and

inescapable, and at this point he loses hope. Trying desperately throughout the novel to retain some mockery of hope in the form of abnegation, in effect creating his own, self-protective, closed system, Yossarian represses the memory of this incident, which is narrated in the form of ever more detailed flashbacks. As Pinsker points out, claiming that this forms a struggle that gives the entire novel its structure,

small wonder that Yossarian ‘circles around’ this scene, half suppressing its grisly import, half attracted to its powerful image. But however much he fills in his post-Avignon days by hiding out in the infirmary or by essentially futile gestures of protest [...] he cannot avoid its truth. (Pinsker, p. 29)

The ‘truth’ that Yossarian tries so hard to avoid, ‘the message [he reads] in Snowden’s entrails’ that ‘the spirit gone, man is garbage’ (C-22, p. 450) is so powerful that most critics see it as the overriding ‘message’ of the entire novel. Davis, for example, reads this scene as describing Yossarian’s failed attempt to attain ‘some kind of direct encounter with whatever “reality” may or may not lie “outside” discourse’. Noting the literary allusions and traditional metaphysical content present in the scene, he argues that

the bombardier’s seemingly ‘existential’ confrontation with Snowden’s innards thus discloses that we can no more dwell within some hypothetical order of simple materiality than we can speak in a language free of the self-reflexive discontinuities which make possible Catch-22 and all its variations. (Davis, pp. 74-75)

Consequently many critics see the ending as weak, or not of a piece with the rest of the novel. Brustein, for example, considers the end to be ‘an inspirational sequence which is the weakest thing in the book’ (Brustein, pp. 30-31). I shall argue, however, that Heller has provided strong structural indicators that lead us to the final chapter and illustrate the crucial importance of a laughing relationship that exists
between Yossarian and his tent-mate, Orr. Again, Heller himself supports this, saying that

the ending was written long before the middle was written […] perhaps four years before the book was finished […] I couldn’t see any alternative ending. It had a certain amount of integrity. (Krassner, p. 287) 14

Throughout most of Catch-22 Yossarian has two tent mates, the dead man who cannot leave because he never officially arrived and the pilot Orr, ‘that dirty goddam midget-assed, apple cheeked, goggled-eyed, undersized, buck-toothed, grinning, crazy sonofabitchinbastard’ (C-22, p. 156). Like the dead man, killed after he arrived but before he signed in, whose kit haunts Yossarian but cannot be removed (because it is not, officially, there), Orr at first seems to be a background character, one of a series of running jokes in the novel. Heller provides three threads to this joke: Orr’s endless odd stories, his constant fiddling with the contents of the tent, and the fact that he cannot take a plane up without crashing it in the sea.

Described most often in terms that emphasise his smallness, his madness and his giggle, Orr can easily be seen as a sort of court dwarf, alienated by his grotesque form while being, paradoxically, totally dependent on society. The fact that he is almost invariably described in such streams of adjectives as are quoted above highlights the essential unclassifiability of the type. Traditionally in European culture, such figures were kept to entertain, but also to bring luck to, a court or wealthy household. In the context of twentieth-century America, however, Orr cannot fulfil such a role, and although this Airforce community on Pianosa may act as a sort of

14 Again, see note 1. While it is possible that this is retrospective re-creation on Heller’s part, not only has he claimed to have used the same process of planning the ending first (or at least, early on) in writing Closing Time (see Chapter Three), the evidence from the text here strongly suggests that this is, indeed, the case.
household (and, as such, he becomes the squadron's Made Fool), Yossarian worries about what will happen to him after the war.

Yossarian felt sorry for Orr. Orr was so small and ugly. Who would protect him if he lived? Who would protect a warmhearted, simple-minded gnome like Orr?

[... He] was a happy and unsuspecting simpleton [...] an eccentric midget, a freakish likeable dwarf with a smutty mind and a thousand valuable skills that would keep him in a low income group all his life. (C-22, p. 321)

As John Hunt points out, Orr is 'representative to [Yossarian] of the simple-minded good people of this world' (Hunt, p. 243). A series of key scenes in the novel, however, which parallel the scenes involving Snowden's death over Avignon and the implications of Catch-22 (both of which, as I have argued, only serve to trap Yossarian), gradually reveal the importance of Orr as a Transcendent Fool. In chapter three, when Yossarian has flown 44 missions and has recently returned from hospital, we are told that Orr is building a stove for the tent that they share with the dead man, Mudd. This is two chapters before the first overt explanation of Catch-22 quoted above, which occurs in chapter five, the same chapter that contains the first reference to the disastrous flight over Avignon.

The building of the stove is returned to in chapter twenty eight, when Yossarian has flown 60 missions and has just returned from hospital again, this time after a genuine leg injury sustained in the flak after the milk run to Parma. Again, this is echoed soon afterwards, in chapter thirty, when we are told about Yossarian treating Snowden for the 'wrong wound' – the wound in his thigh. Chapter twenty eight starts with an account of Orr crash-landing his plane in the sea after the second trip to Avignon. Sergeant Knight tells Yossarian how Orr held the life-raft against the
side of the sinking plane so that the other crewmen (one of whom could not swim) could get into it safely; 'that little crackpot sure has a knack for things like that' (C-22, p. 316).

He kept slapping his hands on his legs every few seconds as though he had the shakes and saying 'All right now, all right,' and giggling like a crazy little freak, then saying 'All right now, all right,' again and giggling like a crazy little freak some more. It was like watching some kind of a moron. Watching him was all that kept us from going to pieces altogether during the first few minutes. (C-22, pp. 316-17)

While the others are absorbed in the task of simply keeping on the life-raft, Orr, much to the hilarity of his companions, opens all the compartments and systematically uses every piece of equipment at his disposal, handing round chocolate bars, sprinkling shark repellent into the water and making tea.

Can't you see him serving us tea as we sat there soaking wet in water up to our ass? Now I was falling out of the raft because I was laughing so much [...] The next thing he found was this little blue oar about the size of a Dixie-cup spoon, and, sure enough, he began rowing with it, trying to move all nine hundred pounds of us with that little stick. Can you imagine? (C-22, p. 317)

Sergeant Knight and the others see Orr only as a Made Fool, identified as deviant by society and therefore only useful for entertainment; an important function in its own right, as watching Orr's antics is 'all that [keeps them] from going to pieces altogether during the first few minutes'. Like a clown's props, the chocolate, shark repellent, tea, and so on are used to divert attention from the men's situation, and their laughter expresses a release of tension similar to the laughter of a circus audience who enter the clown's world to escape, for a moment, their own lives. This 'bag of tricks' motif, however, also identifies Orr with the transcendent aspects of the
traditional trickster figure. Although the reader does not discover it until the end of the novel, there is more to Orr’s behaviour here than meets the eye. This motif is repeated when Yossarian returns to his tent to find Orr already there, fiddling with the stove he is building. Orr’s bag of tricks has transformed into the parts for the stove, and, unlike Sergeant Knight, Yossarian becomes aware that there is something going on that he does not, yet, understand.

‘The days are getting shorter,’ Orr observed philosophically. ‘I’d like to get this all finished for you while there’s still time. You’ll have the best stove in the squadron when I’m through’ […]

‘What do you mean, me?’ Yossarian wanted to know. ‘Where are you going to be?’

Orr’s stunted torso shook suddenly with a muffled spasm of amusement. ‘I don’t know,’ he exclaimed, and a weird, wavering giggle gushed suddenly through his chattering buck teeth like an exploding jet of emotion. He was still laughing when he continued, and his voice was clogged with saliva. ‘If they keep on shooting me down this way, I don’t know where I’m going to be.’ (C-22, p. 320)

Yossarian still sees Orr, at this point, as the others see him; an eccentric – sometimes useful, sometimes infuriating, sometimes just odd. No reason for his behaviour is apparent, and therefore none exists, and although they are friends, Yossarian has a superstitious fear of flying with him, putting in an official request never to be put on the same crew. Yossarian, by this stage of the novel in a permanent state of anxiety and paranoia, thinks Orr’s seemingly endless fiddling with a valve for the stove is done just to send him mad.

[It] was about the size of a thumb and contained thirty-seven separate parts, excluding the casing, many of them so minute that Orr was required to pinch them tightly between the tips of his fingernails as he placed them carefully on the floor in orderly, catalogued rows, never quickening his movements or slowing them down, never tiring, never pausing in his relentless, methodical, monotonous procedure unless it was to leer at Yossarian with maniacal mischief. Yossarian tried not to watch him. He counted the parts and thought he would go clear out of his mind. He turned away. shuttering his
eyes, but that was even worse, for now he had only the sounds, the tiny, maddening, indefatigable, distinct clicks and rustles of hands and weightless parts. (C-22, p. 322)

Pushed to the limit, Yossarian considers murdering Orr, thinking that it would solve both their problems, and just as he is imagining plunging a knife into the back of the other man’s neck, Orr asks “‘does it hurt?’ […] as though by protective instinct […] ‘Does what hurt?’ ‘Your leg,’ said Orr with a strange, mysterious laugh’ (C-22, p. 323). This ‘strange, mysterious laugh’, suggesting as it does the possibility that Orr really has just read Yossarian’s mind, reminds the reader of his ‘weird’ laughter when Yossarian asks him where he is going to be after the stove is finished, and casts a subtle atmosphere over the ensuing conversation. Although it seems to be about various girls that both men have known, Yossarian is wary, sensing a trap. Thinking that this will have something to do with his embarrassment about sleeping with a bald girl, Yossarian falls straight into the real trap, which is to force his attention back to the stove-valve and thence to something Orr is trying to tell him.

‘Will you please hand me that small composition gasket that rolled over there? It’s right near your foot.’
‘No it isn’t.’
‘Right here,’ said Orr, and took hold of something invisible with the tips of his fingernails and held it up for Yossarian to see. ‘Now I’ll have to start all over again.’
‘I’ll kill you if you do. I’ll murder you right on the spot.’
‘Why don’t you ever fly with me?’ Orr asked suddenly, and looked straight into Yossarian’s face for the first time. ‘There, that’s the question I want you to answer. Why don’t you ever fly with me?’
Yossarian turned away with intense shame and embarrassment. (C-22, p. 324)

Orr, having just duped Yossarian into asking about the whore in Naples, may be only pretending to hold a tiny piece of machinery to further infuriate Yossarian
and amuse himself, as well as to give him an opportunity to look straight at Yossarian and ask his question. There is also the possibility, however, that the valve part is invisible only to Yossarian, as is the truth that Orr is trying to tell him; the significance of his invitation to fly with him. The valve therefore becomes symbolic of both Orr's status as Made Fool – a foolish and infuriating fiddler – and his status as Transcendent Fool, possessing otherworldly knowledge. By the end of the chapter we are told that on his next mission Orr crash-lands again and, although the other men from his plane are picked up, he is not found.

The truth that Orr could not make Yossarian see in chapter twenty eight is not revealed until the final chapter, forty two, and again an echo occurs just before it (in chapter forty one) when Yossarian, under anaesthetic after having been stabbed in the chest, finally remembers the wound in Snowden's chest that he could not treat. In hospital once more, this time recovering from a murderous attack by Nately's whore, Yossarian agrees with Major Danby that 'there is no hope for us, is there? [...] No hope at all' (C-22, p. 458). He has now flown 70 missions, and refuses categorically to fly any more. Having been offered an untenable choice between Colonel Korn's deal (to return home a hero and lie about the conditions on Pianosa, thus betraying his companions) and simply going AWOL (the final example of a Catch-22 situation in the novel) the two men decide that there is no other option, no escape from the closed system of the Air Corps. At this point the chaplain rushes in with the electrifying news about Orr [...] Yossarian leaped right out of bed with an incredulous yelp when he finally understood.

'Sweden?' he cried.
'Orr!' cried the chaplain.
'Orr?' cried Yossarian.
'Sweden!' cried the chaplain, shaking his head up and down with gleeful rapture [...] 'It's a miracle, I tell you! A miracle! I believe in God again. I
really do. Washed ashore in Sweden after so many weeks at sea! It's a miracle.'

'Washed ashore, hell!' Yossarian declared, jumping all about also and roaring in laughing exultation at the walls, the ceiling, the chaplain and Major Danby. 'He didn't wash ashore in Sweden. He rowed there! He rowed there, chaplain, he rowed there.' (C-22, p. 458)

Orr has left his laugh as a legacy, a symbol of hope. Yossarian and the chaplain imagine him in his tiny life-raft, fishing for cod and collecting rainwater, and are helpless with laughter that echoes, and yet is unlike, the laughter of Sergeant Knight during the telling of the previous life-raft episode. They are laughing now at the same thing that Orr was laughing at, rather than at Orr himself; the recognition that he has always had the knowledge of how to escape Catch-22. This laughter is, therefore, in the form of a revelation, something recognised by Heller as he describes Yossarian as 'holding both fists aloft triumphantly as though hoping to squeeze revelations from them. He spun to a stop facing Major Danby. "Danby, you dope! There is hope, after all. Can't you see?"' (C-22, p. 459). Danby is not yet laughing – he cannot yet see the joke – and is therefore as blind to it as Yossarian was to the composition gasket. In this sense, there is a direct correlation between the metaphor of 'seeing a joke and the concept of revelation as a revealing or sudden insight. 16

While the Institution that created Catch-22 teaches Yossarian that the only possible actions are meaningless (and often immoral) linguistic games and Snowden's

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15 Thomas provides a mythological analysis of Orr that indicates his potential for transcendence in equating him with the divine. He points out that 'Or' is not only the French for 'gold', but the Hebrew for 'light', and in this sense Orr can be seen to represent Apollo, the sun-god. He is also, through his constant association with the stove, Hephaestos, a name which comes from 'hemero-phaiostos', 'he who shines by day' (pp. 320-21). Pinsker also notes that Orr's name denotes an alternative, an 'or' (p. 27).

message is that the only reality that such games conceal is the reality of death. Orr’s escape transcends both and shows Yossarian that one can live outside the Institution, even with the knowledge that one must die. Thus Alan Cheuse compares Catch-22 to Les Mouches, with Yossarian as Orestes, ‘escaping into responsibility’ when he decides to follow Orr to Sweden.\(^{17}\)

[Yossarian] knows that Catch-22 is not invincible, that it can be beaten. After all, who would accuse Orr of going AWOL, of planning the whole thing? Nobody in their right mind ‘rehearses’ crash landings, and nobody imagines rowing – with an implement as ludicrous as a ‘tiny blue oar’ – to Sweden. It is all too absurd, too outlandish – even for the world of Catch-22. But Orr does, and better yet, he did. (Pinsker, p. 47)

Davis, as I discuss above, considers that Catch-22’s importance as a novel derives from its overt portrayal of the discontinuities between reality and discourse. As he points out, ‘an awareness of the problematic boundaries between nature and artifice, events and interpretations, and even texts and commentaries has become an inescapable part of our intellectual order’ (Davis, p. 68). He therefore concludes that the only choices in literature are between ‘dangerous, closed discourses’ (in other words, those texts that do not openly admit that they are discontinuous with reality) and ‘an open exploration of discourse itself’ (he cites Borges, Nabokov and Barth as examples, p. 77).\(^{18}\) Davis considers the ending to be problematic because Heller himself points [out] that he no more thinks of Sweden as a real paradise than he believes that Yossarian will get there. Sweden and Yossarian’s desertion are only images of a ‘goal’, an ‘objective’ for those who seek to renounce the world of Peckems, Cathcarts, and Scheisskopfs. (Davis, p. 76)

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\(^{17}\) ‘Laughing On The Outside’, in Kiley and McDonald, pp. 86-93 (pp. 93). The reference is also to Catch-22, p. 461, when Yossarian says ‘I’m not running away from my responsibilities. I’m running to them’.

\(^{18}\) As I shall discuss in Chapter Two, this assessment, particularly of Nabokov, is not unproblematic.
‘Sweden’, according to Davis, is thus just another example of a discontinuous discourse, although it is more open than Catch-22. This reading is based on the question of whether or not Yossarian can get to Sweden, and on these terms it does indeed seem that Sweden, as a fantasy, is a type of closed system. However, it is not Yossarian’s escape that is important here, but Orr’s. Sweden is not merely a ‘goal’ or ‘objective’ for Orr, it is a reality. Without his example Sweden would have no meaning for Yossarian and we are thus faced with a character who provides a third alternative to Davis’s assessment of the possibilities of fiction. Existing at once within the closed world of the Air Corps and outside it, Orr seems to argue for a discourse that is more than the ‘illusory depth which gives us the temporary spectacle of things beyond words’. There is no discontinuity between this newly created meaning of ‘Sweden’ and the reality of his having got there (indeed, his act has created the meaning). It is this direct relationship between Orr’s act and Yossarian’s interpretation of it, mediated by laughter (which, crucially, is non-linguistic) that gives this final chapter, and hence the whole novel, its power as an example of the possibilities of transcendence.

One Flew Over The Cuckoo’s Nest

Ken Kesey’s One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest (1962) is set in a men’s ward in a psychiatric hospital. The patients, under the charge of the obsessively orderly Nurse Ratched, are divided into ‘Chronics’, for whom there is deemed to be no cure, and ‘Acutes’, for the most part voluntary admissions who feel that they cannot, temporarily, cope with life outside the hospital. The novel is narrated by Bromden, a Chronic, through whose eyes we see the effect on the ward of the arrival of a new patient, Randle Patrick McMurphy. McMurphy has been diagnosed as psychopathic,
and his rebellious behaviour throws the ordered world of the hospital into disarray.

As the novel progresses, he comes to represent the possibility of a life outside the restrictions of the hospital and the other patients begin to look to him, rather than to Ratched, for their cure. Finally, although McMurphy himself is killed, it is Bromden, the ‘incurable’ Chronic, who regains his sanity and escapes from the hospital to tell his tale.

Although popular ever since its publication, the novel has also received much negative criticism, the main points of which can be summed up by Robert Forrey’s assessment that the novel is macho (and implies therein a repressed homosexuality), misogynous and anti-Christian.\(^{19}\) In a typical critical move that interprets the novel as celebrating irresponsible adolescence, Bruce E. Wallis speaks for many when he says

Kesey suggests that by throwing butter at walls, breaking in windows, stealing boats, and doing in general whatever comes naturally, the inmates will become carefree and vital individuals at last. A Utopia composed of such self-centred children can spare itself the trouble of making any long-range plans.\(^{20}\)

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\(^{20}\) ‘Christ in the Cuckoo’s Nest; or, the Gospel According to Ken Kesey’. in Searles, pp. 103-10 (p. 110) (orig. publ. in *Cithara* 12: 1 (1972), 52-58).
Such readings argue that McMurphy, who performs all the above-mentioned acts in the novel, is an anti-hero who encourages, by example, destructive and anarchic behaviour. Other critics, however, see McMurphy as heroic, in the mould of the self-sufficient heroes of Western and Southwestern tradition. Richard Blessing, for example, describes McMurphy as 'an anachronistic paragon of rugged individualism', whom he compares to Huckleberry Finn, Paul Bunyan and the Lone Ranger.\(^\text{21}\)

Fred Madden points out that such reactions to the book rely on the assumption that McMurphy is the central character, and as he is seen in either a positive or a negative light, so the novel as a whole is seen as positive or negative.\(^\text{22}\) Madden, rather than seeing McMurphy as either hero or villain, argues that it is in fact Bromden, the narrator, who is the novel's central character, and that McMurphy is merely the equal and opposite force to Nurse Ratched, between whose two extremes Bromden attempts to find his way and his sanity. I shall argue that there is yet a fourth possibility, which is that *Cuckoo's Nest* does not have a straightforward 'hero' at all, and that it is the relationship between Bromden and McMurphy, the former as Protagonist, the latter as Fool, that forms the focus of the narrative.

Stephen Tanner points out the existence of a transitional, pre-*Cuckoo's Nest*, story called 'The Kicking Party', the hero of which is a jazz musician who is 'plotting to undermine the whole system with his evil laugh and sinful stories'.\(^\text{23}\) Kesey, having


\(^\text{22}\) 'Sanity and Responsibility: Big Chief as Narrator and Executioner', *Modern Fiction Studies*, 32: 2 (Summer 1986) 203-17.

decided that 'the Beat response to an uncongenial conformist society was withdrawal by such means as wine, pot, jazz, and Zen', a response to which he felt unsuited, then rewrote this character as the 'active and self-reliant' McMurphy (Tanner, p. 24).

More importantly, as Tanner points out, in 'The Kicking Party' 'the laugher and the mental patient are a single person. The turning point would come when he separated them as hero of event [McMurphy] and hero of consciousness [Bromden]' (Tanner, p. 24). As John Hunt argues,

Bromden's telling of McMurphy's story thus functions as a vehicle for his reaching a truth about himself, a truth which releases him from sickness and promises to make him whole. If we look at each of the stories, Bromden's and McMurphy's, in the context of the other, we see an exchange of visions, a clash between the originally tragic view of Bromden, to which hope has been added, and the hopeful view of McMurphy, which became completely qualified by tragedy from the day he signed on for the whole game. Though each attenuates the vision of the other, Bromden's vision remains the larger. In making Bromden his narrator, Kesey not only provides a voice to tell the events of a hero's life and death, but also a point of view from which to judge the events narrated. The narrator's own story at once arises from and incorporates the story he tells. In doing so, the one transcends the other, finds its own touchstone, and achieves its own truth.24

Tanner talks of Kesey's 'persistent fascination with the transcendent, his impatience with the attitude that dreams are only dreams and imaginative experiences are just fictions' (Tanner, p. 25). Much of Bromden's world is obviously delusional, but as he says in a much quoted passage, 'it's the truth even if it didn't happen'.25 In a letter to Kirk Douglas about the adaptation of the novel for cinema, Kesey explains that Bromden's point of view is necessary

25 One Flew Over The Cuckoo's Nest (London: Methuen, 1962), p. 8. Subsequent references appear in parentheses within the text. Bromden's statement echoes a long tradition of the idea that fictions may be 'less real but more true' than life. See, for example, Sir Philip Sydney, Defense of Poesie; Nathaniel Hawthorne, preface to Marble Faun; Pirandello, 'Tragedia d'un personaggio'.
to make the characters *big enough* to be equal to their job. McMurphy, as viewed from the low-angle point of view of the Chief, is a giant, a god, he's every movie show cowboy that ever walked down a mainstreet toward the OK corral, he's every patriot that ever died for his countrymen on a scaffold in history books. The Big Nurse [Ratched] is seen more clearly by the Indian than by anyone else, as that age-old ogre of tyranny and fear simply dressed in nice neat white. Of course, McMurphy and the nurse are also people, in a human situation, but in the distorted world inside the Indian's mind these people are exalted into a kind of immortality. To do this you need fantasy. You need to jar the reader from his comfortable seat inside convention. You need to take the reader's mind places where it has never been before to convince him that this crazy Indian's world is *his* as well. (Quoted in Tanner, p. 23)

As Tanner points out, 'the novel is about rescue or salvation, and Bromden's inner condition gives us a clear idea of what the patients need rescue from' (Tanner, p. 22). Bromden himself describes his predicament in terms of a closed system he calls the Combine. This is an Institution, of which the hospital is only a small part, that seeks to homogenise and order all humanity according to a set of easily managed stereotypes. Anyone who cannot or will not conform with the role given them is seen merely as a fault to be rectified so that the machine can continue to run smoothly. As Jack de Bellis puts it, the Combine commits 'ontological violation [...] the kind of prejudice that reduces a person to the level of an object'. The effect of this, as Joan Bischoff argues, is entropy, with everything 'progressing toward total inertia [...] In such circumstances, movement becomes uniform, human individuality is erased, and language loses its power to communicate'.

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27 "Everything Running Down": Ken Kesey's Vision of Imminent Entropy*, *Lex et Scientia* 13: 1-2 (1977), 65-69 (p. 65). This is an important definition of entropy, since, while in this novel the influence of the Combine is balanced by the influence of McMurphy, in the texts I analyse in Chapter Three of this thesis the conditions that Bischoff describes control the whole text.
Early in the novel Doctor Spivey, the nominal head of the department that Ratched actually controls, outlines to the Acutes the theory on which the hospital runs.

Our intention, he usually ends by saying, is to make this as much like your own democratic, free neighbourhoods as possible – a little world Inside that is a made-to-scale prototype of the big world Outside that you will one day be taking your place in again. (CN, p. 47)

From Bromden’s point of view, this intention has a very sinister quality; the ‘big world’ that the doctor speaks of is not the real world, but the closed system of the Combine, and the hospital’s function is therefore to remove, by force if necessary, any individuality that would prevent the patients from ‘taking their place’ in this system. This manipulation of language, referring to a ‘big world Outside’ that is actually a closed system, is similar to the way Catch-22 functions; when an Institution has control over language, it also has control over reality. This is illustrated when a group of visitors is shown around the ward. Bromden tells us of

that fool Red Cross Woman […] saying how overjoyed she is that mental hospitals have eliminated all the old-fashioned cruelty: ‘What a cheery atmosphere, don’t you agree?’ She’ll bustle around the school-teachers, who are bunched together for safety, clapping her hands together. ‘Oh, when I think back on the old days, on the filth, the bad food, even, yes, brutality, oh I realize ladies that we have come a long way in our campaign!’ (CN, p. 9)

Not only does the action of bunching the visitors ‘together for safety’ contradict the ‘cheery atmosphere’, this passage comes shortly after descriptions of filth, bad food and brutality that expose this speech for the lie that it is.

Recognising that language is one of the Combine’s chief weapons, Bromden has for years been feigning deafness and dumbness as a defence against feeling unseen and unheard. The son of an Indian Chief and a white woman. Bromden has
watched the Combine use his mother to manipulate his father into selling the dam on which the tribe depended for its livelihood, an action which Bromden could do nothing to prevent. He has become lost in a fog of his own making which keeps him hidden from the Combine, but also from everything else. Like Yossarian’s evasive tactics after Snowden’s death, however, Bromden’s fog does not always protect him from the pain of others. Considering the life of Pete Bancini, another patient, Bromden admits:

I can see all that, and be hurt by it, the way I was hurt by seeing things in the Army, in the war. The way I was hurt by seeing what happened to Papa and the tribe. I thought I’d got over seeing those things and fretting over them. There’s no sense in it. There’s nothing to be done. (CN, p. 130)

Bromden, despite his best efforts, is fully aware of everything that goes on around him, but feels powerless to prevent it (rather as Yossarian does in the middle stages of *Catch-22*). An example of this can be seen in the descriptions of the main form of therapy used in the hospital: group sessions. At these the patients sit in a circle with Ratched and Spivey and discuss one another’s problems. Through Bromden’s eyes we are given a clear picture of what the effect of the sessions actually is. By turning patient against patient, encouraging them to identify faults in one another, the treatment becomes as much of a problem as the symptoms of mental illness that the sessions concentrate on and, again, helpless, Bromden can only watch. During one of the sessions, he mentally addresses Billy Bibbit:

I can’t fix your stuttering. I can’t wipe the razor-blade scars off your wrists or the cigarette burns off the back of your hands. I can’t give you a new mother. And as far as the nurse riding you like this, rubbing your nose in your weakness till what little dignity you got left is gone and you shrink up to nothing from humiliation, I can’t do nothing about that either. (CN, p. 131)
Much of the language used by the Combine to control those it deems mad uses images of childhood and emasculation, either refusing to acknowledge the maturity of the patients or removing any adult independence they may possess. Before the arrival of McMurphy, the men on the ward have internalised these attitudes, recognising themselves only as children, eunuchs, or even timid animals. The head nurse is referred to as ‘Ol’ Mother Ratched’ in bitter recognition that she has total control over the men on her ward (CN, p. 116). The Combine thus presents its members with a limited set of stereotypes, and if individuals are unable to conform to its idea of adulthood, they must be children, since this is the only alternative the Combine will admit. The image of an adult male, which McMurphy represents, is therefore a powerful one in the novel.

The reader’s introduction to McMurphy is also the first time any of the other characters have seen him – he has come in from the outside. Significantly, as Bromden realises, ‘the Combine hasn’t got him in all these years’ (CN, p. 153) and he is thus free of its influence. ‘I hear him coming down the hall [Bromden says], and he sounds big in the way he walks, and he sure don’t slide; he’s got iron on his heels and he rings it on the floor like horseshoes’ (CN, p. 10). This first description, which is repeated throughout the novel, gives McMurphy a mythological status. He is perceived by Bromden as a satyr, a force of nature to be set against the mechanised world of the Combine. A few pages after McMurphy’s initial appearance on the ward, the scar across his nose is described as ‘wine-coloured’, a metaphor that reinforces both McMurphy’s physical side (reminding us as it does of the red nose of the heavy drinker and of the fighting that got him the scar) and, in its bacchanalian
associations, of his mythical side.\textsuperscript{28} This image is repeated later in a discussion between McMurphy and Harding (the unofficial leader of the Acutes) to sum up the extent to which the men have lost, or had taken from them, any satyr-like qualities they might once have possessed; ‘Harding hushes all of a sudden and leans forward to take McMurphy’s hand in both of his. His face is tilted oddly, edged, jagged purple and grey, \textit{a busted wine bottle}’ (\textit{CN}, p. 62, emphasis added).

The first thing McMurphy does when he enters the ward and sees the other patients is to laugh at them.

Nobody can tell exactly why he laughs; there’s nothing funny going on. But it’s not the way the Red Cross Woman laughs, it’s free and loud and it comes out of his wide grinning mouth and spreads in rings bigger and bigger till it’s lapping against the walls all over the ward […] This sounds real. I realize all of a sudden it’s the first laugh I’ve heard in years. (\textit{CN}, p. 11)

Although encouraged and interested by the sound of a genuine laugh, Bromden is so far lost in his self-protective fog that he finds it threatening. While he can recognise in McMurphy’s laughter the sign of a world that exists outside the Combine, he has, at this point, no means to exist outside it himself. He has created his fog according to the only system he knows, the closed system of the Combine. In effect, he has negated his own identity to prevent the Combine from doing so.\textsuperscript{29} McMurphy, who is in a position to see the Combine for what it is, is, therefore, also


\textsuperscript{29} This is a recognised psychiatric phenomenon. See, for example, R.D. Laing’s analysis of ontological insecurity; \textit{The Divided Self: An Existential Study in Sanity and Madness} (London: Tavistock, 1960), part 1, p. 3 (discussed in Chapter Three of this thesis).
in a position to see through Bromden’s fog, potentially exposing him to a threat from which he has no other means to defend himself.

All of a sudden I was scared he was laughing because he knew the way I was sitting there with my knees pulled up and my arms wrapped around them, staring straight ahead as though I couldn’t hear a thing, was all an act. (CN, p. 22)

It soon becomes clear that McMurphy’s laughter is what enables him, here in the heart of the Combine, to resist its influence.

A couple of times some stupid rule gets him mad, but he just makes himself act more polite and mannerly than ever till he begins to see how funny the whole thing is – the rules, the disapproving looks they use to enforce the rules, the ways of talking to you like you’re nothing but a three-year-old – and when he sees how funny it is he goes to laughing, and this aggravates them no end. He’s safe as long as he can laugh, he thinks, and it works pretty fair. (CN, p. 113)

As Nicolaus Mills points out, ‘for McMurphy, laughter is above all functional. It does not simply provide a release of tensions but a way of gaining one’s balance so that he can deal with pain’ (Mills, p. 86). Thus we see that McMurphy’s laugh is just as much a protective strategy as is Bromden’s fog, but it is a strategy that is open and empowering; where Bromden’s fog keeps him safe at the expense of his identity, McMurphy’s laugh enables him to be flexible, to maintain his balance, his sense of self. This strategy comes so naturally to McMurphy that he assumes that everybody employs it, and he is confused by the reactions of the Acutes. As Mills notes, ‘getting the men to laugh’, thereby ‘giving [them] a new and amused perspective of the arbitrary way they have been categorized’ is no easy task (Mills, p. 87).
Witnessing his first group therapy session, which the patients accept as a valid and useful process, McMurphy points out that what it reminds him of most is a ‘pecking party’.

The flock gets sight of a spot of blood on some chicken and they all go to *peckin’* at it, see, till they rip the chicken to shreds, blood and bones and feathers. But usually a couple of the *flock* gets spotted in the fracas, then it’s their turn. And a few more gets spots and gets pecked to death and more and more. Oh, a peckin’ party can wipe out the whole flock in a matter of a few hours, buddy. I seen it. A mighty awesome sight. (*CN*, p. 55)

Although Harding reacts cynically to this observation, patronising McMurphy that he has been ‘on our ward six hours and [has] already simplified all the work of Freud, Jung and Maxwell Jones and summed it up in one analogy’ (*CN*, p. 56), his defence of the Combine’s methods is not convincing, and eventually he admits this. Significantly, his admission comes after he has tried, and failed, to laugh.

Harding looks around, sees everybody’s watching him, and he does his best to laugh. A sound comes out of his mouth like a nail being crow-barred out of a plank of green pine; Eee-eee-eee. He can’t stop it. He wrings his hands like a fly and clinches his eyes at the awful sound of that squeaking. But he can’t stop it. It gets higher and higher until finally, with a suck of breath, he lets his face fall into his waiting hands.

‘Oh the bitch, the bitch, the bitch,’ he whispers through his teeth. (*CN*, p. 60)

Harding’s failure to produce a real laugh makes him realise that the system he has been defending is based on falsehood, and he suddenly sees Ratched, who represents that system, in a new light (‘the bitch’).

A small group learns the power of laughter on the fishing trip that McMurphy manages to organise, despite Ratched’s reservations. Tanner points out that the sea is an appropriate place for ‘this moment of transformation, this Pentecost’ because it is away from the influence of the Combine (*Tanner*, p. 41). On the way to the docks,
the men are made to feel confident and courageous by associating themselves with McMurphy. However, when he is absent, talking to the captain, and the dock-side loiterers throw abuse at them, they are powerless to respond. Once at sea, however, the only man present with any experience of fishing is George, who is obsessed by cleanliness and will not touch anything, and McMurphy has brought along a prostitute with whom he immediately disappears below decks. When they have actually hooked fish, therefore, the men are forced to act for themselves. The physical symptoms of their ‘madness’, the only things by which they have hitherto been defined, become mere encumbrances that they must deal with in order to perform.

Billy still stutters, but he forgets to get frustrated with himself in his excitement, and Harding discovers that his mobile hands, hitherto a source of shame to him, can be put to practical use.

Arriving on deck in time to see the transformation that has occurred – symptoms have turned into men – McMurphy begins to laugh. It is a laugh that echoes his first that ‘laps against the walls all over the ward’; but this time, finally understanding the message in the laughter, the men join him.

McMurphy laughs [...] at the girl, at the guys, at George, at me sucking my bleeding thumb, at the captain back at the pier [...] and the Big Nurse and all of it. Because he knows you have to laugh at the things that hurt you just to keep yourself in balance, just to keep the world from running you plumb crazy [...] I notice Harding is collapsed beside McMurphy and is laughing too. And Scanlon from the bottom of the boat. At their own selves as well as at the rest of us [...] Swinging a laughter that rang out on the water in ever-widening circles, farther and farther, until it crashed up on beaches all over the coast, on beaches all over all coasts, in wave after wave after wave. (CN, p. 237-38)

On the return to shore, when the patients are able to stand up to the wharf loiterers without McMurphy’s assistance, the real effect of their new-found ability to
laugh at themselves becomes apparent. As Terence Martin observes, ‘community laughter this, comic, aware, the signature of a deep experience, the expression of freedom – earned and shared’.\(^3\)

It is only on the return trip to the hospital, when Bromden notices that McMurphy looks ‘dreadfully tired and strained and frantic’ \((CN, p. 245)\), that we realise he has sacrificed his laugh in giving it to the others. Back in the ward the men lose their courage, and while they now understand that the Combine is something to be challenged rather than accepted, they rely on McMurphy to fight their battle. Although he successfully challenges Ratched’s authority over and over again, only Bromden notices that McMurphy’s laughter has gone on ‘long after his humour had been parched dry between two electrodes’ \((CN, p. 305)\). Finally, facing his inevitable fate, McMurphy marches towards the nurses’ station to challenge the Combine for the last time. Having attacked Ratched, he is fought to the ground by aides, and

only then did he show any sign that he might be anything other than a sane, wilful, dogged man performing a hard duty that finally just had to be done, like it or not.

He gave a cry […]

A sound of cornered-animal fear and hate and surrender and defiance.

