Spring 2020

Aesthetics and Poetics of the Novel in Viet Thanh Nguyen's The Sympathizer and Adam Johnson's The Orphan Master's Son

Frederick Feldman
ff516908@wcupa.edu

Aesthetics and Poetics of the Novel in Viet Thanh Nguyen's *The Sympathizer* and Adam Johnson's *The Orphan Master's Son*

A Thesis

Presented to the Faculty of the

Department of English

West Chester University

West Chester, Pennsylvania

In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for

the Degree of

Master of Arts

By

Frederick William Feldman III

May 2020

Acknowledgements

I would not have been able to complete this thesis—let alone the M.A. program—without the help and mentorship of Dr. Shevlin. I cannot properly express my gratitude.

To Dr. Porritt, for guiding me through the field of aesthetics, helping me develop my theoretical framework, and for always taking time to chat whenever I showed up unannounced.

To Dr. Nessly, for talking through aspects of this thesis, recommending several useful articles, and for his careful and patient tutelage.

To Carolyn Sorisio—a fantastic EIC/boss and valued mentor—and everyone who has been part of the *College Literature* family.

To Frank Dooley, for giving me a copy of *The Orphan Master's Son* years ago at the polls.

To Sean Keller, for letting me ramble about this thesis multiple times.

To my fellow thesis-writers, who provided me with examples, support, and encouragement: Katelyn, Ruth, Ariana, Dale, and Ellie.

And to all the wonderful friends, professors, workers, and classmates I've met over the course of my time at West Chester University.

Abstract

Viet Thanh Nguyen's *The Sympathizer* and Adam Johnson's *The Orphan Master's Son* are both Pulitzer Prize-winning novels from the first half of the 2010s. Nguyen's novel of a Vietnamese spy in America during the Vietnam war has been critically acclaimed and has attracted significant scholarly attention, a special issue of *PMLA* being dedicated to the work. Johnson's novel about North Korea, while also a recipient of praise, has been comparatively less noticed and attracted little scholarly work. This thesis seeks to contribute to the scholarly literature on American literature and to literature on the poetics of the novel by reading these two US novels together, focusing especially on the theme of confession and its relation to an ethics of reading. The confession has a mode has exigency in a society enamored with what I call a *logic of presentation*. I argue that the poetics of the novel as a genre allows these two works to represent identity in ways that undermine demands that the characters be "authentic" in commodifiable ways. The narrative strategies used in Nguyen's and Johnson's novel are sophisticated and strategic, and their representations of identity create the conditions for what I call *aesthetic faith*. I conclude that this aesthetic faith involves a novel's ability to suggest the supersensible realm of consciousness, and thus supports the reader's openness to an atopic but socially-embedded otherness.

Tables of Contents

Chapter 1: Genre-games and the Aesthetics of the Novel

This thesis's primary focus is analyzing Viet Thanh Nguyen's *The Sympathizer* and Adam Johnson's *The Orphan Master's Son*. To do so, I rely heavily on James Dawes's recent monograph, *The Novel of Human Rights*. Both novels fit within this new genre, and I analyze them accordingly, devoting Chapter 2 to *The Sympathizer* and Chapter 3 to *The Orphan Master's Son*. In Chapter 4, I compare the two novels and suggest conclusions. In addition to Dawes's work, my theoretical framework synthesizes several approaches and forms the basis of this chapter. Here I outline a few of the theoretical issues that inform my approach. I have broken this chapter into three parts: 1. Genre-games, 2. The Logic of Presentation, and 3. Aesthetics and the Poetics of the Novel. With the section on genre-games, I argue that the novel can have different aims from those created by literary criticism, and that these differences should be factored into analysis. In the second section, I synthesize concerns related to the postcolonial novel, such as those noted by Graham Huggan, with similar concerns related to the novel of human rights and what philosopher and social critic Byung-Chul Han has called the transparency society. The third section is a response to the previous two sections, in that, drawing on Kant's aesthetics, I suggest that the poetics of the novel can create a loosening of concepts. This chapter can be little more than the barest of sketches, but it is my hope that even a rough beginning will clarify some of the interventions I am attempting in this study.

1. Genre-games

It is a question of method: the tracing should always be put back on the map.

—Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, pg. 13

Jorge Luis Borges's short story "On Exactitude in Science" takes up less than a page. As is his wont, he presents it as an extract from a fictional volume. I reproduce it in an even (reluctantly) more condensed form:

> [T]he Cartographer's Guilds struck a Map of the Empire whose size was that of the Empire, and which coincided point for point with it. The following Generations [. . .] delivered it up to the Inclemencies of Sun and Winters. In the deserts of the West, still today, there are Tattered Ruins of that Map [. . .] (Borges 325)

Jean Baudrillard views the story as an outmoded allegory of simulation. For my purposes, it is useful as an allegory of theory's relation to the world. This view is relevant to literary criticism, for criticism is a means of navigation through the world of the text. The relation of theory to the novel (or other literary artifact) it serves is not primarily one of *explanation* or *definition*. Theory guides the reader in their *navigation* of a text. Theory enacts a territorialization.

The territory we map when we read depends on the type of reading in which we are engaged. When we say we are "reading" a novel, what we mean depends on our use in the particular language-game we are playing. I take the idea of language-games from Ludwig Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations*; language is defined by its use in a multitude of language-games. He asks the reader to "think of the tools in a toolbox: there is a hammer, pliers, a saw, a screwdriver, a rule, a glue-pot, glue, nails and screws. — The functions of words are as diverse as the functions of these objects" (Wittgenstein PI 2009: 11). Literary criticism might operate as if it were extracting the meaning of a novel, but criticism does not

"discover" meaning so much as create it—it creates connections and ways of understanding relations within the novel and with what is external to it. Wittgenstein asks us to consider what we call a game and how we define a game and to observe that there is no single common attribute or goal that connects all conceivable games. If we try to explain a game, we must give examples and note similarities. "We don't know the boundaries because none have been drawn. To repeat, we can draw a boundary — for a special purpose" (PI 2009: 69). Totalizing explanations of what the novel is *for* and even what criticism is *for* are doomed to draw boundaries that are not comprehensive. "[N]ew language-games, as we may say, come into existence, and others become obsolete and get forgotten" (PI 2009: 23). What criticism is able to do is expand and clarify the language-games in which we can employ a given text—create new ones, overturn old ones, or modify the rules. This is akin to making new maps. To break up an old map is, using Deleuze and Guattari's term, a deterritorialization. They say that deterritorialization "can be called the creator of the earth—of a new land, a universe, not just a reterritorialization" (509), though reterritorializations often follow. I understand these terms as referring to a certain conceptualization of the world, systems of categorization and understanding—a map that marks a conceptual "territory" in the mind, which of course is where territories exist. To deterritorialize, then, could also result—would be expected to result—in the reformulation of language-games.

We must also consider that novels and criticism play different language-games. I call these *genre-games*, meaning the different language-games that are played by different genres of writing. The different functions of different genres[1] suggest that they are playing different

[1] The distinctions and overlaps between genres and subgenres—say, a novel in verse versus an epic—is an area of the genre-game theory that could be developed further—always keeping in mind that, as Wittgenstein says in (PI 69), boundaries are unknown because they have not yet been drawn, and that new genre-games will continue to come into existence. Still, there are clear differences between the use-value, say, of a sonnet and the

genre-games with different rules/conventions, strategies, and goals. The novel is also "cartographic," as Eleanor F. Shevlin argues. Cartography has a vitality and indeterminacy that theory can lack. Shevlin uses Mariama Bâ's *Scarlet Song* to argue that the territorialization enacted by this novel is akin to Deleuze and Guattari's conception of a *refrain*, a multi-function territorialization, and not reducible to a single, established map.

> *Scarlet Song* maps a series of such refrains [. . .]. What these refrains enable, in turn, are multiple terrains of readings that thwart attempts to essentialize any one, independent category of identity. [. . .] The constantly shifting nature of these arrangements avoids cartographic rigidity while simultaneously producing a viable means of addressing the postcolonial experience. By creating such narrative maps, *Scarlet Song* demonstrates that cartography can indeed be "a fluid art." (Shevlin 954).

As Shevlin argues in her article, the postcolonial situation reveals how fraught the drawing of boundaries is—cartography is not just the study of maps but the power that mapping exercises. Bâ's novel interjects a fluidity that highlights the mutability of cartographic space.

To relate another perspective, Byung-Chul Han often employs the idea of a pilgrimage, where the journey is itself a goal, as a contrast to the immediate transmission of information (*Scent* 37). He contrasts this with tourism. Tourists travel to see the sights and move on; there is a determinate goal. He titles his essay *The Scent of Time: A Philosophical Essay on the Art of Lingering*. Let us extend this idea—lingering is contemplative and allows for one to re-map a space, even a familiar space. One takes in the richness of the environment and reconceptualizes it—there appears an endless potential in doing so. Shevlin draws attention to the *aural* quality of the refrain and its expression in Bâ's novel. Han believes that

---

nouveau roman. Drawing out the relationships between genres like poetry versus novels as well as the rhizomatic interconnections between literary subgenres could be an interesting project.

time must have a *scent*. These invocations of the sensory world suggest the difference between the genre of information and the genre of the novel. Sound and smell occur within time and space: a particularly robust chronotope. The novel is not a world in the same sense that one's lived reality is a world because it is representational, but it uses referentiality and draws its power from the real world to create a fictional world. This cartographic fluidity and representation of sensory data can confer endless conceptual possibilities: herein lies both the novel's aesthetic and rhetorical strength. The aesthetic is rhetorical in its refusal to argue; the novel arrives at its destination by refusing to get there immediately.

The types of conceptual maps, then, that the novel creates and that criticism creates are not always the same. They may or may not be commensurate. The mapping that theory enacts *because* of its negativity—that is, theory's selectivity at the expense of the whole—lacks the subtlety and the embeddedness (with all the contradictions, confusions, and mixtures of the extraordinary and the mundane) of the novel. In M. M. Bakhtin's concluding remarks on the chronotope, any meaning that is not abstract has a chronotope (literally "time space"—"the inseparability of space and time" [84]). He argues that "in order to enter our experience (which is social experience) they must take on the *form of a sign* that is audible and visible for us [. . .]. Consequently, every entry into the sphere of meanings is accomplished only through the gates of the chronotope" (258). The distinction to be made, then, is how a novelistic chronotope might differ from informational or theoretical chronotopes.

In this sense, Han finds the genre of information and new media lacking, and he uses spatial metaphors to make his point. "The new media abolish space itself. Hyperlinks make pathways disappear. Electronic mail does not need to conquer mountains and oceans. [. . .]

Space and time implode into a here and now" (Han *Scent* 61). For Han, information is purely additive. Amassing information without picking out what is important means there is no narrativity. On the other hand, we might notice that literary criticism tends to make heavy use of spatial metaphors (exemplified by metacritical discussions about finding meaning "inside" or "behind" the text, or even the recent turn to look at the "surface" of the text). The text is deconstructed and recombined to create an assemblage that is smoother than the novel. This is the genre-game that criticism plays. Han defends theory's capacity for negativity: "Theory in the strong sense of the word is a phenomenon of negativity, too. It makes a decision determining what belongs and what does not. As a mode of highly selective narration, it draws a line of distinction. On the basis of such negativity, theory is violent" (Han *Transparency* 6). Compared to information, theory does have a more stable chronotope. "Selection" and "determining what belongs and what does not" are visual metaphors, suggesting an ordering in space. "Draw[ing] a line" is even more explicitly spatial. This idea of space, however, is two-dimensional. In contrast, the world of the novelistic chronotope uses time and three-dimensional space (the metaphors of looking "through" or "at" the surface implicitly treats the novel as existing in three-dimensional space). In brief, what I wish to argue is that, rather than being two moments in a single game (the object and its definition), the novel can participate in a genre-game that is entirely different from that of criticism. If criticism is to do justice to its material, we must consider the ways in which the novel's topology is different from what we overlay on top of it through the practice of criticism. The aesthetics of the novel can create a deterritorialization that lets us see the shreds of map laying atop a freshly-revealed terrain.

2. The Logic of Presentation

Always be ready to speak your mind, and a base man will avoid you.