\((CN, p. 305)\)

McMurphy’s laugh, the thing that represented his sanity, has become merely an animal cry that denies even humanity. Already in effect dead, he is further dehumanised by lobotomy and returned to the ward with eyes ‘like smudged fuses in a fuse box’ \((CN, p. 309)\). Bromden, partly as an act of compassion, partly to prevent Ratched using McMurphy as ‘an example of what can happen if you buck the system’

(CN, p. 308), suffocates him with a pillow and, having done so, breaks a window and escapes.

During the novel McMurphy is characterised as a Made Fool from two different perspectives. First the Combine, unable to fit him into its scheme of things, labels him as a psychopath and has him sectioned in an attempt to contain his deviancy. This act has no power over him as an individual, and at first he behaves in hospital exactly as he has behaved all his life. The second fool-making, which destroys him, is carried out by the men on the ward who desperately need him to be their hero. As he says in conversation with Harding,

‘I’ve had people bugging me about one thing or another as far back as I can remember but that’s not what – but it didn’t drive me crazy.’
‘No, you’re right [...]’
‘It is us.’ [Harding] swept his hand about him in a soft white circle and repeated, ‘Us.’ (CN, pp. 294-95)

McMurphy discovers that teaching the men how to laugh, although it pushes him to his limits, is not enough to save them, and he is sacrificed so that they might see that Ratched is human and can therefore be beaten. The satyr, a transcendent force of nature, has been transformed into a scapegoat, a Made Fool who acts both as a community’s liberator and as its victim.

McMurphy’s role as Transcendent Fool occurs entirely from Bromden’s point of view. As Hunt points out, Bromden sees McMurphy initially in terms of how the others see him, but is in a position, by already being aware of the threat that the Combine poses, to begin to see McMurphy as he really is, outside the definition provided of him by both the Combine and the other patients (Hunt, p. 14). As McMurphy weakens, Bromden grows stronger, so that eventually he is able to glimpse what it is like for McMurphy to be haunted by the needs of others (see, for
example, *CN*, p. 277). It is Bromden who, at first, sees McMurphy as a satyr, come
to destroy the mechanised world of the Combine. The idea that he is some sort of
mythical being is almost immediately contradicted, however, by McMurphy himself.

After he witnesses his first group therapy meeting and compares the men to chickens,
Harding explains to McMurphy that they are all nothing more than maladjusted
rabbits. When McMurphy challenges this, arguing that the description must refer to
his ‘fuckin’ tendencies’, Harding responds,

‘You remember, it was you that drew our attention to the place where the
nurse was concentrating her pecking? That was true. There’s not a man here
that isn’t afraid he is losing or has already lost his whambam. We comical
little creatures can’t even achieve masculinity in the rabbit world, that’s how
weak and inadequate we are. Hee. We are – the rabbits, one might say, of
the rabbit world!’ […]

‘Harding! Shut your damned mouth! […]

Here; all you guys. What the hell is the matter with you? You ain’t as
crazy as all this, thinking you’re some animal.’ (*CN*, pp. 64-65)

McMurphy insists throughout the novel that he is a man, and is exasperated by
the other patients’ claim that they are not, and Bromden becomes increasingly
confused about McMurphy’s status. On some occasions he celebrates his simple
humanity, as when he is sweeping under McMurphy’s bed:

Sweeping the dorm soon’s it’s empty, I’m after dust mice under his bed
when I get a smell of something that makes me realize for the first time since
I been in the hospital that this big dorm full of beds, sleeps forty grown men,
has always been sticky with a thousand other smells […] but never before
now. before he came in, the man smell of dust and dirt from the open fields.
and sweat, and work. (*CN*, pp. 97-98)

At other times Bromden shows a more complex reaction to McMurphy’s
qualities, showing that a strong and complete man is something so unusual in the
closed world of the Combine that it is strange and frightening:
He’s layin’ awful quiet, I told myself, I ought to touch him to see if he’s still alive …

That’s a lie. I know he’s still alive. That ain’t the reason I want to touch him.
I want to touch him because he’s a man.
That’s a lie too. There’s other men around. I could touch them.
I want to touch him because I’m one of these queers!
But that’s a lie too. That’s one fear hiding behind another. If I was one of these queers I’d want to do other things with him. I just want to touch him because he’s who he is. (CN, p. 210)

Much of Bromden’s confusion has to do with the fact that, having realised that McMurphy is human rather than divine, he initially applies a stereotyped definition of manhood to him, in much the same way that the Combine interprets him merely as a ‘psychopath’. As the novel progresses, however, he learns that an independent man may be complex without losing any of his masculinity.

I was seeing him different than when he first came in; I was seeing more to him than just big hands and red sideburns and a broken-nosed grin. I’d see him do things that didn’t fit with his face or hands, things like painting a picture at OT with real paints on blank paper with no lines or numbers anywhere on it to tell him where to paint, or like writing letters to somebody in a beautiful flowing hand. How could a man who looked like him paint pictures or write letters to people, or be upset and worried like I saw him once when he got a letter back? (CN, p. 153)

The pivotal moment of their relationship comes when McMurphy discovers that Bromden has been hoarding chewing gum, stuck to the frame under his bed. He laughs and begins to sing ‘oh, does the Spearmint lose its flavour on the bedpost overnight?’. Angry at first, Bromden tells us, ‘but the more I thought about it the funnier it seemed to me. I tried to stop it but I could feel I was about to laugh – not at McMurphy’s singing, but at my own self’ (CN, p. 205). The first thing he says, after many years of silence, is ‘thank you’, ostensibly for the gift of fresh chewing gum, but, more importantly, also for the return of his laugh, which brings his voice
and signals his return to sanity (see also Mills, p. 89). This is a much more direct and personal influence than McMurphy has on any of the other characters, and significantly it happens in the hospital, several chapters before the fishing trip. As soon as Bromden has recovered his voice, he begins to tell McMurphy about the Combine, and about his parents; the painful memory he has been trying to repress throughout the novel. Bromden clearly identifies McMurphy with his father, and warns him that, just as the Combine destroyed him because he was big and tried to fight back, so, now that McMurphy has made a stand, his life is also in danger (CN, p. 209). This expresses a personal, rather than an altruistic, fear, since the Combine’s destruction of his father is what originally sent Bromden mad. If he were to rely entirely on McMurphy as a father-saviour, as the other men do, therefore, he would risk total annihilation should McMurphy fail.

As Martin argues, however, although McMurphy does not defeat the Combine, his laugh shows Bromden a new way of looking, of seeing other possibilities (Martin, p. 37). Hunt points out that, after Bromden’s initial identification of McMurphy with his father, new memories start to emerge of his childhood that show independence, first from his father, then from his mother (who has an equivalent parallel in Ratched). In this way, Bromden is gradually able to achieve a sense of his own identity (Hunt, pp. 21-22). In the novel’s title passage (CN, p. 224), Bromden finally remembers his grandmother, a ‘person of wisdom, a carrier of culture, a figure of both nurture and nature […] a woman who is fully a person, not a stereotypical victim or victimizer’ (Hunt, p. 22. See also de Bellis, p. 73). Although McMurphy often reminds Bromden of his father, therefore, the fact that he is also a complete person in his own right (neither symbolic force nor father-protector) teaches Bromden to outgrow his dependence on these roles, and become complete himself.
Given the example of a fully rounded personality (Randle Patrick McMurphy is the only character in the novel to have a full name), Bromden is able to transcend the label given him by the Combine: that of incurable Chronic.

McMurphy’s rebellious behaviour, therefore, exists only as a reaction against the Combine, which prevents its members from achieving a balanced identity. What in other circumstances might show such irresponsibility as irritated many of the novel’s critics, works in fact as balancing anti-system against an already existing, and life-denying, system. Bromden’s escape, therefore, does not imply that Kesey is suggesting we should behave as McMurphy does throughout much of the novel. Instead he presents a situation where McMurphy, as Transcendent Fool, reveals to Bromden, as Protagonist, the means by which he can reorientate himself so as to live successfully in the real world. This revelation is achieved through Bromden’s understanding of McMurphy’s laughter, which, as Mills says, ‘was not intended to eliminate death and failure but to show that death and failure need not prevent [one] from acting’ (Mills, p. 90).

On The Road

As Howard W. Webb Jr. has pointed out, Jack Kerouac lived in two worlds; the Lowell of his childhood and the subterranean territory of the beats. ‘He celebrates Lowell because it remains for him a place of unsullied beauty; he celebrates the beat generation because he finds in it what he […] had once thought was forever lost.’

This nostalgia for a lost world creates an ambivalence in Kerouac that is reflected in

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his novels. While some aspects of his work show a wish to return to an idealised past, others seem to argue that the beat way of life indicates a way forward.

This confusion between the past and the future is evident even in the word ‘beat’ itself. Although usually seen as a phenomenon of the big cities, an expression of a new urban generation’s dissatisfaction with its country’s traditional values, Kerouac claims to have first come upon the meaning of beat as Beatific in a church in Lowell, his childhood home. Indeed, Kerouac has said that the beat generation goes back to the wild and raving childhood of playing the Shadow under windswept trees of New England’s gleeful autumn, and the howl of the Moon Man on the sandback until we caught him in a tree (he was an ‘older’ boy of 15), the maniacal laugh of certain neighbourhood madboys, the furious humor of whole gangs playing basketball till long after dark in the park, it goes back to those crazy days before World War II when teenagers drank beer on Friday nights at Lake ballroom […] It goes back to the completely senseless babble of the Three Stooges, the ravings of the Marx Brothers (the tenderness of Angel Harpo at harp, too).

(Quoted in Webb, p. 128)

On The Road (1957) relates, in five parts, four round trips across America made by Sal Paradise, and the development of his friendship with a ‘neighbourhood madboy’, Dean Moriarty, whose ‘maniacal laugh’ and ‘senseless babble’ ring through the novel. It starts with a marriage break-up and illness that force Sal to reassess his life and begin a search for a more meaningful and fulfilling existence, a search in which, as Webb points out, Dean becomes crucial (Webb, p. 123).

R. J. Ellis sees the novel as symbolic of America in the post-war years.

The pattern of ejection from domestic stability into a period of illness and a subsequent setting-forth – a pattern of stability/distress/new departure – matches the way the USA had, after a long period of endeavouring to isolate itself within domestic concerns, engaged in reluctant global combat during
World War Two, and then entered upon a period of post-war development possessing undefined characteristics. In this way, Ellis continues, the novel ‘reassesses America’s national myths in this post-war climate, now devoid of the sense of euphoria generated by VJ Day’. At the start of On The Road Sal, influenced by these national myths, seeks ‘the West’ (which he sees as ‘an arena for self-discovery’), and attempts to cast Dean in the role of rugged frontiersman. However, not only does Sal discover that the West no longer exists as he had imagined it, but Dean steadfastly refuses to fit into the desired stereotype, although Sal ‘desperately attempts to re-integrate [him] into a conventional heroic representation – the good bad (cow)boy who “only stole cars for joy rides”’ (Ellis, p. 67). Dean’s resistance to categorisation teaches Sal, over the course of the novel, that a more open existence, one which is essentially undefinable by conventional means, may be possible. As George Dardess argues, the relationship between the two men is of paramount importance to this process; ‘On The Road is a love story, not a travelog (and certainly not a call to Revolution)’.

Gradually [Sal] realizes that Dean is as he is because he has left behind all ‘bitterness, recrimination, advice, morality’ and has always ahead of him ‘the ragged and ecstatic joy of pure being.’ In his experiences with this ‘new kind of American saint,’ [...] Jack recaptures joyfulness. (Webb, p. 124)
As is suggested by the novel’s title, the Road is where Sal, as Protagonist, is taught to see with new eyes. Gerald Nicosia says that ‘travel to [Sal and Dean] is a conscious philosophical method by which they test the store of hand-me-down truisms. Moreover, as a potent imaginative symbol, travel is a philosopher’s stone that turns every experience into a spiritual lesson’. Comparing the novel to Jack London’s *The Road*, Nicosia says that ‘while the tramp may have no legal or social authority, he has, according to London, the power of witnessing injustice and telling about it, and thus he may serve as one of the most powerful forces for change’ (Nicosia, p. 344). Dean, born on the road and brought up in the streets by a hobo father, is thus clearly identified with the Fool, whose traditional position and function in society is just as London describes.

Although the idea of an Institution is not so clearly defined in *On The Road* as it is in *Catch-22* or *One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest*, there are clear indications throughout the text of a closed system of convention that Sal is trying to escape. Regina Weinreich argues that the first sentence of the novel, linking Sal’s split with his wife to his first meeting with Dean, ‘immediately associates [him] with disappointment about social restriction at large’, or, as Sal puts it himself, ‘my feeling that everything was dead’.

This disappointment is evident on two levels. Society as a whole has become, in Sal’s eyes, either dominated by a controlling ideology that restricts any expression of

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freedom (represented by the police and the government), or homogenised to a meaningless parody of its own past. The first of these can be seen in Sal's description of the police as being involved in psychological warfare against those Americans who don't frighten them with imposing papers and threats. It's a Victorian police force; it peers out of musty windows and wants to inquire about everything, and can make crimes if the crimes don't exist to its satisfaction. (OR, p. 136)

It is also evident in Bull Lee's complaint that 'they can make clothes that last forever. They prefer making cheap goods so's everybody'll have to go on working and punching timeclocks and organizing themselves in sullen unions and floundering around while the big grab goes on in Washington and Moscow' (OR, p. 149). The second is apparent in Sal's disillusionment when he finds that everywhere he goes is covered with identical prefabricated houses and is 'chock full of chichi tourists' (OR, p. 51). Modern society, for Sal, can be summed up by his much-quoted remark; 'This is the story of America. Everybody's doing what they think they're supposed to do' (OR, p. 68).

The second level on which Sal's disappointment with restriction appears is in his relationships with intellectual friends who consider themselves to be a counterculture to broader society. As he says, 'all my New York friends were in the negative, nightmare position of putting down society and giving their tired bookish or political or psychoanalytical reasons' (OR, p. 10). The fact that this position is 'negative' and 'tired' shows that it has become just as stagnant as the society it claims to be a reaction against. Consequently, when Sal meets the uneducated and

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39 It should be noted that, during the course of his travels, Sal, ironically, both becomes a policeman and embraces the myth of America that leads to such parodies.
anarchic (though intelligent), Dean, he wants to get to know him ‘because my life hanging around the campus had reached the completion of its cycle and was stultified’ (OR, pp. 9-10). In Dean, by contrast, Sal can ‘hear a new call and see a new horizon’ (OR, p. 10).

This raises the question of who, exactly, is being identified with ‘beatness’ in the novel. Although this entire group, both biographically and as they are fictionalised within the text, are commonly identified by critics as the beat generation, in On The Road it is Dean (whom the group opposes), who is described by Sal as beat. Revealing in this context is Webb’s analysis of the driving force behind the feelings of the original beat group in the mid-forties. It is a description that has clear parallels with the prevailing pathologies of post-war America:

they were haunted by their inability to believe in anything, convinced that this faithlessness was unbearable, and driven by the tension arising from their conflicting views to a craving for excess. (Webb, p. 121)

A result of this tension, as John Clellon Holmes wrote in his seminal article in 1952, is that ‘beatness’ meant ‘being undramatically pushed up against the wall of oneself’. This is an image of restriction, at odds with the ‘new horizon’ that Sal seeks. The very use of the word beat to describe Dean, therefore, is another sign of Kerouac’s ambivalence about the possibilities of transcendence.

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40 Dean’s position in this group is illuminated by Gerald Nicosia’s discussion of Kerouac’s choice of his name. Nicosia notes that ‘if Professor Moriarty was Holmes’ most nefarious opponent, Moriarty’s great intelligence and energy also stimulated Holmes to his most brilliant feats of crime detection’. There is, therefore, ‘a pun on the fact that Neal was the greatest “opponent” of John Clellon Holmes, who like Sherlock would have been insufferably bored without “Moriarty’s” challenge to his stiff morality’ (Nicosia, p. 347).


As Barry Miles points out, the episode early in the novel (several days into Sal's first, solo, trip across America) when he wakes after a long sleep in a cheap hotel and cannot remember who he is, is a form of epiphany.\textsuperscript{43} Significantly, it is an epiphany that occurs alone and takes the form of wiping clean the slate of his identity; until Sal travels with Dean, and shares a laughing relationship with him, he has nothing with which to refill himself.

Sal first gets the impression that Dean has knowledge of things outside the norms of society when listening to his frenetic descriptions of everything he experiences. In discussing Dean's attempts to describe his intuitions, especially about time, Ellis says

imposing narrative order threatens to undermine Dean's attempt to recast it as mystical experience. His transcendence cannot be fixed in time as a linear story any more than the original myth [of the West] can fit post-war America. Dean's endless talking necessarily ruptures syntactical rules. (Ellis, p. 73)

Dean, wanting to be a writer like Sal, echoes this, saying, 'there's so many things to do, so many things to write! How to even begin to get it all down and without modified restraints and all hung-up on like literary inhibitions and grammatical fears …' (OR, p. 7). Analysing the way that Kerouac modulates between different styles in On The Road, and noticing that the most free-flowing, 'spontaneous prose' language is used to describe Dean's behaviour, Ellis argues that 'this sort of stylistic alternation in [the novel] complements its exploration of the increasing separation between the dominant values of a post-war American middle-class seeking to re-establish some consensual stability and an increasingly alienated,

sexually polymorphous minority' (Ellis, p. 83). Dean's position, then, is firmly established as expressing the paradoxical possibility of communicating the ineffable truths that exist outside everyday life.

He appears to have the ability to apprehend everything he encounters as it exists in itself, which he calls 'digging'. His constant laughter is an expression of this apprehension, as, for example, when he, his girlfriend Marylou, and Sal are on a ferry crossing over to Algiers to visit Bull Lee.

Negroes were working in the hot afternoon, stoking the ferry furnaces that burned red and made our tires smell. Dean dug them, hopping up and down in the heat. He rushed around the deck and upstairs with his baggy pants hanging halfway down his belly. Suddenly I saw him eagering on the flying bridge. I expected him to take off on wings. I heard his mad laugh all over the boat — 'Hee-hee-hee-hee-hee!' (OR, p. 141)

Dean's laughter is described as 'mad' here and elsewhere, which has a twofold meaning for Sal. First, it shows Dean's status as a Made Fool; as with Orr, because it is unclear what this laughter means, it is assumed to mean nothing. Second, as is indicated here by Sal's impression that Dean is about to 'set off on wings', 'mad' takes on the alternative associations discussed in the Introduction that involve supernatural knowledge or ability and thus indicates Dean's status as Transcendent Fool. For Sal there is a measure of virtue in 'madness' (as the resonances with Melville's Ishmael, Emily Dickinson, Blake and the Shakespearean fool make clear) to offset his sense that Dean is merely 'foolish'. Though Sal's position oscillates between these attitudes, he also constantly strives to integrate his experiences into manageable, culturally-familiar patterns. (Ellis, p. 77)

Dean’s position in society as Fool is clear in the way he parodies the establishment, as, for example, when Sal says that he ‘loved to smoke cigars. He smoked one over the paper and talked. “Ah, our holy American slopjaws in Washington are planning fur-ther inconveniences – ah-hem! – aw – hup! hup!”’ (OR, p. 115). He is fascinated by people whose ‘souls really won’t be at peace unless they can latch on to an established and proven worry and having once found it they assume facial expressions to fit and go with it, which is, you see, unhappiness, and all the time it all flies by them and they know it and that too worries them no end’ (OR, pp. 208-09).

Increasingly, however, it is clear that Dean’s dual role creates tension within the group. His frenetic behaviour disrupts the lives of those around him. No longer merely an interesting and entertaining ‘madman’, he regularly hurts those closest to him. From his transcendent perspective, however, he is unable, or unwilling, to limit himself to the closed system of ‘normal’ behaviour, and sees the establishment simply as another aspect of the universe to be ‘dug’. Marylou, for example, says to Sal,

‘Gee, I’m sad.’

‘What are you sad about, kid?’

‘I’m sad about everything. Oh damn, I wish Dean wasn’t so crazy now.’

Dean came twinkling back, giggling, and jumped in the car.

‘What a crazy cat that was, whoo! Did I dig him! I used to know thousands of guys like that, they’re all the same, their minds work in uniform clockwork, oh, the infinite ramifications, no time, no time …’ (OR, p. 163)

Although aware of the effect Dean is having on his friends, Sal begins to understand what the world must look like from his point of view, and, in a moment of epiphany, perceives a backstreet softball game not as a closed system of rules, but as the totality of human possibilities, with Dean at its centre.
A great eager crowd roared at every play. The strange young heroes of all kinds, white, colored, Mexican, pure Indian, were on the field, performing with heart-breaking seriousness. Just sandlot kids in uniform. Never in my life as an athlete had I ever permitted myself to perform like this in front of families and girl friends and kids of the neighbourhood, at night, under lights; always it had been college, big-time, sober-faced; no boyish, human joy like this. Now it was too late. Near me sat an old Negro who apparently watched the games every night. Next to him was an old white bum; then a Mexican family, then some girls, some boys – all humanity, the lot. Oh, the sadness of the lights that night! The young pitcher looked just like Dean. (OR, pp. 180-81)

At this point Sal considers that it is ‘too late’ for him to exist within this ‘human joy’. Although he has become aware of the restrictions of blindly following convention, this awareness has made him an outsider, a misfit, and he has not, as yet, found an alternative mode of existence. Consequently, Sal vacillates between defending Dean’s status as Transcendent Fool and feeling pain and embarrassment at his behaviour, which becomes more and more detached from everyday responsibilities. In the following passage, which occurs when Sal is staying with Dean and his wife, Camille, Dean’s ‘maniacal giggle’ is thrown into sharp relief by the ‘wails of his baby’ and the loneliness of the women:

[Camille and Dean] were yelling at each other as I slipped through with a feeble smile and locked myself in the bathroom. A few moments later Camille was throwing Dean’s things on the living-room floor and telling him to pack. To my amazement I saw a full-length oil painting of Galatea Dunkel over the sofa. I suddenly realized that all these women were spending months of loneliness and womanliness together, chatting about the madness of the men. I heard Dean’s maniacal giggle across the house, together with the wails of his baby. (OR, p. 187)

Here, Sal identifies closely with the women, but soon afterwards he maintains his attitude that Dean is a transcendent being, and sees the group as being at fault for not accommodating him, for not knowing what to say to him.
‘I think Marylou was very, very wise leaving you, Dean,’ said Galatea. ‘For years now you haven’t had any sense of responsibility for anyone. You’ve done so many awful things I don’t know what to say to you.’

And in fact that was the point, and they all sat around looking at Dean with lowered and hating eyes, and he stood on the carpet in the middle of them and giggled – he just giggled. He made a little dance [...] I suddenly realized that Dean, by virtue of his enormous series of sins, was becoming the Idiot, the Imbecile, the Saint of the lot. (OR, p. 193)

The climax of this scene comes when Sal makes the decision to side wholeheartedly with Dean, and defend him against the attack of the group. The language Sal uses no longer concerns the implications of Dean’s behaviour, a crying baby or lonely woman, but the full metaphysical import of what Dean has been trying to communicate. Dean stands

in front of everybody, ragged and broken and idiotic, right under the lightbulbs, his bony mad face covered with sweat and throbbing veins, saying, ‘Yes, yes, yes,’ as though tremendous revelations were pouring into him all the time now, and I am convinced they were, and the others suspected as much and were frightened. He was BEAT – the root, the soul of Beatific. What was he knowing? He tried all in his power to tell me what he was knowing [...] He was alone in the doorway, digging the street. Bitterness, recriminations, advice, morality, sadness – everything was behind him, and ahead of him was the ragged and ecstatic joy of pure being [...] ‘The sooner he’s dead the better,’ said Galatea, and she spoke officially for almost everyone in the room.

‘Very well, then,’ I said, ‘but now he’s alive and I’ll bet you want to know what he does next and that’s because he’s got the secret that we’re all busting to find.’ (OR, p. 195)

It is important to notice that the group that attacks Dean in these exchanges represents a counter-culture, rather than society at large. Leading a bohemian existence themselves, they target Dean (at least in part) to divorce him from, and therefore validate, their own lifestyle. As Ellis argues, ‘Dean the ex-reform school car-thief is scapegoated for the excesses of the group’ (Ellis, p. 79).
Significantly, in the passage quoted above, Dean does not giggle; his effort to be understood has fallen on deaf ears. Although Sal defends him to the others, it is important to notice that Dean stands ‘alone in the doorway’ looking outwards, while Sal stands inside with the others. At this point, Dean is unreachable, and Sal must also cross the threshold, leave the Institution, if he is to learn Dean’s secret. Back on the road with Dean (in other words, in Dean’s transcendent territory), however, Sal finds that he cannot cope with the pitch at which Dean experiences life.

All that old road of the past unreeling dizzily as if the cup of life had been overturned and everything gone mad. My eyes ached in nightmare day.

‘Ah, hell, Dean, I’m going in the back seat, I can’t stand it any more, I can’t look.’

‘Hee-hee-hee!’ tittered Dean and he passed a car on a narrow bridge and swerved in dust and roared on [...] I could feel the road some twenty inches beneath me, unfurling and flying and hissing at incredible speeds across the groaning continent with that mad Ahab at the wheel. (OR, p. 234)

When Dean and Sal part after this latest trip it is evident that there is still some distance between the two men, but Sal has at least realised the significance of Dean’s attraction to the Road; that revelation is a process, a journey. We are given, however, the first indication that their roads might follow separate paths in the distinction Sal makes between Dean’s ‘life’ and his own ‘way’:

‘Good-by, good-by.’ Dean walked off in the long red dusk [...] All the time he came closer to the concrete corner of the railroad overpass. He made one last signal. I waved back. Suddenly he bent to his life and walked quickly out of sight. I gaped into the bleakness of my own days. I had an awful long way to go too. (OR, p. 254)

The next time the friends meet, Dean’s transcendence is complete and the group has accepted him as a Fool, no longer expecting any social responsibility from him. To illustrate this, Sal describes him in terms of natural objects (a boulder and a
flower) and as an Angel (a supernatural creature), rather than as a ragged idiot or 'mad Ahab'.

If you touched him he would sway like a boulder suspended on a pebble on the precipice of a cliff. He might come crashing down or just sway rocklike. Then the boulder exploded into a flower and his face lit up with a lovely smile and he looked around like a man waking up and said, 'Ah, look at all the nice people that are sitting here with me.' [...] People were now beginning to look at Dean with maternal and paternal affection glowing in their faces. He was finally an Angel, as I always knew he would become. (OR, p. 263)

This acceptance of Dean as fully transcendent, without any more confusion with his status as a Made Fool, finally enables Sal to understand Dean's laughter. Significantly, this occurs only after Sal has given up his search for a stereotyped American West with Dean as its hero and 'realized I was beginning to cross and re-cross towns in America as though I were a travelling salesman – raggedy travellings, bad stock, rotten beans in the bottom of my bag of tricks, nobody buying' (OR, p. 245). Sal’s dreams of the past have been revealed to be too well-trodden, his bag of tricks – empty but for rotten beans that have turned out not to be magical – parodying the stock in trade of the genuine trickster.

Sal’s final road trip, taken with Dean and another friend, Stan, breaks this meaningless repetition of crossing and re-crossing America and takes them South, to Mexico and a new land (see also Ellis, p. 72). They spend the afternoon in a whore house, getting high and listening to mambo music, then drive on, at night, through deep jungle. The headlights fail and, insisting that they can ‘make it’, Dean drives on through utter darkness. Suddenly the friends realise they have crossed over into the Tropic of Cancer – Dean has taken them over a dark threshold into a world none of them have experienced before.
‘We’re in a new tropic! No wonder the smell! Smell it!’ I stuck my head out the window; bugs smashed at my face; a great screech rose the moment I cocked my ear to the wind. Suddenly our lights were working again and they poked ahead, illuminating the lonely road that ran between solid walls of drooping, snaky trees as high as a hundred feet.

‘Son-of-a-bitch!’ yelled Stan in the back. ‘Hot damn!’ He was still so high. We suddenly realized he was still high and the jungle and troubles made no difference to his happy soul. We began laughing, all of us.

(OR, p. 293)

Dean’s message is revealed to Sal, through laughter, to be the essence of man without civilisation; ‘no towns, nothing, lost jungle, miles and miles, and down-going, getting hotter, the insects screaming louder, the vegetation growing higher, the smell ranker and hotter until we began to get used to it and like it’ (OR, p. 293).

Paradoxically this is at once an image of becoming one with the earth and a vision of hell, and it is the memory of whores and drugs and mambo music that initially makes Stan laugh and protects his ‘happy soul’ from ‘the jungle and troubles’. Crucially, however, as we have seen in the analyses thus far in this thesis, laughter expresses just this acknowledgement of the real world as having a positive and a negative aspect which are inextricable from one another. Moreover, Kerouac seems to be arguing that such a confrontation is impossible within the closed system of American society as he describes it. The fact that Mexico is a different, and more open, world, is indicated by Sal’s response to a policeman who stops in the middle of the night simply to ask if Dean is sleeping; ‘such lovely policemen God hath never wrought in America. No suspicions, no fuss, no bother: he was the guardian of the sleeping town, period’ (OR, p. 295).

Having finally communicated his revelation, Dean leaves Sal, with dysentery, in Mexico City. When they next meet, Sal is living in New York with a new girlfriend
and Dean has travelled cross-country again to visit him, but has nothing coherent to say.

He hopped and laughed, he stuttered and fluttered his hands and said, 'Ah—ah—you must listen to hear.' We listened, all ears. But he forgot what he wanted to say. 'Really listen—ahem. Look, dear Sal—sweet Laura—I’ve come—I’m gone—but wait—ah yes.' And he stared with rocky sorrow into his hands. 'Can’t talk no more—do you understand that it is—or might be—But listen!' (OR, pp. 306-07)

Due to go out in a foursome with Remi Boncourt and his girlfriend to a Duke Ellington concert, they refuse to give Dean a lift, and abandon him to return cross-country alone. Sal has returned to a life of convention, and now sides with Remi, who, he notes 'was fat and sad now but still the eager and formal gentleman, and he wanted to do things the right way, as he emphasized. So he got his bookie to drive us to the concert in a Cadillac' (OR, p. 308).

While the ending is ambivalent, it is open. Analysing the first and last paragraphs of the novel, Dardess says that

the book begins with the narrator’s construction of distinctions and boundaries; it ends with his discarding them – a discarding which indicates his desire to suspend opposites in a perhaps continuous state of flux. The book moves from hierarchy to openness, from the limitations of possibilities to their expansion. (Dardess, p. 201)

Ellis, however, argues that Sal’s ‘fear of trespassing beyond the consensual bounds of class and sexual propriety' always make him unable to understand Dean fully (Ellis, p. 82). He says of the novel that

in this ending, On The Road’s structure decisively bifurcates. Sal’s story ends up as a Bildungsroman: swept up by commodity capitalism’s luxury limousine, he is carried back into society – the Bildungsroman’s classic pattern [...] Sal’s final acceptance of self-imposed limitation is marked by
the way his final thoughts of Dean are nostalgically sentimentalized [...] Dean’s story, in contrast, is still picaresque in form: he is left on the road, rounding the corner, still seeking to resolve his inward conflicts. (Ellis, p. 75)

He continues;

How Sal shapes his story will mean he always ends up doing what he is ‘supposed to do’. The unanswered questions concern the means of release from the consumerist subject-position he embraces. They remain unanswered precisely because the narrative position Sal adopts excludes penetrative understanding of Dean’s continuing rejection of limitations. Dean is ultimately commodified in Sal’s syntactical account – just another American tale told in the back of a Cadillac. Sal seeks to produce Dean’s idealism as a Bildungsroman like his own, but Dean’s idealistic adherence to pure activity is incompatible with Sal’s insistence on arrival. (Ellis, pp. 76-77)

Nicosia, on the other hand, sees the novel as echoing natural processes, thereby putting Sal’s eventual self-limitation in the context of his recognition of a broader, more open, system. Noting the constant repetition of such words as star, beat, vision, dream and so on, Nicosia argues that

the thrust of all these symbolisms is to establish the cyclical nature of what men designate ‘truth’ or ‘the absolute,’ etc. To this end Kerouac also uses many time collapses and images of light springing from darkness, and pays close attention to the passage of the seasons. The story begins and ends in winter. The book completes one cycle in the life of the narrator, since at the opening he has just lost one wife, and at the close he has finally found another. (Nicosia, p. 348)

Webb argues that the problems with the ending of On The Road stem from the ambivalence in Kerouac himself that is suggested at the beginning of this section. Because he was never able to reconcile his feelings about the two worlds of Lowell and the beats, he is not able to provide a convincing representation of a transcendent character.
Has he exaggerated the possibilities of self-realization in the beat world; has he sentimentalized the hoodlum, the dope addict, and the poet? After all, if Jack himself remains always separate from the beat generation, what chance is there for anyone else? [...] He must either re-evaluate his worlds and his relation to them as man and artist, or he must find fresh experiential and literary means for reaffirming the virtues of Lowell. (Webb, pp. 132-33)

This observation gets at the heart of transcendence in literature. If one takes the position presented in the Introduction, laughter and art have in common the ability to stand outside the normal conventions, finding 'fresh experiential and literary means' by which we can develop. While Kerouac has shown the possibility for revelation in the laughing relationship that develops between Dean and Sal, he himself seems to remain unconvinced. This is, perhaps, because of his insistence that transcendent experiences can be communicated by changing the language used to describe them. As we see in Dean's decline into incoherence, however, such an attempt is bound to fail because of the ineffability of such experiences. Where Kerouac does succeed (although his other utterances seem not to reflect this) is in presenting Sal's revelation in the Mexican jungle in terms of (non-linguistic) shared laughter.

Conclusion

While each of the novels analysed in this chapter explores the relationship between an Institution, a Protagonist, and a Fool - laughter forming an essential part of this dynamic - Heller, Kesey, and Kerouac use different techniques to illustrate the phenomenon that I have called Laughter of Revelation.

The Institution of the Air Corps in Heller's novel uses Catch-22 to control language, which, Gary Davis argues, is discontinuous with reality. Because its members are trapped within its closed system, the effect of this is that whoever controls language controls the only reality that those within the system have access
to. In a similar way, the Combine in *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* reifies humanity so that people are seen, not as independent identities, but as cogs whose only purpose is to keep the machine running smoothly. By controlling the definition of what this ideal person is, the Combine is able to designate those who don't fit merely as faults to be rectified. In both cases, individual people are secondary to the Institution, which is a self-perpetuating and self-serving system. Furthermore, the Institution is shown to be actively destructive (as we see, for example, when increasing numbers of Yossarian's friends are killed during pointless bomb runs, or in the lobotomies conducted on disruptive patients, including McMurphy himself). Less overtly, in *On The Road* the police and the government exist on the one hand, to stamp out any signs of deviancy, and, on the other hand, to trap the population into an endless cycle of commodification.

In each of these novels there appears a character (the Fool) who exists independently of the Institution, thereby having access to a reality that exists outside the closed system. While Orr seems trapped at the beginning of *Catch-22*, serving as the example used by Yossarian and Doc Daneeka in the first overt definition of Catch-22, it is revealed that he has, while living within the system, long been planning and practising for his escape. McMurphy and Dean, however, are slightly different. McMurphy has always lived independently of the Combine, and his engagement with it is due entirely to the need he recognises in his fellow patients, while Dean is also an outsider, who watches conventions with as much interest as he does everything else, but is fundamentally unaffected by them. He is only accepted into the community when his intrinsic difference is recognised and he is given license to behave irresponsibly.
Orr overcomes the language paradox of Catch-22 simply by acting. McMurphy’s dilemma is how to live independently once the pain of others has been recognised. He cannot stand as the others’ representative in a battle against the Combine and maintain the separation that keeps him safe, and he dies. In his independence, unqualified throughout *On The Road*, Dean becomes more and more distant from others, and he ends in incoherence.