—William Blake, *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* [Plate 8]

Any literary excursion that focuses on cultural experiences unfamiliar to its audience engages in a risky venture, namely, that it might, intentionally or unintentionally, exoticize its subject. The problems associated with exoticism, essentialism, and the like are familiar within the realm of literary studies. I will limit repeating these discussions and instead give a definition. Graham Huggan says that exoticism is not an inherent quality but that "exoticism describes, rather, a particular mode of *aesthetic perception*—one which renders people, objects and places strange even as it domesticates them, and which effectively manufactures otherness even as it claims to surrender to its immanent mystery" (13). Exoticism, Huggan says, often happens when a consumer desires to discover cultural authenticity in the absence of knowledge about that culture; this tends to produce, ironically, "[. . .] products whose authenticity is a function of their cultural dislocation" (16). This authenticity becomes a form of imposed sameness—the cultural artifacts are valued not for their specificity but for their foreignness, their otherness. Huggan, then, views the postcolonial exotic as raising questions such as

> [I]s it possible to account for cultural difference without at the same time mystifying it? To locate and praise the other without also privileging the self? To promote the cultural margins without ministering to the needs of the mainstream? To construct an

> object of study that resists, and possibly forestalls, its own commodification? (Huggan 31–32)

These are concerns of postcolonial studies, but they are not limited to that field. They recur in discussions of world literature, and the burgeoning field studying the novel of human rights stands to inherit the same problems because these novels deal with subjects wherein issues of power, vulnerability, and agency are prominent. Any literature that deals with cultural alterity will, like it or not, find itself amidst these concerns. In such discussions, the average white, middle-class reader often finds themselves portrayed in an unflattering light: portrait of the reader as voyeuristic gawker—easily commodified representations being what the market will bear. The unfortunate reader who finds themselves privy to the concerns of the postcolonial, world, etcetera crowd is placed in a double-bind. "Otherness is good—consuming otherness is bad." Either the reader must renounce as unattainable high-minded ideals of learning about other cultures or become complicit in a system of market-driven representational exploitation. Neither option seems to recommend itself very strongly, but neither does there appear any easy way out of the double-bind. Must one become an expert on a given culture before they can read without a twinge of guilt a novel set there? *Can* one become an expert on any given culture not one's own? Is one doomed to misapprehend the other in a flurry of egoism each time? Vexing problems, indeed, and not to be taken lightly.

I want to approach this issue as a legitimate concern within the novel of human rights. Readers are apt to approach the human rights novel similarly to how they may approach world or postcolonial literature: partially as entertainment, partially as educative. This becomes fraught because the impulse hardly seems ignoble, but the yawning pit of exoticism

always beckons. Authors, James Dawes writes, often feel this tension, but are motivated by a sense of moral urgency.

> Of course, when authors like [Chang-rae] Lee discuss the moral inspiration of their work, they are often quick to clarify that their ambitions are aesthetic rather than didactic. Such disclaimers testify to the continuing aesthetic influence of modernism, which rejected the morally edifying premises of the nineteenth-century humanitarian narrative or social problem novel. Nonetheless, I contend that most authors who write contemporary human rights novels do so with an ambient sense of moral purpose, and some even with an explicit and specific social mission. (Dawes 18)

Dawes sees that some novels dramatize "the narcissism of authorship itself, and the narcissism of the reader as a stand-in for those whose fantasies of moral self-affirmation include the work of rescue in any of its dramatic, individualizing forms" (36–37). If these are words of moral purpose and social mission, they sound sorely conflicted. If there is an "ambient sense of moral purpose," many authors of human rights novels also write with an ambient sense of moral anxiety.

I want to reframe the issue of the double-bind as symptomatic of a societal *logic of presentation*. I draw heavily on Byung-Chul Han's idea of "the transparency society," but I adopt this phrase to synthesize this overarching concern with transparency with the more specialized concerns of novels dealing with cultural alterity and to emphasize the mandate for the subject to "present" themselves rather than the less directional "transparency." Presentation would seem to view identity as innate and authentic, but acts as if identity is performative. That which is supposed to arise naturally is in reality an exacting standard. Han says: "The imperative of authenticity develops a self-directed compulsion, a compulsion to

constantly question oneself, eavesdrop on oneself [. . .]. The compulsion to authenticity forces the I to *produce itself* (*Expulsion* 19). In a similar vein, Huggan writes that "[a]uthenticity emerges both as a self-validating identitary category and as a consumer-oriented strategy to consolidate Western power by alleviating white-liberal guilt" (xiv). Alterity is not alterity unless it presents itself. For this reason, authors can use "authenticity" strategically, but Huggan warns that "[c]onscious use of exoticist techniques and modalities of cultural representation might be considered less a response to the phenomenon of the postcolonial exotic than as a further symptom of it" (33). Han would agree, seeing authenticity as a "selling point" that involves comparing oneself to others to discover what qualifies as "different," thus perpetuating a "higher-order conformity" (*Expulsion* 20).

I suggest that the etiology of a logic of presentation, or at least a large part of it, involves categorizing the self or the other conceptually. In general, this practice is not necessarily bad—but the quest for a concept can overreach. This is the case with concepts such as "authenticity" or "otherness." These concepts expect that what is private and innate can and should become public. Bakhtin notes that the encomium—a public form—measures the subject against the requirements of the particular role filled in life by the one being praised, and in this "there is almost no quality of 'becoming'" (136). Often in the encomium, this lack of becoming is of course because the subject has fulfilled the demands of their role, hence the occasion of praise. However, the contemporary world often requires individuals to praise themselves in the manner of the encomium in order to "market themselves"—here the I is producing itself. Authenticity and otherness are either self-referential or self-comparative in the vaguest sense (there is not even a role), and they offer no "becoming." One is asked: "what *kind* of different are you?" And one must live up to this standard, somehow. "In

consequence, no stable self-image emerges. The narcissistic subject melts into itself to such an extent that it proves impossible to play with identity [*mit sich zu spielen*]" (Han *Transparency* 36). The novel of human rights is confronted with the problem of creating classes of people. Dawes rightly refers to documents such as the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, pointing out that it is both necessary to formulate and authenticate what constitutes a victim of human rights abuse, and that it can undesirably "restrictively categorize vulnerable identities" (143). A character or person figured as a victim may become trapped beneath that identity.

Identity—and the use-value of identity—becomes a central problem of the novel of human rights. The genre requires that its characters conform to certain identificatory criteria, but its universal mission risks dominating and eliminating traces of the singular. The human rights novel risks creating subjects who have "only been scripted the power to narrate their place in the world" (Nessly 69). The central lesson of Michel Foucault's *History of Sexuality, Vol. 1* is relevant here: the scientific explanation of the human meant to create freedom can instead serve to restrict. He expresses skepticism that the voices speaking "the formidable injunction to tell what one is and what one does [. . .] are speaking to us of freedom" (60). Foucault's is possibly an extreme view, but the supposed freedom of authenticity easily becomes restrictive; the logic of presentation demands that one *be what one is*—and that entails a public, transparent expression that conforms to a standard. The self is categorized, and this obscures alterity—problematic for human rights novels that seek to be faithful to their subject's unique contexts and experiences. The pressing question for the reader, then, is how does one escape the double-bind?

3. Aesthetics and the Poetics of the Novel

> *Language is a labyrinth of paths. You approach from* one *side and know your way about; you approach the same place from another side and no longer know your way about.*
>
> —Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations* (203)

I propose that there is a potential way out of the double-bind via the novel's aesthetics. The double-bind arises from the desire for information, for a "learning experience." The desire need not be condemned as illegitimate—Martha C. Nussbaum argues that novel-reading promotes worthy goals such as empathy and more judicious judgements. If we are to defend such humanistic goals, however, we must also take into account the more spectacular and egoistic pitfalls identified by critics like Graham Huggan and James Dawes.

Assuming the primary concern is that the novel reifies concepts in the sense that its world-making constructs a set of operating principles and maps of social relations, I argue that the *aesthetic* nature of the novel is able to create a mode of perception that effects a *loosening of concepts*. I will sketch this idea through Immanuel Kant's aesthetic theory in the *Critique of Judgement*, alongside Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari's conceptual pair of de/reterritorialization and Yi-Ping Ong's recent recovery of Simone de Beauvoir's poetics of the novel.

Kant's third critique is a notoriously uneven work, but many of its insights can be usefully applied to the novel. As opposed to genre-games played by criticism, the novel seeks first aesthetic pleasure. In the "Analytic of the Beautiful," Kant says that the judgement of taste "is an aesthetic and not a cognitive judgement, and so does not deal with any *concept* of

the character or of the internal or external possibility, by this or that cause, of the object" (Kant §11, 52). For Kant, it should be said, the judgement of pure beauty is most fully expressed in nature's pure form, and a comprehensive application[2] of the third critique to literary criticism will need to translate accordingly. To this purpose, I draw attention to connections between Kant's stance and Ong's reading of Simone de Beauvoir's early writing on the novel. When Beauvoir says the novel shows "impartiality," Ong says this does not mean "objective" but "suggests many-sidedness, fullness, and [. . .] richness" (85). The novel, Ong explains, orients us to things "not by knowing how to designate them with abstract concepts, but rather by finding them situated in a world of activity in which we have uses for them—uses that are determined by our aims and attitudes, infused by our moods and our affinities" (84). Unlike theory, which cuts up and reassembles a given work to create an interpretative map, the novel has a rough and bumpy topology. Elements are connected first in their relations to each other rather than in abstraction. Again, the relation of theory to the (realist) novel is that of the map to the terrain.

We can also theorize the reader. The judgement of taste, says Kant, is independent of interest. Interest involves desire for the object. The judgement of taste does not take into account our "concern[ ] with the existence of the thing, but rather how we judge it on the basis of mere contemplation" (Kant §2, 36). Kant uses the example of a palace—we might

[2] Which this section is decidedly not. Kant also seems to revise his aesthetic theory when he returns to a discussion of beauty and the fine arts in the "Analytic of the Sublime," but he does not sufficiently explain what has been revised. But for Kant, pure beauty is most fully expressed in nature (indeed, genius is what "gives the rule," but the rule is given by nature). Nature's "purposiveness without purpose" finds expression in patterns and shapes that resist categorization: say, sunlight cutting through leaves, shells along the beach, or the rings and patch-markings on a raccoon. A fuller treatment of this concept of conceptual territorialization would include an examination of the deterritorializing power of nature. This would be done with an examination of Kant's natural aesthetics along with Deleuze and Guattari's re/deterritorialization plus Simone Weil's gloss and development of Kant's natural aesthetics (esp. her emphasis on the *opacity* of nature). There is a precedent in Romanticism that is worth recovering, at least in part; one need only read William Wordsworth's "The Tables Turned" to see this as-yet undeveloped line of thought laid out in miniature.

have distaste for its lack of utility, or its showiness, or that so much money was spent on such a structure when it could have been used more productively. A judgement of taste, however, must suspend whether or not we are incensed that it exists or whether we ourselves desire it and only consider whether we think the object (the palace) in contemplation is beautiful. Regardless of *why* a reader approaches a novel, once the pages are opened and the reader becomes engaged within the world of the novel, their "interest" in the novel as an object disappears as they move to the periphery of the novel's world. Their interest may reemerge after the reading experience is completed, but not after first passing through the world of the novel, whose genre-game can involve the loosening of concepts—this process could be understood as providing the source or impetus for the novel's generation of empathy in Nussbaum's approach.

On the loosening of concepts, the next important observation in Kant's aesthetics is whether pleasure precedes the judgement or comes after. Kant argues that pleasure that precedes the judgement of taste would merely be agreeable, a private sensual pleasure coupled with interest (§3, 37). The aesthetic judgement of taste occurs when the representation causes the "[c]ognitive powers" to become "engaged in a free play, since no determinate concept restricts them to a particular rule of cognition" (§9, 48). A merely pleasurable experience rarely changes one's opinion on any matter. In the judgement of taste, however, the pleasure is triggered by the cognitive faculties' attempt and continued inability to place the object under a concept (such as cause and effect, teleology, etc.). This can promote a *deterritorialization*. Deleuze and Guattari offer one of many definitions: "A fiber strung across borderlines constitutes a line of flight or deterritorialization" (249). The aesthetic experience of novel-reading can prompt a free play of the cognitive faculties, lifting

previous concepts and notions from where they rest and reconfiguring them within the world of the novel, where judgement according to a concept is suspended—a line of flight.

The idea of "purposiveness without purpose" also can be used to understand the aesthetics of the novel. "Purposiveness, therefore, may exist apart from a purpose, in so far as we do not locate the causes of this form in a will, but yet are able to render the explanation of its possibility intelligible to ourselves only by deriving it from a will" (§10, 52). The idea of purposiveness without purpose intersects with the absence of interest. The reading experience is not directed to an end or a definitive purpose. We give our attention to a novel as authored by someone, but during an immersive reading experience any intent of the author recedes from view. The novel is not experienced as being produced by an authorial will but as an open experience. As Ong writes, "The presence of the author as form-giving agent completely disappears in the motion by which the totality of the work incarnates its meaning" (87). Ong distinguishes the suggestion of an interpretation of the representation of life from the demonstration of a theory of life—for Ong, the novel must show its characters as free.[3] We can say that the novel is filled with conceptual material because the novel is always imbricated in the social. However, the genre-game of the novel tends not to lay out a theory of life but depict life in its ambiguity and *suggest* a theory. The novel can make these suggestions without puncturing the aesthetic experience. The novel's particular suggestions will guide the re/deterritorializating effect.

---

[3] A similar idea of how the novel works appears in William Nessly's study of the novels of Richard Kim. He writes that in Kim's *The Innocent*, "The novel effectively stages its own inability to track the covert, guerrilla movements of the characters it has created, as a means to figure the existence of elements in the text that are resistant to narrative control—independent actors operating outside of the centralized, scripting authority of the text.[12] Kim's characters have no existence outside of the novel, yet the novel dramatizes its limited ability to "control" its own creations to symbolize a resistance to the totalizing power of the novel and, figuratively, the totalizing power of the colonizer. Here, the figuratively imperialistic relations between the controlling narrator and the subordinated, penetrable, and narratable subjects of the text are disrupted, creating a performance of resistance to controlling authority at the level of form" (69).

Despite the potential in the third critique to counter elements of a society of transparency, Byung-Chul Han does not quite know what to do with Kant. In one book, he appears to grasp this potential for free contemplation.

> According to Kant, the imagination [*Einbildungskraft*] is based on play. It presumes room for play, where nothing is clearly defined or drawn. It requires a certain fuzziness and indistinctness. It is not transparent to itself, whereas understanding [*Verstand*] is marked by self-transparency. For this reason, understanding also does not engage in play. It works with unambiguous concepts. (*Transparency* 16)

Strangely, he reverses this in a later book. In *Saving Beauty*, Han disparages Kant's conception of the beautiful and sublime as "autoerotic." According to Han, Kant's aesthetics always refer to the faculties of cognition and thereby always to the subject and are therefore guilty of an excess of positivity.

> No negativity of the *other* which would cross out the autoeroticism of the subject is inherent in the sublime. Neither when faced with beauty, nor when faced with the sublime, does the subject end up *beside itself*. It permanently remains grounded *in itself*. Anything that would be wholly other, and would evade the sublime, Kant would consider dreadful, monstrous or abysmal. It would be a disaster for which there is no place in Kant's aesthetics. (Han *Beauty*, 21)

Han's critique is strange. He is too enamored, it seems, with a nearly masochistic conception of beauty that he misses the potential for deterritorialization in Kant's aesthetics. Han believes Kant's aesthetics are entirely subject-focused, but this is incorrect. Kant's notion of aesthetic ideas, which appears (seemingly out of nowhere) partway through the analytic of the sublime, shows that the object is necessary for the judgement of taste. Aesthetic ideas are

what prompt the judgement of taste, kicking into gear, so to speak, the cognitive free play. What is important to note is that aesthetic ideas are prompted via something *external*. Aesthetic ideas show that the mechanism is not autoerotic. The process of the free play must be *prompted* by an object and its pure form. When Han says that the "sublime, like beauty, is not an object-, but a subject-feeling, an autoerotic feeling of the self" (21), he is focusing only on one part of the aesthetic process. He is jumping to the middle wherein the object has already set in motion its effects in the subject. Han also takes issue with the conception of beauty as *play* as preliminary to *work* (19), but the free play of the cognitive faculties is a useful metaphor not because it is a *prelude* to work but because it is *distinct* from work. In fact, the distinctiveness of the free play of the imagination and understanding is the inability for this free play to bring beautiful form beneath a concept. The aesthetic experience is deterritorializing; it is able to remain *surprising* even after sustained reflection. Work is concerned with utility and has an objective, whereas play has no objective. Han's earlier understanding of Kant in *The Transparency Society* is a better reading.

Returning to the original complaint, to say that Kant's aesthetics is wholly concerned with the subject is also to ignore the whole surge of the Kantian ethical imperative of viewing the other as an end unto themselves, a maxim which is useful to imagine as lurking in the background of the *Critique of Judgement*. In the aesthetic, one finds this maxim emerging spontaneously

> both on account of this [judgement giving the law to itself rather than being subjected to a heteronomy of laws] inner possibility in the subject, and on account of the external possibility of a nature harmonizing therewith, it finds a reference in itself to something in the subject itself and outside it, and which is not nature, nor yet

> freedom, but still is connected with the ground of the latter, i.e. the supersensible—a something in which the theoretical faculty is combined with the practical in a shared and unknown manner. (Kant §59, 181)

Kant here sounds almost mystical. Contrary to Han's complaint that Kant's aesthetics are cognitive and therefore always subject-focused, we find the aesthetic faculty engaged in a reaching outward that begins within the subject but is concerned with the subject's relation to that which is outside itself. There is a synthesis between the "theoretical" and the "practical" that remains open, vibrant, and hopeful. From this, we can again refer to Ong's reading of Beauvoir. For Beauvoir, the experience of novel-reading, Ong explicates, allows that the intellectual response "that the reader undergoes emerges from her own deliberative responses to the unfolding narrative, responses that cannot in principle be determined in advance of her deliberation [. . .]. A novel that succeeds in spellbinding its reader thus offers what Beauvoir repeatedly characterizes as a task of reading that involves genuine risks on the part of the reader" (81). This "spellbinding" of the reader sounds akin to the immersive reading that Suzanne Keen recounts is more effective at producing empathy than is "perspective-taking" reading (25). The immersiveness of the novel undoubtedly stems from its referentiality. Nussbaum writes that

> the novel is concrete to an extent generally unparalleled in other narrative genres. It takes as its theme, we might say, the interaction between general human aspirations and particular forms of social life [. . .]. In this way, the very structure of the interaction between the text and its imagined reader invites the reader to see how the mutable forms of society and circumstance bear on the realization of shared hopes and desires—and also, in fact, on their very structure. (Nussbaum 7)

Nussbaum's understanding of the ethical potential of the novel works well with (and is much more readable than) Kant's idea of beauty as the symbol of morality. While of course one must make the distinction between morality and ethics (though Kant's categorical imperative would seem to connect the two closely anyway), there is a mixture of the universal and the particular in both. From Nussbaum we note the concreteness of the novel; from Ong we can see how the ambiguity of the novel can suggest an understanding of life without compromising its aesthetic free play; and from Kant we can see how the aesthetic experience allows this to arise as if from within the subject. Thus, contrary to a logic of presentation ("You will be organized, you will be an organism, you will articulate your body [. . .]. You will be signifier and signified, interpreter and interpreted [. . .]. You will be a subject, nailed down as one, a subject of the enunciation recoiled into a subject of the statement" [Deleuze and Guattari, 159]), the novel is able to retain an opacity in its "concrete" representation of time and space. In this way, it presents the world as an object not of determination but of contemplation ("Taking a walk is a haecceity; never again will Mrs. Dalloway say to herself, 'I am this, I am that, he is this, he is that'" [263][4]). The opportunity to contemplate allows for a loosening of concepts as the mind enters a space of play. The entertainment provided by the novel need not be meaningless; it can be a productive state of cognitive free play. As Beauvoir has written:

> The novel is justified only if it is a mode of communication irreducible to any other. While the philosopher and the essayist give the reader an intellectual reconstruction

[4] Deleuze and Guattari often reference Virginia Woolf in *A Thousand Plateaus*, and rightly so. Woolf, perhaps more than any other author, uses and invents a poetics of the novel that deterritorializes and loosens concepts. Novels such as *Mrs. Dalloway* and *The Waves* do not lay out theories but invent new ways of seeing, of narrating, of representing thought, new ways even of thinking itself.

> of their experience, the novelist claims to reconstitute on an imaginary plane this experience itself as it appears prior to any elucidation. (Beauvoir, quoted in Ong 80)

Thus, this discussion comes full circle. The novel has its own genre-games it tends to play, and my argument is that literary criticism should attend to the novel's capacity to play genre-games that may not be immediately obvious—or that may be so obvious they are overlooked. For example, creating an immersive reading experience is a genre-game in its own right that can have powerful conceptual (and therefore, indirectly, rhetorical) outcomes. Popular fiction can be studied accordingly—however, the specificities of a given novel are determinate of the success and implications of the poetics of the novel.

The approach outlined in this chapter can only be provisional at this point. But as I move on to analyze *The Sympathizer* and *The Orphan Master's Son* in the following chapters, I do so according to the spirit—if not, perhaps, to the letter—of the theoretical framework I have outlined in this chapter.

Chapter 2: *The Sympathizer*

> *One confesses—or is forced to confess. When it is not spontaneous or dictated by some internal imperative, the confession is wrung from a person by violence or threat; it is driven from its hiding place in the soul, or extracted from the body.*
> —Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality, Vol. 1*, p. 59.

> *"But you will surely admit there is a difference between pain-behavior with pain and pain-behavior without pain." — Admit it? What greater difference could there be? — "And yet you again and again reach the conclusion that the sensation itself is a Nothing." — Not at all. It's not a Something, but not a Nothing either!*
> —Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations* (304)

Viet Thanh Nguyen's *The Sympathizer* (2015) is structured as the first-person confession of a highly-educated Vietnamese spy. The novel opens with the Fall of Saigon and is set in the aftermath of the Vietnam War. The narrator, who remains unnamed throughout the novel, is a double-agent. He relocates to America with the South Vietnamese character simply called the General, but all the while he acts as a spy for the North Vietnamese. The confession, however, is written to his Communist superiors (including the Commissar, Man, who is his old friend and handler) after he returns to Vietnam to protect his friend Bon in a self-destructive attempt to re-take the country.

This chapter draws upon James Dawes's recent work on what he calls "the novel of human rights." Dawes asserts that "the novel of human rights is both a contemporary and a

US genre" (5): "I simply argue that among US-based texts there is a pattern emerging that can be usefully understood as a new genre of the novel" (7). Dawes recounts that the National Humanities Center's first of three planned interdisciplinary conferences on human rights was the first such meeting where literature professors were the majority (Dawes, 2–3). This was in 2012, the year Adam Johnson's *The Orphan Master's Son* was published. Viet Thanh Nguyen's *The Sympathizer* would follow three years later. Dawes's identifications of the formal features and narrative concerns of this emergent genre are valuable in understanding these two novels in terms of the functions and use-value of their plots. Dawes identifies two plots in the novel of human rights: the justice plot and the escape plot. The justice plot involves the uncovering of a human rights abuse and a desire to recover the subject(s) of that abuse. The escape plot has picaresque elements and involves a series of events as a character flees an inhospitable place or country. Dawes categorizes Nguyen's novel as an escape plot (45), but as I will argue later, it more closely follows the idea of the justice plot.