Yossarian, the only Protagonist in these texts who is not a first-person narrator, is initially as much a functioning part of Catch-22’s system as anyone else, although he develops his own Catch-22-like strategies for his own individual purposes. After Snowden’s death, however, he realises that the war has implications for others beside himself, and he begins to confront the system directly (although he has no means to attack it coherently). Until he learns the significance of the private joke that causes Orr to giggle throughout *Catch-22*, Yossarian tries to repress his awareness of mortality; the apparent pointlessness of existence which Snowden’s message communicates to him. Bromden (partly, perhaps because his story is told retrospectively) is already fully aware of the threat of the Combine at the start of *One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest*. Like Yossarian, however, he does not consider that anything can be done, as his own experience with his father has taught him that any attempt to fight back leads only to destruction. He underestimates his own (and by extension, everyone’s) potential for inner strength until McMurphy – not only a hero for his community, but revealed to be nothing more than a man in his gradual weakening and eventual death – teaches him that a true laugh, by acknowledging both pleasure and pain, can keep one sane and enable one to act despite the threat of the Combine. In effect, the laughter of McMurphy and Orr teaches Bromden and Yossarian that it is possible not only to become independent enough to see the limits
of the Institution, but also to move outside it and live without the (limiting) protection that it does provide. Sal on the other hand, while recognising in Dean’s laughter an important symbol of freedom, returns quite happily to the Institution once his adventure is over, satisfied simply to have learned that there is more to life than conventions and norms. Never able to embrace wholeheartedly what Dean represents, Sal merely tells us of his existence. This is therefore a different kind of first-person account from Bromden’s, whose ‘exchange of visions’ essentially means that he has become a version of McMurphy that, nevertheless, leaves his own personality intact and strong.

All three of these novels, therefore, question in different ways the possibility of the transcendence of everyday reality, and especially of the restrictive systems that society creates. Heller circumvents the problems of language by making an epiphany of an action, communicated by laughter. It is important to notice that the reader is never actually given a description of either Orr’s or Yossarian’s escape. Instead, the first is presented as accomplished fact and the second as the existential statement that Yossarian, in running, has taken responsibility for his own life. Kesey confronts the idea that fantasy is essential to communicate things that ‘mere truth’ cannot. In so doing, he creates a series of interrelating metaphors or visions that describe Bromden’s world in a way that naturalistic language could not. Kerouac, as his style in On The Road shows, vacillates between the necessity for mutually agreed modes of language – syntax and grammar that communicate but are limited – and experimentation with a much freer mode of expression, which ultimately achieves little more than incoherence. The different tellings of these tales, each of which contains a powerful image of transcendence, therefore invite questions regarding the possibility of communicating anything truly new in novelistic form. These three
novels, then, show the beginnings of a metafictional tendency to problematise the way the story is told and, in Kerouac’s case in particular, the possibility is intimated that language may not prove able to overcome its own limitations to communicate objective ‘truth’ coherently.
CHAPTER TWO: LAUGHTER OF APOCALYPSE

Introduction

Laughter of Apocalypse takes the form of a relationship that involves revelation, as in Chapter One, but here the revelation is either of evil, or comes too late to prevent catastrophe. The relationship between Institution, Protagonist and Fool (and indeed, the designation of these roles) is also more complicated in these examples than in those discussed in Chapter One, although, as before, it is clearly identifiable through the dynamics of shared laughter.

Typically, the Fools in these examples are perceived to be demons or monsters. While they function as Made Fools, in that by breaking taboos they serve mainly to reinforce the norm, in these examples the taboos broken are of an extreme kind, so that the Apocalyptic Fool may seem to be different from the more benign (and often victimised) figures who cannot be expected to cope with social convention. Of course, the question of degree that influences the perception of the Fool exists on a continuum, rather than falling conveniently into the categories of demons and victims. Randle McMurphy and Dean Moriarty, for example, both display demonic characteristics, but the crucial difference is that their influence on the Protagonist is positive and creative.

Here, on the other hand, the Fool directly threatens both the Institution and the Protagonist; his or her laugh expresses a desire to destroy both individual sanity and social relationships. The revelation that the Fool betokens through his or her mockery typically concerns the guilt or fear of those he or she attacks, those truths that one would rather not face. The demonic Fool, therefore, can only be defeated once a Protagonist has accepted responsibility for these truths and assimilated them into his
or her personality, thereby negating the Fool's destructive intent. Also, in personifying, and thus externalising, the sins or fears of a society, this type of Fool often acts as a scapegoat, in that, in destroying the Fool, society is cleansed.

The Protagonists, because they have the potential to understand and assimilate transcendent experiences, are able to confront and overcome the threat that the Fool poses in a way that Institutional or closed thinking, because of its lack of flexibility, is unable to. Thus while the sense of Protagonist as advocate for the Fool’s message to the reader still holds, there is also a sense in which the Protagonist acts as champion for his or her community, defending it against the Fool as demon. The relationship that is expressed by the Laughter of Apocalypse, therefore, occurs in the form of a struggle between the forces of system and anti-system, and describes transcendence in terms of the destruction of a corrupt or static system in order, ultimately, to create a better world.

The Fool as Demon

Leslie Fiedler points out that horror writing has existed for a long time, its current incarnation beginning in the eighteenth century as a reaction against Samuel Richardson’s ‘mimetic mode’ and signalling a return to a style more like Medieval and Renaissance romance with its elements of the ‘marvellous’ and the ‘wonderful’. Such fiction was, Fiedler says, reborn ‘as terrifying nightmare’ after upheavals such as the French Revolution, ‘when the failed dream of Reason was breeding monsters in the dark undermind of Europe’ (Fiedler, p. 46). Despite periods since then when horror stories have been largely dismissed as ‘disreputable schlock’, ‘they have

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refused to die from our imagination, in which all of us remain children, for therapeutic reasons we do not understand" (Fiedler, p. 47, p. 48). This response to the failure of Reason adequately to address experienced reality seems different from the entropic response outlined in the Overview (and discussed in Chapter Three) that concludes that life is chaotic and therefore meaningless (in effect, seeing it as entirely nightmare). Instead, horror fiction uses fantasy to draw the monsters out of the 'dark undermind' and personify them in order that they may be confronted. By acknowledging the power of the irrational in this way, a balance can be maintained between the demands of Reason – the ordered systems that we need in order to function – and those of Unreason; the potential for chaos and destruction that exists in every individual and every society.

A crucial element of horror fiction is its use of laughter; as Stephen King has pointed out, 'humor and horror are close together'. In traditional gothic tales laughter typically acts as a mark of madness brought on by despair on the part of a victim, or of mockery or triumph on the part of a demon. In H.P. Lovecraft’s 1922 tale ‘The Hound’, for example, the narrator, confronted by the animated skeleton of a gigantic dog, ‘scream[s] and [runs] away idiotically, [his] screams soon dissolving into peals of hysterical laughter’. The mocking demon appears in Mary Shelley’s novel of 1818. Victor Frankenstein, finding his new bride murdered, looks up to see the creature he created at the window: ‘a grin was on the face of the monster; he seemed to jeer, as with his fiendish finger he pointed towards the corpse of my wife’.  

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In both these examples, guilt and responsibility play an important part. In the first, the narrator has robbed the Hound’s grave of a valuable artefact and is being punished, either by a supernatural force or by his own delusional conscience. In the second, Frankenstein had abandoned his creation as soon as it awoke, denying his responsibilities as ‘father’, and refuses to help the creature make a new Eden with a mate of its own kind. Consequently, Frankenstein’s creation punishes him by killing all those he loves. Both of these are examples of destructive, mad laughter, unmitigated by any positive sense of forgiveness or redemption. In more recent horror fiction, however, a sane, human laughter is often also present, which opposes and balances the demonic.

A contemporary American example of demonic mockery can be found in William Peter Blatty’s *The Exorcist* (1971). The demon Pazuzu, having possessed twelve-year-old Regan MacNeil, speaks through her, its laughter contrasting with her fear, as, for example, when ‘Regan’s piercing cry of terror turn[s] to a guttural, yelping laugh of malevolent spite and rage triumphant’.\(^5\) Repeatedly described in terms of bestial, bellowing laughter, Pazuzu most often shows its presence by stretching Regan’s mouth ‘into a feral grin, into bow-mouthed mockery’ (*Ex*, p. 204). Merrin, the exorcist, describes to his assistant, Damien Karras, the purpose of this constant mockery:

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\text{I think the demon’s target is not the possessed; it is us … the observers … every person in this house. And I think – I think the point is to make us despair; to reject our own humanity, Damien: to see ourselves as ultimately bestial; as ultimately vile and putrescent; without dignity; ugly; unworthy.} \\
\text{(*Ex*, p. 311)}
\]

As the destruction of McMurphy in *One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest* shows, however, Pazuzu’s victims will only despair (and thereby lose their humanity) if they lose their own ability to laugh. Natural, human laughter, therefore, acts as a powerful balancing force in *The Exorcist*. One of the principle agents of this force is Father Dyer, a young priest who comes to a party at the MacNeil household early in the novel. ‘At the door, he apologized for his lateness. “Couldn’t find the right necktie,” he told Chris [Regan’s mother] expressionlessly. For a moment, she stared at him blankly, then burst into laughter. Her day-long depression began to lift.’ (*Ex*, p. 61)

The other is detective Kinderman, who is investigating the death of Chris’s colleague, Burke Dennings. During his first interview with Chris (who is almost at breaking point) he starts to tell her a story about his mother keeping carp in the bathtub, finishing “‘ah, that’s enough now; enough.” He sighed wearily, motioning his hand in a gesture of dismissal. “But now and then a laugh just to keep us from crying’” (*Ex*, p. 175). When Kinderman, after much hesitation, asks Chris for an autograph (she is an actress), she ‘almost laugh[s] with relief; at herself; at despair and the human condition’ (*Ex*, p. 181).

The fact that Chris almost laughs shows how close the demon is to winning, and it does, in fact, succeed in destroying Karras’s humour. Towards the end of the novel he can no longer laugh, so that when he returns to his room to find a note from Dyer – ‘A key to the Playboy Club has been found on the chapel kneeler in front of the votive lights. Is it yours? You can claim it at Reception’ – he puts it down ‘without expression’ (*Ex*, p. 321). Again, some pages later, Kinderman tells another of his funny stories, and Karras can only respond by ‘smiling bleakly’ (*Ex*, p. 323). The power of shared, human laughter is shown only to balance the demon’s, it cannot defeat it outright. Instead Karras finally destroys Pazuzu by being moved to fury
(action) rather than shame (retreat) by its mockery. Denouncing the demon as a 'loser', he forces Pazuzu to possess him instead of the child and then kills himself (Ex, pp. 329-30).

The function of the Made Fool, it has been argued, is to unite a community in its recognition and rejection of the Fool's deviancy. As Enid Welsford says,

The Fool is an unabashed glutton and coward and knave [...] he winks at us and we are delighted at the discovery that we also are gluttons and cowards and knaves. The rogue has freed us from shame.\(^6\)

As Transcendent Fool, however, the demon has special knowledge, in this case of the hearts and minds of its victims, and it uses this knowledge to divide and isolate people, destroying any sense of community. The demon reveals those hidden things about ourselves that we are too ashamed to share with others and laugh about, playing on our guilt and fear until our sense of our own unworthiness destroys us. Karras, consumed by guilt about his mother's lonely death in a sordid apartment, is weakened by the demon's taunts about his filial duties. It is only when he is able to see Pazuzu not simply as his own cruel conscience but as a threat to everybody in the house that Karras can reassert a sense of community by sacrificing himself for the others. Significantly, this occurs only when both he and the demon have stopped laughing. The moment of recognition and confrontation happens beyond laughter, which is presented simply as an expression on the one hand of the threat to humanity, and on the other of the defensive response.

Thus apocalyptic laughter entails two types of revelation. First the demon, as Transcendent Fool, reveals those things that characters would rather remained

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hidden, in an attempt to use their shame or fear to destroy them. Second, a Protagonist, realising that this attempt can only be successful if one refuses to acknowledge one’s own culpability, takes on the role of scapegoat. In this example, Karras literally accepts the sins of the world by taking the demon into himself. In committing suicide, therefore, he not only punishes himself for what he perceives to be his crime (abandoning his mother), he also releases the others from guilt.

Perhaps the best contemporary example of an overt battle between demonic and human laughter is to be found in Stephen King’s novel, *It* (1986). As in *The Exorcist*, the demonic is expressed through the aggressive and destructive laughter of the monster, ‘It’, which uses the fears of its individual victims against them. However, as Jeanne Campbell Reesman points out, this mockery is ultimately defeated by ‘happiness expressed through simple laughter – *shared* laughter’.⁷ In order to understand how this defeat is possible, it is important to address the dynamics King sets up between the Fool (as demon), It, the town of Derry which it is trying to destroy, and a group (the ‘Losers’ Club’) who act communally as Protagonist in order to defeat it.

Several critics have pointed out that King’s effectiveness as a writer stems from his placing of the horrors of Gothic fiction in everyday, small town settings, with recognisably ordinary characters.⁸ Furthermore, as Ben Indick points out, he combines the fear of the supernatural with ‘the self-conscious real and imagined fears

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of the young (which do not vanish even in adulthood) of inadequacy, physical changes, need for love and attention’ (Indick, p. 10). In so doing, King amplifies and deepens the ordinary, everyday fears of his readers. As Tony Magistrale puts it,

At the heart of King’s fictional microcosm is an acute awareness of the most emotional and deep-seated American anxieties. Under the supernatural veneer of vampires and telekinetic powers, which remains acknowledged as one of the great popular attractions of his writing, King’s world is a mirror to our own. Echoing a dominant concern of Christopher Lasch and many other contemporary social scientists, King’s world highlights the ways in which American society undermines the morality necessary for love – of self and for others.9

This is a common aim of modern horror novelists. As Michael Morrison points out, ‘while the modern horror short story typically focuses on the psychology of a single character, the modern horror novel takes on society’ (Morrison, p. 14).

King’s method, as Edwin Casebeer shows, is to use an external antagonist (in this case, It) to lead members of a community into conflict with their neighbours. ‘This conflict results in a community held together by conformity rather than cooperation, with narcissism and the closed door, fealty to no code but self-gratification, and apocalypse simmering beneath the surface’.10 King has said in interview that

my work underlines again and again that I am not merely dealing with the surreal and the fantastic but, more important, using the surreal and the fantastic to examine the motivations of people and the society and the institutions they create. (Quoted by Casebeer, p. 45)


10 ‘Stephen King’s Canon: The Art of Balance’, in Magistrale and Morrison, pp. 42-54 (p. 48). See also King’s Needful Things (1991), in which an external antagonist destroys a community by giving each member of it what he or she most desires, at the expense of their relationships with one another.
The town of Derry has a long and bloody history, marked by cyclically recurring acts of cruelty and murder. The demonic It, which most frequently appears in the guise of a clown called Pennywise, is always present, killing and encouraging others to kill, while simultaneously acting as a depraved conscience to those it has thus encouraged. The clown’s presence is felt both in the inhabitants’ fear of one another and in their attempts to hide their own part in the town’s guilt. Rather than homogenising a community and refusing to accept difference, as the Institution has been shown to do in the last chapter, Pennywise’s influence denies community, turns neighbour against neighbour, and destroys social structures.

To overcome this influence King uses children, presenting an image of childhood that is both free of the taint of sin and imaginative enough to understand the threat posed by It. As Casebeer points out,

King adheres to the romantic belief that the child is the father of the man. It may be that children are superior in wisdom and psychological talents to adults simply because the latter are corrupted by psyches shrunken by materialism and rationalism – but they are superior. (Casebeer, p. 49)

King addresses this potential – the ability to see the world as it really is, unmediated by adult constraints – overtly in It. While, for a child, ‘a sudden upheaval of beauty or terror at ten did not preclude an extra cheese-dog or two for lunch at noon’.

when you grew up, all that changed. You no longer lay awake in your bed. sure something was crouching in the closet or scratching at the window … but when something did happen, something beyond rational explanation, the circuits overloaded. […] It didn’t digest. Your mind kept coming back to it, pawing it lightly like a kitten with a ball of string … until eventually, of
course, you either went crazy or got to a place where it was impossible for you to function.\footnote{It (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1986), p. 433. Subsequent references appear in parentheses within the text.}

The child, then, is in an ambivalent position, at once prey to the terrors of the irrational and flexible enough to assimilate those terrors, to continue to function when confronted by them. The Losers’ Club works as an extended version of this image. Not only are its members (at the start of the narrative) children, they are also outsiders, ostracised because of their difference: Bill has a stutter, Ben is fat, Beverly has an abusive father, Richie wears glasses, Eddie is a hypochondriac, Stan is Jewish and Mike is black. Facing daily confrontation in their ordinary lives, therefore, these children are ideally placed to meet the challenge of the irrational when it arises.

Laughter plays an important part in this schema because, being child outsiders, all the central characters are laughed at by others, and it is not until they form their club that they are able to laugh amongst themselves. An example of this occurs when Ben first meets the others in the Barrens, a green wilderness that surrounds the sewage system in the heart of the town.

Stuttering Bill burst out laughing. Ben looked at him sharply, decided he wasn’t being laughed at, exactly (it was hard to say how he knew it, but he did), and grinned. […]

Both Bill and Eddie burst out laughing this time, and Ben joined them […] He liked the way his laughter sounded with theirs. It was a sound he had never heard before; not mingled laughter – he had heard that lots of times – but mingled laughter of which his own was a part. (It, pp. 196-97)

Significantly, this happens after Ben has triumphed in an encounter with the children’s chief schoolyard enemies, the bullies Henry, Butch and Vic. Initially drawn together by their attempts to avoid these boys, the Losers’ Club is formed by a
mutual agreement that Ben and his new friends will fight back. The laughter in this scene, then, is an expression of solidarity against an enemy, an attitude that becomes crucial once they are involved with It.

This involvement is provoked by the start of a new cycle of violence in Derry, this time the murders of local children. Bill’s younger brother, George, is the first victim, and Bill’s fury at this act draws the others into an investigation of crimes that the adults of the town seem unable to cope with. Illustrated by the monster’s frequent appearance as Pennywise the giggling clown, It uses demonic laughter to undermine the sanity of its victims, as when the father of another of the murdered children hears what he thinks is his daughter’s voice coming from the kitchen sink:

I heard Betty somewhere down in those friggin pipes. Laughin. She was somewheres down there in the dark, laughin. Only it sounded more like she was screamin, once you listened a bit. Or both. Screamin and laughin down there in the pipes. (It, p. 132)

Not only does this experience make the man question his own sanity, the adults of Derry are simply unable to believe such things to be possible, and his tale is ignored.

The Losers, by contrast, do believe, and pursue It, ultimately to its lair in the sewers. It fights back by disguising itself as the thing each child is most afraid of and then mocking their fear. They find out by accident, however, that It is also afraid of their laughter. In a haunted house which Pennywise has both created and led them to, Richie tries to encourage the terrified Stan:

‘Come on, Stan-kid,’ he said. ‘Is you a man or is you a mouse?’

‘I must be a man,’ Stan said shakily, and wiped tears from his face with the heel of his left hand. ‘So far as I know, mice don’t shit their pants.’

They laughed and Ben could have sworn he felt the house pulling away from them, from that sound. (It, pp. 692-93)
The contrast between laughter and screams or tears in these examples is telling. In the first, the ambivalent connection between laughter and horror is expressed by It, and the response of the listening adult is fear and disbelief. In the second, however, Stan's ability to turn his tears into laughter (but only, it should be noticed, with the full support of the others) indicates that the children are just as able to use the power inherent in this ambivalence as It is. This leads Bill to the discovery of an ancient ritual, the *Ritual of Chuld*. This is a form of wit contest, in which a holy man and a demon bite one another's tongues so that neither can escape and then tell jokes, the first to laugh being destroyed. The children use this idea to turn Its illusions against itself, shooting It with a silver bullet when it appears as a werewolf and using Eddie's inhaler to squirt 'acid' at It when it appears as a giant crawling eye. By turning their fears around in this way the children are able to overcome them, to see a werewolf or a crawling eye as ridiculous rather than frightening. This gives them power over It, and, in a significant reversal of the Ritual, their laughter causes it to retreat.

When the Losers, now adult, are called back to Derry by another cycle of murders, they return to the ambivalent world of their childhoods, where laughter and terror are two sides of the same coin, and must therefore abandon their dependence on adult rationality if they are to survive. With two important exceptions, each Loser has become successful in a career in which creativity has a vital role. Rather than lose their childhood selves completely, each has retained a flexibility of imagination that makes this return possible. Stan, however, who even as a child regarded the irrational as an 'offense' (*It*, p. 349) and could therefore never assimilate it in the way the others could, kills himself when he is called home. Eddie, who has become a limousine driver, has the strength to return, but no longer has the imagination to
engage with It, and he is killed in the final battle. Both men have chosen careers which are merely on the fringes of creativity; Stan managing a large video company and Eddie driving famous actors too and from their film sets. This indicates that, while still attracted to the power of a fantasy world, neither, as an adult, is truly creative himself.

The two most important characters in this respect are Bill, who has become a novelist, and Mike, who is now the town librarian. Bill, always the leader of the group, becomes its main imaginative focus, and it is his revelation, as I shall discuss in a moment, that finally leads to Its death. While the others must abandon their adult selves in order to confront It on its own terms, Mike lives at once in both worlds. As he says, ‘on one level of my mind I was and am living with the most grotesque, capering, horrors; on another I have continued to live the mundane life of a small-city librarian’ (It, p. 126). Mike, whose journal entries form much of the narrative and whose research reveals many of the details of Derry’s bloody past, becomes the group’s advisor as well as the reader’s guide. This liminal position is unique in the novel and, significantly, Mike does not engage in the final apocalyptic battle with It. His liminal status is reinforced by his visit to Albert Carson, who was librarian before him and is now dying of throat cancer. Carson, having spent a lifetime studying the history of Derry, tells Mike that it is now his turn to find and tell the truth. He emphasises that this telling should rely more on feeling (the imaginative power of the child) than on fact (adult rationality), and when Mike laughs at this

Carson grin[s] with his leathery lips – an expression of good humor that was actually a little frightening. In that instant he looked like a vulture happily guarding a freshly killed animal, waiting for it to reach exactly the right stage of tasty decomposition before beginning to dine. (It, p. 129)
What seems to be an evil smile, evoking Pennywise’s habit of partially eating his victims, is in this case that of someone who is helping Mike to defeat It. Meeting again as adults, the Losers gradually realise the significance of this blurring between themselves and It. Finding that Stan is dead and they are only six, Bill feels that It was the seventh; that It and time were somehow interchangeable, that It wore all their faces as well as the thousand others with which It had terrified and killed ... and the idea that It might be them was somehow the most frightening idea of all. How much of us was left behind here? He thought with sudden rising terror. How much of us never left the drains and the sewers where It lived ... and where It fed? Is that why we forgot? Because part of each of us never had any future, never grew, never left Derry? Is that why? (It, p. 395)

In this realisation that their lives are inextricably linked to the evil that It represents, the Losers recognise that they are at once Derry’s champion and its scapegoat. The part of them that never grew up, the innocence of childhood, is to be sacrificed in a final confrontation that will cleanse the town. As adults, however, Pennywise mocks them, playing on their fear that they have lost the childish ability to use the ambivalence of laughter as a weapon; ‘You’ll never think of the right riddles and jokes. You’ll never make me laugh, Mikey. You’ve all forgotten how to turn your screams upside-down’ (It, p. 565). This image returns twice in the novel. Shortly after the episode just described, Pennywise is described as having a ‘bloody grin too red and too wide, a scream turned upside-down’ (It, p. 570). And again, in a picture from an old copy of the Derry News, ‘off to the left was a clown – their clown – turning a handspring for a group of children. The artist had caught him upside down. turning his smile into a scream’ (It, p. 583). As Reesman argues in her Bakhtinian analysis of the novel,
Such grotesque laughter, the ambivalent laughter of the carnival, acknowledges horror even as it rises above it. It knows of this possibility, and fears it. Disguised as Vic, It visits Henry in the insane asylum and says, “They can’t hurt Me if they only half-believe ... But there have been some distressing signs”. The Losers must “believe” enough in evil to confront it, but they must also “unbelieve” in its monological control over them. If the Losers were to laugh at It instead of succumbing to Its terrors, It would not only be threatened but destroyed. (Reesman, p. 166)

This is finally achieved by the adult Losers at the moment that Bill sees Its laughter for what it really is: an attempt to destroy all communication rather than to create intimacy. In an enactment of the Ritual of Chüd, Bill’s mind and the creature’s have become enmeshed, and It draws him inexorably towards its own world, the Deadlights.

It screamed noxious laughter, and Bill became aware that Its voice was beginning both to fade and to swell, as if he was simultaneously drawing out of Its range ... and hurtling into it [...] He would shortly be beyond sane communication with It ... and some part of him understood that, for all Its laughter, for all Its alien glee, that was what It wanted. Not just to send him out to whatever It really was, but to break their mental communication [...] To pass beyond communication was to pass beyond salvation. (It, p. 846)

This realisation releases Bill from Its power, and he recognises that to believe in It is to understand it, and therefore to believe in and understand the things that It is trying to destroy.

‘Chüd, this is Chüd, stand, be brave, be true, stand for you brother, your friends; believe, believe in all the things you have believed in, believe that if you tell the policeman you’re lost he’ll see that you get home safely, that there is a Tooth Fairy who lives in a huge enamel castle [...] that courage is possible and words will come smoothly every time [...]’

He suddenly began to laugh in the darkness, not in hysteria but in utter delighted amazement. ‘OH SHIT, I BELIEVE IN ALL OF THOSE THINGS!’ he shouted, and it was true: even at eleven he had observed that things turned out right a ridiculous amount of the time. (It, p. 847-48)
Its power over them eliminated, the Losers are finally able to kill It. However, because of its corrupting influence which pervades Derry, as Its world falls apart the sewers, both symbolically and literally the heart of the town, collapse, and Derry is also destroyed.

As Reesman observes, the function of It as enabling, by confrontation, Bill’s moment of revelation, has implications for It as a novel, and for its relationship with the reader.

As It serves as the town’s soul, a historical collective self of the sins of the town fathers, It also represents the dark personal unconscious the young developing psyches of the novel must confront in order to live, while on a meta-level It points to the jarring psychological function of the novel itself. Pennywise could be called a grotesque image of the artist, particularly in Its insistence on upsetting usual ways of ‘seeing’ of ‘knowing’. (Reesman, p. 161)

The idea of It as Fool, as Artist is consistent with the analysis in the Introduction to this thesis of the Transcendent Fool as creative force. As Reesman points out, however, it is significant that the two strongest voices in the novel are those of writers, Mike and Bill, for ‘the characters’ narratives are attempts to explain, to tell about, the darkness of It in order to survive’ (Reesman, p. 163). Comparing Stan’s reactions to It and Bill’s, Reesman argues that where Stan only ‘sees’, and then rejects, Bill ‘addresses’, he assimilates situations and uses them later in his work (Reesman, p. 167). Casebeer also points out that in It, the persona of ‘author’ is given an optimistic potential; ‘where the child’s imagination is the only weapon of the adult against the death and meaninglessness of the eponymous evil, the novelist Bill Denbrough […] regains this state most easily and thus is a vital element of the protagonistic band’ (Casebeer, p. 51).
Two images of the artist are, therefore, presented in the novel. The new ways of ‘seeing’ and ‘knowing’ that It represents lead only to the revelation that its ultimate purpose is to destroy both communication and community, and it is only the ability of the Protagonists to assimilate and ‘tell about’ this threat that proves to be genuinely creative, in that it takes this knowledge and communicates it to the reader.

King’s fiction, Casebeer argues, does more than simply produce catharsis, ‘it urges readers to confront squarely and disturbingly the horror in their own lives’ (Casebeer, p. 43). King’s skill, he continues, is in ‘his ability to balance opposing realities’ so that, while the resolutions of his novels may seem unsatisfactory, King is, in fact, placing the onus on the reader; ‘we will behold in the artistic experience an affirming and illuminating mirror of our problems and our solutions’ (Casebeer, p. 45). He argues that the authorial voice in King’s work is a conservative persona who ‘agrees with the norms of the community’, while

the antagonist (as monster) is that shadow aspect of us which finds its reality in the individual, the bizarre, and the grotesque. This antagonist seeks to tyrannically control or to destroy rather than to belong, which is dynamic rather than centred and driven rather than ordered. We contain both and we come to the novel to experience both. Their conflict will never be settled, for it is the essence of what they are: opposites that define one another. (Casebeer, p. 47)

Barker similarly argues that King’s aims are basically conservative, but that they are also subversive in that fantastic literature shows us the complexity of our minds in its totality, including our own propensity for morbidity or perversion which is usually suppressed (Barker, p. 57). King, Casebeer argues, thus balances the traditional horror novel, in which the antagonist is destroyed, and the postmodern, in which the antagonist is transformed into the protagonist, with the result that King acts as a shaman, ‘employing magic (the fantasy image, childhood imagination) to
lead his culture into self-discovery' (Casebeer, p. 47). This assessment of King as an author seems to support the idea of artist as Fool, employing magical truths to show society a new way forward. As we have seen in the analyses both of his own novel, *It*, and of Blatty's *The Exorcist*, however, not only can the Fool's knowledge be used destructively rather than creatively, but the Protagonist, in such circumstances, frequently takes on both the role of scapegoat and the role of artist.

*Sula*

*Sula* (1973) is, like *It*, set in a small town, in this case, Medallion, a 'little river town in Ohio'. The plot covers the years 1919 to 1965, tracing the decline of the black community of Medallion. Called the Bottom as 'a nigger joke' (*Su*, p. 4) by its inhabitants, the neighbourhood began when a slave was offered freedom and a piece of the most fertile 'bottom land' as a reward for a difficult task. On completion of this task the farmer tricked the slave by arguing that the infertile land in the hills around Medallion was, in fact, the 'bottom of heaven – best land there is' (*Su*, p. 5), so the slave begged for, and was given, land in the hills rather than the valley. Calling their neighbourhood the Bottom keeps this trick – and their ancestor's having fallen for it – constantly in the inhabitants' minds, and the acknowledgement of white evil and their own folly therefore underpins and defines the community. Morrison shows, however, that the 'joke' is more complex than this dichotomy between white oppressors and black victims when she defines it as

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The kind white folks tell when the mill closes down and they’re looking for a little comfort somewhere. The kind colored folks tell on themselves when the rain doesn’t come, or comes for weeks, and they’re looking for a little comfort somehow. (*Su*, pp. 4-5)

While this clearly indicates that whites too respond to misfortune with laughter, important word changes between these two sentences show the difference in the dynamics of this response. Where the ‘white folks’ look for comfort ‘somewhere’, outside themselves, the ‘colored folks’ tell the joke ‘on themselves’ to find comfort ‘somehow’, in other words, they internalise it, and the evil that provoked it. By associating a white trick with drought or flood in this way, Morrison also seems to argue, as Victoria Middleton points out, that ‘[the community’s] confusion of natural and social wrongs implies that they renounce responsibility for contributing to their own suffering’.\(^{14}\) Consequently, the community’s laughter is a means of defence, a way of surviving the evils that seem to surround it rather than an attempt to defeat them. Morrison describes a white visitor to the Bottom misunderstanding the laughter that he hears;

> It would be easy for the valley man to near the laughter and not notice the adult pain that rested somewhere under the eyelids […] He’d have to stand in the back of Greater Saint Matthew’s and let the tenor’s voice dress him in silk, or touch the hands of the spoon carvers (who had not worked in eight years) and let the fingers that danced on wood kiss his skin. Otherwise the pain would escape him even though the laughter was part of the pain.

> A shucking, knee-slapping, wet-eyed laughter that could even describe and explain how they came to be where they were. (*Su*, p. 4)

This laughter, therefore, is static rather than dynamic. It describes ‘how they came to be where they were’ rather than showing a way forward. As Madhu Dubey

argues, ‘the folk culture of the Bottom is geared toward survival rather than change’, hence ‘the community’s perception of evil as an uncontrollable natural phenomenon that must be allowed to run its course’.\(^\text{15}\) One of these evils, which is bitterly resented but still accepted, is the black community’s constant exclusion from the economic development of Medallion as a whole. When a road is started in 1927 to improve business links with other towns, rumours circulate that local black labour will be used to build it, which come to nothing when itinerant white workers are brought in instead. The same thing happens in 1937, when a plan is formed to build a tunnel under the river. Again the black men try to get work, and again they are bitter, but not rebellious, when they are turned down. Like the Losers’ Club in King’s novel, the inhabitants of the Bottom feel marginalised and victimised, but unlike the Losers they respond by forming the closed system of an Institution rather than acting as Protagonists.\(^\text{16}\)

Cynthia Davis argues that, as we see when the valley man misunderstands the laughter he hears in the Bottom, white brutality involves ‘the systematic denial of the reality of black lives’.\(^\text{17}\) An important aspect of this denial is illustrated by the way the white people of Medallion refuse to see their black neighbours as part of the same

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\(^{16}\) Many critics note the importance of marginalisation in Sula, although most see it as a political issue. Barbara Rigney, for example, argues that black women are doubly marginalised, taking the reductive view that while men are dualistic, women are multiple, which enables Morrison to ‘[subvert] traditional Western notions of identity and wholeness’. While she does identify this stance as postmodern, she claims that it first appears in literature that concerns marginalised characters, seeing this as entirely a race and gender issue and therefore ignoring the way madness has influenced Western literature over the centuries, as well as the cultural theories of such commentators as R.D. Laing and Christopher Lasch; ‘Hagar’s Mirror: Self and Identity in Morrison’s Fiction’ in Peach 1998, pp. 52-69 (p. 53). Joseph H. Wessling, on the other hand, interprets the novel in terms of Freud’s theory of narcissism; ‘Narcissism in Toni Morrison’s Sula’, College Language Association Journal, 31: 3 (March 1988) 281-98.

community. Even when there is plenty of well-paid work available (as when the road is built), black families are allowed to starve rather than be given jobs. Davis interprets the novel in terms of Sartre’s ‘Look’, where ‘being “seen” by another both confirms one’s reality and threatens one’s sense of freedom’ (Davis, p. 28). This leads to ‘a cycle of conflicting and shifting subject-object relationships in which both sides try simultaneously to remain in control of the relationship and to use the Other’s look to confirm identity’ (Davis, p. 29). This can lead to Bad Faith, ‘a vacillation between transcendence and facticity which refuses to recognise either one for what it really is or to synthesise them’ (Davis, p. 29, quoting from Being and Nothingness).

Thus, characters are in Bad Faith who ‘use others to escape their own responsibility to define themselves’ (Davis, p. 29). This can, of course, also happen in ‘internalising the “Look” of the majority culture’, an action which is ‘life-denying, eliminating […] one who really accepts the external definition of the self gives up spontaneous feeling and choice’ (Davis, p. 29, 30). This is a compelling interpretation of the position of the black community of the Bottom. As Davis points out, although reciprocation is possible between two individuals, social divisions of power unbalance the process and lead inevitably to Bad Faith from the social perspective; ‘the adoption of a rigid role, the departure from life, is for Morrison as for Sartre a failure’ (Davis, p. 30).

An existential hero would therefore, in this context, be the character who overcomes not only the dominant, white ‘Look’, but, more importantly, the introjected version of it that leads to the Institutionalisation of the black neighbourhood. Moreover, for this self-definition to have context, and therefore a wider meaning, such a character must attain a reciprocal relationship with an ‘other’, since ‘freedom defined as total transcendence lacks the intention and significance that can come from commitment’ (Davis, p. 34). This freedom, and the reciprocation that
contextualises it, is expressed in the relationship between two girls, Nel Wright and Sula Peace, who grow up in the Bottom. Both are, to a large extent, the product of their upbringings; Nel in a traditional nuclear family, the daughter of a conformist mother who strictly adheres to society’s rules, Sula in an anarchic household of relations and boarders, the daughter of a wild and promiscuous mother. The isolation that both girls feel, caused on the one hand by restriction and on the other by chaos, brings them together, and they become close friends.

Playing together by the river one day, the girls are approached by Chicken Little, a child younger than they, whom they introduce into their games. Sula takes the boy’s hands and swings him around in a circle until, losing her grip, and watched by a horrified Nel, he flies into the river and sinks without trace. Again, this incident is filled with laughter, from the boys ‘swimming and clowning in the water, shrouding their words with laughter’ that Nel and Sula pass on their way to the river (Su, p. 57), to Chicken Little himself, whose ‘bubbly laughter’ the girls could still hear as he ‘sailed away out over the water’ (Su, p. 60-61). The laughter here is external to the girls themselves, and therefore different to the protective laughter discussed above. This expresses experience outside the Institution, a transcendent laughter that does not contain pain or tragedy, showing that, despite the attempts of the community of the Bottom, such things are not controllable.