Even within the genre of the novel of human rights, Nguyen's choice of a spy as the narrator and the confession as the mode of address is unusual. Nor have his choices been ignored by the novel's critics. In a *PMLA* special section dedicated to Nguyen's *oeuvre* (thus far), Sunny Xiang notes:

> In the first case, its narrator-spy can provide an individual perspective from both sides of the war, yet this first-person voice also obscures the distinction between truthful testimony and coerced confession. (Xiang 424)

In a compelling contribution to the section ("*The Sympathizer*: A Dialectical Reading"), Anjali Prabhu writes:

> The compactness of the enterprise's totality also makes it literary, in that it implicates in the diegesis the writer (narrator) of the confession and its reader: his friend and blood brother Man, a Vietnamese communist. Any reference to the reader here or in Nguyen's text must include this internal reader. (Prabhu 390)

To extend these critics' remarks, the choice of protagonist and the mode of confession put the reader on uneasy footing from the start. In a novel dealing with events from the recent past, readers are apt to look for a truthful account of the war and an "authentic" fictional portrayal (the ever-present and intractable paradox of novel-reading). As Graham Huggan notes, "authenticity" is a frequent selling-point in the literary marketplace, and postcolonial novels are often advertised as providing Western readers with an "authentic" look at global otherness—and authors are often aware of this pull and sometimes write to it or against it (xi). The genre of the human rights novel is likewise subject not only to a self-conscious attraction/repulsion to representing a reality understood to be ethically urgent but also to the limits of entertainment and representation itself. Nguyen's decision to narrate a spy giving a confession is a canny response to these conflicts. The reader must necessarily be unsure of the veracity of the confession, even in the novel's fictional world. This readerly unease invites an interpretative approach that has implications for recent approaches to literary criticism.

In their 2009 introduction, Stephen Best and Sharon Marcus call for the value of "surface reading," which would attend to "what is evident, perceptible, apprehensible in texts" (9). This call is emblematic of a recent interest in literary criticism for an approach to reading that is more affirmative than past applications of critical theory—a response to a frustration strongly expressed in sociologist Bruno Latour's "Why Has Critique Run out of

Steam?" A natural concern about the turn toward more trusting modes of reading is the worry that it will lead to a critical naivety and that reacting against the excesses of ideological critique will lead us to be ever the dupes of ideology. The concern is not, I think, without some warrant, but Nguyen's authorial strategy of choosing a narrator whom we are not sure whether to classify as reliable or unreliable shows a way that the surface can still be complex and sophisticated. Surfaces come in all shapes and sizes—they can be artless or artificial, ironic or sincere, simulating or dissimulating. A novel can have enough captivating play on the surface to keep a critic busy without demanding that they look beyond the surface or miss the forest for the trees. The confession, as both flux and stability, exemplifies an approach that requires critics to take a step back.

We should also distinguish the contemporary interest in "surface reading" from Bakhtin's understanding of the "surface." When Bakhtin speaks of public man being on the surface, this surface belongs to a different historical epoch. The interiority of the novel means that a "surface" is not full exteriorization, but implies an inwardness that is not accessible (even if the inwardness is a representation and its autonomy is "necessarily fictional," as Yi-Ping Ong calls it). I will discuss this issue further in the following chapter on *The Orphan Master's Son*. For now, exteriorization will gain importance at the close of *The Sympathizer*. Even our distrust creates a believable world—we should not understand the novelistic surface at this stage as a planar space but as implying a concave underside. There is a certain distance we *can* look through before we are "outside" the world of the novel, so to speak, and into the hoary realm of humdrum ideological critique.

Indeed, one of the themes of *The Sympathizer* is ideology itself. In the Commissar's quarters, the words of Ho Chi Minh are emblazoned on a red banner: "NOTHING IS MORE

IMPORTANT THAN INDEPENDENCE AND FREEDOM" (Nguyen 323). The word "nothing" will acquire a double meaning (discussed later in this chapter). This deliberate misunderstanding, though, is a trait Bakhtin identifies with the role of the rogue. Bakhtin likens the role of servant and rogue/adventurer to that of a spy. These roles

> create around themselves their own special little world, their own chronotope. [. . .] Essential to these [. . .] figures is a distinctive feature that is as well a privilege—the right to be "other" in this world, the right not to make common cause with any single one of the existing categories that life makes available. (Bakhtin 159)

The spy is a particular kind of "other"—the *raison d'être* of a spy is to be an "other" that passes as the "same." This duality allows a view from both sides and, as the narrator himself says, is perfectly suited to his skill of "sympathizing" with both sides. In turn, this talent puts him in trouble when he writes his confession. Says the Commandant: "You would be better off if you only saw things from one side. The only cure for being a bastard is taking a side" (Nguyen 314). During a crucial several pages, the Commandant rejects the narrator's confession as genuine "[i]n content, perhaps, but not in style" (312). The style is an *inflection* with which the rogue-like narrator—and the novel as a genre—is able to approach and puncture the trappings of ideology.

However, the narrator's role is more complex than merely fitting into one of these types, even if he shares chronotopical functions. From a Bakhtinian perspective, we might see this complexity as following from *The Sympathizer*'s position in a late stage of novelistic development. The narrator is implicated in the novel's events and its specific political and historical referents. He is not the fully exteriorized rogue or fool; he is in a later "stage in the transformation of the rogue," introduced as a major protagonist, who is "almost always the

bearer of the authorial point of view" (Bakhtin 163). This introduces a corresponding sense of interiority. This novel is deeply engaged with issues of the public/private dichotomy. We also see this theme in the text's portrayal of the body and its invasion. The body is a problematic in *The Sympathizer*, but in way that is very different from its portrayal in Bakhtin's Rabelais. Bakhtin emphasizes Rabelais's portrayal of the body. Rabelais, in his scales and series that center the body, seeks "to 'embody' the world, to materialize it, to tie everything in spatial and temporal series, to measure everything on the scale of the human body, to construct—on that space where the destroyed picture of the world had been—a new picture" (117). In Nguyen's novel, the body is primarily an abject thing. In the post-Vietnam world of the novel, the body is a spectacle of damage, injury, and torture.

If Rabelais's portrayal of the body accords with its historical epoch, as Bakhtin argues, *The Sympathizer* also conforms to the epoch of its characters. The novel, despite its subject of war, is not action-packed. A handful of violent events are connected by long stretches of aimless waiting, drifting, preparing, or dialoging. The unnamed narrator is primarily a voice. His body loses a sense of materiality and fades into the background, until the end when his confinement and torture serve to signal his abjection. Most of page 317 of *The Sympathizer* is filled by a grotesquely florid disquisition on the narrator's defecatory routine during confinement, but this measures the abjection of the narrator's body and the space and temporality of being imprisoned. All the while, he is forced to write and re-write his confession. There is an increasingly heightened, seesawing separation between body and voice—the textual record of the voice becomes more and more refined and controlled as the body becomes more and more abject and outside his control. If Rabelais's world is one of growth and the organic, Nguyen depicts a world that is ascetic and being purged of life and

culture. This is the excess of a logic of presentation—rather than the Rabelaisian body that expresses everything on the surface in an overflow of vitality, torture attacks the body in order to gain information in a way that breaks the will and destroys the body's vitality to get the inside to the outside. The exteriority that torture seeks is not the full range of the human—only useful information. Torture views the body as a means to extract information from within. The body is *penetrable*.[5] The unity of the singular body is violable because it is subordinated to the "body" of the state or of the movement. Torture becomes a tool of the regime to preserve the health of the state or the party.

The narrator has a different problem in America. He is not tortured physically, but he is tortured by a dematerialization because of his own violent activities and loss of culture. Culture is participatory, and the spy is trapped in only the simulation of participation. The narrator's ability to "sympathize" with his enemies and his Westernized self, though, makes him conflicted, which his confession reveals. He has lost the liberty to form a self because for both sides, he is neither a participant in culture nor a citizen, but a killing machine.

Enemy combatants are treated not as selves but as objects of study. The Western logic of presentation is exemplified by the character of Dr. Richard Hedd, the author of *Asian Communism and the Oriental Mode of Destruction*. His work is also the cipher used by the coded messages exchanged by Man and the unnamed communist spy (Nguyen 68). Man takes Hedd's text meant to *decipher* Man and his fellow communists as the enemy and instead uses it to code and decode secret messages passed between the agents. Later on, the

---

[5] For Friedrich Heinrich Jacobi, the individual must be an impenetrable unity because it is in this that their agency lies: "An absolutely penetrable being is a non-entity.
A relatively penetrable being cannot, in so far as it is penetrable by some other being, either touch this being or be touched by it.
The immediate consequence of impenetrability at contact we call 'resistance.'
So wherever there is contact there is mutual impenetrability; and hence there is resistance also—action and reaction." (Jacobi 295)

protagonist meets Hedd at a meeting with the General and the Congressman. He recounts having reread Hedd's categorizing of Vietnamese fighters and then, meeting the author face-to-face, he muses: "These categories existed as pages in a book exist, but most of us were composed of many pages, not just one. Still, I suspected, as Dr. Hedd scrutinized me, that what he saw was not that I was a book but that I was a sheet, easily read and easily mastered" (252). The encounter is tense but successful for the General's war effort (and the spy's knowledge of it). Afterwards, the assembled men retreat to a secret room where, it is implied, they engage in orgiastic pleasure-seeking—both playing into the communist stereotype of Western decadence and suggesting that the taxonomizing logic is one of domination and not of self-restraint. The taxonomizing and, to draw on Foucault, inscribing within discourse creates a "scientific" viewpoint, without sympathy, and becomes a form of *méconnaisance.* After all, Hedd does not uncover the spy in his midst.

The protagonist's sympathy has a limit, though, for he has forgotten that he witnessed the torture/rape of a captured agent. He remembers at the end of the novel during his torture by Man, and the remembrance shatters his mind into two. There arises in "his ocean of disremembering [. . .] a movie projector, for what had been forgotten, he now remembered, had occurred in the room they called the movie theater" (347). The scene of the rape is particularly brutal and graphic—much more so than the rape in the Auteur's film, *The Hamlet*. Sylvia Shin Huey Chong wonders, "If the rape of the communist agent has its analogue in *The Hamlet*'s rape of Mai, can one salvage the representation of Mai's rape as exploitative while commending the rape of the communist agent as artistic, perhaps necessary?" (376). The concern is not unwarranted, and one she continues to probe: "Here, the critique of spectatorship collides with the ethics of witnessing often called on by human

rights activists. Why is it necessary that we, as the readerly or spectatorial audience, play confessor to the guilty conscience of the Heinemanns and Auteurs of the world?" (376). Chong's queries are provocative and worth pursuing.

I do not claim to be able to fully answer Chong's legitimate concerns. However, I argue that a formal analysis of how the novel treats the two scenes of rape in relation to each other and to the theme of spectatorship is necessary before one reaches a judgement. That the first rape is presented as fictional, and the second as "real" should not be ignored in assessing what figures as necessary and/or exploitive. Both rapes involve a framing of the face. The narrator describes the film: "Alternating with these long shots were extreme-close ups of Mai's battered face [. . .], one eye so swollen it had closed completely. The most extended shot of the movie was devoted to this face filling the entire screen, her open eye wheeling in its socket" (Nguyen 287). Later on, when he is remembering the rape of the agent that he witnessed, he describes her face. "She was staring directly at me, but with the screws of pain tightened on her jaws and eyes, those screws that turned ever more, I had the feeling she did not see me at all" (351). In the second case, there is a look directed at the narrator. Jean-Paul Sartre writes that "my consciousness appears originally to the Other as absence. [. . .] When Pierre looks at me, I know of course that he is looking at me. His eyes, things in the world, are fixed on my body, a thing in the world [. . .]. The meaning of this look is not a fact in the world, and this is what makes me uncomfortable" (105). This unfocused look is uncovered in the narrator's memory as his mind is stretched to its limit, and the remembrance finally breaks it.

In explicating Nguyen's treatment of visages and more in these scenes, Han's work provides a particularly useful lens. As Han writes, "Today, not only the beautiful but also the

ugly becomes smooth. The ugly also loses the negativity of the diabolical, of the uncanny and terrifying, and is smoothed out, a formula for consumption and enjoyment. It lacks entirely the fear- and terror-inducing gaze of the Medusa which petrifies everything" (*Beauty* 7). He also writes that "[i]n contemporary films, the face is often shown in close-up. In a close-up, the whole body appears as pornographic. [. . .] The close-up smoothens out the features [*Gesicht*] into a face [*Face*]. A face has neither depths nor shallows. [. . .] It lacks inwardness" (11, 13). Writing on the same theme in the context of the novel of human rights, Dawes observes that "[h]uman rights representation in all its forms—from photography to novels—always faces the choice of pornographizing for spectacular appeal" (123). A salient difference between these two scenes might be the representation of the face. In the film, the victim is portrayed in close-up with one eye swollen shut, the other "wheeling in its socket." In the memory, the victim looks at the narrator without appearing to see him. These are both types of sightlessness, but the second is less spectacular and thereby more arresting. In the separation of the fact of the eye (directed at the narrator) and the absence of the mind, there is a horror that is less consumable than the filmic spectacle of abjection. The close-up becomes almost absurd in the extremity of its horror, whereas the horror of the agent's look is in the disconnection between the body and mind.