Joseph Wessling notes that ‘as the two girls grow into womanhood, Sula continues the impulsive life, the life without priorities, while Nel settles into a conventional pattern of middle-class respectability’. 18 This leads to Sula’s

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18 Wessling describes Nel’s upbringing in terms of the superego, while Sula’s is of the id; ‘Narcissism in Toni Morrison’s Sula’, College Language Association Journal, 31: 3 (March 1988) 281-98 (p. 285, pp. 290-94). Houston A. Baker Jr. also interprets the novel in psychoanalytic terms; ‘Knowing Our Place: Psychoanalysis and Sula’, in Peach 1998, pp. 103-09.
identification as evil (because ‘different’) by the Institution (of which Nel has, by now, become a part). Many critics have noticed that Sula defies stereotypical interpretation, making her not only a threat to her community, but a puzzle for the reader. As Dubey argues, ‘that most readers are baffled by Sula’s inconsistency is apparent from the strenuous critical attempts to translate her character into a familiar ideological format’ (Dubey, p. 75). Morrison, she argues, deliberately undermines the reader’s ability to arrive at a straightforward interpretation both of Sula as a character and of Sula as a novel. In particular, says Dubey, by playing black nationalist and feminist issues against one another, Morrison makes any political reading of the novel difficult, although critics often make this attempt.

Significantly, Linden Peach describes Sula as a trickster figure, defined by Paul Radin as ‘the undifferentiated present within every individual […] the who was before good and evil, denier, affirmer, destroyer and creator’, rather than in terms of a binary opposition of good and evil. Middleton argues, in a similar vein, that Sula ‘is a Promethean artist, defiant of the gods and superior to other mortals’ (Middleton, p. 368). In this role of artist creator Sula is revealed as a Fool, one who ‘possesses no

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values, moral or social, is at the mercy of his passions and appetites, yet through his actions all values come into being' (Peach, p. 51, quoting Radin, p. ix). Since, as was shown in the previous paragraph, Morrison deliberately obstructs easy interpretation of both this central character and the text as a whole, it is unsurprising that 'one of the salient features of the trickster figure is the way the onus of interpretation is placed upon the observer' (Peach, p. 50). Typically, such interpretation is fraught with difficulty even when the narrative shows Sula's own thoughts, as in the following, when she interprets herself, by implication, as 'wicked', an assessment undercut by the wording of the passage,

She thought she liked the sootiness of sex and its comedy; she laughed a great deal during the raucous beginnings, and rejected those lovers who regarded sex as healthy or beautiful. Sexual aesthetics bored her. Although she did not regard sex as ugly (ugliness was boring also), she liked to think of it as wicked. (Su, p. 122, emphasis added)

The question of interpretation is, however, easy for the inhabitants of the Bottom; Sula is simply another evil to be survived. Feeling that Sula is wicked, her neighbours finally decide that she is guilty of the ultimate transgression, that of sleeping with white men. This is clearly symbolic, since not only is the truth of the accusation immaterial ('it may not have been true, but it certainly could have been. She was obviously capable of it' (Su, p. 112)), this sin is later described as being impossible, since 'all unions between white men and black women were rape; for a black woman to be willing was literally unthinkable' (Su, p. 113). This accusation is therefore merely a way of saying that Sula's evil makes her at home with transgression and thus capable of anything.

She came to their church suppers without underwear, bought their steaming platters of food and merely picked at it – relishing nothing.
exclaiming over no one's ribs or cobbler. They believed that she was laughing at their God. (*Su*, pp. 114-5)

Thus, Sula's adult laughter has a similar status to the laughter during the episode in which Chicken Little is killed; it expresses the uncontrollable, the vast possibilities of 'outside' that the Bottom seeks to protect itself from. As Joanne Gabbin points out, however, '[Sula's] difference makes her at once the pariah of the Bottom and its most precious and needed symbol of evil. Sula is the center' (Gabbin, p. 256). This is illustrated in the actual effect Sula has on the community, which is, ironically, positive:

Their conviction of Sula's evil changed them in accountable yet mysterious ways. Once the source of their personal misfortune was identified, they had leave to protect and love one another. They began to cherish their husbands and wives, protect their children, repair their homes and in general band together against the devil in their midst. (*Su*, p. 117)

Thus Sula's role in her community is as a Made Fool. Identified as the cause of the inhabitants' problems, she can be scapegoated to absolve them of responsibility for their sins. In doing this, however, the people of the Bottom respond to Sula in exactly the same way that they respond to white oppression; she is something to be suffered rather than confronted. By using her to embody its problems, the community can avoid acknowledging any culpability they may have for their own situation. Acting as an Institution, the people of the Bottom cannot use Sula's example to develop and grow because they have separated themselves too effectively from what she represents. As Dubey notes, 'Sula's newness so sharply departs from the past that it cannot revitalise her community's old ways; the encounter between the new (Sula) and the old (the community), far from producing a dynamic exchange, remains locked in a state of absolute contradiction' (Dubey, p. 79). The one person with whom such
an exchange might have been possible, Nel, becomes, as an adult, so firmly entrenched in the rules of the Institution that when Sula carelessly sleeps with Nel’s husband, Jude, Nel is so horrified by the transgression that she abandons both marriage and friendship. Later, when Sula is dying alone of a wasting disease, Nel goes to see her and is appalled when Sula, apparently recognising that the visit has more to do with social etiquette than with friendship, laughs at her. Nel no longer understands Sula’s claim that ‘I can do it all, why can’t I have it all?’ , responding with the voice of the Institution, with all its prejudices and stereotypes, ‘You can’t do it all. You a woman and a colored woman at that. You can’t act like a man’ (Su, p. 142).

In contrast to this deadlock between the Institution of the Bottom and the chaos of the Fool Sula, Morrison introduces another Fool-figure, Shadrack, a local man who has been traumatised by his experience of war. Having ‘turned his head a little to the right’ one day ‘and [seen] the face of a soldier near him fly off’ (Su, p. 8), Shadrack becomes afraid that his own body will fly into pieces or grow unnaturally. After a spell in a psychiatric hospital he is released, and returns to his grandfather’s shack on the riverbank. Terrified of the unexpectedness of death, ‘he hit on the notion that if one day a year were devoted to it, everybody could get it out of the way and the rest of the year would be safe and free’ (Su, p. 14). He therefore institutes January the third as National Suicide Day, and ‘walk[s] through the Bottom down Carpenter’s Road with a cowbell and a hangman’s rope calling the people together. Telling them that this was their only chance to kill themselves or each other’ (Su, p. 14). At first terrified by National Suicide Day, by its second year the inhabitants of the Bottom have grown used to it, and him; ‘once the people understood the boundaries and nature of his madness, they could fit him, so to speak,
into the scheme of things’ (Su, p. 15). They understand Shadrack’s madness because it is similar to their own; where they attempt to shut out all pain, forming a closed system of defensiveness and denial, he attempts to shut it in, to enclose death and make it conform to the rule of appearing on only one day of the year. Both attempts are doomed to failure, because they insist on a structure that does not reflect the world as it really is.

Shadrack, therefore, functions as another kind of Made Fool, one who accurately mirrors the feelings of his community. That he is bound to this community in a way that Sula is not is crucial to his ability to fulfil this role. He performs the ritual of National Suicide Day out of love for the others and a genuine desire to help them. Ironically, however, it is again Sula’s influence that has made him feel this love, a feeling which is based on a misunderstanding. After Chicken Little’s death, Sula runs to Shadrack’s hut to make sure he was not a witness to the accident, but Shadrack, lonely and ostracised, interprets this simply as a visit from a neighbour, a sign that he is accepted and loved. Sula, so unbounded that her neighbours see her as evil, is thus instrumental not only in binding the community together, but also in binding Shadrack, the Bottom’s genuine representative, to them.

Because the social systems of the Bottom are not self-reliant, Sula’s absence, particularly the absence of her mockery, makes the whole structure fall apart. Shortly after her death, which is more celebrated than mourned by the people of the Bottom, a hard winter makes everybody ill and hungry.

Still it was not those illnesses or even the ice that marked the beginning of the trouble, that self-fulfilled prophecy that Shadrack carried on his tongue. As soon as the silvering began, long before the cider cracked in the jugs, there was something wrong. A falling away, a dislocation was taking place. Hard on the heels of the general relief that Sula’s death brought, a restless irritability took hold [...] mothers who had defended their children from
Sula's malevolence (or who had defended their positions as mothers from Sula's scorn for the role) now had nothing to rub up against. The tension was gone and so was the reason for the effort they had made. Without her mockery, affection for others sank into flaccid disrepair (Su, p. 153).

Shadrack's 'self-fulfilled prophecy' is of the only possible outcome for the Bottom's life-denying systems; self-destruction. Echoing the laughter 'that could even describe and explain how they came to be where they were', the people of the Bottom finally accept their fate and follow Shadrack.

Like the scarlet fever that had touched everybody and worn them down to gristle, their laughter infected Carpenter's Road. Soon children were jumping about giggling and men came to the porches to chuckle [...] It was Mrs Jackson, who ate ice, who tripped down off her porch and marched – actually marched – along behind him. The scene was so comic the people walked into the road to make sure they saw it all. In that way the parade started. (Su, p. 159)

This laughter is more than just a static expression of the acceptance of suffering. Described in terms of an infection, Morrison emphasises that the Bottom's laughter here is unhealthy and destructive. Without Sula, there is nothing to prevent the people of the Bottom from giving in to the despair that their 'prophet' Shadrack represents. Once Sula is dead, Shadrack is entirely alone, no longer having any link to his community, and with the love that might have saved them exposed as a meaningless misunderstanding, there is nothing to stop Shadrack leading them to their deaths. Nearly everybody that lives in the Bottom follows Shadrack through the town of Medallion and into the unfinished workings of the river tunnel (the symbol of their feelings of victimisation), which, due to a sudden thaw, collapses on top of them.

Dubey argues that a combination of passive hope for a saviour and a single act of rebellion (attacking the river tunnel) lead to Suicide Day 1941 because both
involve looking outward for a solution to one’s problems (Dubey, p. 79). Their attempt to break out of the circle of history that keeps them oppressed (the road in 1927, the river in 1937) fails, and things are no better (indeed, they are worse) by 1965 (Dubey, p. 80). As Maxine Lavon Montgomery points out, ‘Shadrack’s tragicomic holiday fails to end the community’s constant disorder’. This is because it forms another closed system, embodying not a containment of death, but ‘the latent, almost suicidal despair of this community’ (Middleton, p. 372). Montgomery does point out, however, that this ritual fits the pattern of ‘the annual celebration of the end of the world among many non-Western cultures whose conception of time […] is circular, not linear’ (Montgomery, p. 130). ‘In the community’s collective unconscious, then, the apocalypse, an event prefigured by the many deaths and disasters, endings and beginnings, is indeed a hopeful affair signalling the recovery of a romantic past […] characterized by freedom, vitality, and psychological wholeness’ (Montgomery, p. 132). As we shall see, however, this wholeness is achieved not by the community, but by a single individual; Sula’s friend, Nel.

A sense of completeness can never be achieved by Sula herself, since, as Dubey argues,

with no grounding roots in the past, Sula’s radical difference proves to be meaningless and is ultimately reduced to the very sameness she tries to challenge: ‘If I live a hundred years my urine will flow the same way, my armpits and breath will smell the same. My hair will grow from the same holes. I didn’t mean anything. I never meant anything’. (Dubey, p. 79)

Sula’s independence from all norms of behaviour becomes ultimately meaningless because, as Davis argues, ‘freedom defined as total transcendence lacks

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the intention and significance that can come from commitment'. Without the context that Nel provided when they were children, Sula’s very limitlessness isolates and traps her, and her only solution, after a life of experimentation, is to embrace the one experience she has not yet encountered, death. As Montgomery points out,

For Sula, the apocalypse is a solitary event: Her death is the rite of passage by which she escapes linear time altogether – an oppressive cycle that has inhibited her free self-expression. Alone, alienated from the community, having explored herself freely, she assumes a fetal position and symbolically descends through water and darkness. Hers is a successful ritualistic return to the past. (Montgomery, pp. 134-5)

Carolyn Jones argues that Sula embodies an ‘immense and unchecked power [which] is destructive both for the self, as we see when Sula dies alone, and for the community, as we see when the people of Medallion refuse to recognize Sula’s importance and are destroyed by the angry spirit of the dead Sula’. It is important to notice that Jones sees the destruction of the town as caused by the community’s refusal to recognise Sula’s power, rather than by that power itself. It is their inability to acknowledge their own contribution to the evil she represents that destroys them.

Nel’s individual revelation of Sula’s importance, therefore, can only be achieved once she has faced, in a way the rest of the town is never able to, her own sins (in her case, the guilt she bears for her part in Chicken Little’s death). Middleton points out that some critics have seen Sula as merely irresponsible or traumatised by

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childhood, while others (including Morrison herself) have argued that Sula and Nel complement one another and, taken together, make one healthy personality.

Middleton, however, argues that ‘despite what Morrison tells us, her novel shows that the two women do not merely complement and correct each other’s limitations. Nel’s final understanding of Sula symbolizes the awareness of otherness that is essential to self-realization’ (Middleton, p. 368). As with Hunt’s argument about the relationship between Bromden and McMurphy in One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest, Middleton thus sees Nel’s vision as being, ultimately, the larger, as her eventual understanding of Sula enables her to learn and grow. Sula’s message to Nel is of the means by which one can transcend ‘the norms of an oppressive and unheroic society [...] a self-destructive, closed world that functions at the expense of the self-esteem of its individual members’ (Middleton, p. 369).

Sula, as is typical of the Transcendent Fool, communicates this message through laughter, but, since Nel’s realisation of Sula’s importance comes after Sula is dead and the town is largely destroyed, it occurs in a changed form. Two key scenes identify this change, the first appearing half way through the novel, when Sula has just reappeared after a ten-year absence, the second occurring at the very end. In the first scene Nel, now married with children, sits in her kitchen considering Sula’s return.

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24 For example, Jerry H. Bryant, ‘Something Ominous Here’, Nation 219 (July 6 1974), 24 (Sula as irresponsible); Joan Bischoff, ‘The Novels of Toni Morrison: Studies in Thwarted Sensitivity’, Studies in Black Literature, 6: 3 (1975), 21-23 (Sula as traumatised).

Her old friend had come home. Sula. Who made her laugh, who made her see old things with new eyes, in whose presence she felt clever, gentle and a little raunchy. (Su, p. 95)

It is clear that Sula’s laughter is different from the kind that protects the inhabitants of the Bottom from their pain. Rather than enabling survival and endurance, Sula’s laughter makes Nel ‘see old things with new eyes’, the creative possibilities that indicate that Sula is a Transcendent Fool. Later, the two women sit together, remembering the absurdity of their sexual experimentation as children, and their laughter makes a ‘duet’ that is contrasted with the everyday, defensive laughter of the Bottom.

Nel lowered her head onto crossed arms while tears of laughter dripped into the warm diapers. Laughter that weakened her knees and pressed her bladder into action. Her rapid soprano and Sula’s dark sleepy chuckle made a duet that frightened the cat and made the children run in from the back yard, puzzled at first by the wild free sounds, then delighted to see their mother stumbling merrily toward the bathroom, holding on to her stomach, fairly singing through the laughter: “Aw. Aw. Lord. Sula. Stop.” […]

Damp-faced, Nel stepped back into the kitchen. She felt new, soft and new. It had been the longest time since she had had a rib-scraping laugh. She had forgotten how deep and down it could be. So different from the miscellaneous giggles and smiles she had learned to be content with these past few years. (Su, pp. 97-98)

In this passage Nel can appreciate the creative value of Sula’s laugh, and is thus in a position to act as Protagonist. She is not, however, ready to understand Sula’s laughter fully at this point. Taking the judgmental stance that typifies the Institution’s reaction to the Fool, Nel becomes angry at Sula’s decision to put her grandmother into a nursing home rather than look after her herself. As their conversation continues, ‘the closed place in the water spread[s] before them’ (Su, p. 101). Chicken Little’s drowning, which brought them together as children, is used as an image of
separation, a 'closed place' that exists between the two women as adults. It is shortly after this scene that Nel finds Sula with Jude and cuts them both out of her life.

At the end of the novel Nel visits Eva Peace, Sula's grandmother, in her retirement home, and the old lady not only confuses her visitor with her granddaughter, she lays the blame for Chicken Little's death equally between them,

'I didn't throw no little boy in the river. That was Sula.'
'You. Sula. What's the difference? You was there. You watched, didn't you. Me, I never would've watched.' (Su, p. 168)

This makes Nel reconsider her whole relationship with her friend since this pivotal moment of their lives, and, remembering Sula's solitary funeral, she suddenly feels the other's presence in a moment of epiphany.26

'All that time, all that time, I thought I was missing Jude.' And the loss pressed down on her chest and came up into her throat. 'We was girls together,' she said as though explaining something. 'O Lord, Sula,' she cried, 'girl, girl, girlgirlgirl.'

It was a fine cry – loud and long – but it had no bottom and it had no top, just circles and circles of sorrow. (Su, p. 174)

Memories, specifically memories of the childhood the two women spent together, instigate the reaction in both passages. However, where in the first Nel's memories are of innocent experimentation, in the second, Eva has made her aware that she is just as guilty of killing Chicken Little as Sula. This makes Nel realise that in judging Sula, as the rest of the community do, she has avoided accepting the responsibility they share for this event, and for the break-up of Nel's marriage, and

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26 Several critics see the end of the novel in terms of epiphany, for example: Gabbin, p. 259; Middleton, p. 380; de Weever, 'Inverted World', p. 408, p. 423.
that it was therefore her denial, not Sula’s transgression, which had driven the two apart.

The similarity of language between the two scenes is significant. Only the word ‘sorrow’ in the second passage indicates that Nel may be crying, while tears appear, ‘dripped into the warm diapers’ in the first. The laughter ‘pressed [Nel’s] bladder into action’ in the first passage, while the loss ‘pressed down on her chest’ in the second. She cries ‘Aw. Aw. Lord. Sula. Stop.’ in the first passage, a cry which is repeated as ‘O Lord, Sula’, then extended, rather than ‘stopped’ in both the repetition of ‘girlgirlgirl’ and in the ‘circles and circles of sorrow’ that follow. The ‘deep and down’ laugh has become a cry with no bottom and no top as Nel, finally released from restriction, realises, too late, the value of the friend she has lost. Now truly ‘soft and new’ Nel must face life alone, without the ‘duet’ that made this newness possible.

Michelle Pessoni points out that while some critics see the ending as idealistic (for example, Dorothea Drummond Mbalia), ‘others, like Barbara Christian, read the ending as a type of eulogy for the Bottom, a recognition come too late that a belief in Sula might have saved Nel and the entire community’. Middleton agrees with this view, pointing out that ‘at the novel’s end, only Nel is changed by her epiphany. Racial integration has left Medallion not really “so much better in 1965”. The townspeople all seem like the Deweys, the trio of innocuous but unindividuated boys adopted by Eva’ (Middleton, p. 380).

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Montgomery argues that ‘to be Black in America, the novel implies, is to experience calamity as an ever-present reality, to live on the brink of apocalypse’ (Montgomery, p. 127). This perception of apocalypse, that ‘the Black American world has always been chaotic’, is at odds, Montgomery argues, with the ‘Western apocalyptic vision [that] includes a gradual decline in social, economic, and moral conditions, a major catastrophe, then a new beginning’ (Montgomery, pp. 127-28). Acting as an Institution, the people of the Bottom are unable to learn from their apocalypse and become, instead, like members of Bromden’s Combine; ‘innocuous but unindividuated’. Their Bad Faith, the ‘vacillation between transcendence and facticity [Sula and Institution]’ leads ultimately to destructive denial rather than to rebirth.

Montgomery continues, however, by arguing that on an individual basis such cyclical development is possible; ‘the novel’s circular narrative structure – beginning with the creation of the Bottom, ending with Nel’s symbolic rebirth – indicates the possibility of recovering one’s lost selfhood’ (Montgomery, p. 128). In assimilating Sula’s laughter, but re-expressing it as tears, Nel simultaneously shows her understanding of Sula as ‘other’ and her recognition of herself as a complete person, containing the potential for both creation and destruction.

*Lolita*

Vladimir Nabokov’s novel about an affair between a middle-aged man, Humbert Humbert, and an eleven-year-old girl, Dolores Haze, has caused controversy ever since its subject matter was considered unsuitable for an American readership, leading to the initial publication of *Lolita* in Paris by a company notorious for its works of
pornography. Contemporary reviewers, not, apparently, wishing to seem prudish, often combine criticism of *Lolita*’s morality with criticism of its aesthetic qualities. Kingsley Amis, for example, regards Humbert’s remorse at the end of the book to be unconvincing and the portrait of Lolita (Humbert’s name for Dolores) to be just that, an image ‘devotedly watched and listened to but never conversed with, the object of desire but never of curiosity’, which he sees as a major fault in the novel. F.W. Dupee in an early review (and before *Lolita*’s publication in America) considers that both Humbert’s ‘world of total evil’ and his final repentance are inconsistent with his ‘idiom’ as presented elsewhere in the novel, and argues that ‘it is the author intervening on Humbert’s behalf and playing the role straight in order to make a vital point’, which he regards as a weakness.

Gladys Clifton, on the other hand, argues that those critics who have found the novel objectionable morally, ‘must have seen only the stereotypes they brought to their reading, not the unique creations that Humbert and Lolita are in their fictional world’. Stereotypes, or the images people create in their relationships with one another, are an important theme in the novel. Consequently, I shall argue not only that Humbert does create a portrait which he calls Lolita and Nabokov does break into his own narrative, reminding us that Humbert too is just an image, a fiction, but that these are just the qualities that give *Lolita* its power.

28 Although *Lolita* was published in Paris in 1955, it was not published in America until 1958. All references are to the first English edition (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1959) and appear in parentheses within the text.


30 Review of Lolita in Page, pp. 84-91 (p. 91) (orig. publ. in *Anchor Review*, 1-3 (1957), 5-13).

Dupee argues that ‘Lolita applies its heat to the entire sensibility [not just to erotica or pornography], including the sense of humour. Instead of putting the desires in an agreeable simmer, it acts on them almost like a cautery, sterilizing them with horrid laughter’ (Dupee, p. 84). This is an important observation, since not only is the book itself full of laughter, Dupee also suggests that Nabokov is using this laughter, as well as his controversial subject matter, to act as Fool, mocking his readers.

The supreme laugh may be on the reviewers for failing to see how much of everyone’s reality lurks in its fantastic shadow play […] the book’s general effect is profoundly mischievous, like that of some diabolical distorting mirror in some particularly obscene amusement park. (Dupee, p. 85)

As we shall see, both these points are crucial to an understanding of Lolita. Nabokov has written the novel on several levels, each identifiable in terms of the dynamics of a laughing relationship. This relationship is apocalyptic not only because, as the spurious foreword tells us, all the main characters are already dead by the time we read the novel, but also because, as I shall go on to discuss, Lolita involves the double revelation that is typical of the demonic Fool. As our awareness of these levels shifts, we come to recognise the inability of norms, of the stereotypical ‘American girl’, ‘American family’ or ‘pervert’, to explain the experience of real life. At the same time, Nabokov also makes us question the ability of even the text that teaches us this to describe reality adequately.

Haunted by memories of Annabel, the first, and unrequited, love of his own childhood, the adult Humbert struggles against the temptations, ‘the fey grace, the elusive, shifty, soul-shattering, insidious charm’ of a certain kind of girl-child (Lo, p. 19), which he describes in the following terms:
Between the age limits of nine and fourteen there occur maidens who, to certain bewitched travelers, twice or many times older than they, reveal their true nature which is not human, but nymphic (that is, demoniac); and these chosen creatures I propose to designate as ‘nymphets’. (Lo, p. 18)

The nymphet inhabits a magical world, an ‘intangible island of entranced time’, completely separate from her human sisters, whom Humbert describes as ‘incomparably more dependent on the spatial world of synchronous phenomena’ (Lo, p. 19). In both his definition of such children as ‘demonic’ and his suggestion that they exist outside time, Humbert describes the nymphet in terms of the Transcendent Fool whose aims are destructive rather than creative. As G.D. Josipovici says, ‘she is no other than that amoral, ever-desirable female who leads those who pursue her to destruction’. 32

Looking for lodgings, Humbert visits the house of Charlotte Haze, but is unimpressed until he is introduced to her daughter. At their first meeting Humbert recognises Dolores as a nymphet, recasting her in his mind as ‘Lolita’, and he immediately falls under her spell and decides to stay. Her demonic world is characterised by a happy, yet mocking, laughter that Humbert longs to share, as we see in his failed attempt at a practical joke early in the novel. Noticing the child leaning out of an upstairs window, ‘wisecracking streetward’ to a friend outside, Humbert creeps up behind her and grabs her, but is told roughly to ‘cut it out!’ and retreats with a ‘ghastly grin’. He continues:

But now listen to what happened next. After lunch I was reclining in a low chair trying to read. Suddenly two deft little hands were over my eyes: she had crept up from behind as if re-enacting, in a ballet sequence, my morning manoeuvre. Her fingers were a luminous crimson as they tried to blot out the sun, and she uttered hiccups of laughter and jerked this way and that as I stretched my arm sideways and backwards without otherwise changing my recumbent position. My hand swept over her agile giggling legs. *(Lo*, p. 55)

Here we see Lolita in a characteristically liminal position; inside the house talking and laughing with some unseen other outside. Her ‘wisecracking’ contrasts strongly with Humbert’s ‘ghastly grin’ as he withdraws; he has not been allowed into her world. She, however, enters his soon afterwards by coming into his study (symbolically his world both because he is a scholar and because the rest of the house is Haze territory) and she does so laughing.

Later, Humbert describes his feelings of jealousy and inadequacy while watching Lolita play tennis, ride on horseback,

or else, at a ski lodge, I would see her floating away from me, celestial and solitary, in an ethereal chairlift, up and up, to a glittering summit where laughing athletes stripped to the waist were waiting for her, for her. *(Lo*, p. 158)

In this passage, we see Lolita rising up towards another, celestial world where beautiful people (of Lolita’s own demoniac kind) await her, laughing, while earthbound Humbert can only watch.

After much plotting, Humbert finally gains access to the nymphet’s world in a hotel room significantly full of mirrors. While he tries to explain that it may prove necessary for them frequently to share such rooms, Lolita unexpectedly takes charge of the situation.
‘The word is incest,’ said Lo – and walked into the closet, walked out again with a young golden giggle, opened the adjoining door, and after carefully peering inside with her strange smoky eyes lest she make another mistake, retired to the bathroom. (Lo, p. 119)

The casual way in which she orientates herself among all the reflections in the room echoes her facility at entering different worlds and reinforces Humbert’s idea that she is a demon, as does the fact that it is she that seduces him the next morning, suggesting ‘with a burst of rough glee’ that they play a game ‘she and Charlie’ had played at summer camp (Lo, pp. 131-32). Too late, and without being able to help himself anyway, Humbert Humbert realises that he has been trapped, and that his destruction is now inevitable:

I should have understood that Lolita had already proved to be something quite different from innocent Annabel, and that the nymphaean evil breathing through every pore of the fey child that I had prepared for my secret delectation, would make the secrecy impossible, and the delectation lethal. I should have known (by the signs made to me by something in Lolita – the real child Lolita or some haggard angel behind her back) that nothing but pain and horror would result from the expected rapture. (Lo, pp. 123-24)

This, then, is one layer of the novel, but the reader sees throughout a possibility that Humbert himself comes to acknowledge – the possibility that Lolita is just an ordinary American eleven-year-old; that she has been Dolores and not Lolita all along. During their travels together across America (after Charlotte’s death) Humbert becomes aware, despite himself, that he has taken on the role of surrogate parent, a role for which he is totally unprepared:

A combination of naivety and deception, of charm and vulgarity, of blue sulks and rosy mirth, Lolita, when she chose, could be a most exasperating brat. I was not really quite prepared for her fits of disorganized boredom, intense and vehement griping, her sprawling, droopy, dopey-eyed style, and what is called goofing off – a kind of diffused clowning which she thought
was tough in a boyish hoodlum way. Mentally I found her to be a disgustingly conventional little girl. *Lo*, pp. 145-46

Dupee argues that in undergoing this role reversal with respect to Lolita – from her lover to her father – Humbert ‘registers more and more sharply the real horror and the real significance of his partnership with Lo’. As she sees life, Dupee points out, as ‘just one gag after another’, this distorting mirror therefore reflects our own familial relationships; children feel ‘misunderstood, abused, betrayed’ by their parents until they grow up to ‘accept them as part of the gag that life is’. He argues, therefore, that the novel deals with ‘the bitter commonplaces of life’s indestructible surface’ (Dupee, p. 90).

Some part of Humbert, throughout, seems to realise that if Dolores is simply a conventional American girl, then the magical world of the nymphet is just a fantasy of his. If this is true, then what he is doing is tragic and monstrous, and in a rare moment of clarity, Humbert sees America as

the lovely, trustful, dreamy, enormous country that by then, in retrospect, was no more to us than a collection of dog-eared maps, ruined tour books, old tyres, and her sobs in the night – every night, every night – the moment I feigned sleep. *Lo*, p. 172

As Clifton points out ‘whenever Humbert begins to describe the actual detail of his life under the influence of “the perilous magic of nymphets”, a grotesque gap appears between his fantasy of “bliss” and his life with a flesh-and-blood American teen angel. It is a gap filled with comedy and irony at his own expense’ (Clifton, p. 153). She cites several passages that serve as ‘an emphatic reminder that while we may be invited to smile at Humbert’s situation and find it comical, this is not true for
Lolita, even though she is part of the same situation. It is an important paradox' (Clifton, p. 155).

Matthew Winston points out that Humbert is essentially trapped in a closed world of his own making. His obsession is with holding time at one magical instant, the 'immortal day' of his childhood when he almost possessed Annabel Leigh. In this sense, Winston argues, it is important that Humbert is writing his memoirs; as Nabokov himself says, 'both memory and imagination are a negation of time'. Winston argues that Humbert is equally 'trapped by his own predilection for seeing his life through a veil of literature [...] Since Humbert needs to impose upon his life the fixity of a literary work, he later attempts to force Lolita into the invariable pattern of a literary character, and therein lies his crime and his sin' (Winston, pp. 423-24).

For the most part, however, Humbert shows himself to be an expert at self-delusion, reinterpreting Lolita's laughter in the following passage, as he watches her being escorted home by a boyfriend:

She had developed more than one conventional mannerism, such as the polite adolescent way of showing one is literally 'doubled up' with laughter by inclining one's head, and so (as she sensed my call), still feigning helpless merriment, she walked backwards a couple of steps, and then faced about, and walked toward me with a fading smile. (Lo, p. 183)

Humbert's interpretation sees himself and Lolita in a private world of their own, which involves the necessity of her learning various polite tricks so that she may seem normal when she is forced by circumstances to go out into the conventional

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one. Another interpretation, however, is that, far from 'feigning helpless merriment',
Lolita is in fact enjoying a joke with a contemporary, for a moment being an ordinary
little girl, and the sight of Humbert, forcing her to rejoin his mad world, is what
makes her smile fade. The use of the word 'feigning' (particularly when associated
with being 'helpless') recalls its previous use – 'the moment I feigned sleep' – and
therefore also recalls her 'sobs in the night - every night, every night'. In a similar
episode later in the novel Humbert considers Lolita's reactions as she watches the
signs of genuine affection between Avis, a school friend, and her father.

Lolita always had an absolutely enchanting smile for strangers [...] which
did not mean a thing of course, but was so beautiful, so endearing that one
found it hard to reduce such sweetness to but a magic gene automatically
lighting up her face in atavistic token of some ancient rite of welcome –
hospitable prostitution, the coarse reader may say [...] While fat Avis sidled
up to her papa, Lolita gently beamed at a fruit knife that she fingered on the
edge of the table, whereon she leaned, many miles away from me. Suddenly,
as Avis clung to her father's neck and ear while, with a casual arm, the man
enveloped his lumpy and large offspring, I saw Lolita's smile lose all its light
and become a frozen little shadow of itself, and the fruit knife slipped off the
table and struck her with its silver handle. (Lo, pp. 278-79)

The tone is, of course, ironic and self-condemning. Writing in retrospect from
his prison cell, Humbert now realises the full import of what he has done, and
narrates such scenes in order to torture himself with his crime. As he says several
pages before the passage quoted above,

Unless it can be proven to me – to me as I am now, today, with my heart
and my beard, and my putrefaction – that in the infinite run it does not
matter a jot that a North American girl-child named Dolores Haze had been
deprived of her childhood by a maniac, unless this can be proven (and if it
can, then life is a joke), I see nothing for the treatment of my misery but the
melancholy and very local palliative of articulate art. (Lo, pp. 275-76)
Later, in possibly the most famous passage in the book, Humbert reflects on his relationship with this North American girl-child, and, in a tragic revelation, realises too late that in an effort to regain his own childhood he has deprived Lolita of hers. He listens to a strange sound in the distance;

Reader! What I heard was but the melody of children at play, nothing but that, and so limpid was the air that within this vapor of blended voices, majestic and minute, remote and magically near, frank and divinely enigmatic – one could hear now and then, as if released, an almost articulate spurt of vivid laughter, or the crack of a bat, or the clatter of a toy wagon, but it was all really too far for the eye to distinguish any movement in the lightly etched streets. I stood listening to that musical vibration from my lofty slope, to those flashes of separate cries with a kind of demure murmur for background, and then I knew that the hopelessly poignant thing was not Lolita’s absence from my side, but the absence of her voice from that concord. (Lo, p. 299)

The tone of this, the ‘limpid air’, the ‘magical’, ‘divinely enigmatic’ sound of innocent laughter echoes, of course, previous descriptions of the world of the nymphet. It is Humbert, as he has eventually realised, not Lolita, who inhabits the alien world. The ‘intangible island of entranced time’ that he cannot reach is the world of his own lost childhood with Annabel. Crucially, it is a revelation that puts Lolita’s laughter in its proper context – in innocent play with other children – and it is Humbert’s sudden ability to hear it as such that leads to his remorse.

If the alien world we explore in Lolita is, as is suggested by this revelation, Humbert’s rather than Lolita’s, it could then be argued that it is Humbert that enacts the role of Fool in the novel. Humbert does, in fact acknowledge that he inhabits his own private world into which he invites Dolores, an ordinary American eleven-year-old.
She had entered my world, umber and black Humberland, with rash curiosity; she surveyed it with a shrug of amused distaste; and it seemed to me now that she was ready to turn away from it with something akin to plain repulsion. Never did she vibrate under my touch, and a strident 'what d'you think you are doing?' was all I got for my pains. To the wonderland I had to offer, my fool preferred the corniest movies, the most cloying fudge. To think that between a Hamburger and a Humburger, she would – invariably, with icy precision – plump for the former. (Lo, p. 163)

His is a corrupt and evil world, inhabited by a monster he describes as a master of contradiction and deceit: ‘Humbert Humbert, with thick black eyebrows and a queer accent, and a cesspoolful of rotting monsters behind his slow boyish smile’ (Lo, p. 45). His habit of renaming everybody he describes illustrates the way Humbert recasts experience to fit this world that he inhabits. Even his own name, he reveals, is a species of joke to which we are never given the key, and he often refers to himself in the third person, as though Humbert Humbert, who ‘tried hard to be good. Really and truly he did’, is simply another facet of this fantasy (Lo, p. 21). The ‘queer accent’ is important, as it reminds us that Humbert comes literally from another world; Europe. Dupee argues that ‘[Humbert’s] fate hangs on the godlike motion of the motorcar and the wayward oracle of the telephone’, in other words, he does not fit into the twentieth-century American world, which he perceives as divine, whereas to the Hazes he is ‘the prince of a lost realm’ and ‘the sinister outsider’ (Dupee, p. 86, p. 87). Comparing the two worlds, Humbert echoes his description of himself as he walks through a small American town at night:

The rain had been cancelled miles before. It was a black warm night, somewhere in Appalachia. Now and then cars passed me, red tail-lights receding, white headlights advancing, but the town was dead. Nobody strolled and laughed on the sidewalks as relaxing burghers would in sweet, mellow, rotting Europe. I was alone to enjoy the innocent night and my terrible thoughts. (Lo, p. 274)
In contrasting the old, rotting, world, with the new – America – Humbert is placing himself in the role of Made Fool. Humbert’s depravity, in other words, when combined with his foreignness, makes him ideally placed to act as a jester, mocking the society of nineteen-fifties America simultaneously from within and without. The spurious foreword to the novel, warns us (with irony) of this role:

No doubt, he is horrible, he is abject, he is a shining example of moral leprosy, a mixture of ferocity and jocularity that betrays supreme misery perhaps, but is not conducive to attractiveness. He is ponderously capricious. Many of his casual opinions on the people and scenery of this country are ludicrous. (Lo, p. 6)

In keeping with his position as Fool, Humbert often addresses his reader directly, and, significantly, invites his or her laughter overtly on many occasions. Organising the hotel room for his and Lolita’s first night together, for example, he says,

What a comic, clumsy, wavering Prince Charming I was! How some of my readers will laugh at me when I tell them the trouble I had with the wording of my telegram! (Lo, p. 108)

And again,

At this point I have a curious confession to make. You will laugh – but really and truly I somehow never managed to find out quite exactly what the legal situation was. (Lo, p. 168)

The laughter that Humbert encourages here is typical of the ambivalent laughter of the Fool. As Clifton points out, Humbert’s situation may be ludicrous, but we are aware that Dolores’s is not, and we are also aware that Humbert knows this.