As Chong points out, the rape of the agent is the analog of the rape of Mai. The parallel is reinforced by the location of the movie theater. The narrator does not see the scene with Mai until he watches it in the movie theater with Bon. The rape of the agent he has repressed occurs in "the room they called the movie theater" (Nguyen 347). Spectatorship is a theme tying both events together. For the narrator, one is a representation and the other is presentation. He is like a movie camera, watching passively. There is also the evil joke about

the “speculum.” However, the analogical presentation of these two events goes in two directions depending on whether interpreters orient themselves according to the *fabula* or the *syuzhet.* In the *syuzhet* [plot of the novel], the actual rape is measured against the movie rape. In the *fabula* [the raw chronological unfolding of the events], the movie follows the rape of the agent. From this perspective, the movie is measured against the actual rape that the narrator witnessed. His concern about infiltrating American propaganda and the representation of his fellow Vietnamese then appears insufficient measured against the real horror of what he watched. Moreover, his concern with the American culture industry appears as a distraction from the destruction of the Vietnamese civil war. The atrocity is committed by the General’s Vietnamese policemen (with the US, of course, looking on) against the Communist Vietnamese, presaging the commandant’s rejection of the American/anti-American dichotomy (“We are simply one hundred percent Vietnamese” [319]). Man/The Commissar’s take is similar with a less optimistic gloss: “Now that we are powerful, we don’t need the French or Americans to fuck us over. We can fuck ourselves just fine” (364). The narrator’s attempt to save his fellow Vietnamese from representational violation on the movie screen then looks like a paltry attempt at atonement for failing to act to protect his fellow Vietnamese agent from actual violation. Man, who sees this from the temporal sequence of the *fabula,* forces the narrator to make this linkage and confess to the repressed memory.

The position of the viewer, of the camera, then, is ultimately revealed not simply as “Westerners” viewing the commodified “Easterners” (as Japanese-American Ms. Mori focuses on exclusively [74–75, 120, 152] and that therefore can be solved by proper “representation”), but instead as a cold, impassive space that anyone can fill—that the

narrator *does* fill. In his case, the empty, nullified subjectivity of the camera is instead his own presence in the room. The imagined viewer becomes very specific. He acts as if he were a camera, watching impassively, but his physical presence implicates him in a moral imperative. He is looking at *her*, but in a moment she looks at him and reveals that she has been lost behind a screen of pain. This look—so reminiscent of Wittgenstein's questioning throughout the *Philosophical Investigations* of how we can *know* someone is in pain—is unlikely to be explained within Dr. Hedd's typology of the Asian Communist. The transparency of spectatorship is denied.

Whether Nguyen's graphic depiction of the event is therefore warranted is a question this chapter feels unable to answer. Dawes observes that "[a]t the meta-narrative level, some novelists meet the challenge of what to do with the violently exposed body by thematizing the act of guilty watching" (26). As we have seen, Nguyen makes spectatorship and its implications a central theme of *The Sympathizer*. On the other hand, Dawes is firm in regarding "the grave ethical implications of using women as allegories of justice and injustice" (118). He argues that using the female body as a metaphor for the nation contributes to the conditions for sexual violence during war. Whatever the scene's merits relative to the exploitative representation of rape by the Auteur, the rape of the agent remains a graphic and disturbing spectacle, and "[t]here is often no clear line between the necessary and the exploitative, between witnessing and voyeurism" (Dawes 25). As the agent realizes, the rape "was not an interrogation but a sentence" (Nguyen 350), with no reason other than cruelty. Even here, the theme of spectatorship is present. Nguyen describes the policemen looking into the coke bottle/speculum "with gynecological interest [. . .]. Let me see, said the youngest [. . .], I don't see a thing, he complained" (352). The goal is not information *per*

se—instead, the language of medical science links with "information" and "transparency" for the sake of debasement.[6] Here, then, after nearly three hundred pages filled with characters (the narrator, the General, Bon, Man, Ms. Mori, Sonny) overly concerned with meaning or a cause, there is no other reason than a desire to desecrate. As Dawes notes of perpetrators, "Role specialization eliminates ethical frictions by insulating individuals from responsibility for anything outside the narrow compass of their prescribed actions" (183). Human rights abusers can persuade themselves to ignore their own human empathy for the "greater good." But there is no vast dialectical logic that will explain the rape—the event is molecular and individualized, people from the same country on opposite sides of the war. Perhaps it is this ultimate situation that the narrator, who has for a cause killed multiple people who continue to haunt him, cannot face. The unforgetting is followed by the narrator deploring a vast sequence of events—personal, world-historical, cultural, mythological—that brought him to his "revisions" and "visions" (Nguyen 353–54). Man, the Commissar, has become disillusioned with the revolution and desires to save Bon and the narrator, but he still pushes the narrator to a twisted enlightenment: "nothing!" (368)—which is also what earlier he had said he did to the agent: "But I did nothing to her!" (336).

[6] A reader might wonder at the larger implications of what the rapists could have desired to see. I would suggest that, considering the context of a bitter civil war and Dawes's concerns regarding the body-as-nation turning the individual (and usually female) body into a target of violence (127), the rapists were consumed by what René Girard theorizes as metaphysical desire ("the threshold of psychopathology" [Girard 297]), wherein rivalry reaches such an intensity that the original motivation for the rivalry is forgotten and passes into an uncanny desire for the rival's *being*. Of course, rivalry seems insufficient a term for enemy combatants in a war, but the mixture of fear of and desire to crush the model-obstacle's being appears a psychologically plausible explanation here. Friedrich Heinrich Jacobi, in *David Hume on Faith, or Idealism and Realism, a dialogue*, (294–295) draws upon G. W. Leibniz's concept of the monad to expound how the "I" (which, as Jacobi observes, is implied by and implies a "Thou") creates a unity out of the manifold of the material body (unities otherwise being such only in perception). For Jacobi, as for Leibniz, the monad, as a unity, is impenetrable. The attempt to penetrate the body, then, is an act of violence against the monad—an attempt to violate its unity. The ensuing dissociation could be theorized as a result of an attack upon the monadic unity of the mind and body. The filmic portrayal of rape, with the "wheeling eye," is not as explicit in representing the "inwardness" of the monad. The body is portrayed as closer to a mere assemblage.

The narrator is no longer able to function after his torture and "enlightenment," so the doctor orders him to copy out his confession, which revives him. Rereading his confession, he has dissociated from his former self. He decides that the people he wanted to represent "would never, in the end, be representable at all" (373). He joins "the boat people," who earlier were the abject extras on the movie set. He is optimistic, a "revolutionary in search of a revolution," determined to live (382). The ending is strange, highly ambivalent, and difficult to interpret, but I will outline a few possible readings.

The narrator's koan-like enlightenment coincides with a memory of his mother's recounting of his birth: "my mother pushed so hard she expelled not only me but also the waste from her bowels," which is Rabelaisian, recalling the birth of Gargantua coinciding with Gargamelle's fundament falling out because she ate too much tripe (Rabelais 47, 52). One might argue that this connection between birth, excrement, and Bakhtin and the shift from "I" to "we" is a method by which the novel attempts to suggest a movement from an individual to the recovery of a collective, folkloric time. The narrator writes about the absurdity of his answer: "months later and in the temporary safety of the navigator's house, I laugh even as I reread this scene of my enlightenment, which itself devolved from screams to laughter" (370). What he got, he says, was *the joke*. There is a positive meaning, beyond *there's nothing there*, in "the paradoxical fact that nothing is, indeed, something," and people who do not get the joke are dangerous partisans of nothing (371). Laughter is of prime importance to Bakhtin in his study of Rabelais because "only laughter never underwent sublimation of any sort [. . .]. It never took on an official character. [. . .] Laughter alone remained uninfected by lies" (236). He continues to say,

> The extraordinary force of laughter in Rabelais, its radicalism, is explained predominantly by its deep-rooted folkloric base, by its link with the elements of the ancient complex—with death, the birth of new life, fertility and growth. [. . .] This connection on the one hand with fundamental realities of life, and on the other hand with the most radical destruction of all false verbal and ideological shells that had distorted and kept separate these realities, is what so sharply distinguishes Rabelaisian laughter from the laughter of other practitioners of the grotesque, humor, satire, and irony. (Bakhtin 237)

A positive interpretation of *The Sympathizer*'s ending would understand it in this Bakhtinian light. The narrator has sacrificed his life and very identity-formation to ideologies that have failed to deliver hope and freedom. He has been cross-contaminated by Eastern Communism and Western democracy and seems unable to settle or commit fully to either one. He has killed for both; the novel depicts his assassinations of (with Bon's help) the crapulent major and then Sonny and alludes to others. The interrogation/confession with Man sets him free from both competing "shells" of ideologies by destroying them with laughter and framing them as a joke. This, put in sequence with birth, excrement, and a sort of death that leads to a "we" setting out to the ocean with the boat people, would suggest a Rabelaisian reclamation of a folkloric basis that retains a destructive quality, which frees the folkloric from its cyclicity. This reading would be an affirmative reading of the novel's ending.

Caroline Rody also interprets *The Sympathizer*'s conclusion in this affirmative register. Offering the most thorough and sophisticated treatment of the ending, she reads it as a triumphant embrace of community.

> Individuals who call themselves part of an aspiring communal "we" can imagine triumph beyond their own survival—or death. Nguyen's sympathizer, having been knocked from the preening perch of the ironic, observing "I," passes through a phase of disintegration into an honored collectivity of the abject, a "we" of stateless migrants.[22] At the novel's beginning, sympathy opens his ambivalent "I" to a broad American literary inheritance. How do we understand the journey from that confraternity to an ending in which—intertextual pastiche having faded—suffering moves the speaker to join an interpersonal "we" of Vietnamese "boat people"? (Rody 402–403)

She writes, "The great transformation in Nguyen's ending is his hero's growth from one kind of 'we' into another. Swelled by fleeing masses, it becomes a 'choral' we, an impulse toward 'communitas' (402). But what differentiates this from the innumerable mass? The narrator seems to have found some amount of peace, but it comes at the loss of an individual identity after physical and psychological torture, following and revisiting a traumatic and repressed experience. We should articulate a more nuanced reading of the ending before we accept it as wholly affirmative. In order to do this, let us back up and look at how identity is treated in the novel.

The novel's progression shows how the war hollows out identity. Names bear noting here. Dawes writes of the importance of names in the human rights novel's two plots. "In the escape plot, the protagonist is named and renamed, sheds names, takes aliases, or avoids names" (Dawes 75). Dawes mentions Ralph Ellison's seminal contribution to this convention in *Invisible Man*, on which (as many critics have noticed) *The Sympathizer* self-consciously riffs even in its opening. In the justice plot, "protagonists are investigators rather than

escapees. They retain a single name and hold dearly to names" (79). Names provide closure and recognition. In other cases, "torturers demonstrate their absolute power by arbitrarily renaming their victims" (79). Regardless of some of its similarities, *The Sympathizer* does not cleanly fit into the escape plot. The dissimilarity here is that the narrator is not the protagonist-as-investigator, but the perpetrator who did "nothing." Man, the Commissar, is the investigator—and already knows the details of the crime. We might best understand *The Sympathizer* as a hybrid of the two plots, because the lack of names does function in accord with the escape plot. The combatants in the war are known only by their roles: the narrator/Captain, the General, the crapulent major, the Commissar, the Commandant, the agent, and the policeman.[7] Even the Auteur is reduced to his role as filmmaker/propagandist, and the list could go on.

All those touched by the war have their given individual names replaced by generic functional ones. The enculturated Americans are the ones with names. Ms. Mori has constructed a pan-Asian identity as a racial formation in response to her US milieu. Sonny the radical journalist did not participate in the war, and his first name testifies that he has been untouched by it (fittingly, Ms. Mori exchanges the narrator for Sonny as her lover). The General's daughter Lan changes her name to Lana (Nguyen 116) as she separates herself from her Vietnamese identity and embraces an unrestrained US identity in rebellion. Claude and Dr. Hedd are notable exceptions in their connection to the war and their possessions of proper names—but these Westerners seem to be able to "rise above the fray" with chilling

[7] The uses of occupational names and confessions are also present in the novels of Daniel Defoe, as Eleanor F. Shevlin pointed out to me. This should be kept in mind given James Dawes's mention of Defoe (which I reproduce a few pages below) as an early practitioner of the realist novel "that has tended toward individual identification, individualizing narrative, and individual problems." The antinomies of identity and identification, in this view, become a concern not exclusive to the human rights novel (even if it reaches a heightened urgency there) but are present throughout the history of the novel's genre as whole. See also Michael Ragussis's *Acts of Naming* (1986) for an approach that sees acts and systems of naming as central to the novelistic tradition.

detachment. They are not marked by the war in the same way. Even the narrator's two named friends, Bon and Man, go through experiences that begin to depersonalize them. In the third chapter, Bon's wife and son are killed on the tarmac during the fall of Saigon. Dawes also notes the importance of the family matrix in the novel of human rights, and here the loss of his family in the war takes from Bon his identity as husband and father. Man's injury by burning turns him literally into "the faceless man" (316). The picaresque elements that lead Dawes to classify the novel as an escape plot dovetail with the narrator's inability to settle anywhere. The protagonist is held together by two things—his presence in time and space and his voice.

Drawing on theorists such as Jacques Derrida, Walter J. Ong, and René Girard, I say that writing is not only representation but also a form of expulsion. The confession is a particularly rarified form of the sort of expulsion writing is able to effect. Either sins are confessed and expelled, or criminal or political wrongdoings are drawn out and brought into the light. The confessant can then be either restored or destroyed—ascertained as alternately separate and associated with the details of the confession. The reader, occupying the role of the confessor, is witness not so much to the war as to the emptying out of the narrator. Identity—compromised, contradictory, fleeting, contested—and the difficulty of grasping identity are what is on display. Yet what makes identity difficult to grasp is represented in the manifold of what is presented and what *can* be seen on the surface of the text. Dawes writes that "war's elimination of private space is best understood when seen as an elimination of all non-war space and time, the creation of a condition from which there is no outside" (58).

As discussed earlier, the surface of Bakhtin's exteriorized "public man" belongs to an earlier epoch, in the prehistory of the novel or during its early development. The novel

develops along with the depiction of the private sphere, and there is a struggle to represent the interiority of the mind and the inwardness of consciousness. The confession is a way of making the private public. As Bakhtin notes, a criminal act immediately makes the private a matter of public interest; in *The Sympathizer*, the narrator's crime is doing "nothing." The novel thus plumbs the depth of his mind and memory to draw out this "nothing." When the confession is fully accomplished, it leads to the publicizing of a private guilt; the effect is the making-public of the narrator's mind. In a formal sense, this publicizing of the private is both against the grain of the novel's concern with private matters and a natural consequence of it. This paradox is an acute concern in the novel of human rights:

> [R]ights violations present a challenge to the novel's ability to adequately describe the world, insofar as the novel as a form—that is, the realist novel, in the broadest sense of the word, ever since Defoe and Richardson—has tended toward individual identification, individualizing narrative, and individual problems. In other words, because the novel of human rights is dominated by individual crimes it is also dominated by individualizing conceptions of rights. (Dawes 27)

We can see how Nguyen's novel attempts to navigate these sparring concerns that often characterize the novel of human rights. The horror of the rape is individualized, and the trauma/emptying out caused by the confession is communalized. Moreover, in order to fully appraise the "we" that appears at the end, we must first acknowledge the already-present parliament in the narrator's head before his interrogation and retraumatization. The men he has killed have accompanied him throughout the novel. The crapulent major and Sonny the journalist appear in strange places and comment on the narrator's activities; they are present

during his interrogation (Nguyen 326). The individual victims are already becoming a "we" in his head before the final "communal" moments of the novel.

For these reasons, *The Sympathizer* more closely accords with the "justice plot" than the "escape plot." The unnamed narrator is both a victim and a perpetrator. His voice leads us through the narrative and never lets us forget its presence, and consequently the reader easily forgets that he is not merely a victim. As I discussed in Chapter 1, the poetics of the novel can act to suspend concepts and categorizations of people. We are given the unnamed narrator's confession in his own words—his narration maps the events of the novel from his perspective and conduces the reader to sympathize, whereas a more abridged informational account might lead us to view him as either victim or perpetrator. Narrated by the perpetrator (an assassin and witness to human rights abuses), we are unmoored by his voice and circumstances and thereby lose sight of how closely *The Sympathizer* fits Dawes's justice plot. To categorize a plot as a justice plot necessarily identifies and assigns certain categories that the unnamed narrator's confessions works to subvert. He has been traumatized and, one can argue, victimized via his role as a spy and an instrumentalized killing machine. Later on, he becomes a victim in the reeducation camp. However, he is also an assassin who confesses to murdering innocents. If we choose to believe the narrative, it is not merely a political confession but a *real* confession—he has actually committed sins. He is also a perpetrator, and the novel's climax is the unveiling of the hidden crime. Joining the boat people is an escape, but it is also a new homelessness and placelessness. The narrator is part of a "we" that cannot be represented and that struggles to find a way in US society. There is an escape at the beginning (from Vietnam to the US) and the end (from Vietnam to the US, again), but these take up comparatively little narrative space, especially if we view the murders and the

movie as leading to the final interrogation. The elements that do fit the picaresque[8] can all be reintegrated if we view the novel in the mold of the justice plot.

Understanding the narrator as both perpetrator and protagonist of a justice plot also helps elucidate the ambivalence of the ending. As Dawes writes, "[authors] do not want their endings to transform the suffering of their protagonists into worthwhile 'experience'" (48) and so the genre and the texts "offer possibility, multitude, and contradiction rather than ideological clarity" (48). Dawes categorizes Nguyen's novel as an escape plot (45), but also says that "[i]f the primary worry of the justice plot is individualization, the primary worry of the escape plot is inevitability" (48). As I have shown, individualization is one of—if not *the*—core concern of this novel. In Dawes's analysis, a perpetrator can be written as "one who is in fact tragic because he cannot escape his name" (90). The narrator remains nameless throughout his confession, but even this is not enough for him to escape his guilt from his involvement in the atrocity committed in the name of the war. His final "escape" is to vacate his very self. This attempt to escape from guilt, though, extends from the logic of his role in the justice plot.

We can also see that the ending of *The Sympathizer* suggests an ironic approach to making "the suffering of [the protagonist] into [a] worthwhile 'experience.'" The "we" is a deferral. In this sense, Rody is correct. The "we" seeks to redirect readerly sympathy from the narrator to the collective. But it also can be read as a wry response to "the narcissism of authorship itself, and the narcissism of the reader as a stand-in for those whose fantasies of

[8] The narrator's roguish characteristics certainly pushes the novel in a picaresque direction. *The Handbook of Literary Terms* defines the picaresque as: "A narrative, usually a novel told in the first-person voice, that presents the life and adventures of a likable rogue (*picaro,* in Spanish) who is at odds with respectable society. Loosely plotted, with adventures unfolding in discrete episodes, the picaresque is part adventure story, part satire, and part realism" (Kennedy, Gioia, & Bauerlein, 113–114). Dawes views escape plots as being picaresques (understandably, as a protagonist moves between cultures), but *The Sympathizer* shows that not *all* picaresques are only escape plots.

moral self-affirmation include the work of rescue in any of its dramatic, individualizing forms" (Dawes 36–37). The ending, which presents the confession as both freedom (physically and psychically) and destruction ("nothing" and retraumatization), in effect says to the reader: "This is what you wanted, isn't it?" The seeming reconciliation is preceded not only by the narrator's social/personal isolation but also by his victims lingering in his head. These individual victims haunting his mind are emptied out along with the narrator's inwardness as his identity flows into the non-individualized mass. Any reading of *The Sympathizer* must deal with the cost at which the ending comes and recognize the balancing act Nguyen's novel plays with the competing spheres of the public/private.

In the end, the balancing act does allow for readerly sympathy, even as the novel questions whether the reader's position of confessor participates in the final destruction of the protagonist's voice. To again quote Bakhtin: "All this acquires special importance when we consider that one of the most basic tasks for the novel will become [. . .] the exposure of all that is vulgar and falsely stereotyped in human relationships" (162). This polyvalence is suggested by the narrator's friends Bon and (especially) Man. They are the individualized ambassadors of the two ideologies and sides of the war between which the narrator is caught. Both, ultimately, want their homeland back. And friendship for both, for the narrator and for each other, transcends the demands of their ideologies. At the end, the faceless Man (whose name suggests, in its homophonic relation to the English word, an unindividualized person) has neither identity-markers nor any illusions about Ho Chi Minh's revolution. All he has left is care for the narrator and Bon and concern for their lives and escape—granted, his way of showing it involves psychological torture. *The Sympathizer* does not offer easy answers to the question of the possibility of the novel's ethical intervention or to the place of the reader

or author, but it lets these concerns steep in a complicated and always compromised mixture. What is sympathy worth? Perhaps, says Nguyen's debut novel—"nothing."

CHAPTER 3: *The Orphan Master's Son*

> *The life of the individual gives way to an impersonal and yet singular life that releases a pure event freed from the accidents of internal and external life, that is, from the subjectivity and objectivity of what happens [. . .]. The life of such individuality fades away in favor of the singular life immanent to a man who no longer has a name, though he can be mistaken for no other.*
> —Gilles Deleuze, *Immanence: A Life*, pp. 28–29.

> *When you talk to North Koreans or read their stories, you can be shocked by things they've seen in the famine or traumas they have been through, but what strikes me the most is how much we have in common. [. . .] So I think that a fiction writer can project humanity inward, based on the assumption they are just like us.*
> —Adam Johnson, *Washington Post Interview (March 7, 2014)*

In this chapter, I offer a reading of Adam Johnson's *The Orphan Master's Son*. This novel has been overlooked by literary critics—despite its position at a sort of flowering of the human rights novel as a genre. As I noted in the previous chapter, the year 2012 saw literary critics become a plurality of those presenting at human rights conferences (Dawes, 2–3). Johnson's novel won the Pulitzer Prize for fiction in 2013, and we could view this event as an informal marker of the ascendance of the novel of human rights. For the greater part of the decade, the selections of the Pulitzer jury followed a trend of prizing fiction showing generic features of the novel of human rights. Granted, earlier winners and shortlist selections also

belong to this category (for example, Chang-rae Lee's *The Surrendered* on the 2011 shortlist, Junot Díaz's *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*'s 2008 win in the previous decade), but 2012 marked a surge of interest, both popular and critical, in novels dealing with human rights and societal ills—Viet Thanh Nguyen's 2016 Pulitzer Prize-winner *The Sympathizer*, of course, being a prime example of this trend's continuation.

Nguyen's and Johnson's novels are complementary, and their treatments of theme and plot show surprising similarities at times—a useful finding for the theorization of the novel of human rights. Yet I have chosen to position *The Orphan Master's Son* after *The Sympathizer* chapter—despite Johnson's novel's earlier publication date—for several reasons. The first is that *The Sympathizer* has received a great deal more critical and (especially) academic attention. In the realm of scholarship, close to nothing has been published on *The Orphan Master's Son*. James Dawes's occasional treatments in his monograph *The Novel of Human Rights* are a notable exception. The second reason is in some ways related to the first: *The Orphan Master's Son* takes, as we shall see, a very different novelistic approach than does *The Sympathizer*, and the groundwork established in Chapter 2 helps illustrate these differences in Johnson's novel.

However, besides the different novelistic approaches each takes and perhaps because of these different approaches, *The Orphan Master's Son* has received vastly different treatment in academic circles. Indeed, Nguyen's novel has been an academic darling of sorts while Johnson's novel has been virtually ignored. First, as many scholars have noticed, *The Sympathizer* situates itself within a *literary* tradition in highly self-conscious ways. The well-educated and self-conscious narrator's voice is the outstanding vehicle for this literariness. Moreover, Viet Thanh Nguyen's academic background and role as a public intellectual exert

an effect on his work.[9] *The Sympathizer* is a novel that alludes to Ralph Ellison and T. S. Eliot on the first page. Casual allusions to both relatively obscure films and theorist Homi K. Bhabha appear in the dialogue. Beyond functioning as veritable catnip for literary critics, this is a novel that already recommends itself to the genre-game of criticism. As we saw in the previous chapter, drawing on the history of literary criticism goes a long way to "unlocking" the novel's particular concerns and strategies. Undoubtedly, being able to play the multiple genre-games of readerly enjoyment and intellectual overcoding is crucial to succeeding both in the literary marketplace and as a public intellectual and can make for a rewarding and enjoyable read.