Having encouraged us to laugh at him, however, Humbert next turns his attention to American society, inviting us to laugh with him. The many generic motels
that come to sum up American popular culture for Humbert are described in scathing
terms:

Nous connûmes (this is royal fun) the would-be enticements of their
repetitious names – all those Sunset Motels, U-Beam Cottages, Hillcrest
Courts, Pine View Courts, Green Acres […] Some motels had instructions
pasted above the toilet (on whose tank the towels were unhygienically
heaped) asking guests not to throw into its bowl garbage, beer cans, cartons,
stillborn babies; others had special notices under glass, such as Things to
Do. (Lo, pp. 143-44)

The impossibility of distinguishing between one motel and another describes a
homogenisation of American society as a whole, while the lack of hygiene and the
image of babies being thrown away so regularly as to necessitate a specific instruction
reveals the underlying horrors that this uniformity fails to control. Humbert’s own
‘cesspoolful of rotting monsters’, therefore, acts as a mirror to the world he sees
around him.

When he first meets the headmistress of Beardsley School for girls, it is clear
from her disquisition on the school’s philosophy that she represents everything that
he finds vacuous and vulgar about American culture. To reinforce his opinion that
she is talking misguided nonsense (in an ironic reversal of his own habit of doing so)
she persistently gets his name wrong.

I mean, you could have a child learn by heart a good encyclopedia and he or
she would know as much as or more than a school could offer. Dr. Hummer,
do you realize that for the modern pre-adolescent child, medieval dates are
of less vital value than weekend ones [twinkle]? – to repeat a pun that I
heard the Beardsley college psychoanalyst permit herself the other day. We
live not only in a world of thoughts, but also in a world of things. Words
without experience are meaningless. What on earth can Dorothy
Hummerson care for Greece and the Orient with their harems and slaves?
(Lo, p. 174)
The irony of the last sentence — that Lolita knows considerably more about harem life than the headmistress would be able to cope with if she knew — is both mockery of her and further self-indictment by Humbert, and again we detect the ambivalence in his laughter. To understand how Humbert’s (invariably elitist and highbrow) mockery of American life works, we must turn again to the foreword by the fictional John Ray Jr., PhD.

In this poignant personal study there lurks a general lesson; the wayward child, the egotistic mother, the panting maniac — these are not only vivid characters in a unique story: they warn us of dangerous trends; they point out potent evils. "Lolita" should make all of us — parents, social workers, educators — apply ourselves with still greater vigilance and vision to the task of bringing up a better generation in a safer world. (Lo, p. 7)

This wonderfully pompous attitude, as Humbert teaches us over the course of the novel, misses the point completely. As Peter Levine argues, ‘Ray and his colleagues seek to simplify and classify human behaviour, viewing everything in the monochrome statistics of a Kinsey report’.34 If Dolores’s only options are between a ‘panting maniac’ on the one hand, and the cloying fudge and vacuous psychobabble of those very parents, social workers and educators whose task it is to bring up the next generation on the other, then, to return to an earlier quotation ‘it does not matter a jot that a North American girl-child named Dolores Haze had been deprived of her childhood by a maniac’ because the childhood she missed was equally unworthy of her. In this sense, Nabokov does indeed seem to argue, through Humbert, that ‘life is a joke’. Nabokov thus provides the novel with a third layer of meaning; that Humbert, as Fool, provides the reader, as Protagonist, with a revelation of the true state of society.

Moreover, by parodying the inadequate stereotypes that John Ray uses, again mirrored by Humbert’s attempts to make Lolita conform to an image he has created, Nabokov forces the reader to confront the idea that words can never explain reality, with the paradoxical result that Humbert’s revelation should not be possible. Many critics have engaged with this apparent paradox. Trevor McNeely, for example, concludes that ‘the Nabokov intellectual position […] is that Lolita is justified on aesthetic grounds alone’, seeing this as ‘nihilistic – that is to say, utterly meaningless, and known to be such by Nabokov – though masquerading as a reasonable and logical proposition’.  

This idea that Nabokov is tricking his readers, encouraging them to look for meaning where there is none, is a popular critical response. There is, however, another interpretation of Lolita as a text that insists that it is possible to transcend the words on the page and access ‘truths’. Walter Allen, for example, says that Humbert’s language is ‘a form of exhibitionism, a manic showing-off’ through which he, and the reader, occasionally glimpses a ‘truth’, as, for example, in his last meeting with Dolores.  

Lionel Trilling argues that Lolita is a modern version of what he calls ‘passion-love’; a type of relationship in literature (for example in Arthurian romance) that breaks taboos and subverts the idea of a happy marriage. Passion-love must be ‘suffered’ as though it were an illness, and ‘typically led to disaster for the lovers, to death’.  

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35 "Lo" and Behold: Solving the Lolita Riddle", *Studies in the Novel*, 2 (summer 1989), 182-99 (p. 188).


'passion-love', but in order to set this type of relationship in the twentieth-century, Nabokov has had to turn to paedophilia to create the appropriate level of scandal; 'it puts the lovers, as lovers in literature must be put, beyond the pale of society' (Trilling, p. 99). Significantly, as Trilling points out, in the nineteenth-century 'the creative genius took over some of the characteristics of the lover: his obsessiveness, his masochism, his noble subservience to an ideal, and his antagonism to the social conventions, his propensity for making a scandal' (Trilling, p. 97). Consequently, 'in this respect lovers were conceived of much as we conceive of the artist – that is, as captivated by a reality and a good that are not of the ordinary world' (Trilling, p. 98). Thus it can be argued, as John Hollander does, that Lolita is about Nabokov's love affair with the romantic novel (rather than with America, as other critics suppose) (Hollander, pp. 81-82).

Thomas Frosch also sees Lolita as a romance, in which Lolita's 'appeal consists partly in her transiency – she will only be a nymphet for a brief time – and partly in her status as a daimonic visitor to the common world' (leading to an impossible quest for Humbert). Frosch points out that 'even John Ray, the fool who introduces Lolita, asserts a prime Nabokov theme when he says that every great work of art is original and “should come as a more or less shocking surprise”' (Frosch, p. 174).

Arguing that Humbert's confession is at the same time a defence of his actions, Frosch considers that as a whole, the book defends itself against a utilitarian concept of art [...] Nabokov's obvious satire [in the foreword] is intended to remove the allegation of his having a conventional moral purpose. Other accusations are handled within the text itself. In addition to conventional moralists, Nabokov detests psychiatrists and literary critics, and it is against these [closed] types

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38 'Parody and Authenticity in Lolita', in Rivers and Nicol, pp. 171-87 (p. 171).
of readers – or these metaphors for the Reader – that Humbert wages constant war [...] What is on trial, then, is Humbert’s uniqueness and originality, his success in an imaginative enterprise. (Frosch, pp. 175, 179)

Although he considers that Humbert’s attempt fails, Frosch compares him to Hermann, the irredeemable artist criminal in Nabokov’s Despair (1937), claiming that Humbert’s final acknowledgement of guilt and responsibility enables him, unlike Hermann, to ‘be paroled from Hell’. As he points out, ‘Humbert is finally able to see beyond the prison of his solipsism’ (Frosch, p. 181).

Frosch argues that Nabokov uses parody ‘to evade the accusation of triteness and to elude the literary past in the hope of achieving singularity’ (Frosch, p. 182). In this way, he claims, ‘parody is Nabokov’s way of getting as close to the romantic novel as possible and, more, that he actually does succeed in re-creating it in a new form, one that is contemporary and original, not anachronistic and imitative’ (Frosch, p. 182). He points out that Nabokov has himself ‘spoken of the artist as an illusionist trying to “transcend the heritage” with his bag of tricks [...] But we are really dealing in works such as Lolita with the magic of the shaman, and, in this case, parody – together with the other features of a proleptic comic style – is perhaps his most powerful spell’ (Frosch, p. 186).

Robert Uphaus writes of Humbert’s artistic ideal to be ‘the ideal of the soaring imagination disciplined by craft, but unencumbered by the commonplace’. 39 He continues, ‘the novel thus becomes both a contest between artist and society and between the Dionysian and Apollonian, the two aspects of Humbert’s increasingly haggard self’ (Uphaus, p. 106).

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What these approaches have in common is the conviction that the imagination has the power to transcend the ordinary. Nabokov, such critics argue, shows us that the reader who, like John Ray, insists on *explaining*, on engaging simply with the meanings of and relationships between words, is missing the point of art. The power of the imagination, which the artist as shaman reveals to us, is to enable a Kierkegaardian leap of faith. The artist’s bag of tricks thus relies on the reader’s capacity to understand the magic that is performed, rather than concentrating on the props themselves. Where, for example, Orr’s antics with shark repellent and tea in *Catch-22* are shown to have a hidden meaning, and Sal’s rotten beans in *On The Road* are shown not to, it is not the image of tea or beans that is important, but what they represent. In *Lolita*, Nabokov uses his own narrative as a bag of tricks, fooling some readers into seeing only the props – the words – and concluding that the whole is meaningless, while others see through the layers of fiction and image to apprehend truths that are at once independent of and contextualised by the actual narrative.

Thus Humbert’s revelation that he has deprived Lolita of her childhood, of her own identity, paradoxically told within the context of his memoirs – his image of her – stands for the equally paradoxical double revelation with which Nabokov provides the reader. Like the demon Pazuzu, Nabokov encourages us to despair of finding meaning, or moral worth, in his novel. However he also reveals to us, through Humbert, that we can overcome the closed system of language by engaging with *Lolita* at an imaginative level, in effect taking responsibility for own interpretation of the text and apprehending our own truths.

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40 McNeely, conversely, argues that this leap is not of faith, but of despair, a sign that one has accepted the meaninglessness in Nabokov’s work (McNeely, p. 136).
Conclusion

In this chapter Laughter of Apocalypse has emerged as entailing two revelations. The revelation of the Fool as Demon, as we see in Blatty’s *The Exorcist* and King’s *It*, is of human weakness, and the mockery of the Fool is designed to bring the victim to despair. In the case of the demons Pazuzu and It this revelation leads, for the Protagonists, not to despair, but to the second revelation that it is possible to overcome fear and the hatred of the demonic and reclaim a sense of human worth. In this case, then, the Fool acts as a negative example in order for the Protagonist to retain the sense of balance that, I have suggested, is necessary for sanity. Where Laughter of Revelation involves a Protagonist overcoming the madness of system, Laughter of Apocalypse occurs in such texts as *The Exorcist* and *It* when a Protagonist resists the madness of anti-system. In Blatty’s novel, the demon’s mockery is balanced, but not defeated, by communal, human laughter, but this balancing in itself enables Karras to find the strength to attack the demon and reassert the sense of community that the sharing of jokes expresses. In *It*, the laughter of the Losers is shown to have the power not merely to resist, but to destroy the demon. Having isolated and corrupted the adults of Derry, It is defeated by child Protagonists who possess both innocence and imagination. This gives them an ambivalent perspective similar to the demon’s own, which enables them to turn Its laughter against itself, transforming the terrifying irrational into the merely ridiculous.

The Fool’s initial revelation can, however, be misinterpreted as the sign of an evil that he or she bears alone; the task of the victims then apparently being to ostracise and contain this evil in order to defend the community from it. Such an attempt, as I have shown in the analysis of *Sula*, will always fail since it involves the refusal to recognise that such characters embody not an abstract idea of evil, but the
guilt and fears of the community itself. Since balance can only be achieved by confronting the chaos that the Apocalyptic Fool represents, this response to perceived evil betrays unbalanced, Institutional thinking. Thus when the inhabitants of the Bottom lose Sula, the community is immediately exposed as being too inflexible to accommodate adverse experiences, which leads to the apocalypse of National Suicide Day 1941. In Morrison’s novel the second revelation, achieved by the Protagonist Nel, again involves the acceptance of responsibility, but in this example it is accompanied by a sense of loss, since Sula is, by this time, dead. Realising that it is she, not Sula, who is to blame for her problems, Nel re-expresses Sula’s limitless laughter in the form of equally boundless tears, crying out a eulogy that acknowledges Sula’s importance both in her own life and in the community.

Nabokov’s novel Lolita involves a more complex example of the Laughter of Apocalypse, as the narrative occurs on several levels, causing the dynamics of the laughing relationship to shift. In the first of these, Humbert as Protagonist falls victim to the seductive yet mocking laughter of Lolita, whose status as Apocalyptic Fool is assumed through Humbert’s designation of her as a nymphet. It becomes clear, however, that the demonic Lolita is a creation of Humbert’s, projected onto an ordinary eleven-year-old girl in much the same way that, for example, Kesey’s Combine applies limited stereotypes of mental illness to the men in the hospital. At this level of the narrative, Humbert as Apocalyptic Fool seeks to control those around him according to the rules of a fantasy he has created, with Dolores Haze as his chief victim.

Like King’s monster It, Humbert therefore illustrates an interesting aspect of Laughter of Apocalypse, which is that the demonic Fool often acts in ways almost indistinguishable from the Institution, in that both Humbert and It seek to manipulate
and control reality, at the expense of the identity of other characters. Humbert's mockery of American popular culture, which the reader is invited to join, therefore evokes an ambivalent response. It is impossible to deny that the narrow-minded and superficial world at which Humbert laughs deserves this scorn, but it also difficult to feel anything but revulsion for Humbert himself, even while one laughs with him.

It is at this point that the third level of the narrative becomes crucial. By introducing a character who fictionalises those around him, Nabokov reminds the reader that Humbert, too, is fictional. By encouraging us to laugh at limited and stereotypical thinking, Nabokov is thus, in effect, inviting us to laugh at our own folly in taking his images seriously. Humbert becomes the character who is trapped by Nabokov's image of him, which ironically results in a partial return to the first level of the narrative, in which Humbert is a Protagonist, although here the Fool is Nabokov himself. As do the other Protagonists in examples of Laughter of Apocalypse, Humbert thus experiences a double revelation, but in this example the second revelation is metafictional. When, in a moment of epiphany, Humbert accepts his guilt for the sin of having deprived Dolores of her childhood, he also embodies the paradoxical revelation to the reader that, even though he is fictional, his transcendence of a solipsistic fantasy world has real meaning beyond the confines of the text.

The analysis of Laughter of Apocalypse in this chapter illustrates possible ways of dealing with the problem of writing about ineffability. As Cynthia Davis argues in her analysis of Sula, transcendence without a reciprocal relationship with an other leads to meaninglessness. Both Blatty and King personify the irrational as demons, whose relationship with other characters is mediated by the ambivalent nature of laughter. The Protagonists' real fear of It is transformed into a sense of the
ridiculous, their laughter therefore simultaneously putting them into a relationship with and keeping them separate from it. In a similar way, Morrison employs ambivalence by showing how the unbounded laughter of the Fool, which cannot be directly echoed by a non-transcendent character, is instead transposed into tears that recognise the importance of anti-system while at the same time remaining rooted in system. Nabokov, moreover, shows that this sense of ambivalence can be used to overcome the difficulties of the reader’s relationship with the text. Again using laughter, he parodies apparently exhausted modes of discourse in order, paradoxically, that they may be encountered as something new and revealing.
CHAPTER THREE: LAUGHTER OF ENTROPY

Introduction

So far in this thesis I have traced the recurrence in several novels of a relationship between two or more characters, the dynamics of which are expressed through laughter. Within the context of an Institution, a society or community that I have defined as mad in that its rules are so strict as to form an apparently inescapable closed system, there appears in each case a Fool. Seen initially in terms that the rules of the Institution can encompass, in other words, as a Made Fool, these characters are revealed to be transcendent, in that they have the ability to see and function beyond the Institution’s conventions. Thus the Transcendent Fool, according to a definition of madness as loss of balance, is also mad, in that he or she is an expression of limitlessness or anti-system. The Transcendent Fool’s influence may be either creative or destructive, and this potential is mediated and realised through a relationship with one or more Protagonists, who act as advocate or champion, either for the Fool’s creative message, or in defence of society against the Fool’s desire to destroy. Thus, while the Fool facilitates orientation by opposing the Institution’s system, it is the Protagonist who ultimately achieves balance, and is in a position to communicate this achievement to the reader. While the revelatory process may be either creative or destructive, it occurs in every case accompanied by shared laughter, which I have called a laughing relationship.

Such models rely on the idea of a coherent reality outside the closed system of the Institution, access to and communication of which is crucial to the healthy development both of the individual and of society. While, for example, in *Lolita* Nabokov resists the idea that reality is something that can be reached and expressed,
and in *On The Road* Kerouac's communication of Dean's revelation can appear incoherent to the reader, in both these novels the creative possibilities of the world outside the Institution are still fundamental to the text as a whole.

In this chapter, on the other hand, I shall look at three novels that, while apparently presenting the reader with the familiar pattern of Institution, Protagonist and Fool, offer the view that escape from our own Institutions (including the view of language as a closed system) is impossible, either because there is no real world outside the systems we create, or because we can only ever understand things as mediated by such systems, and could never, therefore, gain meaningful access to anything beyond them. As we shall see, in these novels the crucial laughing relationship does not occur, either because laughter itself is largely absent from the text, or, even when there is much laughter, it occurs either in a closed, solipsistic way or as an expression of unassimilated chaos.

Although this thesis has concentrated on laughter as it appears in the text, rather than on theories of humour in literature, some general observations here will illuminate the change in world views between the novels analysed in Chapters One and Two and those that will be looked at in this chapter. Many critics in the past have considered that comedy should serve a corrective function by highlighting the follies of mankind. Ben Jonson, for example, considers that both comedy and tragedy are cathartic, but deal with different subject matters, the former with folly, the latter with crime. Increasingly, this distinction has become blurred, so that, by the twentieth century, there is little that is not considered a proper subject for laughter. Dugald Stewart considers that there is an essential moral element to laughter, as it involves

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not only the ability to reason (to distinguish one idea from another), but also the ability to distinguish right from wrong. George Meredith goes further, saying that 'comedy is the fountain of sound sense'. Quoting Meredith, Ralph Piddington says that "participation in the comic spirit gives high fellowship," but in order to attain it one must believe that our society is founded upon common sense, otherwise one will not appreciate the contradiction which the comic spirit perceives. Thus it seems possible, even when dealing with extremes of transgressive behaviour, to use comedy rather than tragedy, but only providing the reader can be assumed to make accurate moral judgements about the events that occur.

Jean Jacques Rousseau's analysis of this view is interesting. He argues that since comedy must be designed to please the civilisation in which it occurs, it only confirms or condemns things already approved or disapproved of, leading merely to exaggeration of these dominant views (see Piddington, p. 165, who cites Rousseau's Complete Works, volume 2). If these dominant views are the product of an Institution, in other words, a sick society, comedy cannot, then, be said to serve a genuinely corrective function. Thus, the views expressed above rely on confidence in an innate and universal moral sense that exists independently of the systems of any given society, and it is this moral sense that, when shared in laughter, improves a community. Should this confidence in absolute moral values fail, therefore, community (shared laughter) is undermined and the individual is isolated from others

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and at the mercy of both dominant ideology and intrusive chaos. The novels to be analysed in this chapter reflect such a failure, and the laughter present in them expresses isolation, chaos or entrapment rather than interaction, community and progress.

What one might call the anti-realist world view can be distinguished not only in a different treatment of laughter, but also in a different conception of madness. Where the definition I propose in the Introduction involves the retaining or regaining of balance, and thus assumes a strong sense of a 'self' that desires this balance, in the twentieth century an alternative view of madness develops that concerns doubt about that very self’s existence. The first model can be illustrated by the theoretical superstructure proposed by Freud that divides the personality into id, ego and superego, where the id describes the indiscriminate instincts and natural urges, the superego the conscience, or controlling rule-set, and the ego the central core of an individual that attempts to balance the former against the latter. Clearly, this structure parallels the ideas of Fool (anti-system), Protagonist (self) and Institution (system) that I have suggested. The second model is illustrated by the idea of the personality described by R.D. Laing as ‘ontological instability’, where the core ‘self’ is felt by the subject to be absent, or so fragmentary as to appear so. Laing describes the ontologically stable person as having

> a sense of his presence in the world as a real, alive, whole, and, in a temporal sense, a continuous person. As such, he can live out into the world and meet others: a world and others experienced as equally real, alive, whole, and continuous.

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The ontologically unstable person, on the other hand, 'may feel more unreal than real; in a literal sense, more dead than alive; precariously differentiated from the rest of the world, so that his identity and autonomy are always in question' (Laing, p. 42). Such an individual, Laing explains, feels that the everyday circumstances of life, rather than being enriching and productive, pose a constant threat to his or her very existence. The anxiety that this produces can occur in three forms: engulfment, implosion and petrification. Engulfment expresses the fear that 'in being understood (thus grasped, comprehended), in being loved, or even simply in being seen' one's own identity will be overwhelmed and destroyed by the other. Thus any form of 'dialectical relationship' is dangerous, and self-imposed isolation is the only safe position to take (Laing, pp. 43-45). Implosion, in a similar way, expresses the feeling that one is a vacuum. Any contact with the external world threatens to fill this void, something that must be prevented at all costs since the vacuum (albeit negatively) is the only 'self' that one has (Laing, pp. 45-46). Petrification holds, for Laing, the dual meaning of a fear of being 'turned to stone', of being made a thing rather than a person, and the state (being 'petrified') that this fear itself induces. As Laing points out, the result of this has been described by Sartre in Being and Nothingness (discussed in this thesis in Chapter Two, section on Sula). As Laing puts it, 'if one experiences the other as a free agent, one is open to the possibility of experiencing oneself as an object of his experience and thereby of feeling one's own subjectivity drained away' (Laing, p. 47). This may be counteracted by accepting all others only as things, as objects of one's own consciousness. As Laing points out,

those very dangers most dreaded can themselves be encompassed to forestall their actual occurrence. Thus, to forgo one's autonomy becomes the means of secretly safeguarding it; to play possum, to feign death,
becomes a means of preserving one's aliveness [...] To turn oneself into stone becomes a way of not being turned into a stone by someone else [... while] the man who is frightened of his own subjectivity being swamped, impinged upon, or congealed by the other is frequently to be found attempting to swamp, to impinge upon, or to kill the other person's subjectivity. (Laing, pp. 51-52)

Thus, the ontologically unstable person is in a permanent position of what Sartre calls Bad Faith, the vacillation between accepting oneself and accepting others that denies both a coherent existence and the possibility of coherent relationships. In the Freudian model, an individual can be seen to struggle to maintain his or her sense of a whole self, and to regain a balance recognised by that self as essential to well-being. In the Laingian, there exists no such centre around which to rebuild or regain a sense of balance, and the struggle is one of existential survival – to have a sense of self at any cost.

This change in attitude to madness emerges, in part, from a relatively new concentration on the individual – and particularly the individual's internal and even unconscious states of mind – which seems to have developed in parallel with a type of mental illness which can be identified as specifically twentieth-century. A view of humanity arises (although there are many arguments for its appearance at odd times previously) that can be seen in philosophy (in Existentialism and Absurdism), in culture (what Christopher Lasch calls 'the culture of narcissism'), in literature (in the theatre of the absurd and elsewhere), indeed in every field of human endeavour, not just on the psychiatrist's couch. As Lasch observes,

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6 Roy Porter argues that madmen and mad doctors have always influenced one another to the extent that it is sometimes difficult to establish whose 'idea' a particular manifestation of madness is: *A Social History of Madness: Stories of the Insane*, 2nd edition (London: Phoenix, 1996), pp. 8-38.
Studies of personality disorders that occupy the border line between neurosis and psychosis, though written for clinicians and making no claims to shed light on social or cultural issues, depict a type of personality that ought to be immediately recognizable, in a more subdued form, to observers of the contemporary cultural scene: facile at managing the impressions he gives to others, ravenous for admiration but contemptuous of those he manipulates into providing it; unappeasably hungry for emotional experiences with which to fill an inner void; terrified of aging and death.  

Lasch says that clinical narcissism is not about self-love and the ‘me’ generation; instead, ‘the new Narcissus gazes at his own reflection, not so much in admiration as in unremitting search of flaws, signs of fatigue, decay’ (Lasch, p. 90). He points out that this image of madness as destabilisation or disintegration can be seen not only in broader society, but also in literature.

The rise of the theater of the absurd, it has been argued, ‘seems to mirror the change in the predominant form of mental disorders which has been observed and described since World War II by an every-increasing number of psychiatrists.’ Whereas the ‘classical’ drama of Sophocles, Shakespeare, and Ibsen turned on conflicts associated with classical neuroses, the absurdist theater of Albee, Beckett, Ionesco, and Genet centers on the emptiness, isolation, loneliness, and despair experienced by the borderline personality […] Instead of the neurotic character with well-structured conflicts centering around forbidden sex, authority, or dependence and independence within a family setting, we see characters filled with uncertainty about what is real. (Lasch, p. 89. It is unclear from the text who Lasch is quoting.)

Laing also points out this contrast in the ‘basic existential position’ between classical and modern authors, citing Lionel Trilling’s comparison between Shakespeare and Keats on the one hand, and Kafka and Beckett on the other (Laing, pp. 39-41).

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This has enormous implications for the role of the Fool, since this figure relies for his or her power on a relationship with an other. If the lack of a coherent self undermines the possibility for such a relationship, the Fool's function collapses. As Enid Welsford points out,

The King, the Priest and the Fool all belong to the same regime, all belong essentially to a society shaped by belief in Divine order, human inadequacy, efficacious ritual; and there is no real place for any of them in a world increasingly dominated by the notions of the puritan, the scientist, and the captain of industry; for strange as it may seem the fool in cap and bells can only flourish among people who have sacraments, who value symbols as well as tools, and cannot forever survive the decay of faith in divinely imposed authority, the rejection of all taboo and mysterious inspiration.  

That symbols are as important as tools is revealed in Lasch's analysis of the current fashion for dismantling illusions and laying bare the means by which they are achieved. As he says,

The urge to understand a magician's tricks, like the recent interest in the special effects behind a movie like Star Wars, shares with the study of literature a willingness to learn from the masters of illusion lessons about reality itself. (Lasch, p. 87)

However, literature that makes no claims to represent reality, that self-consciously presents itself as no more than an illusion, paradoxically undermines the traditional assumption that such illusions are crucial symbols of reality. Lasch continues,

a complete indifference even to the mechanics of illusion announces the collapse of the very idea of reality, dependent at every point on the distinction between nature and artifice, reality and illusion. This indifference betrays the erosion of the capacity to take any interest in anything outside the self. (Lasch, p. 87)

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The anti-realist model of laughter, which expresses this disintegration of the relationship between the real and the illusory (between the external world and our internal vision of it) suggests the genre popularly known as Black Humour. However, as I shall discuss in a moment, this term is fraught with difficulty as regards both its critical definition and application, and its historical and geographical position.

Instead, I propose to borrow a phrase from Patrick O’Neill, and call this model the Laughter of Entropy.  

As O’Neill points out, while there was an enormous increase in interest in the idea of Black Humour in the America of the nineteen sixties and seventies, not only do other occurrences of the phrase appear in both French and German critical texts which place its genesis much further back in time, but even within the specifically post-war American definition, very little consensus is evident as to what, exactly, the phrase refers to.

Different writers use the term to mean humour which is variously grotesque, gallows, macabre, sick, pornographic, scatological, cosmic, ironic, satirical, absurd, or any combination of these. (O’Neill, p. 62)

The writer of a *Time Magazine* essay of 1965 notes that the writers usually identified as being exponents of Black Humour form ‘no cohesive school or even a wave’, 10 while Koji Numasawa says the term is ‘at once convenient and vague’ although he does acknowledge that ‘American writers on the whole appear to be more articulate about it, and American audiences more susceptible to the form’. 11

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suggests that the need for this form of humour in America is exacerbated by such things as the Second World War, materialism, nuclear threat and the decline of social taboos, with the result that 'human beings at their utmost grotesque now freely flit about the pages and stages without any concern for conventional decency' (Numasawa, p. 44).

Numasawa identifies a readership that seems to have much in common with the Protagonists described here in Chapters One and Two; at odds with the closed system of an Institution they recognise but will not accept. Calling such readers 'hipsters', Numasawa says that they 'recognize in these writers “cool” agents of destruction mercilessly assaulting the manners and moralities of the ignoble “squares’” (Numasawa, p. 45). Thus, according to this argument, the author acts as Transcendent Fool, showing the reader, as Protagonist, another way of looking at the world.

So far, then, Black Humour would seem to have much in common with revelatory or apocalyptic laughter (indeed, in these terms, it does not seem to be a different form of laughter at all). Moreover, Numasawa also points out that by using outsiders (as those writers designated as black humorists often do) an author can ‘maintain sufficient comic detachment and perspective; also that a certain freedom of movement [can] be secured for the characters, such freedom being essential for picaresque indulgence as well as for creating fantasy’ (Numasawa, p. 51). Bruce Jay Friedman, in the foreword to his book, Black Humor, agrees with this, arguing that they say it is a critic's phrase [...] and besides, don't these fellows just write about outcasts? Fags, junkies, hunchbacks, 'perverts', Negroes, Jews, other assorted losers [...] but] I have a hunch Black Humor has always been around [...] and] it may be that you can govern by consensus, but you can't write anything distinctive by consensus. And it may be that if you are doing anything as high-minded as examining society, the very best way to go about
it is by examining first its throwaways, the ones who can’t or won’t keep in step.\textsuperscript{12}

What is being described, as Friedman suggests, is a form of satire that has been in existence for as long as there have been human conflicts. The Made Fool, in particular, has a long history of taking the position of ‘throwaway’ through whom the dynamics of a society can be revealed.

The apparent confusion between Black Humour as an extreme form of an existing type of comedy and as an essentially different type is also evident in the argument of J. Jerome Zolten. While taking the more delimited view that Black Humour is a term that defines a specific movement in nineteen-sixties American literature, what he describes sounds more like what I have defined as Laughter of Apocalypse.

Joking about tragedy is a way to create ‘community’ in the face of disaster. Sharing a laugh provides release of anger and frustration. But joking also has meaning as a communicative act designed to enhance the teller’s appeal with an audience.\textsuperscript{13}

André Breton, in the preface to his \textit{Anthologie de l’humour noir}, quotes extensively from Freud, who argues that humour is not only liberating, it also contains elements of the sublime and the elevated.

The sublime evidently derives from the triumph of narcissism, from the invulnerability of the ego which affirms itself victoriously. The ego refuses to let itself be broken into, to let suffering impose exterior reality on it. It

\textsuperscript{12} ‘Foreword [sic]: Black Humor’, in Pratt, pp. 19-24 (p. 23) (orig. publ. in \textit{Black Humor} (London: Transworld Publisher, 1965)).

\textsuperscript{13} ‘Joking in the Face of Tragedy: Why would people try to turn tragic events into humor?’, in Pratt, pp. 303-11 (p. 310) (orig. publ. in \textit{Etc.} 45: 4 (winter 1988), 345-50).
refuses to admit that the shocks of the exterior world can touch it; much more, it shows that they can even become for it the sources of pleasure. 14

Again, we see that, in associating Black Humour with ideas of the transcendent and the sublime, Breton considers it to be no different from the sense of overcoming opposition to regain balance that I have already described. Moreover, it should be noted that, by citing Freud, Breton is reinforcing the assumption that the self, the ego, is a coherent entity that uses laughter to assimilate experience. 15 Many critics, then, see Black Humour merely as a form of satire. As Numasawa notes, for example, both Conrad Knickerbocker and Bruce Jay Friedman ‘envisage black humor as a sort of satirical protest against the world gone completely insane’ (Numasawa, p. 42).

Louis Hasley, on the other hand, argues that Black Humour is a metaphysical rather than a social phenomenon, and cannot, therefore, be called satire. 16 He argues that evident in such work is distrust not in continuity, but ‘in the intelligence that controls, or fails to control, the ongoing conditions of life’ (Hasley, p. 109). He claims that earlier American writers differ in that ‘they relived [sic] the gloom of their vision by a lambent play of light and of humor that has no need of special definition. In them there was a searching that never quite concluded that life is meaningless’ (Hasley, p. 110). The idea that Black Humour expresses a metaphysical anxiety – that life is meaningless and that, therefore, satire can have no coherent function – seems to suggest a reading of the term that does reflect a fundamentally different position.


15 It should be noted that both Breton and Lasch use the term ‘narcissism’ in a way that is different from, or misunderstands, Freud’s.

from either the Laughter of Revelation or the Laughter of Apocalypse. It is this position that I propose to call Laughter of Entropy.

Analysing *Catch-22*, a novel that most critics identify as an example of Black Humour, Numasawa says, ‘it is almost as if, the whole [of] mankind having been deprived of the right to be either sane or mad, a man has to be simultaneously both sane and mad. Every positive value is cancelled out by the inherent negative, resulting in a paralyzing relativity’ (Numasawa, p. 52). Although I dispute this as a reading of *Catch-22*, and, indeed, have already shown that that novel is an example of Laughter of Revelation, this argument makes the crucial distinction between Laughter of Entropy and satire. As we have seen, entropy involves the experience described by Laing as ontological instability and by Sartre as Bad Faith; the reduction of both the self and any relationship with an other to just such ‘paralyzing relativity’.

Satire, on the other hand, is based on the conviction that life is purposeful, that people can relate to one another in a meaningful way, and that criticism of inappropriate rules or behaviour can lead to progress. The 1965 *Time* essay considers (giving the film *Dr Strangelove* and the humour of Lenny Bruce as examples) that ‘commitment to satire has seemed to degenerate into a monotonous, self-destructive scatology’ (*Time*, 1965, p. 4). Monotonous self-destruction implies just the sort of circling, solipsistic state that we shall see in the three novels discussed in this chapter. It is evidently not the same as satire, whose function seems rather to be to improve, through criticism, the state of society.

Another *Time* essay, written in 1966, sums up the solipsism inherent in entropic laughter by using the example of television: ‘TV has become a robot talking to itself,
giggling at its own jokes'. The writer of this essay considers that 'the humorists who dwell on death and disaster today lean too often toward the narcissistic, reflecting images of themselves as helpless heroes in a world they can neither take nor leave' (Time, 1966, pp. 96-97). Numasawa uses this image of entrapment, unmitigated by the possibility of transcendence, to distinguish Black Humour (as Laughter of Entropy) even from traditional existentialism; 'if, it might be said, the whole attempts of existentialists have centred on creating something positive out of the omnipresent negative [...] the new black humorists set up shop as mocking the futility of such processes in an I-told-you-it's-no-good spirit' (Numasawa, p. 45).

Bruce Janoff agrees that there is a generic confusion between Black Humour (as Laughter of Entropy) and existentialism. While much of his argument centres around the obstructively subjective assessment that a crucial difference between the two is that Black Humour literature is funny while existential and absurdist works are not, Janoff does highlight the distinction by arguing that, for the Camusian man,

only when he is painfully conscious of the absence of meaning outside this world and the chaos inherent in it, and yet shoulder to shoulder with his fellow man continues the struggle, can he hope to endure.  

He contrasts this position with that of Jacob Horner in John Barth’s The End of the Road, where, he argues, 'affirmation simply means continuing to live rather than committing suicide’ (Janoff, p. 303). Following Ihab Hassan’s analysis of the literature of silence, Janoff argues that Barth epitomises the outlook that I have described as entropic.