In stark contrast Johnson's novel takes fewer pains to make itself amenable to the genre-game of criticism. As I will argue, *The Orphan Master's Son* nonetheless enacts sophisticated narrative and thematic strategies (of the sort one might expect from a creative writing professor), but there is a greater emphasis on playing a readerly genre-game than recommending itself as "Literature." Dawes's frequent criticisms of *The Orphan Master's Son* are arguably related to the novel's greater "conventionality" in its aesthetic aims. Dawes's failure to account for the use-value of Johnson's particular aesthetic strategies indirectly reveals an area of the genre of human rights novel that is undertheorized. While

[9] Viet Thanh Nguyen's first book, *Race and Resistance: Literature and Politics in Asian America*, is a scholarly monograph. Many of the contributors to *PMLA* view his scholarly and fictional work as a single project. Sarah Chihaya, in "Slips and Slides," equates the project of *The Sympathizer* with Nguyen's nonfiction *Nothing Ever Dies: Vietnam and the Memory of War* (2016). Yogita Goyal calls those two works, plus his short story collection *The Refugees* (2017), as forming a "troika of revisionist accounts of the Vietnam War" (379). Ben Tran also reads *The Sympathizer* through the lens of Nguyen's critical work. Min Hyoung Song looks at not only Nguyen's work but also his public presence as forming a persona of a "scholar-public intellectual" (410). The literariness of *The Sympathizer* undoubtedly supports this role of the scholar-public intellectual. While it is of course eminently reasonable to take into account the author's stated and unstated goals of his nonfiction work when interpreting his novel, following from my discussion of genre-games in Chapter 1, I would respond that it is not self-evident that different genres do or even can participate in a single literary-scholarly project. And (unlike what many of the *PMLA* contributors seem to assume) certainly not in the same way. Though the concept of genre-games implies that they can be *used* in the same way, fiction and nonfiction's different forms suggest different use-values, and a supple criticism should take this into account.

Dawes claims that he wishes to avoid judgements in favor of certain novels (and he does attempt rehabilitative readings of works such as Isabel Allende's that have been criticized as being unsophisticated), his criticisms accord more with aesthetic criteria than he first admits. As he later acknowledges, "The most interesting novels [. . .] are the ones that are self-conscious about [their] narrative patterns" and that "[s]ubvert, interrogate, thoughtfully analyze" (201). Yet, Johnson's novel, in many ways, does subvert, interrogate, and analyze its subject matter in interesting ways. Moreover, despite disavowals, Dawes does adhere to aesthetic criteria, and perhaps those criteria cause him to overlook Johnson's skillful harnessing of techniques that Dawes admires. In particular, and as this chapter details, we should not overlook the different relationship that Johnson's novel creates with the reader than that enacted by *The Sympathizer*.

It is *The Sympathizer*'s engagement with literary-critical language games that makes it especially appealing to academic readers. As I discussed in Chapter 1, the novel of human rights falls into a similar double-bind as that of postcolonial novels in its desire to convey information and to do so in ways that are "authentic." The fictional nature of the human rights novel is its greatest strength and its greatest stumbling block. Somewhat paradoxically, I argue that a novel's ability to play an *aesthetic* language-game is crucial to the effectiveness of its ethical intervention. Not only does Dawes fail to account for the structural reasons for the more "conventional" aspects of Johnson's novel, but he also does not sufficiently attend to the place of form in the aesthetic experience's catalyzation of the novel's concerns. To understand Johnson's aesthetic use of form, we must first look at how the novel positions the reader and the stark contrast it offers to the reader's positioning in Nguyen's novel.

The Orphan Master's Son uses its plot and its modes of address to keep the reader off-balance. In the previous chapter, *The Sympathizer*'s use of the first-person confession was discussed at length. In that work, the confession foregrounds the protagonist's voice and places the reader in the role of the confessor. This positioning establishes a dyadic relationship between the confessor and confessant, reader and character, and the unfolding of the novel becomes the negotiation of this relationship. This dynamic harkens to a postulate of Michel Foucault's conception of power—"the moving substrate of force relations" within a "grid of intelligibility" are "always local and unstable," an aggregate of "every relation from one point to another" (93). Foucault's idea of power is based upon a vision of "points" on a "grid." Thus, in this view, power is based upon the moves and countermoves between two points in relation to each other.

> The confession is a ritual of discourse in which the speaking subject is also the subject of the statement; it is also a ritual that unfolds within a power relationship, for one does not confess without the presence (or virtual presence) of a partner who is not simply the interlocuter but the authority who requires the confession, prescribes and appreciates it, and intervenes in order to judge, punish, forgive, console, and reconcile [. . .]. (Foucault 61–62)

Foucault's understanding of power assumes a certain aura of stability because it relies on this dyadic model. The confession is an exemplar of this type of power, a case in which this idea of power is shown to be valid. In *The Sympathizer*, the reader becomes privy to a complex and tantalizing game the spy plays, necessitated by his own sense of being under scrutiny. There, the movement of points in a game of power is apt and provides much of the narrative pleasure. Foucault's idea of power, however, is overly parsimonious, which becomes a

problem when the literary experience is assumed to be merely a game of power, ignoring the many other language-games in which literature participates or to which it can be deployed. This deficiency is highlighted in a novel like *The Orphan Master's Son* that takes pains to trouble this dyadic relationship such that the "points" on the "grid" are made difficult to locate. *The Orphan Master's Son* varies its mode of address to the reader and the point of view of its narrative, using the novel's structure to disorient readers and keep them off-balance.

The Orphan Master's Son also uses the genre of confession but does not introduce it until the second half of the novel. This delay allows a very different relationship to develop with the reader than that found in *The Sympathizer*. From the first page, the novel works to subvert a "conventional" relationship of the reader with the novel. The text opens with a propaganda broadcast. The first words of the novel proper are as follows: "CITIZENS, gather 'round your loudspeakers, for we bring important updates! In your kitchens, in your offices, on your factory floors—wherever your loudspeaker is located, turn up the volume!" (Johnson 3). This broadcast is not listed in the table of contents that instead indicates Part 1 as beginning on page 5. The interpolation of the propaganda comes as a surprise. As was implied in the previous chapter, literary criticism does well to ask: "Who is the reader?" The propaganda broadcast, with its mixture of direct commands and hokey diction, throws its readers "onto the ground," so to speak, as if they are in North Korea. In the second sentence, places of residence and labor are described ("in your kitchens, in your offices, on your factory floors") using second-person possessives. Not only does this show how the private is invaded by the communist regime, the sudden demand to "turn up the volume!" blares into the novel before the narrative even begins, creating an atmosphere of bewilderment and

unease from the start. From here, the novel switches to third-person narration and continues fairly conventionally for the work's first half. Johnson's style is pellucid, without accent or flourish. The plot speeds along without providing any stylistic cues toward what happens next. As Suzanne Keen has noted, with reference to empirical studies of novel-reading, immersive reading is more effective in promoting empathy than is perspective-taking reading (25). The style of Johnson's novel should be recognized for both facilitating an immersive reading experience and setting up the reader to be shocked. After all, the leaps in point of view and perspective pull the reader both outside the novel and then back in, in a sophisticated narrative strategy that blends a "conventional" approach with more self-aware "postmodern" approaches—a strategy equally suited to the near-incredible subject matter and a successful aesthetic experience. The second half only intensifies these strategies. Marked as occurring one year later, the second part is titled "The Confessions of Commander Ga" and opens with a first-person confession by Ga's interrogator. From then on, the novel alternates between this first-person account of the narrator trying to discover Ga's true identity and the third-person narrative of Commander Ga as well as the irregular appearances of the second-person propaganda broadcasts that tell a serialized story.

As might be gathered from this mixture of the intimate genre of the confession and the public genre of a propaganda broadcast, a central concern of *The Orphan Master's Son* is the public and the private. The novel represents a North Korea that has been stripped of any sort of privacy. Dawes writes how war's destruction of private space is "an elimination of all non-war space and time" (58). Johnson, however, is faced with a different task. To portray North Korea, he must depict not a society in the midst of war but one in which the regime has totalized a "state of exception" for its citizenry at all times. There is no war in the novel.

Instead, there is spying, surveillance, kidnapping, and diplomatic overtures. At the novel's onset, protagonist Jun Do participates in a state-sanctioned kidnapping and soon after is deployed on a clandestine mission to gather intelligence on international players suspected of being a threat to North Korea. Despite the secrecy and the covert nature of much of what happens in the novel's plot, what is depicted is a lack of privacy and the lack of and struggle for interpersonal connections. Portraying this state of affairs is the central problem of *The Orphan Master's Son*. Thus, the means by which Johnson's novel seeks to present the lack of privacy are worth analyzing. Indeed, the ways in which Johnson's poetics grapple with this problem have not received attention for how radical they are. To assist in understanding how Johnson tackles this problem, I must first sketch the theoretical contours in which his novel operates.

A central difficulty of portraying the private/public dichotomy stems from the generic form of the novel itself; Bakhtin identifies the increased need to represent privacy as a prime factor furthering the development of the novel as a form. "*A contradiction developed between the public nature of the literary form and the private nature if its content*" (Bakhtin 123, italics original). Here enters the use of criminal investigations, legal trials, and detective investigations as ways of resolving this contradiction. As Bakhtin observes, the confession, both legal and personal self-revelation, is part of this legal realm (123). "Events [personal and private] acquire a public significance as such only when they become crimes" (122). Literary critic D. A. Miller has also written on investigations and surveillance as characteristic of the nineteenth-century novel. For Miller, the novel reproduces Foucault's panoptic technologies of power; the novel—with its unflinching interest in the private, the intimate, and the secret—places the reader in the position of the hidden detective writing a

dossier on his suspects.[10] These two understandings of the novel have similarities, but Bakhtin emphasizes the novel's place in a historical movement from the public to the emergence of the private, whereas Miller sees the novel as a technology mirroring the exercise of power and authority. Miller's view is acutely observed, but inserts the reader in a difficult position.

Yi-Ping Ong, in a recent monograph, takes a very different understanding of the poetics of the novel. As she posits, within the experience of reading, the author of the realist novel must "disappear" as the causal principle moving the characters. In her understanding, the novel can only succeed by plausibly representing a character's autonomy. "The aesthetic fiction of an existence as the progressive unfolding of undetermined free will thus depends upon the apparent absence of any perspective from which the consummated whole becomes comprehensible" (22). To gloss—the novel, in order to be believable, must preserve a core of deterritorialization. The issue becomes deciding what is representable, and how to approach the necessity of containing that which must not and cannot be fully unveiled. Creating "an apparent absence of any perspective" that can fully know the novel and its characters is an effect of *The Orphan Master's Son*'s shifts in point of view. Within both the novel as a form

[10] These critics also take exact opposite views regarding *who* does the spying. Bakhtin specifically mentions the prostitute and courtesan (Defoe's *Moll Flanders* and *Roxanne*) as "extremely convenient for spying and eavesdropping on private life with its secrets and intimacies" (125). For Miller, on the other hand, the prostitute gains salience as someone who is *spied upon*. His example, from Zola, is the prostitutes fleeing from the police, only to instead be documented with impeccable detail by the novelist. Bakhtin's spy is immanent in the world; Miller's spy is at the world's edge or (as the reader/author) outside of it. The question becomes one of distance: Bakhtin's enmeshing of novelistic and real-world chronotopes (131) as the epic's treatment of time gives way to the contemporaneity of the novel or Miller's cool remove at the periphery of the novel's events, viewing them from behind a two-way mirror. Bakhtin's conception of a novelistic chronotope is actually more "invasive," as the boundary between the real-world and the novel becomes more permeable as the novel gains maturity as a form, but it is not experienced as such. Miller's conception could be likened to parallel lines on different planes: yet the non-invasiveness is experienced by one who considers it as more "invasive." Even this approach, though, could be said to rely upon an embrace of the novel's world in *aesthetic faith*, even as it worries itself with violating it. This alarm can even give way to *care*. If we take a step back from the immediacy of its paranoia, Miller's approach can be a step toward a practice of novel-reading that is concerned with the ethical.

that reveals the private and a State regime that totalizes the public, a semblance of privacy and unknowability must be preserved.