Convinced of the failure of words, of feeling, of art and of the efficacy of action in life or art, Barth [...] is also convinced of the failure of failure. The horror of being inwardly blank is to the black humorist even more a cause for despair than struggling to write about the absurdity that surrounds him. In the end, black humor is aimed not so much at the affirmation of art and life as to the negation of silence and lifelessness. (Janoff, p. 304)

This position has implications for the reader as well as for the author. Writing of Barth’s subversion of allusive literature in The Sot-Weed Factor, Elaine B. Safer considers that

fluctuations between the reader’s hope that allusions will culminate in a discovery of fundamental truths and his realization that the novel’s references certainly do not move toward an anagogical level of meaning brings forth the disorientation and shamefaced laughter of black humour.19

Christopher D. Morris considers that much of the reader’s sense of disorientation when confronted by such texts has to do with a stylistic undermining of the reader’s desire to relate to a character. Discussing Barth’s Lost in the Funhouse, he says that

selfhood [...] is altogether ignored, except as a farcical or sentimental entity, and the locus of the ‘narrative’ affliction is ultimately reduced to the purely linguistic problem of substitution. The situation is more disturbing than the early existentialist dilemmas because the Cartesian subject has been replaced as its center by meaningless, autonomous phonemes. The funhouse world resembles the universally neurotic one described by the French post-structuralist Jacques Lacan.20

Thus, the work of those authors who hold an entropic world view has crucial implications not only for the kind of fictional narratives that are created, but also for the writer's position as artist and for the reader's position as interpreter of the text.

There are many examples of novels of this type that contain laughter which takes the sense of disintegration and solipsism to extremes, having little or no sense of a relationship between characters. In William Burroughs's *Naked Lunch* (1959), for example, the author's treatment of laughter is epitomised by the Sailor:

> He laughed, black insect laughter that seemed to serve some obscure function of orientation like a bat's squeak. The Sailor laughed three times. He stopped laughing and hung there motionless listening down into himself. He had picked up the silent frequency of junk.  

Here, the orientation that laughter facilitates serves the merely solipsistic function of enabling the Sailor to 'listen down into himself'. Similarly, Guy Grand's taste for solitary practical jokes in Terry Southern's *The Magic Christian* (1959) is expressed in a laughter that is never shared with other characters in the novel. The failure of revelatory or apocalyptic laughter is, however, best examined by analysis of texts that suggest such relationships, only to undermine them.

**Slaughterhouse-5**

Vonnegut's sixth novel, *Slaughterhouse-5* (1969) has been seen as a 'resolution of sorts to themes and techniques developing throughout his previous work'.

Although this is, to a certain extent, true, I shall argue that the conclusions Vonnegut

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comes to in *Slaughterhouse-5* differ significantly not only from his previous work, but also from the novels thus far analysed in this thesis. While the familiar pattern of a trapped Protagonist and a Transcendent Fool seems to exist, any sense of a meaningful or constructive revelation is undermined by the lack of a coherent laughing relationship between them.

That this novel is the product of Vonnegut’s twenty-year struggle to write about his experiences in the Second World War is particularly significant in this context, since previous attempts show clearly defined Fools and Protagonists. Many critics note religious overtones in Vonnegut’s work, most often in the form of a prophet-figure bringing a message of hope to Mankind. Stanley Schatt, for example, points out that ‘Vonnegut’s protagonists in at least four of his [pre-*Slaughterhouse-5*] novels assume the role of a Jonah figure when urged to follow [...] a course of action by a Messiah figure’. 24 Of these critics, most admit that no such characters exist in *Slaughterhouse-5*, as, for example, Glenn Meeter who argues that ‘the voice that speaks to us in his tales does not seem that of a prophet; the reader has no feeling of being seized and held and overpowered by something unearthly, like Coleridge’s wedding guest when the Ancient Mariner seized him with his skinny hand and held him with his eye’. 25

It would therefore seem that Vonnegut comes to the conclusion that such figures are inadequate to explain life as he had experienced it. The major event that Vonnegut tries repeatedly to explain, to himself and to his readers, is the fire-bombing of Dresden by allied forces, which killed 135,000 people in an undefended

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25 ‘Vonnegut’s Formal Otherworldliness: *Cat’s Cradle* and *Slaughterhouse-Five*’ in Klinkowitz and Somer, pp. 198-212 (p. 198).
and strategically unimportant city. A prisoner of war, kept in an underground
slaughterhouse at night, Vonnegut was witness to this event (and, indeed, one of its
few survivors). John Somer argues that

Vonnegut found it difficult to write about the bombing of Dresden because
it contradicted everything he was brought up to believe in; and it happened
at an age, twenty-two, when a man’s beliefs are most vulnerable [...] Kurt
Vonnegut could not rush home and knock out a masterpiece about the
destruction of Dresden because his real subject was the destruction of Kurt
Vonnegut, Jr. 26

As Tony Tanner puts it, Slaughterhouse-5 ‘is not a novel simply about
Dresden. It is a novel about a novelist who has been unable to erase the memory of
his wartime experience and the Dresden fire-storm, even while he has been inventing
stories and fantasies in his role as a writer since the end of that war’. 27 The
implication of this is that horrific or disorientating memories can only be successfully
integrated into one’s experience if they can be ‘told’. Slaughterhouse-5 is Vonnegut’s
sixth attempt at this telling, and by abandoning his previous reliance on the
transcendent power of the prophet he seems to conclude that it is not actually
possible to tell about experiences as large as Dresden. This leads to the paradoxical
situation of a novel whose theme is the impossibility of writing a novel.

One could argue that Vonnegut’s work before Slaughterhouse-5 indicates in
part an escape into fantasy similar to Yossarian’s retreat into hospital or Shadrack’s
attempts to contain death in National Suicide Day. However, whereas Catch-22 and
Sula both illustrate a final escape from these closed systems (in the former in the form

26 ‘Geodesic Vonnegut; or, if Buckminster Fuller Wrote Novels’ in Klinkowitz and Somer, pp. 213-21 (pp. 213-14).
27 ‘The Uncertain Messenger: A Reading of Slaughterhouse-Five’, in Critical Essays on Kurt
Vonnegut, ed. by Robert Merrill (Boston, MA: G.K. Hall, 1990), pp. 125-30 (p. 125) (orig. publ. in
of revelation, in the latter in the form of apocalypse), *Slaughterhouse-5* does not provide an analogous escape from the closed system of fantasy. Meeter points out that the world of *Slaughterhouse-5* is not allegory, where a fantastic world stands for (and therefore explains) some aspect of the real world. In this novel 'there is a different alignment of fantasy and reality. The two are portrayed side by side, as if both are equally fantastic and equally real' (Meeter, p. 199). This 'contamination of reality by dream' as John Barth has put it undermines the reader's sense of place; we have no more understanding of where we stand in relation to the world of *Slaughterhouse-5* than Vonnegut has (his novel suggests) of where he stands in relation to the universe (quoted by Meeter, p. 199).

The central character of the novel is Billy Pilgrim, who, as a young soldier, like Vonnegut, was taken as a prisoner of war to Dresden shortly before it was destroyed. He has become 'unstuck in time', travelling uncontrollably from one part of his life to another and existing 'in a constant state of stage fright' as he never knows where he will be from one moment to the next.\(^{28}\) Additionally, and independently of being 'unstuck', Billy is kidnapped, on the night of his daughter's wedding, by aliens from the planet Tralfamadore, who take him back to their world as an exhibit for a zoo. Billy learns that the Tralfamadarians live simultaneously in all moments of time, seeing the past, the present and the future all at once as a human being might see a stretch of the Rocky Mountains. From them he learns to accept an entirely deterministic view of the universe; that all things and all times just *are* and any attempt to change them is therefore meaningless. Death, they tell him, is not real in the sense that it is not an end; Tralfamadarians see people as giant millipedes, with

young legs at one end and old legs at the other, with death being just one aspect of
the whole. Billy finds this thought comforting, and when he returns to Earth he
begins to tell others what he has learned so that they, too, may be comforted. Tanner
argues that

Vonnegut has [...] total sympathy with such quietistic impulses [...] Fantasies of complete determinism, of being held helplessly in the amber of
some eternally unexplained plot, justify complete passivity and a supine
acceptance of the futility of all action. (Tanner, p. 130)²⁹

A crucial characteristic of the Protagonist has been shown to be his or her
willingness to take responsibility (at least in part) for the evils that he or she
witnesses, creating a relationship not only with the Fool, but also with the society of
which he or she is a part. Billy, however, is in a position to accept the Tralfamadorian
philosophy because it echoes a pre-existing detachment that he feels, not only from
the rest of society, but even from himself. The result of being unstuck in time is that
Billy becomes merely an observer of his own life, rather than an active participant in
it. Billy seems quite resigned to this state of affairs even before meeting the
Tralfamadorians, indeed, an episode from his early childhood implies that he has
always felt that even the responsibility of being alive is too much of a burden for him.
As Billy relives the day that his father tried to teach him to swim by throwing him
into the deep end of the pool, we are told that

[He] was numb as his father carried him from the shower room to the pool.
His eyes were closed. When he opened his eyes, he was on the bottom of the
pool, and there was beautiful music everywhere. He lost consciousness, but
the music went on. He dimly sensed that somebody was rescuing him. Billy
resented that. (S-5, p. 38)

²⁹ It should be noted that several critics disagree with the assessment that Vonnegut is quietistic,
arguing instead that Billy acts as a negative example, serving as a critique of such passivity.
Significantly, this is the first occasion on which Billy becomes unstuck in time. Moments before, he had been struggling through a forest behind enemy lines, inadequately equipped, cold and hungry. The effort of simply staying alive is almost too much, and shortly after he returns to the forest, he tells his companions to go on without him. Then, on waking from 'a delightful hallucination' that is 'the craziness of a dying young man with his shoes full of snow', Billy is forced to face the reality of his situation by a companion who tells him 'you shouldn’t even be in the Army' (S-5, p. 42, p. 44). The irony of this, echoing as it does Billy’s own feelings, causes him to start ‘involuntarily making convulsive sounds that were a lot like laughter’ (S-5, p. 44). That these sounds are involuntary and are like, rather than actually being, laughter indicates that Billy’s detachment, while giving him the illusion of escape from his situation, prevents him from facing and dealing with it. A genuine laugh would express Billy’s acceptance of his position and be an assertion that he can survive it, but such confidence in his self’s resilience is something that Billy does not possess.

Unable to face his own problems, to accept himself as an active participant in his own existence, Billy is totally unequipped to act on anyone else’s behalf. Charles B. Harris argues that, while in Vonnegut’s previous work figures are present who care sufficiently about humanity to act as a contrast to absurdity and hopelessness elsewhere in the novel, in Slaughterhouse-Five, however, no such figure appears. ‘There are almost no characters in this story,’ Vonnegut explains […] So the pervasive hopelessness of the novel’s tone remains unmitigated by any character who strives, no matter how futilely, to act in a meaningful manner.³⁰

³⁰'Illusion and Absurdity: The Novels of Kurt Vonnegut', in Merrill 1990, pp. 131-41 (p. 137).
Several critics compare \textit{Slaughterhouse-5} with \textit{Catch-22} to make this point. Robert Martin, for example, argues that while in \textit{Catch-22} 'there is a definite sense of conflict escalating towards a climax', that climax forming a resolution of the plot in Yossarian's escape, 'in Vonnegut's work there is little or no resolution, no turning point, and no building up to a climax'. Similarly, Thomas Hartshorne argues that, There is climactic action and intensity in \textit{Catch-22} because there are discernible goals for action; things move in a particular direction. In \textit{Slaughterhouse V} they do not; things move in cycles; there is no progress. \textit{Catch-22} is more invested with feeling, with fear, terror, and at the end, exultation, because Yossarian feels himself to be free in a way that Billy is not and cannot be. Because he is free, he is responsible, and therefore to a degree, guilty [...] Billy simply walks through things, feeling compassion for the sufferings of others, but not feeling guilt because he is not guilty; he knows he is not responsible. He feels no moral pressure beyond the necessity of being nice to other people. Yossarian's goals are wider.\footnote{\textit{From Catch-22 to Slaughterhouse 5}: \textit{The Decline of the Political Mode}, \textit{South Atlantic Quarterly}, 78 (1979), 17-33 (p. 26).}

Not only does Billy's lack of a feeling of guilt keep him detached from his surroundings, the message that he thinks will comfort others actually alienates him still further. With the transcendent knowledge of the Fool represented by the Tralfamadorian philosophy of total determinism, Billy cannot accept and pass on this message without losing all meaningful contact with his fellow beings. The implications of the message itself undermine the possibility of communicating it to others. The idea that the purpose of telling a tale is to make one's audience see with new eyes in order that they may develop is in total contradiction to the 'tale' that nothing can be done to change the way things happen. Nevertheless, Billy makes the

\footnote{\textit{“Catch-22 and Slaughterhouse-Five"}, \textit{Notes on Contemporary Literature}, 15: 4 (September 1985), 8-10 (pp. 9-10).}
attempt, indeed he sees the communication of the Tralfamadorian philosophy to be his mission in life.

He was devoting himself to a calling much higher than mere business. He was doing nothing less now, he thought, than prescribing corrective lenses for Earthling souls. So many of those souls were lost and wretched, Billy believed, because they could not see as well as his little green friends on Tralfamadore. (S-5, p. 25)

At first it may appear that Billy (an optometrist) is ‘prescribing corrective lenses’ so that, as a Protagonist, he may show the world the new, Tralfamadorian, way of seeing that will lead them out of the closed systems of convention and into creative development. Moreover, he attempts to overcome even mortality by assuring people that death is not, after all, an end. However, in the quotation above and elsewhere, there are clear indications that it is Billy who is ‘lost and wretched’. He merely ‘thought’ he was prescribing lenses for people who, he ‘believed’, could not see properly. This uncertainty is underlined by Vonnegut’s use of the phrase ‘little green friends’ to describe the Tralfamadorians, so close to the cliché of ‘little green men’ of popular culture as to be almost indistinguishable.

Vonnegut uses several techniques to suggest, then undermine, the idea that Billy is a holy, or Transcendent, Fool. For example, in knowing the future, particularly the time, place and manner of his own death, Billy is following the tradition of the prophet fool (seen, for example, in ancient Irish stories) who, having been scared literally out of his wits by warfare, runs away to the forest, from where he eventually emerges as a wise fool or holy madman, much valued by the king as an advisor (see, for example, Welsford, pp. 98-99, pp. 103-05). Billy, traumatised by war, runs not into the symbolic wilderness of the forest, but into outer space, its twentieth-century equivalent. The one feature that recurs again and again in these
stories is the fact that these characters foretell their own deaths. At a conference, at which Billy will give his Tralfamadorian message to the world, he tells his audience about Paul Lazzaro, a fellow prisoner of war who threatened to kill him.

‘Many years ago,’ he said, ‘a certain man promised to have me killed. He is an old man now, living not far from here. He has read all the publicity associated with my appearance in your fair city. He is insane. Tonight he will keep his promise.’ (S-5, p. 123)

The mythic impact that this announcement seems to have is undermined by the fact that Billy claims to have seen his own birth and death, with everything in between, many times, so the significance of death as a final event is lost. Again, the message itself undermines the power of the messenger. Instead of assimilating the idea of mortality, of accepting it as an inevitable part of life, Billy tries to negate it. Where Shadrack, for example, tries to contain death by making it conform to certain rules, and Yossarian spends as much time as possible in hospital, where he thinks death can be made to behave itself, Billy simply denies that it is of consequence.

That Billy’s attempt to dismiss death is equivalent to Shadrack’s attempt to contain it can, however, be seen in the similarity of the two men’s relationships with their community. Where National Suicide Day can be seen to reflect the despair of the people of the Bottom, Billy’s denial of the significance of death reflects the inability of military authority to accept responsibility for Dresden. During Billy’s stay in the veterans’ hospital after the war, we are told of his attempts to make Professor Rumfoord, a military historian who occupies the next bed, listen to the truth about the firebombing. Rumfoord claims that Billy is suffering from Echolalia, a mental disease which makes people immediately repeat things that well people around them say. But Billy didn’t really have it. Rumfoord simply insisted, for his own comfort, that Billy had it. Rumfoord was thinking in a
military manner: that an inconvenient person, one whose death he wished for very much, for practical reasons, was suffering from a repulsive disease. (S-5, p. 166)

In Rumfoord’s insistence on the truth of the official version of what happened during the war, which contradicts Billy’s actual experience of it, he appears to assert the authority of the Institution’s language by interpreting Billy’s speech as not only inaccurate, but diseased.

There in the hospital, Billy was having an adventure very common among people without power in time of war: He was trying to prove to a wilfully deaf and blind enemy that he was interesting to hear and see. (S-5, p. 166)

Faced with a dominant ideology that he knows to be false, Billy seems to be in the position of a Protagonist who is trapped within the conventions of an Institution, but has not yet found a means of escape. Ironically, however, in an important sense Billy is simply repeating what Rumfoord says. The historian’s denial that Dresden was an unnecessary massacre – that death on such a scale has actually occurred – is mirrored in Billy’s denial that those deaths, although he knows them to be fact, are of any significance. Furthermore, Protagonist and Institution seem to merge in a way that makes either acceptance of or resistance against the system impossible. Military authority, presented as a strong image of an Institution in Catch-22, is here undermined as an effective antagonist not only because Billy is unsuitable as a Protagonist, but because the exchange between Billy and Rumfoord takes place in a psychiatric hospital in which they are both patients. Assessing the ‘truth’ or ‘sanity’ of the utterances of either man is therefore problematic.

Moreover, Catch-22 is presented as a single, coherent antagonist against which Yossarian struggles. In Slaughterhouse-5, on the other hand, several potential
Institutions appear. The English prisoners of war that Billy encounters, for example, are presented in a stereotyped form derived from contemporary films. To them, war is a game (and therefore a closed system). The American soldiers present an image of suffering that contradicts the cinematic myths, and therefore break the rules of this game. More significantly, mortality may appear to represent another Institution, in that death is presented as ever-present and inescapable. This undermines the sense of ‘monological control’, as Jeanne Campbell Reesman puts it (after Bakhtin),\(^3^3\) that is an essential aspect of the dialectical laughing relationship that I have described. The presence of more than one system implies existence between, rather than within, them, in which case the notion of transcendence (of the necessity for anti-system as a balance to system) becomes meaningless. The treatment of death further destabilises the notion that it takes an Institutional role in the novel. Billy adopts the Tralfamadorian reaction – a resigned ‘so it goes’ whenever death is encountered – that apparently supports their deterministic philosophy. The persistent (almost intrusive) repetition of the phrase, however, constantly keeps the idea of death in the reader’s mind, with the result that it takes on far more significance in the novel than this philosophy would suggest. This paradox is complicated by another; because the response to death in any form is the same, there is no sense in which the loss of a human life is more important than, for example, a bottle of champagne that has gone flat. This vacillation between significance and insignificance makes a stable relationship with the concept of mortality impossible.

While Yossarian eventually attains control of his destiny, Billy is permanently trapped in a rootless and circling system; at the mercy of forces both external and internal. For example, at a party being held for his wedding anniversary long after the war is over, the singing of a barber-shop quartet provokes such a strong reaction in Billy that his wife Valencia thinks he has seen a ghost.

He could find no explanation for why the song had affected him so grotesquely. He had supposed for years that he had no secrets from himself. Here was proof that he had a great big secret somewhere inside, and he could not imagine what it was. (S-5, p. 149)

This is entirely different from Yossarian’s suppression of Snowden’s death, where Yossarian is perfectly aware of the ‘great big secret’ inside him, but tries to avoid it. Although Billy does work out what is wrong – the singers look exactly like the four guards on the morning after the Dresden fire-bombing, mouthing their horror at one another – this evidence that he does not have, or at least is not in control of, any special knowledge, even of himself, further undermines his position as a traditional soothsayer.

Neither message nor messenger, then, seems suited to the task of communicating a meaningful revelation to humanity. Moreover, the possibility is clear throughout the novel that, traumatised by his childhood and by war, Billy is delusional. As Leonard Mustazza notes, ‘critics of Vonnegut’s Slaughterhouse-Five have long recognized Billy Pilgrim’s psychological need to “create,” albeit involuntarily, his Tralfamadorian experience’. 34 The delusional world he creates is

different from, for example, Bromden’s in *One Flew Over The Cuckoo’s Nest*, in that Bromden’s world is allegorical in the way Meeter discusses; he is attempting to find valid expression for a real experience. Billy’s delusion, as I discuss above, is more akin to Shadrack’s, in that it constitutes an attempt to contain reality, to ‘make everything all right’ rather than to confront and tell about it. This inability adequately to tell about his experiences leads to Billy’s uncertainty as a Protagonist.

There is much evidence for the different things that may have driven Billy mad. Even as a child, as we have seen, he seemed incapable of accepting responsibility for his own survival in a normal manner. Moreover, he contradicts the image of the child that exists in romantic tradition seen, for example, in Stephen King’s use of child Protagonists. This image sees the child as having the imaginative flexibility and freedom from conventional concerns to assimilate new experiences. Billy, however, in an ironic reversal of an experience of the sublime, cannot cope when he experiences Nature, in the form of the Grand Canyon, which he visits as a twelve-year-old with his parents.

The little human family was staring at the floor of the canyon, one mile straight down.

‘Well –,’ said Billy’s father, manfully kicking a pebble into space, ‘there it is.’ They had come to this famous place by automobile. They had had several blowouts on the way.

‘It was worth the trip,’ said Billy’s mother raptly. ‘Oh God – was it ever worth it.’

Billy hated the canyon. He was sure that he was going to fall in. His mother touched him, and he wet his pants. (S-5, pp. 76-77)

Again, reliving this experience reinforces Billy’s feelings at a particular moment of his narrative. This time, he is ‘flung back into his childhood’ by the Tralfamadorean spaceship entering a time warp. Although he appears to accept the experience of being kidnapped by aliens without difficulty, the juxtaposition of this confrontation
with the unknown with his previous inability to assimilate the vastness of the Grand Canyon implies that Billy is actually refusing to face the implications of this much larger experience. As before, Billy’s consciousness returns almost immediately to the war. He is being deloused at a German prison camp and when he is dressed in an ostentatious coat that is far too small for him, the guards ‘[find] him to be one of the most screamingly funny things they had seen in all of the Second World War. They [laugh] and [laugh]’ (S-5, p. 78). The war is, we come to suspect, the vast experience that Billy is really failing to assimilate, and again this failure is associated with laughter. This time Billy, who has already shown himself unable to use laughter to give himself a new perspective on his situation, is the victim of mockery, as the guards, acting as demonic presences, ridicule his human frailty.

After the war, ‘every so often, for no apparent reason, Billy Pilgrim would find himself weeping. Nobody had ever caught Billy doing it. Only the doctor knew’ (S-5, p. 53). The obvious assumption is that it is the war that has damaged him. However, in the boxcar on the way to Dresden with the other prisoners of war Billy yells, kicks and whimpers in his sleep. This is before the fire-bombing, when Billy is very new to the war, and the implication (supported by the assessment of the psychiatrists in the veterans’ hospital) is that Billy’s experiences as a child have scarred him.

Nobody else suspected that he was going crazy. Everybody else thought he looked fine and was acting fine. Now he was in the hospital. The doctors agreed: He was going crazy.

They didn’t think it had anything to do with the war. They were sure Billy was going to pieces because his father had thrown him into the deep end of the YMCA swimming pool when he was a little boy, and had taken him to the rim of the Grand Canyon. (S-5, p. 86)

Vonnegut, therefore, continually implies that the war – in which Billy witnessed death on a massive scale – has caused his madness. The suggestion is, however,
invariably undermined by the alternative and conflicting reasons that the text offers.

Years after he has returned home, Billy is in a plane crash which fractures his skull, and his wife, panic-stricken at the news of the accident, is killed trying to get to the hospital to see him. While the psychiatrists in the veterans’ hospital think Billy’s childhood has sent him mad, his daughter, Barbara, thinks his delusions about outer space (which he only begins to talk about after this accident) have been caused by brain damage and (implicitly) by repressed grief. She concludes that this damage has made him senile, in a state of second childhood that makes him incapable of looking after himself. Finding that he has let the furnace in his basement go out, Barbara says,

‘Oh my God, you are a child. If we leave you alone here, you’ll freeze to death, you’ll starve to death.’ And so on. It was very exciting for her, taking his dignity away in the name of love. (S-5, p. 114)

Ironically, both the doctors and his own daughter see Billy’s madness in terms of childhood. Billy, who keeps the childish diminutive of his name even in adulthood, avoids any sense of adult responsibility, and his dependence on others for day-to-day necessities, together with his frequent weeping, identify him more as an infant than as a grown man. Barbara, therefore, is not ‘taking his dignity away’, since the point that Billy has missed is that dignity is not possible without responsibility.

Billy’s final attempt at a laugh is not preceded by an escape into time travel. Instead, he is temporarily relieved of his worries in the real world. After several days’ gruelling journey by train, the American prisoners of war are, for a short time, billeted on a crowded prisoner of war camp with the stereotypically jolly English prisoners mentioned above. They welcome their ‘guests’ with as much hospitality as they can muster, providing not only food and warmth but such luxuries as razors, soap, chocolate and cigarettes. Billy, apparently lulled into a false sense of security by
this paradise, answers the questions put to him by an Englishman who is horrified at
the condition of the American prisoners.

‘My God – what have they done to you, lad? This isn’t a man. It’s a broken
kite.’ […]
‘What became of your boots, lad?’
‘I don’t remember.’
‘Is that coat a joke?’
‘Sir?’
‘Where did you get such a thing?’
Billy had to think hard about that. ‘They gave it to me,’ he said at last.
[…]
‘Ohhhh – Yank, Yank, Yank,’ said the Englishman, ‘that coat was an
insult.’
‘Sir?’
‘It was a deliberate attempt to humiliate you. You mustn’t let Jerry do
things like that.’
Billy Pilgrim swooned. (S-5, p. 84)

Suddenly forced to confront reality by the other soldier’s questions, and to
acknowledge the meaning of the German guards’ laughter at his coat, Billy faints.
When he comes to, he is still in the prison camp, but the sense of a fantasy world has
been exacerbated by a pantomime that is being performed for the Americans’
entertainment. Recovering from his swoon, Billy finds himself watching Cinderella.

Some part of him had evidently been enjoying the performance for quite a
while. Billy was laughing hard.
The women in the play were really men, of course. The clock had just
struck midnight and Cinderella was lamenting:

Goodness me, the clock has struck –
Alackaday, and fuck my luck.

Billy found the couplet so comical that he not only laughed – he shrieked.
He went on shrieking until he was carried out of the shed into another,
where the hospital was. (S-5, p. 85)

Unable to assimilate the contrast between the dreadful conditions on the train
and this apparent paradise, Billy is reduced to screaming hysterics as soon as he
realises where he is. It is, paradoxically, only when he is not conscious that he is able to laugh. This laughter, totally unlike the shared laughter between Fool and Protagonist, is not just solipsistic, it is at one remove even from Billy’s own consciousness. Significantly, since the Tralfamadorians do not laugh (in their holistic universe, there is nothing to laugh at), Billy never learns its value, and so remains lost, stuck forever in uncontrollable, futile circles. In this example, Billy leaps in time after his failure to laugh. Under morphine in the prison hospital, he dreams of giraffes and wakes ‘with his head under a blanket in a ward for nonviolent mental patients in a veterans’ hospital near Lake Placid, New York’ (S-5, p. 86). Billy, it seems, has finally faced his reality and, unable to laugh, he has retreated into a ‘nonviolent’ and ‘placid’ state which remains long after the war is over. Although he cries often after this, he never again attempts to laugh.

Vonnegut, therefore, may seem to have provided a familiar structure in Slaughterhouse-5; the closed system of an Institution within which a Protagonist, trying to escape, encounters a Transcendent Fool who teaches the means of this escape. However, it is clear throughout the novel that Billy is merely a potential Protagonist, and the Tralfamadorians merely potential Fools. The laughing relationship that would make a true, meaningful, revelation of the Tralfamadorian message is absent, and the message itself is one that can have no meaningful effect on human development. Moreover, because of the evidence given in the text that Billy is delusional, it is possible that the Tralfamadorians are merely a projection of his internal state. As such they act not as transcendent beings who are in a genuine relationship with Billy, but as a further expression of his detachment and solipsism. Similarly the Institution – shown in previous chapters of this thesis to have a crucial role in providing a stable system that can be either resisted or defended – is never
given a distinct identity within the novel. Consequently, Billy has no context within which to function and exists instead in an entropic state which is neither order nor disorder. Unlike Yossarian or Bromden, there is no sense of Billy being cured (there is, indeed, no sense of him having progressed through time in any coherent way, so there is no time when he possibly could be cured).

Billy's position is reflected in the very structure of the novel, illustrated by the endlessly circling rhyme about Yon Yonson that appears in the first chapter. Vonnegut, having abandoned the idea that Fools or prophets in literature can usefully offer solutions to human problems, seems to suggest by this technique that the novel can never be anything other than a self-referential system that communicates nothing but a sense of 'failure' (S-5, p. 19). Vonnegut has often argued in interview that the Artist has a crucial role in society that involves encouraging the human race to search for meaning. However, unlike the novelists this thesis has addressed so far, he seems to see this search as futile, 'for the depression he acknowledges in his own history testifies to the terrible effort men must make if they would commit themselves to an all but impossible task' (Merrill and Scholl, p. 69). His conclusion, then, seems to be the opposite of Nabokov's. Where Lolita suggests that literature can portray a meaningful revelation, even though Nabokov himself has claimed this to be impossible, Vonnegut claims that the Artist must strive for development and creativity, while both the plot and the structure of Slaughterhouse-5 suggests that to do so is futile.
American Psycho

Bret Easton Ellis’s notorious novel about Patrick Bateman, a good-looking, rich twenty-something who works on Wall Street by day and is a serial killer by night, has provoked extreme reactions since its publication in 1991. Early reviews of the novel, particularly in The New York Times, were, on the whole, scathing; it is described as being ‘of the tiresome enfant terrible school of fiction’ by Anna Quindlen, as ‘nonsense’ by Roger Rosenblatt, as ‘pea-brained’ by Caryn James, and as ‘snobbish and callow’ by Ken Tucker.

As Nancy and Joe Applegate point out, however, many critics (including those quoted above) seem concerned, not with the book’s worth as literature, but with its ‘supposed political and moral agenda’, citing reviews that call it ‘base, misogynous and dangerous’, and ‘exploitative, sensationalist junk’. This is reflected in a long debate in The New York Times letters page in the early months of 1991, which concerned itself chiefly with issues of pornography, censorship, and the cowardice of publishers, rather than with the novel itself. Applegate and Applegate point out that much negative criticism seems ‘to be quoting the same one or two offensive

35 Even publication of the novel caused furore, as the original publishers, Simon & Schuster, dropped the novel on receipt of adverse pre-publication reviews, breaking the contract with Ellis (who eventually found a willing publisher in Random House) and provoking accusations of censorship and cowardice. This controversy, even before the book appeared in shops, produced streams of opinion from people who, often, had read only the excerpts of violent scenes leaked prior to publication, including the Los Angeles chapter of the National Organization for Women (NOW), who called for a boycott of the novel on the strength of these few scenes alone.


passages, without attempting to read the entire book [...] instead of offering Ellis a fair chance to present his satire, [critics] have skipped through looking for the "dirty parts" (Applegate and Applegate, p. 10). Rosenblatt, for example, even goes so far as to recommend that readers '[refuse] to buy this book. Thumb through it, for the sake of normal prurience, but don't buy it', claiming with breathtaking hypocrisy that only in this way can we show our disgust with 'the gratuitous degradation of human life' and maintain 'standards'.

Increasingly, however, the importance of *American Psycho* as a work of literature has come to be recognised, although, as David Price notes, relatively few serious analyses of the novel have so far been published.\(^{41}\) His 1998 study considers only four previous articles to 'conduct a genuinely sustained scholarly engagement with the novel'; those by Frances Fortier, Carla Freccero, Thomas Irmer, and Robert Zaller, of which, as Price points out, only Freccero's, published in *Diacritics*, is reasonably accessible to an American readership.\(^ {42}\) Price considers that it is unfortunate that *American Psycho* has been dismissed in this fashion because this work of fiction, through its very style and structure, raises

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pivotal questions about the novel and its history as a genre, as well as its role in contemporary culture. (Price, p. 321)

He notes, and agrees with the assessment, that all four of these critics interpret *American Psycho* [as] a type of satirical novel that condemns the dominant culture of the 1980s, although – while Irmer sees this as the result of estrangement from 1960s ideals, and Zaller and Freccero place their analyses within the context of ‘legal definitions of pornography and censorship’ – only Fortier assesses the novel within a broader literary context (Price, p. 322).

Fortier […] sees Ellis’s novel as enacting a postmodern aesthetic that undoes the traditional ‘effets de réel’ associated with nineteenth-century realist fiction through a superabundance of referential citations to the real, material world represented in the novel. According to Fortier, this excess of the real fosters a sense of derealization such that we are left wondering, ‘Où est l’insupportable? Dans la violence même ou dans le récit qui la banalise? [What is unacceptable? The violence itself or the narrative which popularises (banalises) it?]’ [Price’s translation]. This, for Fortier, makes *American Psycho* a quintessential postmodern narrative that undoes the tenets of modernist literature which had established protocols for distinguishing the true from the false. (Price, p. 322)

An important aspect of this, which most early critics ignored or dismissed, lies in questions about the reality of the very violence that so incensed them. The editor’s comment that precedes Price’s article considers that, ‘as for the […] murders and dismemberments, one hesitates to say that they may or may not be actual’. Having provided much evidence for the argument that Bateman’s ‘epics of slaughter and rape’ are ‘compensatory flights of drugged-out fantasy’ this editorial then goes on, strangely, to conclude that such a reading is ‘unlikely to be the usual one’. 43

Christopher Lehmann-Haupt, however, considers that Ellis has intentionally created

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an unrealistic world in order to prevent the reader from identifying with Bateman. He compares Ellis to

a cartoonist trying to animate *Tales From the Crypt*, the comic book of the 1950’s that tried in its clumsy way to make black humor of human physicality.

Since the people involved are unreal and the physiology of what is done to them impossible, it is not so difficult to conceive of their scenes as a Tom and Jerry cartoon with human body parts.44

Ellis himself has suggested as much in interview with Roger Cohen, saying that ‘the murder sequences are so over the top, so baroque in their violence, it seems hard to take them in a literal context’.45

Equally difficult to take literally is the way other characters in the novel ignore all signs of Bateman’s secret life. Taking some blood-soaked sheets to ‘the Chinese dry cleaners I usually send my bloody clothes to’, for example, Bateman is frustrated, not by any questions about what the stains are and how they got there, but by the fact that he cannot make the owner understand that the sheets are very expensive and must be cleaned carefully.46 His problem, and it is a problem of far more significance in the novel than that of getting blood-stained sheets clean, is one of communication; he and the owner do not speak one another’s language. Misunderstandings and failures of communication fill the novel. Having dinner with Paul Owen, Bateman intersperses his conversation with such comments as ‘I’m utterly insane’ and ‘I like to

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dissect girls’, but the other man, too drunk to listen properly, does not react (AP, p. 216). On other occasions, in nightclubs whose noise level prohibits conversation, Bateman is able to shout sadistic plans into the ears of potential victims who are unable to hear a word he is saying, as when he says to a girl serving him drinks, ‘quite clearly but muffled by “Pump Up the Volume” and the crowd, “You are a fucking ugly bitch I want to stab to death and play around with your blood”’ (AP, p. 59).

Although it is possible to take such examples at face value – Bateman really says these things but they go unheard or misunderstood – Ellis introduces confusion as to what is real and what unreal, as when the detective, Kimball, turns up at Bateman’s office to talk to him about Paul Owen’s disappearance. He tells him that Owen’s diary records that he was due to meet Marcus Halberstam on the night he vanished. Sensing a trap and giggling nervously (for he has recently hacked Owen to pieces with an axe), Bateman asks if Halberstam has an alibi, only to be told that “he was at Atlantis with Craig McDermott, Frederick Dibble, Harry Newman, George Butner and” – Kimball pauses, then looks up – “you... (AP, p. 274). In a way the reader expects this sort of mix-up, since all these young men are constantly mistaken for one another. As sightings of Owen in London increase, however, it becomes likelier that Bateman has fantasised murdering him. Having telephoned his lawyer, for example, leaving a message that constitutes a full confession, Bateman later sees him at a party. Typically, the lawyer, Harold Carnes, mistakes Bateman for someone else, and, much to Bateman’s chagrin, tells the man he thinks is called Davis that his joke would have been better if he had chosen someone who was less of a ‘bloody asskisser [...] a brown-nosing goody-goody’ to be the supposed murderer (AP, p. 387). When Bateman screams that he has, indeed, killed Owen and many other people
besides, Carnes responds that this is not possible, as he had dinner with Paul Owen in London some days before (AP, p. 388).

Ellis is careful to maintain this series of ambiguities throughout his novel. Perhaps Bateman is delusional, fantasising these murders; perhaps he inhabits a world so evil that nobody really cares what he does; perhaps he is just lucky never to be caught; perhaps neither he nor anyone else in the novel is intended to ‘exist’ in a traditional novelistic sense, the whole being merely an exploration of the issues of surface and artifice. The single element that remains unchanged in all these possible, but contradictory, interpretations of the novel is the lack of a coherent sense of self and communication with an other. This holds true on a metafictional level as well as within the narrative; if Ellis is underlining the fact that none of his characters are real and that coherent communication among them is therefore neither meaningful nor necessary, he is denying the reader the sense of the novel as a ‘self’ (as Bakhtin would have put it) with which he or she can communicate in any traditional sense.

This issue is addressed, often tangentially, by many critics. As Applegate and Applegate argue, ‘the violence in American Psycho does not seem to be what disturbs critics most; [… Bateman] is never caught, never punished. What seems to threaten many readers is that Ellis created a monster but never put him to rest’ (Applegate and Applegate, p. 11). Rosenblatt particularly sees this as an important defect in the novel.

Of course you will be stunned to learn that the book goes nowhere. Characters do not exist, therefore do not develop. Bateman has no motivation for his madness [….] No plot intrudes upon the pages. Bateman is never brought to justice, suggesting that even justice was bored. (NYTimes)
Lehmann-Haupt, while offering a more considered analysis of the novel, agrees with this, saying that

*American Psycho* lacks [...] a moral framework. Mr. Ellis teases us near the end into believing that Patrick Bateman may finally be brought to justice. But he isn’t; at the book’s close, he is still at large. The author is saying that today such monstrous criminality is indistinguishable from the general behaviour of society. But Mr. Ellis’s true offense is to imply that the human mind has grown so corrupt that it can no longer distinguish between form and content. (*NYTimes*)

By this the critic seems to mean that the problem with *American Psycho* is not simply that it uses violence to suggest that no one human activity is more important or meaningful than any other. By presenting graphic violence, without further comment, in the same tone as descriptions of popular music or designer clothes, Ellis is breaking a narrative rather than a social taboo; the suggestion is that the novelist may describe as many social ills as he or she desires, so long as the ‘form’ has a certain moral integrity. This, of course, is exactly the point that leads to Fortier’s assessment of the novel as ‘a quintessential postmodern narrative’; Ellis not only dismantles the cultural rules concerning appropriate content, he also dismantles the literary rules that enable the reader to orientate his- or herself with respect to that content.

Freccero argues that ‘for these critics, there needs to be an inner truth’, but that the novel demonstrates that there is no truth to be found beneath appearances, and the accumulation of Bateman’s successful, unnoticed, and ultimately deeply unsatisfying torture-murders that do not teach him – or the rest of us – anything, proves this point.

Even Bateman’s confession [...] succeeds in revealing absolutely nothing, not because anything remains hidden, but because there is no truth to be revealed, extracted, and expiated in confession. (*Freccero, p. 52*)
The author of a 1965 *Time* essay, ‘The Black Humorists’ cites, among others, James Purdy as one of the main exemplars of nineteen-sixties Black Humor. Purdy’s novel, *Cabot Wright Begins* (1964), is in many ways similar to *American Psycho*, in that its central character is a well-educated, wealthy, serial rapist. As Ellis does with Bateman, Purdy uses Wright, and those around him, to satirise contemporary American culture. As the author of the essay notes,

Purdy has an uncanny ear for American cliche, both the clichés of speech with which people eliminate the need for thinking and feeling and the equally standardized cliché roles in which people take refuge from their motives. He gets his effects by subtle dislocations and dizzying juxtaposition of these clichés, so that his characters talk past each other, and soon every human act seems equally aimless and unlikely. ⁴⁷

This effect, the use of banality to avoid or confuse real communication (and, indeed, identification) between characters is, of course, familiar to readers of *American Psycho*, but there is an important difference between the two novels which calls into question the status of *Cabot Wright Begins* as black, or at least as entropic, humour. The latter is, as the essayist observes, ‘an exploration of psychological anesthesia, the inability to feel anything – sexually, sensually, emotionally, artistically or morally’, but crucially, at ‘the book’s end [Wright] is freed by learning, for the first time in his life, to laugh unrestrainedly’ (*Time* essay, pp. 6-7). This discovery of laughter, this *beginning*, is a revelation of hope both for Wright himself and for the culture that he represents, and is totally at odds with the inescapable circles experienced by Bateman, who never learns to laugh in this way.

Ellis has claimed in interview that everything he writes is a monologue.\textsuperscript{48} This is a crucial observation for our understanding of \textit{American Psycho}, as it highlights the solipsism that precludes the possibility of communication between characters, of the shared laughter that enables transcendence of untenable convention. Instead, the novel abounds with laughter that is either false or threatening. Unable to orientate himself within his world, Bateman is constantly trying to attain what he perceives as heaven – by wearing the ‘right’ clothes and pursuing the ‘right’ activities – while being constantly haunted by the hell of the degradation and corruption that seems the only alternative. Trying to get a reservation at the exclusive restaurant Dorsia, for example, Bateman’s hopes are raised when a pause at the other end of the line makes him think the \textit{maître d’} is looking for a cancellation, ‘but then he starts giggling, low at first but it builds to a high-pitched crescendo of laughter which is abruptly cut off when he slams down the receiver’ (\textit{AP}, p. 75). This sense of exclusion from the world he just wants ‘to ... fit ... in’ to (\textit{AP}, p. 237), is contrasted with the world of prostitutes, beggars and homosexuals that terrifies and angers him, and again threatening, mocking laughter is what illustrates this:

A couple of skinny faggots walk by while I’m at a phone booth checking my messages, staring at my reflection in an antique store’s window. One of them whistles at me, the other laughs: a high, fey, horrible sound. A torn playbill from \textit{Les Misérables} tumbles down the cracked, urine-stained sidewalk. (\textit{AP}, p. 128)

At other times Bateman seems disturbed by the falseness and superficiality of the world he is trying so hard to inhabit in a meaningful way, as when Evelyn, his fiancée, ‘laughs, actually says, “Ha-ha-ha ...,” but she’s serious, not joking’ (\textit{AP}, p. 122), and

when Paul Owen ‘keeps guffawing, which I find totally upsetting’ (AP, p. 216).

Bateman’s own laugh, in consequence, is equally unreal, and becomes merely the stereotypical laughter of the lunatic. He claims to ‘laugh maniacally’ while being given a facial, although the beautician, ‘leaning close to the face’ does not seem to hear him (AP, p. 116), and, having just forced a woman to have an abortion, he ‘resist[s] the impulse to start cackling hysterically’ (AP, p. 381). In this, Bateman is like Humbert in the early stages of Lolita, mocked from both above and below, with only a self-created persona – that of a ‘maniac’ – to protect him from chaos. Bateman’s self-image might even be modelled on Humbert’s, as, for example, when he draws a frightened waitress towards him, ‘grinning like an idiot, but a handsome idiot’ (AP, p. 47).49 Because Bateman never learns the value of ‘laugh[ing] unrestrainedly’, however, the epiphany that frees Humbert is denied him.

Ellis does, nevertheless, tease the reader with the possibility of a laughing relationship, as Vonnegut does in Slaughterhouse-5. Potential Transcendent Fools appear in Bateman’s relationships with Tim Price and, to a lesser extent, with his secretary, Jean. Jean has fallen in love with Bateman, something that he recognises and initially mocks, as we see in his reaction to her at work:

She places the file on top of the desk before asking, “Doin’ the crossword?” dropping the g in “doing” – a pathetic gesture of intimacy, an irritating stab at friendliness. I gag inwardly, then nod without looking up at her. (AP, p. 257)

As the novel progresses, however, her genuine affection and concern for him prompts not a return of intimacy, but a series of desperate, self-analytical monologues.

49 Compare this, for example, to Humbert’s description of himself as having ‘a cesspoolful of rotting monsters behind his slow boyish smile’ (Lo, p. 45).
that explore the very reasons for his inability to reciprocate human feeling. Having confessed that she is in love with him, Jean, embarrassed, tells Bateman, ‘I can’t pretend these feelings don’t exist, can I?’, which provokes the following:

... there is an idea of a Patrick Bateman, some kind of abstraction, but there is no real me, only an entity, something illusory, and though I can hide my cold gaze and you can shake my hand and feel flesh gripping yours and maybe you can even sense our lifestyles are probably comparable: \textit{I simply am not there}. [...] My pain is constant and sharp and I do not hope for a better world for anyone. In fact I want my pain to be inflicted on others. I want no one to escape. But even after admitting this – and I have, countless times, in just about every act I’ve committed – and coming face-to-face with these truths, there is no catharsis. I gain no deep knowledge about myself, no new understanding can be extracted from my telling. There has been no reason for me to tell you any of this. This confession has meant \textit{nothing} ... (\textit{AP}, p. 377)

Instead of intimacy, the closest Bateman can achieve is a negative form of affection; he does not kill Jean. Incapable of humour, of the intimacy of shared laughter, he is, I would argue, therefore incapable of love.

In a similar way, Ellis sets up the potential for a revelatory relationship between Bateman and Tim Price, whose ranting opens the novel. Showing Bateman that day’s newspaper, Price complains that

‘In one issue – in one issue – let’s see here ... strangled models, babies thrown from tenement rooftops, kids killed in the subway, a Communist rally, Mafia boss wiped out, Nazis’ – he flips through the pages excitedly – ‘baseball players with AIDS, more Mafia shit, gridlock, the homeless, various maniacs, faggots dropping like flies in the streets, surrogate mothers [...] and the joke is, the punch line is, it’s all in this city – nowhere else, just here, it sucks’. (\textit{AP}, p. 4)

Bateman, able to see all the filth and suffering around him, reacts by inflicting the pain he feels onto others in an attempt to cope with it. Price, although he too is aware of conditions outside their closed and privileged world, responds, not by overt
acts of violence, but by a symbolic descent into hell. Early in the novel he and Bateman are in a nightclub called Tunnel, constructed out of an old subway station with the track and tunnel intact but railed off. Typically, Bateman does not understand the significance of what Price is saying.

‘I’m leaving,’ Price shouts. ‘I’m getting out.’
‘Leaving what?’ I shout back, confused.
‘This,’ he shouts, referring to, I’m not sure but I think, his double Stoli.
‘Don’t,’ I tell him. ‘I’ll drink it.’
‘Listen to me Patrick,’ he screams. ‘I’m leaving.’
‘Where to?’ I really am confused. ‘You want me to find Ricardo?’
‘I’m leaving,’ he screams. ‘I ... am ... leaving!’ (AP, p. 60)

Unable to make Bateman understand, Price gives up and ‘just keeps staring past the railings, trying to find the point where the tracks come to an end, find what lies behind the blackness’ (AP, p. 61). Finding him a bore, Bateman wanders off through the crowd, until an acquaintance draws his attention to something behind him. Turning, he sees

Price perched on the rails, trying to balance himself, and someone has handed him a champagne glass and drunk or wired he holds both arms out and closes his eyes, as if blessing the crowd. Behind him the strobe light continues to flash off and on and off and on and the smoke machine is going like crazy, gray mist billowing up, enveloping him. He’s shouting something but I can’t hear what [...] and during a perfectly timed byte of silence I can hear Price shout, ‘Goodbye!’ and then, the crowd finally paying attention, ‘Fuckheads!’ Gracefully he twists his body around and hops over the railing and leaps onto the tracks and starts running, the champagne flute bobbing as he holds it out to his side. He stumbles once, twice, with the strobe light flashing, in what looks like slow motion, but he regains his composure before disappearing into blackness. (AP, pp. 61-62)

As in the scene with the stove-valve in Catch-22, in which Orr tries to reveal his secret but Yossarian does not understand him, Price here seems desperate for Bateman to grasp the importance of what he is doing, to listen to him. In a world
where communication is impossible and identity confused, this is a crucial attempt, and it is significant that Price calls Bateman by name; these two characters alone in the novel never mistake one another for somebody else. Bateman responds to Price as Yossarian initially does to Orr, and as Sergeant Knight does when he tells the story of Orr in the lifeboat; he laughs at him. When Price says he is leaving, Bateman’s closed world provides him with only two possible destinations, beyond which he is unable to see; “‘Where to?’ I’m still laughing, still confused, still shouting. “Morgan Stanley? Rehab? What?”’ (AP, p. 60). Like Yossarian, though, Bateman perceives something eerie, otherworldly, in what Price is doing, and, while the other clubbers merely stand and applaud, he fights his way through the crowd shouting at him to come back. Bateman’s description of Price, blessing the crowd, surrounded by flashing lights and billowing smoke, is reminiscent of the Hollywood image of an Old Testament prophet. His flock, however, treat him merely as entertainment, laughing and clapping, and so – anointing them ironically with their own chosen holy water, champagne – he abandons them and runs into the darkness.

Also like Orr, Price is barely mentioned again in the novel until its end. Although Bateman thinks he can see ‘a smudge on his forehead’ (AP, p. 384), Price is otherwise unchanged when he reappears, as Bateman puts it ‘for the sake of form’ (AP, p. 383). Here again Ellis teases the reader. Because of the ambiguities present throughout the novel, it is unclear whether Bateman means social or narrative form. Only the latter really makes any sense in the context; Ellis has led the reader to expect the triumphal return of a prophet, so he provides it, only to undercut it immediately afterwards. Price’s absence is never explained. His reappearance, rather than clarifying anything for Bateman (as news of Orr’s escape does for Yossarian), serves
only to confuse matters further. ‘Where have you been?’, Bateman asks when Price
suddenly turns up at his office.

‘Oh, just making the rounds.’ He smiles. ‘But hey, I’m back.’
‘Far out.’ I shrug, confused. ‘How was … it?’
‘It was … surprising.’ He shrugs too. ‘It was … depressing.’ […]
‘Hey, how are you, Bateman?’ he asks.
‘I’m okay,’ I tell him, swallowing. ‘Just … existing.’ […]
‘You’ve been gone, like, forever, Tim. What’s the story?’ I ask, again
noticing the smudge on his forehead, though I get the feeling that if I asked
someone else if it was truly there, he (or she) would just say no.
(AP, p. 384)

Although the repetition of ‘it’ implies that nothing of any consequence will be
revealed by Price’s return, he displays the Mark of Cain that identifies him as a
scapegoat, while the fact that only Bateman can see it suggests that he will take the
role of Protagonist, learning Price’s ‘story’ so that he may tell it to others.

Several pages later, however, in the last passages of the novel, a group of
friends that includes Bateman and Price sits in a bar called Harry’s watching an old
Ronald Reagan speech on the television. Only Price seems disturbed by this, although
it is still unclear whether Bateman understands him or not.

The first and really only one to complain is Price, who, though I think he’s
bothered by something else, uses this opportunity to vent his frustration,
looks inappropriately stunned, asks, ‘How can he lie like that? How can he
pull that shit?’ (AP, p. 396)

Ellis, through Price, suggests a direct link between Bateman’s acts of mayhem
and the consumer culture of 1980s America, personified by Reagan. Price is horrified
that Reagan
'looks so ... normal. He seems so ... out of it. So ... undangerous' [...] 'I just don't get how someone, anyone, can appear that way yet be involved in such total shit,' Price says [...] He takes out a cigar and studies it sadly. (AP, p. 397)

Although the parallel is obvious, Bateman's extreme physical violence mirroring the damage such men as Reagan are perceived to have done to their society, in a move that takes American Psycho out of the realm of traditional satire, the former does nothing to suggest a solution to the latter. Ellis is showing that Bateman and Reagan are interchangeable, and that nothing can be done about either. Not only does the Mark of Cain that Price seems to bear (and which is repeated three times, implying that it should have significance) remain unexplained, the conversation continues,

'How can you be so fucking, I don't know, cool, about it?' Price, to whom something really eerie has obviously happened, sounds genuinely perplexed [...] 'Oh brother.' Price won't let it die. 'Look,' he starts, trying for a rational appraisal of the situation. 'He presents himself as a harmless old codger. But inside ...' He stops. My interest picks up, flickers only briefly. 'But inside ...' Price can't finish the sentence, can't add the last two words he needs: doesn't matter. I'm both disappointed and relieved for him. (AP, p. 397)

The answer, as Freccero argues, is that there is no answer, 'there is no truth beneath appearances'. The conversation continues in the same superficial vein as many throughout the novel, and the revelation that Ellis leads the reader to think Price will provide (and which, in other novels in this thesis, takes the form of shared laughter) is reduced to 'a slight shrug and [a] sigh' and the sign in Harry's that reads 'THIS IS NOT AN EXIT' (AP, p. 399). Bateman remains trapped within the limitations of the secret revealed to Yossarian by Snowden's entrails, his acts of violence showing him nothing more than that 'man [or woman] is matter'. Without
the perspective, the laughter, that Price might have provided, Bateman is given no way out of his endless cycle of meaningless violence. Given that these are also the final words of the novel, we find ourselves, as readers, equally trapped by this nihilistic conclusion. There is no way out of this text, no way to assimilate and so transcend Bateman’s sense of hopelessness.

David Price’s analysis of *American Psycho* is interesting in this context. Applying the theory developed in *The Dialogic Imagination*, Price argues that Ellis’s book illustrates all but one of the constituents of the novel as outlined by Bakhtin (only polyphony is absent): it contains and parodies other forms of discourse; it ‘has maximum contact with the present’; it presents ‘multi-linguaged consciousness’ as opposed to one authorial discourse; it is possible to read the discourses present in the novel as being the utterance of someone other than Ellis himself (Price, p. 323). Using these techniques, Price argues, Ellis builds up a comprehensive and interrelated series of parodies of the dominant discourses of 1980s American culture, using violence to force the reader’s attention to the comparisons he is drawing. Thus, Price concludes, *American Psycho* fits within the traditional pattern of a satirical novel, encouraging confrontation with society’s ills so that they may be improved.

The more interesting aspect of Price’s analysis comes, however, when he moves on to read *American Psycho* in the context of another of Bakhtin’s works, *Rabelais and His World*. Price’s contention is that ‘in *American Psycho* Ellis attempts to destroy the culture he represents’, and he thus sees similarities between Ellis’s use of violence and Bakhtin’s idea of the ‘carnivalesque’, developed from analysis of Rabelais’s *Gargantua and Pantagruel*. As Price points out, ‘the irritation that both Rabelais and Ellis feel with respect to their cultures becomes translated into an outpouring of violence’. but he dismisses the crucial difference between the forms
that this violence takes. Bakhtin's interpretation of the violence in Rabelais concerns
the 'grotesque body', the comic presentation of, and emphasis on, the processes of
copulation, birth and death. This shows the body 'in the act of becoming, in a state of
transformation', which, as Price points out, accounts for the 'carnival laughter' that
Bakhtin identifies (Price, p. 334). Rather in the manner of Laughter of Apocalypse,
this communal, shared laughter, though ambivalent, is therefore at root positive; it
celebrates the possibility for transformation and transcendence while at the same time
attacking the dominant, and corrupt, ideology. The profound difference between this
approach and Ellis's is that the violence in American Psycho is actually a product of
the dominant ideology, not a reaction against it. Although Price notices this, saying
that 'in Rabelais, violence is used to destroy the dominant ideology', while 'in Ellis,
the violence of the dominant ideology is used in a hyperbolic, exaggerated style and it
repels us', he resists drawing the obvious conclusion that 'attempt[ing] to destroy the
culture he represents' is exactly what Ellis is not doing. The very absence of carnival
laughter in American Psycho precludes the possibility of either destruction (with its
implications of rebirth) or improvement.

In effect, Bateman never passes beyond the position of Made Fool. He takes
the role (defined by Martineau in the Introduction to this thesis) of the jester Hans
Miesko, at whose funeral 'the preacher exhorted his congregation to treat such
creatures kindly and use them as looking-glasses for their own weaknesses'
(Welsford, pp. 148-49). Bateman, therefore, merely reflects, with horrifying
distortion, the true conditions of his society. Moreover, he is like the medieval clown
Til Eulenspiegel ('Owlmirror'), whose name clearly refers to his role as a reflecting
medium for society, but whose reputation was formed in the main by his
predisposition for violent and humiliating practical jokes (Welsford, p. 46). If one
takes Bateman’s acts of torture and murder to be an extreme form of practical joke, it is possible to interpret these acts as mirroring, without further comment or judgement, the violence of his society. As a Made rather than a Transcendent Fool, therefore, Bateman (and, through him, Ellis) is offering merely a representation of 1980s America, suggesting thereby that there is no way out of this meaningless cycle of corruption.

*Closing Time*

*Closing Time* (1994), Heller’s long-awaited sequel to *Catch-22*, while, naturally, having much in common with its predecessor, differs from it in several important respects.\(^5^0\) The first of these is its setting. Where the action of *Catch-22* occurs chiefly in the relatively self-contained and separate wartime community on the island of Pianosa, *Closing Time* is set in America, chiefly in New York, in the 1980s. Secondly, *Closing Time* contains elements of the fantastic and the supernatural entirely absent from the first novel. Thirdly, Heller has introduced many references to other works of literature and to music, and has given Yossarian ambitions to be a writer, playing overtly with ideas of the fictional and the real. Finally, and, I shall argue, underpinning these first three, Heller has removed the laughing relationship that, as I show in Chapter One, is so crucial to *Catch-22*. To give clarity to my discussion of these themes, an initial synopsis of the complex plot is necessary.

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\(^5^0\) Despite the mass of *Catch-22* criticism, *Closing Time* has provoked very little critical response, and Heller, up until his death in December 1999, firmly resisted offering his own explanations of the text.
Yossarian, now in his seventies and twice divorced, is living in a luxurious apartment building close to New York’s Port Authority Bus Terminal (PABT), where drug addicts, pan-handlers and prostitutes live in the dark stairwells surrounded by their own filth. He works as a part-time consultant for M&M Enterprises, whose offices are in the old Time-Life building. Albert Tappman, the group chaplain in Catch-22, now living in retirement in Kenosha, Wisconsin, has started to urinate heavy water (deuterium oxide), a main ingredient of nuclear armaments, and is ‘disappeared’ by a shadowy government department to be observed and interrogated in an underground railway system that, apparently, stretches beneath the entire country. Contacted by a distressed Mrs Tappman, Yossarian attempts throughout the novel to find and save the chaplain, while at the same time working with Milo Minderbinder and ex-PFC Wintergreen, who run M&M Enterprises, to sell to the government a stealth bomber that, running on the very power that the chaplain is producing, could destroy the world. Meanwhile, Yossarian is also asked to suggest a suitably fashionable venue for the huge society wedding between Milo’s son, M2, and the daughter of some important multi-millionaires, the Maxons. As a joke, Yossarian suggests the PABT – an idea which is leapt at as being suitably unusual and impressive – and spends a large part of the novel organising this wedding and exploring, for security purposes, a series of strange sub-basements beneath the bus terminal that do not appear on any of the maps. Also lying some levels beneath the PABT is an old Coney Island fairground, Steeplechase, which, still fully functional, has gradually sunk beneath the streets of the city, where it is run as a version of purgatory by its long-deceased proprietor, George C. Tilyou. In contrast to this demonic businessman, whom even Satan calls
Mr. Tilyou is the mysterious private detective, Gaffney, whose apparent omnipresence and omniscience alternately worries and enragés Yossarian, and who may or may not be God.

Alongside this surreal narrative occurs a more straightforward one, told by Sammy Singer, his best friend, Lew Rabinowitz, and Lew’s wife, Claire. Sammy, a Coney Island Jew, was the young tail-gunner who, unnamed, fainted repeatedly as Yossarian tried to save Snowden in Catch-22. He is a widower, also living in an apartment in New York, having been, before his retirement, an advertising-promotion writer in the old Time-Life building now occupied by M&M Enterprises. Lew was as a young infantryman taken prisoner during the battle of the Bulge and kept in an abandoned underground slaughterhouse in Dresden, where he witnessed the firebombing of that city by allied forces. Now a rich and successful scrap metal dealer, he has moved out to the wealthy suburbs of Orange Valley, New York. Lew is dying of Hodgkin’s disease, and visits Sammy in the city when he comes to consult his oncologist. Claire takes up Lew’s story towards the end of the novel, after his death. Much of this narrative concerns the two men’s memories of childhood in Coney Island, their wartime experiences and developing careers, and their thoughts about the onset of old age.

These two narrative strands occur in roughly alternate chapters, and are kept stylistically independent of one another. Thus, an image is built up of two New Yorks— one realistic, one fantastic— occupying the same space and time. By placing the narratives side by side without giving either dominance over the text Heller reminds the reader that the realistic and the fantastic are equally fictional. This strategy.

51 Closing Time (Simon & Schuster, 1994), p. 113. Subsequent references appear in parentheses within the text.
though unusual, provides the reader with no real difficulties, as there are accepted traditions in place for the interpretation of realistic and fantastic texts; one could by this means read *Closing Time* as actually containing two novels, each from a different genre. However, Heller further undermines the reader’s expectations by having the two narratives interrelate at certain points in the novel. Yossarian, for example, meets Sammy, appearing in the Coney Island narrative as a ‘realistic’ friend from Sammy’s war years, while Lew, when he dies, disappears (naturally) from the Coney Island narrative, only to appear in the Yossarian narrative as one of the inhabitants of Tilyou’s subterranean fairground. Moreover, by setting his novel in New York, Heller is able to confuse the reader’s expectations still further by introducing elements of autobiography. Heller, also a Coney Island Jew, and of the same generation as his central characters, appears in his own text as ‘little Joey Heller’, a childhood friend of Sammy’s and Lew’s.\(^5\) As David Craig points out, citing an interview between Heller and Barbara Gelb,

of the many autobiographical details and observations, Heller himself says that they supply a factual dimension to an essentially fictional work. Indeed they do, but they also inextricably connect the novelist and the novel, making him simultaneously an embodied and a hovering presence in the novel.\(^5\)

Although they live in ‘different’ New Yorks, Yossarian and Sammy have much in common. They both live alone, they both have sons called Michael about whom

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\(^5\) While *Catch-22* is, of course, partly based on Heller’s own experiences, it also falls within the American novelistic tradition of setting an allegorical text in a foreign land, thus distancing American readers from it, as, for example, James does with *Daisy Miller* and Poe does with many of his gothic tales.

they worry (Sammy’s, a stepson, commits suicide), and they both worry about
getting old and dying. Between them they echo many of the concerns expressed by
Yossarian alone in *Catch-22*. Sammy, for example, remembering how the war was at
first perfect for him, ‘dangerous and safe, exactly as I’d hoped’ describes how

> Not until I saw a kid my own age, Snowden, bleed and die just a few
yards away from me in the back of a plane did the truth finally dawn that
they were trying to kill *me* too, really trying to kill me. People I did not
know were shooting cannons at me almost every time I went up on a
mission to drop bombs on them, and it was not funny anymore. After that I
wanted to go home. There were other things that weren’t funny either.
(*CT*, pp. 227-28)

These sentiments repeat almost verbatim Yossarian’s feelings early in *Catch-
22*, when, having attempted to argue with Clevinger that everyone is trying to kill
him, he points out that

> strangers he didn’t know shot at him with cannons every time he flew up
into the air to drop bombs on them, and it wasn’t funny at all. And if that
wasn’t funny, there were lots of things that weren’t even funnier.
(*C-22*, pp. 17-18)

Early in *Closing Time* Yossarian has been malingering in the same hospital that,
unknown to him, Lew visits for his chemotherapy. He is trying to escape not warfare
this time, but old age, and notes on leaving that

> outside the hospital it was still going on. Men went mad and were rewarded
with medals. Interior decorators were culture heroes, and fashion designers
were the social superiors of their clientele. (*CT*, p. 49)

This again is an almost direct quotation from *Catch-22*, this time from the
beginning of the chapter from which the above passage is taken. Driven out of the
hospital by an affable Texan whom nobody can stand, Yossarian notices that ‘outside
the hospital the war was still going on. Men went mad and were rewarded with medals’ (C-22, p. 16). Thus Heller draws attention within both narratives to the social allegory he created in Catch-22. Instead of using the bureaucracy of warfare as an analogy to criticise his society, in Closing Time he uses references to his own allegorical novel to criticise that society directly. By doing this from both narrative viewpoints, Heller conflates his narrative voices, leaving the reader with no real idea of who is speaking these words.

This introduction of his own previous work into the novel is a more complex strategy than is normally to be found in a sequel, as Catch-22 is only one of many novels that Closing Time refers to. Again, this occurs in both narratives. Lew, for example, as a prisoner of war, not only meets a man ‘whose name was Vonnegut and who later wrote books’ (CT, p. 278), but also a ‘good soldier Schweik’ (CT, p. 122, from Jaroslav Hasek’s novel of that name). Lew’s status as a ‘realistic’ fictional character is undermined, in different ways, by both these examples. The reader must attempt to rationalise the relationship between a real man (Vonnegut), a realistic character (Lew), and an allegorical character (Schweik).

Yossarian has long had ambitions to write a play and a comic novel. The play would portray Charles Dickens’s dysfunctional domestic arrangements in terms of that author’s most famous example of ‘sentimental good feeling’, A Christmas Carol. His plan for a novel, in a similar vein, is derived from Thomas Mann’s Doctor Faustus, and concerns the legal battle between Mann’s heirs and those of his creation Adrian Leverkühn over the rights to Leverkühn’s opus Apocalypse (CT, p. 162). The
status of this fictional piece of music becomes increasingly confused as Yossarian begins actually to hear it.\footnote{James Nagel, in his analysis of Heller’s ‘Note Cards’, the means by which the author planned \textit{Catch-22}, notes that Heller had originally intended an episode in which Yossarian and Dunbar plan to write a Hemingwayesque war novel about their experiences. The fact that Heller dropped this idea from his first novel, only to return to and elaborate on it in \textit{Closing Time} is further evidence that a major theme of the latter, unlike \textit{Catch-22}, is the status of fiction itself. ‘The \textit{Catch-22} Note Cards’ \textit{Studies in the Novel} 8 (1976), 394-405 (repr. in Nagel 1984, pp. 51-61). See also Nagel’s ‘Two Brief Manuscript Sketches: Heller’s \textit{Catch-22}’, \textit{Modern Fiction Studies}, 20 (1974), 221-24.}

Heller’s use of setting, the relationship between the real and the surreal, and the interrelation of fictional worlds, then, all serve to disorientate the reader. No one reading strategy is sufficient to encompass the events of the novel, and one is left without any accepted means of navigating oneself through the text. The various techniques Heller employs are similar to Ellis’s sustained use of ambiguity, therefore, and both texts overtly confront and question the status of the novel as fiction, and the reader’s relationship with it. Before I go on to analyse how this affects the end of \textit{Closing Time}, which carries this sense of disorientation through to its logical conclusion, I shall first explore how Heller’s use of laughter in the novel underpins these techniques.

As in \textit{American Psycho}, there are many examples in \textit{Closing Time} of mirthless laughter. M2 develops a ‘traumatic aversion’ to, among other things, people who ‘smiled an awful lot, even when nothing humorous was said’ (\textit{CT}, p. 192). The two ‘bullying interrogators’ who question the Chaplain are described, one as having ‘manic eyes that seemed ignited by hilarity’ (emphasis added), the other as a man ‘who smiled and winked a lot with no hint of merriment’ (\textit{CT}, p. 264). Raul, one of the agents who accompany Yossarian in an investigation of the sub-basements beneath the PABT, ‘joked […] but did not laugh’ (\textit{CT}, p. 339).
Also appearing, frequently associated with the strange occupants of the PABT, is an eerie, demonic laughter that haunts much of the Yossarian narrative. In the bus terminal’s police station, for example,

even the prisoners seemed ideally acclimated to the turbulent environment and vigorous procedures. Many were bored, others were amused and contemptuous, some ranted crazily. Several young women were hooting with laughter and shrieking obscenities brazenly in taunting debauchery, baiting and incensing the frustrated guards, who had to endure and cope with them without retaliating. (CT, p. 89)

One recurring image in Closing Time combines the ideas of mirthless and demonic laughter; the advertising hoarding in front of Tilyou’s fairground, which, like the eyes of Dr T.J. Eckleberg in The Great Gatsby, develops increased significance as the novel develops.

Bold on every front of Steeplechase was the unforgettable trademark, a striking, garish picture in cartoon form of the grotesque, pink, flat, grinning face of a subtly idiotic man, practically on fire with a satanic hilarity and showing, incredibly, in one artless plane, a mouth sometimes almost a city block wide and an impossible and startling number of immense teeth. (CT, p. 12)

The Steeplechase Park is established as a microcosm of a society that makes no distinction between participant and audience, between victim and victimiser.

Yossarian (although no other evidence is given to suggest that he comes from New York) thinks about the ride he remembers best; the Human Pool Table.

There, an iron handrail circling the viewing enclosure had been rigged electrically to administer stinging shocks of harmless voltage to unwary patrons whenever one of the red-suited attendants in green jockey caps thought the timing appropriate. That sudden onrush of tiny prickling needles bursting into the hands and arms was intolerable and memorable, and all who observed that half second of fright and panicked embarrassment of others laughed; the victims laughed too, afterward. There was laughter
bursting from loudspeakers as well. Not many blocks away were freak shows featuring people with small heads. (*CT*, p. 99)

This strange juxtaposition of images – laughter at others’ discomfort, laughter of embarrassment, mechanical, unreal laughter, and freak shows – suggests that laughter has lost its power to orientate and guide. Those watching, and laughing at, the discomfort of others as they are thrown willy-nilly about the ‘Human Pool Table’ become themselves discomforted and laughed at, and the reader is similarly disorientated by being asked to assimilate his or her own laughter at these victims with the contemporary resistance to finding freaks funny.

The ambivalence of fairground laughter is echoed in a series of confrontations that Lew has with German soldiers during the war. The sour punch-line of Lew’s recurrent joke – having engaged Germans in conversation in their own language – is to tell them that he is a Jew so that he may watch their reaction (see, for example, *CT*, pp. 43-44, pp. 121-28, p. 278). As Lew remarks bitterly after one of these exchanges, ‘when I saw him fold I wanted to laugh out loud, although I didn’t find it funny’ (*CT*, p. 124).

Crucially, Yossarian seems affected by this general loss of meaningful laughter. Early in the novel, when Yossarian is released from hospital and goes home with friend and ex-lover, Frances Beach, she notices a change in him and remarks, ‘You sound so bitter these days. You used to be funnier’ (*CT*, p. 52).

Yossarian seems to have become completely absorbed by Catch-22, now represented by M&M Enterprises, and the bitterness that Frances notices reflects his knowledge of this. This vast multinational, which eventually controls even the government, is now jointly run by Milo Minderbinder, the mess officer in *Catch-22* who began the company as a means of providing food for the squadron, and ex-PFC
Wintergreen, who, as a mailroom clerk, had enormous power during the war, since he simply destroyed those messages he did not like. Between them, these two characters personified the principles of Catch-22 in the earlier novel – Milo’s syndicate representing the impersonal and unstoppable power of capitalism for which Catch-22 is an analogy, Wintergreen representing its arbitrary power over language. Yossarian, therefore, seems to be in the same position as at the start of *Catch-22*, but in *Closing Time*, although he occasionally feels uncomfortable about his situation, he no longer rebels and is therefore unable to take the role of Protagonist. When Milo and Wintergreen beat Yossarian in a logically illogical exchange typical of the way Catch-22 functions, for example, he is ‘enraged with himself for being bested in argument. It never used to happen that way’ (*CT*, p. 320). M&M Enterprises, therefore, seems, by its association with Catch-22, to act as an Institution.

Similarly, the demonic laughter that recurs throughout *Closing Time* seems to suggest the presence of an Apocalyptic Fool. Heller uses echoes from other texts to reinforce this idea. While he overtly refers to the work of Dante, Mann and Wagner in his novel, the influence of Hermann Hesse’s *Steppenwolf* (1927) is also evident. Harry Haller, the wolf of the title, is a scholar and writer who is constantly plagued by ‘the laughter of the immortals’, most often expressed by his long-dead heroes Goethe and Mozart.\(^{55}\) Harry enters a nightmare, visionary world, the whole purpose of which, as the demonic Pablo tells him, is ‘to teach [him] to laugh’, principally at himself (*Steppenwolf*, p. 206). His sin has been, he is told, in taking both himself and Art too seriously. Consequently, he is shown a mirror in which his hidden self – the evil Steppenwolf – is revealed to him, and which he can destroy by laughing at it.

(Steppenwolf, p. 207). Although he finds this liberating, Harry is unable to summon an equivalent attitude when asked to confront the grotesque face of the music he holds so dear. Mozart plays him, to his ‘indescribable astonishment and horror’, a piece of Handel corrupted by a ‘mixture of bronchial slime and chewed rubber’, and Harry cries to the giggling composer,

what are you doing Mozart? Do you really mean to inflict this mess on me and yourself, this triumph of our day, the last victorious weapon in the war of extermination against art? (Steppenwolf, p. 246)

Yossarian encounters similar confrontations in Closing Time. Investigating the sub-basements to the PABT, he eventually enters Tilyou’s fairground, where he finds himself in a hall of mirrors, facing distorted images of himself.

He perceived that he was close to laughing, and the novelty of that surprise tickled him more. In no two mirrors were the deformities alike, in no one lens were the anomalies consistent. His authentic appearance, his objective structure, was no longer absolute. He had to wonder what he truly looked like. (CT, p. 342)

Having apparently accepted the fact that his self, his image, is relative and ambiguous, Yossarian then finds that Steeplechase is peopled by authors whose art has destroyed them. Ernest Hemingway and William Faulkner sit in ‘a packed area populated by heavy drinkers’, Henry James, Joseph Conrad and Charles Dickens are in ‘the area of those with late-life personality disorders embodying depression and nervous breakdowns’, while Jerzy Kosinski, Virginia Woolf, Arthur Koestler and Sylvia Plath inhabit ‘the populous zone of the suicides’ (CT, p. 344). The implication seems to be that Steeplechase stands for Dante’s Inferno, the various authors being punished in different ways for their sin of attempting to reveal truths through
fiction. Like Haller, Yossarian is unable to accept the implied corruption of art (or its necessary destruction of the artist) and responds ‘inwardly with a “Fuck You!”’ (CT, p. 344).

This vision of hell as a challenge to Yossarian’s desire to be a writer – which evokes the Apocalyptic Fool’s strategy of mocking the innermost feelings of its victims – is, however, undermined by the fact that hell is not presented in Closing Time as a stable entity. Instead, references to it appear throughout the text in a variety of conflicting guises. It is the PABT, for example, that is overtly identified with Dante’s Inferno. Going down in one of its lifts, Yossarian and his son discuss the similarity:

‘Except,’ amended Michael, as they descended, ‘the PABT building is out in the open. Like something normal.’
‘That makes it worse, doesn’t it?’ said Yossarian.
‘Than hell?’ Michael shook his head.[…] ‘We get used to this one,’ said Michael.
‘Doesn’t that make it worse?’ Do you think in hell they don’t get used to it?’ Yossarian added with a laugh. ‘In Dante they answer questions, pause in their tortures to tell long stories about themselves. Nothing God did ever came out right, did it? Not hell. Not even evolution.’ (CT, pp. 232-33)

A coherent concept of hell is undermined in the novel, not only by Yossarian’s observation, but by the confusion about what and where it is. Not only do the bus terminal and the fairground both function as hell, one above ground and one beneath, Tilyou’s park is itself surrounded by the fields of pitch and wild animals that appear in Dante’s original work, indicating a third possible site. Also, the levels beneath the PABT – which comprise a system of metal tunnels, staircases and lifts – are described

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56 There are also obvious associations between these passages and the scenes in which Ambrose considers the role of the author in the title story of Barth’s Lost in the Funhouse (New York: Doubleday, 1968).
in terms that evoke the depiction of the demonic policemen’s underground realm in Flann O’Brian’s *The Third Policeman*\(^{57}\). This allusion reinforces the sense of ambiguity that these conflicting images create. In O’Brien’s novel, the mechanical underworld is both heaven and hell. While it can provide anything that one wants, nothing can be taken back up to the surface, so one is either trapped underground with one’s desires, or free above without them. This ambiguity, moreover, undermines the idea of M&M Enterprises as a stable Institution, since eventually all the key spaces in the novel seem to merge into one another. Instead of the essential dialectic opposition of system and anti-system, therefore, the Time-Life building and the PABT, Steeplechase and the government’s railway system, form an Escheristic image of undelimited interrelation.

As in *Slaughterhouse*-5, the issue of mortality is also treated in this ambiguous fashion. Immediately after his discussion with Michael, Yossarian’s attention is drawn to ‘a red-headed man with a walking stick and a loose green rucksack’ whom he thinks he recognises from a ‘famous Mann novella’:

> the mysterious red-haired man whose presence and swift disappearance had been unsettling to Gustav Aschenbach – one glimpse and he was out of sight, gone from the story. This man flaunted a fuming cigarette recklessly, as though equally contemptuous of him and cancer. And while Yossarian stared back at him in defiant and indignant scrutiny, the man grinned brazenly, and Yossarian suffered an inner shudder. (*CT*, p. 235)

Of course, in *Death in Venice* (1897), the novella referred to, this figure does not simply appear once and disappear – he continues to haunt Aschenbach, in different but recognisable guises, throughout the book and prefigures his death. In Mann’s novella, while the character thus described has the imperious air and

\(^{57}\) *The Third Policeman* ([n.p.]: MacGibbon & Kee, 1967).
aggressive stare that so unnerves Yossarian, what Yossarian interprets as a brazen grin is described by Mann in the following manner:

whether it was because he was dazzled into a grimace by the setting sun or by reason of some permanent facial deformity, the fact was that his lips seemed to be too short and were completely retracted from his teeth, so that the latter showed white and long between them, bared to the gums.\textsuperscript{58}

This image calls to mind (as, no doubt, Mann intended) the skull more than the grin, although the two become inextricably linked in Heller’s description, especially since it is ‘a chorus of chittering laughter behind him’, that attracts Yossarian’s attention to the man. This chorus of disembodied giggling is again invoked by Heller in the form of the other Mann novel that haunts Yossarian, \textit{Dr Faustus} (1947). Lying in a motel bedroom listening to Wagner on the radio, Yossarian realises that a local electrical storm is interfering with the transmission.

\begin{quote}
As that chorus of anvils diminished into static, he heard faintly in the static an illogical musical pandemonium of primitive wild laughter ascend through the scales in tune and in key and then, nebulously, beneath a hissing layer of electrical interference, a very different, lonely, lovely, angelic wail of a children’s chorus in striking polyphonic lament he believed he recognised and could not place. He remembered the novel by Thomas Mann about which he had once thought of writing and wondered in his fuzziness if he was losing his bearings and dreaming he was listening to the Leverkuhn \textit{Apocalypse} of which he had read. (\textit{CT}, p. 309)
\end{quote}

When the narrator of \textit{Dr Faustus} describes ‘that pandemonium of laughter [...] the mocking, exulting laughter of the Pit’ that he hates and fears, noting that it is followed in \textit{Apocalypse} by a chorus of children – ‘a piece of cosmic music of the spheres, icily clear, glassily transparent’ – he goes on to make a crucial observation;

that ‘this piece, which has won, touched, and ravished even the reluctant, is in its musical essence, for him who has ears to hear and eyes to see, the devil’s laughter all over again’. 59 That this confusion between cosmos and chaos, between heaven and hell, is an important theme in Closing Time, is prefigured by the combination of images in the ‘chorus of chittering laughter’ that draws Yossarian’s attention, essentially, to death. Rather than simply disappearing, as he does in Death in Venice, the man with the skullish grin that confronts Yossarian is obscured by a long pearl-white limousine with smoked windows [...] longer than a hearse, with a swarthy driver. When the limousine drove forward again, he saw wide streaks of red on the ground disfigured by tire treads, like blood dripping from the wheels, and the man with red hair and green rucksack was gone. (CT, p. 235)

This image provides another echo between the Yossarian and Coney Island narratives. Lew, refusing to travel by ambulance, is in the habit of travelling to hospital for his treatment ‘in a pearl-gray stretch limousine with black windows that allowed us to see out but nobody to see in, with me stretched out in back in a space big enough to hold a coffin, maybe two’ (CT, p. 149). However, as is mentioned above, Lew’s death is not portrayed as a final event, since he reappears later in the novel, enjoying the rides at Tilyou’s amusement park just as he did as a child.

Heller, then, describes a world in which system and anti-system are indistinguishable, and, as in Slaughterhouse-5, in Closing Time no revelation is provided to enable Yossarian to escape. When Yossarian meets Sammy, they discuss people they knew on Pianosa, and both admit that Snowden has become a major influence on their lives. Orr, on the other hand, is mentioned only briefly:

‘I remember them all. Remember Orr? He was in my tent.’
‘I remember Orr. They say he made it to Sweden in a raft after he ditched after Avignon, right before we went home.’
‘I went down to Kentucky once and saw him there,’ said Yossarian. ‘He was a handyman in a supermarket, and we didn’t have much to say to each other anymore.’ (CT, p. 353)

As Yossarian predicted in *Catch-22*, after the war Orr is engulfed by the everyday world, and his ‘thousand valuable skills [will] keep him in a low income group all his life’ (C-22, p. 321). Sammy, it transpires, was in the lifeboat with Sergeant Knight when Orr sprinkled shark repellent in the sea and made tea for them all, and it is this (Orr’s role as Made Fool) that the two men remember, rather than the significance of his rowing to Sweden. Yossarian is no longer a Protagonist – the system he now inhabits is too amorphous to resist coherently – and he and Orr do not ‘have much to say to each other anymore’.

Instead, Heller provides Yossarian with Gaffney, whose status is never clear and whose power is undermined, rather than confirmed, at the end of the novel. Gaffney seems to have the potential to be a Transcendent Fool, as his constant laughter and supernatural knowledge indicate. Unlike Orr, however, he remains a shadowy character, and his jokes are never explained, as in the following exchange, before which Gaffney tells Yossarian that the latter’s planned flight will be delayed because of ‘unpredictable blizzards in Iowa and Kansas’:

‘You predict them already?’
‘I hear things and see things, John. It’s how I earn my living. May I try out my joke now?’
‘I’ll bet you do. And you have been listening, haven’t you? Maybe watching too.’
‘Listening to what?’
‘You think I’m simpleminded, Gaffney? Would you like to hear my joke? Jerry, go fuck yourself.’
‘That’s not a bad one, Yo-Yo,’ said Gaffney, sociably. ‘although I’ve heard it before.’ (CT, p. 294)
Yossarian suspects that the private detective is really God, although Gaffney deflects questions about his identity by making another of his ambiguous and misleading jokes:

‘You seem to know all that’s happening on the face of the earth. You know enough to be God.’
‘There’s more money in real estate,’ answered Gaffney. ‘That’s how I know we have no God. He’d be active in real estate too. That’s not a bad one is it?”
‘I’ve heard worse.’
‘I have one that may be better. I also know much that goes on under the earth.’ (CT, p. 316)

The joke ‘that may be better’, it is implied, is Gaffney’s knowledge about Tilyou’s fairground and the government’s underground railway system, both of which he visits regularly, although the extent of his knowledge is never revealed. Although Yossarian thinks that Gaffney may be God, the fact that he is a private detective might be taken as another reference to The Third Policeman. As ambiguous a figure as O’Brien’s demonic policemen, it seems just as possible that Gaffney is a devil.

Moreover, it becomes clear that Gaffney is not, in fact, omnipotent when he loses control of a computer simulation of the Minderbinder-Maxon wedding. Yossarian watches this simulation in one of the PABT’s offices, and finds it so convincing that he becomes confused about whether or not he is witnessing a real event. There is, however, a ‘glitch’ in the program, which keeps turning the sun black at the end of the wedding. This glitch takes the form of the Apocalypse as described by St John, as Yossarian notices that ‘on the central screens, the sun indeed was black in a sky that was blue, the moon had turned red again, and all of the ships in the harbour […] were again upside down’ (CT, pp. 433-34). Just as Yossarian and Gaffney are discussing this fault, the President accidentally presses the button that
launches M&M's secret stealth bomber, which automatically sets off a nation-wide four-minute warning and heralds an equally apocalyptic third world war.

The end of the world in some form, therefore, seems certain at the end of the novel. However, not only is the biblical apocalypse the product of a simulation which has been watched many times without any ill-effects (as the repetition of 'again' in the quotation above indicates), it is not entirely clear whether or not the President is playing his favourite video game, 'Triage', which is designed to simulate all-out war for training purposes. Just as Heller creates confusion about the status of such figures as God and Satan, and of such places as heaven and hell, he also denies the reader a clear sense of what, exactly, is happening in the closing pages of the novel. Not only is the 'reality' of the apocalypse uncertain, the stealth-bomber, which has been guaranteed by its designers not to work, is piloted by Kid Sampson and McWatt, two pilots killed long before on Pianosa. Again the text's ambiguous representation of mortality is clear. While it seems possible that everybody may shortly be killed, since previous characters have suffered death without any apparent ill-effects this possibility becomes meaningless. Invited to comment on the ending of the novel, Heller responded,

Either the world is ending or it's not. Yossarian doesn’t know what he’ll find when he goes outside, and I don’t know either. Whether the end is taking place right there on that page, or whether it will take place in a week or two when the missiles come back, or whether it will take place in a billion years when the sun explodes, it’s going to take place. [...] I deliberately included contradictions between what Sammy and Yossarian see and think. I don’t know the answer [...] I have no idea, and I don’t want the reader to have any idea.60

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Thus, the failure of laughter to orientate and guide, exemplified by the absence of a laughing relationship between Yossarian and Gaffney, reflects the way that Heller has consciously undermined the reader’s expectations as to character and plot, and even the expectation that a novel should have an ending.

David Craig argues that

the omniscient narrator [of the Yossarian narrative] provides a satiric vision of the America in which Yossarian, Sammy, Lew, and Claire live. He sees society as having become the military-industrial complex that President Eisenhower forecast and seeks to expose from the inside out the life-denying logic of capitalism that is responsible for this transformation. (Craig, p. 230)

However, by also arguing ‘that everything is connected: the Time-Life Building and the Port Authority sub-basements; the Pentagon (Heller’s MASSPOB) and Kenosha, Wisconsin; the Coney Island on which Lew, Sammy, and Heller grew up and its infernoesque re-creation’, Craig in fact gives evidence that what this narrator is saying is that in such conditions of complete relativity, no one thing can be said to satirise any other (Craig, p. 231). As in American Psycho, the constant confusion about what is real and the converging images of system and anti-system show that using one set of behaviour to criticise another is not possible in the world that Heller describes. Like the echo in Forster’s A Passage to India, all attempts at action are reduced to a meaningless ‘boum’.

Conclusion

It seems, then, that these three novels provide examples of a treatment of laughter that is significantly different from the Laughter of Revelation and the Laughter of Apocalypse that are analysed in Chapters One and Two of this thesis. Where the revelatory and apocalyptic models posit a reality outside the closed system of an
Institution, from which it is possible to learn and develop, the failure of the laughing relationship in *Slaughterhouse-5*, *American Psycho*, and *Closing Time* seems to argue that no such reality exists – or, at least, is accessible – with the result that the potential Protagonist in each novel remains trapped within a state of endless futility. Where the dialectical relationship between system and anti-system allows for constructive synthesis, the absence of either a coherent Institution or a coherent Fool in these novels creates a shifting and ambiguous world in which progress is impossible.

Laughter of Revelation and Laughter of Apocalypse site and orientate one in the universe, facilitating both a sense of one’s identity and a relationship with another. Such laughter acknowledges that pain is inevitable given one’s necessarily paradoxical position as both dependent on and independent of things external to oneself. Laughter of Entropy, by contrast, has been shown to express either the inability to assimilate difficult experiences or a reliance on superficiality that implies detachment from them. Billy Pilgrim, for example, abandons all attempts at a laughter that expresses the acceptance of the fact of mortality, while Bateman’s adoption of the stereotypical laugh of the maniac, ironically, denies the genuine contact with others that his acts of violence try to achieve. Yossarian – whose laughter at the end of *Catch-22* expresses the existential assertion that it is possible to live with the knowledge that death and pain are inevitable – has become ‘bitter’ (*CT*, p. 52) in *Closing Time*. With no Fool-figure to give him a sense of perspective in a world of ‘paralyzing relativity’ (*Numasawa*, p. 52), Yossarian, too, has lost the facility for authentic laughter.

The confusion between reality and unreality, and between life and death, that Laing describes as symptomatic of ontological instability appears in these entropic
texts as a clear statement of the human condition as a whole. Burton Feldman, using the phrase 'Black Humor' to indicate the laughter I have defined as entropic, criticises this attitude, saying that it involves a level of detachment that undermines its intended effect:

The stage groans with the wreckage of bewildered innocents and sinister megalomaniacs, cannibals, and intellectual rapists. But the Black Humor manner short-circuits any strong response to this. The novels stay coolly 'humorous', murderously farcical, coldly zany, cosmically slapsticky. 61

What Feldman seems to be arguing is that such a degree of detachment from one's subject matter may protect one from its painful implications, but it also isolates the author from the reader. What results, he continues, 'is an enigma. Instead of much blackness of humor, there is a nightmarish neutrality and grotesque deadpan, and elaborate novelistic impasse to feeling and judgement' (Feldman, p. 102).

Feldman argues that this neutrality is the result of a loss of philosophical courage by the authors of such work. Where, he says, Black Humour (Laughter of Entropy) attempts to be 'pitiless', and 'utterly remorseless', it is actually 'disappointingly mild, even harmlessly "literary"'. For this he blames the extremes of the modern world, and authors who are not prepared to go far enough to encompass them. He argues that the phenomenon I have called Laughter of Entropy 'seems to be wrestling with something subtler, more insidiously shapeless [than 'unmistakable horrors' such as Auschwitz] – American culture in all its permissive restrictions and glossy emptiness'. Comparing modern authors to Melville and Sinyavsky, Feldman argues that these

days no-one is prepared to risk obscurity or jail to make their point (Feldman, pp. 102-03).

As its reliance on parody shows, Black Humor [Laughter of Entropy] does not unmask the illness hidden under our bland surface; it merely mimics the violence in front of the scene. Melville’s ferocity could convey awesome energy because it was an active force. But Black Humor’s violence, though tiresomely inflated, is passive. It is violence, stylized, theatricalized, overblown – but static. (Feldman, p. 103)

He suggests, therefore, that a better term for the genre would be ‘Affluent Terrorism’, in that it risks nothing; ‘it wishes to reform but also to indulge us; to scourge us and yet to leave us comfortably what we were, neutralized’ (Feldman, p. 104).

Taking a similar position, Michael Morrison predicts that the current fashion for fiction about serial killers will be short-lived because of the limitations of addressing the reader’s fears by ‘realistic’ means.

Non-supernatural creatures lack attributes that enlarge and empower narratives about supernatural beings: their potential for ambiguity, their metaphorical resonance, and their access to a reader’s sense of the numinous and transcendent. The serial killer tends to slash his way through the surface of narrative – vivifying in text rather than subtext the fears of the culture. 62

Gerald Nicosia argues that contemporary authors, rather than dedicating themselves to an artistic principle, have become limited by the necessity to achieve commercial success. Quoting George Steiner, he says that ‘American artists have abdicated their traditional high-cultural role, “the commitment of one’s life to a

gambles on transcendence,” in favour of “the pursuit of happiness” in the form of making money’.  

Carla Freccero, by contrast, argues that the entropic view evident in these texts derives from the authors’ commitment to the idea that it has become impossible to write about anything but the mechanics of writing. As she puts it in her analysis of American Psycho, “art for art’s sake” can be seen precisely to resemble the nonproductivity of obscenity’ (Freccero, pp. 44-45). Thus an anti-realist position can result, not in the production of novels designed simply to be commercially successful (as Nicosia suggests), but in a literature whose form is as culturally taboo as much of its content.

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CONCLUSION

At the start of this thesis I argued that two fundamentally opposed world views are evident in post-war American Literature. The first I have called realist in that it assumes a real world independent of human perception, contact with which can be both meaningful and necessary to human development. The second, anti-realist, position, by contrast, holds that experienced reality is an arbitrary construct, and that the idea of a relationship with anything beyond individual thought is therefore meaningless.

I have illustrated these philosophical stances by the application of the terms ‘revelation’ and ‘apocalypse’ to reflect the realist position, and ‘entropy’ to reflect the anti-realist. The words revelation and apocalypse, I have shown, are commonly employed in literature to indicate the positive and negative aspects of a continuous cycle of creation and destruction, the processes or truths of which can be revealed to an individual. The concept of entropy, by contrast, assumes a state from which neither creation nor destruction is possible. In literature, this view is most commonly apparent in the representation of human endeavour as entirely relative – no one action having more significance than any other – with the result that life is seen as ultimately purposeless.

Further, I proposed that the shift between these two stances can be identified by analysing different texts’ treatments of the relationship between laughter and madness. In the Introduction to this thesis I outlined theoretical approaches in which laughter emerges as a key element in the creation, stability and defence of social groups. It also, however, enables the individual to maintain a flexibility of response (both conceptually and emotionally) that is vital to survival. I have argued, therefore,
that laughter fundamentally serves an orientating function, facilitating a sense of one’s place both in society and in the wider world, while at the same time encouraging the constant testing of boundaries and limitations. The social nature of laughter is essential to this, as it is through shared laughter (a ‘laughing relationship’) that new opportunities and possibilities can be revealed to an individual.

Initially taking the realist position, I defined madness as represented in the literature at hand as an inability to recognise or accept the continuous cycle that maintains balance between system and anti-system, between order and chaos. For both individual and society, this inability results in stagnation, since system alone creates so rigid a structure that no further development is possible, while anti-system alone is too disordered to be called purposeful. Thus, in the realist model, the concept of an independently existing reality is crucial to sanity, since it enables the transcendence of the self, or of the conventions of society, that is the means by which such balance may be maintained. This model also relies on the idea of a coherent and continuous self that is able to recognise such imbalances to the extent that it strives to confront and rectify them.

I then considered three instantiations of this definition of madness. The Institution is a social organisation that is mad in the sense of being so bounded by ritual and rule-systems that it has reached the point of stasis. It is a closed system, the only purpose of which is self-perpetuation, and it therefore resists the introduction of any new element that might produce change or development. Instead, innovation is interpreted simply as deviancy, which the Institution must punish or fight in order to maintain the status quo. In contrast to this manifestation of system, the Fool expresses the madness of anti-system. Free of the limitations that define the Institution, the Fool represents creativity in that he or she personifies the newness
that is crucial to growth, but also represents destruction and chaos. The third instantiation of madness occurs when a member of the Institution becomes aware of its constraints, but is unable to find another model by which to live. These misfit characters, perceived as mad by the Institution, are flexible enough to understand the potential of the Fool, while at the same time remaining structured enough to learn from, and communicate, the Fool's example. While the Institution and the Fool in literature, therefore, embody the theoretical extremes of order on the one hand and chaos on the other, it is this third type of character who personifies the idea of the self that seeks to synthesise the two. Acting as Protagonists, such characters mediate between system and anti-system and represent the continuation of the overall cycle. Creativity, in the sense of communicable and useful innovation, therefore derives from the relationship between the Fool and the Protagonist, typically expressed through shared laughter.

I have identified two types of laughing relationship: Laughter of Revelation and Laughter of Apocalypse. Laughter of Revelation is explored in Chapter One by analysis of three novels in which a Protagonist, trapped in the closed system of an Institution, is given a sudden insight into an alternative mode of existence by the laughter of a Fool. The Fool transcends the restrictions of the Institution and thus exists independently of it, and, by example, enables the Protagonist to do so. Crucially, it is the laughter of the Fool, and the understanding of it by the Protagonist, that communicates this possibility. In this way, revelation has been described as analogous to 'getting the joke'.

All three of the novels considered in Chapter One use different techniques to explore the possibility of communicating transcendence in literature. Heller shows that language can function as a closed system, overtly presenting this apparent
obstacle to the portrayal of transcendence as the logical conundrum of Catch-22. However, the actions of the Fool Orr, whose laughter expresses an independence from the Institution, shows Yossarian, and therefore reveals to the reader, that escape from such closed systems is, after all, possible. What Heller achieves is the communication of the idea of transcendence without being bound by the systems of language. Because Orr’s escape occurs ‘off-stage’ and Yossarian’s is implied rather than shown, Heller is able to argue, by sleight of hand as it were, that even when restricted by the self-referential limitations of language, genuine communication with a world outside such limitations is possible. Kesey, similarly, uses fantasy to communicate ideas and impressions that ‘mere truth’ cannot. By sifting Bromden’s words and trying to understand his delusional world, the reader is able to see through the narrative to the story that Kesey is telling. Kerouac, on the other hand, attempts to portray transcendence by changing the accepted syntactical forms of language itself in an effort to make it more open and flexible. Each of these approaches, I would argue, only succeeds insofar as it is contextualised by the laughing relationship between a Fool and a Protagonist that mediates between these opposing forces of order and incoherence.

In the novels analysed in Chapter Two, the Fool typically appears as a monster or demon, a force of destruction. What the Protagonist learns from this type of Fool is not how to escape the Institution, but how to take responsibility for those things that exist within all of us but are conventionally repressed. Thus the Apocalyptic Fool teaches us, through mockery, to remain balanced by accepting our selves, with both their positive and negative aspects, in their entirety.

Again, the texts analysed in Chapter Two illustrate different methods of communicating the idea of transcendence. Both Blatty and King personify the
irrational as demons, enabling a confrontation with chaos through which the
Protagonists can reassert a sense of self and of community. The identification of the
Fool as supernatural is crucial to these accounts, since they must exist outside normal
laws adequately to embody the idea of anti-system. This poses the problem of
coherent communication between Fool and Protagonist, which both authors solve by
means of the ambivalence of laughter. The Fool's mockery of its victims is reflected
in the Protagonists' laughter that recasts the demonic Fool as merely ridiculous and
so defeats it. In Morrison's novel Sula's difference is such that, even though she may
have things to teach the community, communication with or understanding of her
seems impossible. Morrison also takes advantage of ambivalence, showing how
Sula's transcendent laughter can be contextualised by its transposition into the tears
that Nel sheds for her lost friend. In *Lolita* Nabokov presents an Apocalyptic
laughing relationship from a number of points of view. By offering different
perspectives within the text – from which Lolita, Humbert and Nabokov himself may
appear to act as Fool – he forces the reader to make their own interpretation. While
some critics have argued that this technique suggests that the novel is self-referential,
with no connection to reality, others have argued that Nabokov – particularly in his
employment of parody to reaffirm the validity of clichéd modes of discourse – argues
for a sense of transcendence for which the reader must take responsibility.

In Chapter Three I suggested an anti-realist position that explores how an
entropic world view affects laughing relationships in literature. A second definition of
madness proved necessary to this analysis, since the idea of madness as loss of
balance relies on confidence in a coherent external reality. Instead, what emerges in
entropic literature is an image of madness as the loss of an integrated sense of self, a
loss described by Laing as ontological instability, that results in the feeling that
everything, including the concept of a coherent personality, is an illusion. This in turn
leads to the belief that – with no one thing having any more intrinsic existence or
importance than any other – experience is inherently disordered and arbitrary.
Entropy assumes a state which is both static (in that it cannot undergo any further
change) and disordered (in that complex structures cannot exist). When applied to
human endeavour, the implication of this is that the distinctions between entities
collapse and the dialectic that produces creative synthesis disappears, with the result
that nothing new is possible.

Laughter of Revelation and Laughter of Apocalypse occur in novels that
contain opposing influences. As I suggest in the overview to this thesis, using
Ketterer’s analysis of the term ‘apocalypse’, the idea of the opposing forces of system
and anti-system ‘allows for a dialectic, conflict, or tension of oppositions’, which,
Ketterer argues, is the ‘stuff of literature’. Without the contrast that the Institution
and the Fool provide this dialectic is not possible, and the mediating role of the
Protagonist collapses. Neither Billy Pilgrim nor Patrick Bateman communicates
anything to the reader beyond the futility of human existence, while the conflicting
narrative voices in Closing Time produce a contradictory and ambiguous account
from which it is impossible to derive the sense that an argument has been concluded.

There appears to be a similarity between, for example, the Combine or the
community of the Bottom on the one hand and the states that obtain in the texts
analysed in Chapter Three on the other. Characters such as Billy or Bateman appear
trapped within systems in much the same way that the Protagonists are in the early
stages of the texts analysed in Chapters One and Two. One might conclude from this
that the despair evident in entropic texts derives from the conviction that, with reality
perceived as an arbitrary construct, one is forced to exist solely within the
‘institutionalised’ limitations of one’s own perceptions. Alternatively, it may be
suggested that, with no coherent integration of the self, existence is analogous to the
attempts of the Apocalyptic Fool to divide and isolate. The constant threat of
annihilation experienced by the ontologically unstable person results as much from a
feeling of inner emptiness – equivalent to the feelings of worthlessness that the
Apocalyptic Fool exposes – as it does from the fear that the recognition of others, or
of an external reality, will engulf or destroy one. It may seem, then, that the absence
of a coherent laughing relationship in entropic texts is due to the fact that they
describe a world in which only system, or only anti-system, obtains, unrelieved by the
presence of its balancing opposite. It would therefore seem a simple matter to
interpret such texts as describing a world gone mad according to the realist definition
I suggest, and those novels analysed in Chapter Three would then fit into a long
tradition of works that suggest this (as, for example, in the claim of medieval satirists
that *numerus stultorum est infinitus*).

There is a crucial difference, however, between the realist and anti-realist
definitions of madness that is revealed when one tries to identify either an Institution
or a Fool in the final three texts analysed in this thesis. Where, as I suggest in the
Introduction, solipsism may be seen to be equivalent to the madness of system, and
nihilism to the madness of anti-system, entropic texts embody both. If it is asserted
that what is called the self is actually a precariously maintained void, then this
assertion seems nihilistic. If it is claimed that an individual has no recourse to
anything other than subjective interpretation of his or her own perceptions, this
position seems solipsistic. However, when the two are combined in the proposal that
this solipsistic self consists of nothing but the attempt to maintain a vacuum, the
result is an unresolvable vacillation between being and non-being. In the novel that presents this as an image of madness there is simply no place for the concepts of system and anti-system. While it is possible to conceive of a text that as a whole reflects the idea of the world gone mad in a realist sense, the balancing opposite being highlighted by its absence, in entropic texts the terms system and anti-system cease to have meaning.

Since I have argued that the sharing of laughter – by enabling orientation between system and anti-system and the assertion of a newly balanced self – is the means by which sanity can be regained, this second definition of madness has profound implications for the place of laughter in the text. Laughter, I have suggested, serves a twofold purpose; it both binds a community together and liberates the individual from the constraints of that community. It acknowledges a relationship with others while asserting a sense of self. As such, laughter is a phenomenon that relies on ambivalence, since it involves the recognition and assimilation of two apparently contradictory ideas. There is a crucial difference between this function of laughter and the Laughter of Entropy, a difference that relies on the distinction between ambivalence and ambiguity. Ambivalence involves two clearly defined but contradictory propositions held simultaneously. Ambiguity, by contrast, entails a loss of clarity, a wavering or vacillation between potential interpretations. This can be seen when the treatment of laughter in the novels discussed in Chapters One and Two is contrasted with that of those discussed in Chapter Three. Faced with the opposing forces of system and anti-system, and recognising that both are necessary for a sane existence, characters such as Yossarian laugh to express their acceptance of this paradox and their ability to act in spite of it. In an entropic state in which order and disorder merge, however, laughter fails, as we
see in the many examples of abortive or false laughter that occur in *Slaughterhouse-5, American Psycho* and *Closing Time*.

I have suggested that the processes involved in laughter are analogous to the process of revelation in the idea of ‘getting the joke’. It seems possible to argue, from an anti-realist position, that by simply rearranging old ideas one gains nothing but the illusion of newness, or at best a clearer picture of the limits and structure of human thought. Many of the authors whose work is analysed in this thesis seem to suggest, however, that the presentation of existing ideas in a new relation to one another or from a different perspective produces synthesis – the creation of a new idea; that a perspective beyond the boundaries of any given system is both possible and necessary.

Throughout this thesis several models of the Artist have been indicated. In the first of these, the role of the Artist in society emerges as equivalent, or at least analogous, to the role of the Transcendent Fool. By virtue of his or her special perceptive powers, the Artist is not expected to conform to everyday convention and is instead a shamanic figure, existing at once in the material and the spiritual worlds and guiding society towards a greater understanding of fundamental truths. Another account suggests that Artists have more in common with the Made Fool, given license to deviate from norms of propriety in order that they may expose social ills and so help to maintain the long-term equilibrium of a community. Often, however, the Fool exists as an embodiment of the abstract notion of anti-system, set against the instantiation of system in the Institution, and it is the Protagonist, mediating between the two and communicating this process to the reader, who takes the Artistic role.

Where these comparisons become significant is in their application to entropic texts. Since the idea of transcendence is meaningless here, there can be no analogy
between the Artist as Author and the Transcendent Fool. Similarly, if the absence of a
dialectic between system and anti-system causes the role of Protagonist to collapse,
failed Protagonists such as Billy Pilgrim can only be said to reflect the paradoxical
image of the Author who has nothing to tell the Reader. It seems possible to draw an
analogy between the entropic Author and the Made Fool, in that by breaking
narrative (rather than social) taboos each actually serves to reinforce a more
conservative norm. In the novels discussed in Chapter Three, for example, it could be
argued that by parodying the sense of transcendence expected by the reader, the
author is acting as Made Fool to the literary establishment. I have argued, however,
that creativity occurs as a dynamic process between the Fool and the Protagonist,
which is expressed in a laughing relationship. The Fool cannot function as either
Made or Transcendent without this reciprocal relationship, so that texts in which this
dynamic has collapsed actually provide no analogy for the Author, just as they offer
no traditional relationship with the Reader. The question then is whether an
equivalent of the laughing relationship is necessary between the Author and the
Reader in order for a text to function as a novel. The fact that entropic novels exist at
all suggests that it is not, although the reader in these circumstances seems forced to
adopt an ambiguous, rather than ambivalent, attitude to them.

A crucial problem for the reader, and the critic, then, lies in establishing the
status of such texts as those I have described as entropic. If the exploration of a
dialectic is indeed necessary for a work to be called literature, these novels cannot be
included in that category. If, on the other hand, the presentation of one clear
expression of the human condition – for example its futility or its ambiguity – can be
said to constitute a valid artistic statement, then 'literature' must be defined
differently. The strenuous attempts of many critics to find meaning in entropic texts,
or their dismissal of them as being something other than (or less than) literature, may suggest, however, not that the presentation of a single idea is invalid (it could be argued that it occurs in both music and painting), but that the idea so presented is seen as undermining the very idea of art. Authors who offer the single image of existence as either futile or ambiguous lay themselves open to the accusation that, if this is true, it is meaningless to attempt to communicate the fact. Those critics who argue that authors must not make this claim in their work, however, seem thereby in danger of admitting not that art is in a crucial relationship with life, but that it takes the form of a fantasy that bears no resemblance to reality.

Is literature, then, nothing more than a comforting illusion that allows us to believe in coherence and purpose? Many contemporary theorists appear to think so, and many contemporary authors attempt to strip away such illusions to expose our dependence on the closed systems of thought and language. As the foregoing argument about the creative power of laughter shows, however, there is also a body of contemporary authors who continue to strive for transcendence, and attempt to use language as a tool to reveal reality rather than regarding it as constituting reality itself. Given laughter’s evidently crucial role in daily life, its failure in entropic texts seems to suggest, furthermore, that an entropic world view is of limited use as a model of reality.
Primary Texts

Where possible, the first British edition is used. The exceptions to this are *American Psycho*, for which I have used the first British paperback edition, and *Catch-22*, for which I have used the first American paperback edition.


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