The strategies used by the novel to treat the public and the private extend to the treatment of identity. *The Orphan Master's Son* complicates the matter of surveillance by making identity itself inscrutable. Not only does the work keep the reader off-kilter through its point of view and mode of address to the reader, it also surprises the reader with the change of Jun Do into Commander Ga. Rather than attempt to lay bare or pin down an "authentic" depiction of the life of a North Korean citizen, Johnson's novel demurs from giving the main character a stable identity at all. While other texts have played with identity, Johnson's work takes this strategy to vertiginous altitudes when the main character switches identities in the middle of the novel. To ground my analysis of Johnson's treatment of identity, I will first turn to philosopher Byung-Chul Han. Though his attention is on Western democracies, his work is useful to consider here. He writes of the state of the Other in a society characterized by transparency:

> The corollary of hypervisibility is the dismantling of thresholds and borders. Hypervisibility is the telos of the society of transparency. [. . .] Thresholds and transitions are zones of mystery and riddle—here, the atopic *Other* begins. When borders and thresholds vanish, *fantasies of the Other* disappear too. Without the negativity of thresholds or threshold-experiences, fantasy withers. The contemporary crisis in literature and the arts stems from a crisis of fantasy: the *disappearance of the Other*. (Han *Agony* 40–41)

The society of transparency's mandate toward hypervisibility breaks down the thresholds and transitions that allow "becoming." A logic of presentation pushes toward ever-increasing

intelligibility, and this impedes a recognition of otherness. For Han, this has created an exhaustion in contemporary literary and artistic creation because there is no longer any fantasy of the Other. Han, in accordance with his pessimistic evaluation of society, would undoubtedly say that much contemporary literature is "narcissistic" or "autoerotic." In this view, I would argue that Johnson's *The Orphan Master's Son* is a valuable intervention.

The protagonist's metamorphosis in *The Orphan Master's Son* creates a bricolage from several literary traditions. Dawes categorizes *The Orphan Master's Son* as a picaresque "escape plot" (47), but the novel utilizes several novelistic genres beyond the picaresque and its close counterpart, the literature of the rogue. There are many precedents for literary "thresholds and transitions" (the specifically American exemplar of this tradition might be Mark Twain's *The Prince and the Pauper*) wherein individuals switch societal roles—and a long history of the novel being used to illuminate the social milieu, such as the work of Charles Dickens. Even before that, Classical narratives employed metamorphoses, which Bakhtin connects with the character of the rogue or the spy. His primary example is Apuleius's *The Golden Ass*, the animal transformation allowing the main character to invade private spaces without detection. What distinguishes Johnson's portrayal of metamorphosis is how it combines elements of the *bildungsroman*, the novel of social critique, and, to a lesser extent, the picaresque to approach its particular context of a (fictionalized) North Korea. Bakhtin would view the exteriority of "public man" as natural within the prehistory of novelistic discourse (such as Greek tragedy and genres with strong oratorical roots). Johnson's novel must portray the publicization of private life as a *regression* and a despotic exercise of unrestrained State power rather than a natural state of affairs. There is a fine

balance to achieve here, both in terms of the aesthetic success of the novel and efforts to avoid reproducing within its pages a certain kind of despotism in exposing its characters.

The Orphan Master's Son uses many transitions and thresholds. Partly these are due to the novel's picaresque qualities. The roguish adventurer must be thrust from event to event. The everyman character allows the novel to traverse nearly every strata of North Korean society, traveling from the sea, to the concentration camp, and to Pyongyang (and even internationally, to the United States and Japan). What becomes remarkable about this novel's use of its protagonist is that Johnson refuses to allow him an identity. The first half already suggests this lack of identity. "Jun Do" sounds like the placeholder name "John Doe," acknowledged explicitly in the novel when a maid mishears: "John Doe? Isn't that the name you give a missing person?" (Johnson 140). Moreover, Jun Do picks his own name from a list of "the 114 Grand Martyrs of the Revolution" (24–25) because the man supposedly his father would not name him. Rather than privately derived, his name is public, drawn from North Korean cultural mythology. He grows up in an orphanage. He is unmarked by the private. When asked his mother's name, he replies: "Like putting a name to my problems would solve anything" (25). Similar to the naming practices in *The Sympathizer*, the names of characters in *The Orphan Master's Son* are often only their roles (the Captain, the Second Mate) or simply missing (the second half's unnamed interrogator/narrator—who arguably fits in either category—or both his and Jun Do's parents). Personal names are conferred by one's family and community, the network of individuals that ground one's sense of private identity. The naming illustrates how Jun Do and others' identity-formation has been obstructed by the absence of a truly private sphere.

Insisting upon this struggle for the private against the public is essential to understanding the novel. This emphasis on such a struggle is opposed to Dawes's reading of Johnson's North Korea as the totalization not of the public but of the *private*. "At the sphere of the political, the quintessential literary example of the tyranny of the private is Adam Johnson's North Korea, a nation figured as an international secret and a grotesque impersonation of the inviolable home, where Kim Jong Il is the benevolent 'fatherly leader'" (92). In one sense, Dawes is not far off in this assessment, and "[p]rivacy as privation," connected with Hannah Arendt's characterization of the household of the "ancient Greek city-states as a site of unchecked patriarchal power" (92), is dealt with in the novel. However, Dawes misconstrues the situation as "the process of violently converting all individual private spaces into a single, vast private space" (92). The language of familial intimacy is used toward making public the sort of transparency given in a trusting private relationship, but as is obvious, "[t]he society of transparency is a society of mistrust and suspicion" (Han *Transparency* 48). The home has been violated because it has been made public. The interrogator's parents are a prime example. He says, "Their eyesight failed at the same time, and they have become paranoid [. . .]. They listen to the loudspeaker all day, hail me as *citizen!* When I get home, and are careful never to reveal a personal feeling, lest it get them denounced by a stranger thy can't quite lay their eyes on" (Johnson 187–188) This is not "the tyranny of the private" but a *tyrannization of* the private. The difference is subtle, but missing this distinction might have lead Dawes to misconstrue how *The Orphan Master's Son* aims to show Jun Do/Commander Ga's attempts to recover the private.

Indeed, earlier in the novel it is the inscrutable mythology of Commander Ga and his ability to wrest a private space from the Dear Leader himself (by demanding from him

possession of Sun Moon and getting her after “there was trouble in the capital” and “the Dear Leader bitterly relented” [Johnson 74]), which distinguish him. The entrapment of Sun Moon in this private space is also why “Jun Do suddenly felt for her” (74). There is an ambivalent nature to the private, then, but its reestablishment is essential to Jun Do/Commander Ga’s growth and quest for identity and his resistance to his own exteriorization by the North Korean society, whose “fatherly leader” births orphans. Not until Jun Do takes the place of Commander Ga is he able to have the secrecy of the private.

Jun Do’s eventual assumption of Commander Ga’s identity is foreshadowed throughout the first half of the novel. He is characterized by those he meets as being mutable and prone to take from others. The translator from one of his missions, Gil, says to him: “You don’t need to tell yourself that your father was this and your mother was that. You can be anyone you want. Reinvent yourself for a night” (Johnson 29). Jun Do nearly kicks him for this, angered “that ‘take’ was a word people used for those who had so little to give as to be immeasurable” (29). Later on, Jun Do has a heated exchange with the Second Mate:

> “He [the Captain] only said you were an orphan, that they were always after things they couldn’t have.”
>
> “Really? You sure he didn’t say it was because orphans try to steal other people’s lives?”
>
> “Don’t get upset. The Captain just said I shouldn’t get too friendly with you.”
>
> “Or that when they die, orphans like to take other people with them?” (Johnson 69–70)

The orphan (though Jun Do never admits he is an orphan) is figured as being like a cuckoo bird or even a changeling. But even beyond the rogue, the origin-less orphan is an uncanny

and metamorphic creature, a harbinger of loss and dissolution. And his lack of a private life eventually prepares him to steal Commander Ga's identity. As a way to make him an "official" member of the crew, the Captain tattoos a picture of Jun Do's wife onto his chest to match the others—except that Jun Do is not married. Jun Do finds the idea of having a portrait of someone over his heart romantic, but "then Jun Do remembered that he had no one that mattered to him, which was why his tattoo would be of an actress he'd never seen, taken from a calendar at the helm of a fishing boat" (72). When Jun Do worries that a famous actress will be recognized, the Captain assures him the tattoo "is for the Americans and South Koreans. To them, it will simply be a female face" (73). The actress is Sun Moon, Commander Ga's sequestered wife. The Captain says that tattooing their wife's face on their chests "places her in your heart forever" (73). When Jun Do becomes Commander Ga, his lack of identity, like his blank chest, makes the transformation uncannily seamless. Sun Moon, as an actress, even mirrors Jun Do/Commander Ga's lack of identity.[11] The Captain warns, "When you see her movies, that's not really her. Those are just characters she plays" (73). Even Sun Moon, who more than anyone else preserves a form of continuity between Jun Do and Commander Ga, has only an identity as a simulator of identity.

Analyzing the complications of identity is a crucial part of understanding how *The Orphan Master's Son* responds to both modernist refusal of social mission and to the sentimental novel. Johnson has explicitly identified a possible aim of fiction as "trying to give a voice to the most voiceless people in the world" ("Johnson on North Korea"). As a novel of human rights, Johnson's work clearly rejects a modernist refusal of social mission. The dangers of sentimentalism, though, remain perilous for the genre. Dawes reiterates a

[11] Ga reads aloud a passage from Kim Jong-il's *On the Art of Cinema*: "'"*The Actress cannot play a role*,'" Ga read, "'*She must, in an act of martyrdom, sacrifice herself to become he character*.'"
The Dear Leader smiled in approval at the sound of his own words" (230).

common and understandable concern that "human rights discourse today produces classes of persons defined by their vulnerability" (118). For authors, this is an "intractable problem" that risks "rendering such populations equivalent to their vulnerabilities," and "reifying classes of absolute identity" (118). Johnson refuses to allow his protagonist an identity. Jun Do/Commander Ga, unmarked by the private, is translator, kidnapper, taskmaster, intelligence officer, concentration camp inmate, military official, diplomat, orphan (or orphan master's son), husband, father, traitor, and imposter. Though the rising and falling of Jun Do/Commander Ga is similar to the "rags-to-riches" genre (recalling, again, the mixture of *bildungsroman* and panoramic social view of a work by Dickens like *Great Expectations*), there are no rituals or thresholds and no real "becoming" to each of these roles. The protagonist merely zips to each and occupies them. Dawes writes that, in the escape plot, immobility is surrender (99). However, he does not mention the relation of immobility to identity: immobility establishes an identity-category. The protagonist's multitude of roles is how the novel gives him a hypermobility, and this hypermobility and lack of "becoming" bewilder identity categories. The reader is hard pressed to define such a contradictory character according to his vulnerabilities or to "sentimentalize" him. Yet, what does help to lend insight to the character's conflicting identities is the persistent motif of bodies of water.

The tension between state boundaries and personal becomings are thematized through the motif of the ocean and the two American rowers. The ocean and boats represent mobility, but more as well. James Dawes writes that freedom of movement (and residence) is foundational for the tacit consent required in the social contract, but "[t]he novel of human rights is about the breakdown of state legitimacy, about the undoing rather than the establishment of the social contract. In these novels, Socratic/Lockean conceptions of

mobility and residence are overturned" (94–95). Mobility depicts "resistance to state-defined space" (95). Dawes invokes Jun Do's work as a translator as an example of resistance via mobility. However, while mobility is a means of survival for Jun Do, it never gives him the power to resist. His travels are always undertaken under the aegis of the DPRK. Defection is potentially a death-sentence for those left behind, and for this reason Jun Do abstains from defection himself and thwarts the attempts of others. Furthermore, Dawes misconstrues mobility as corresponding to the protagonist's development of an identity. Dawes perceptively notes that the vehicles grow from small motorboat to airplane as Johnson's story progresses. He says the development of the protagonist's transportation mirrors "the development of the protagonist's identity" when he eventually achieves an "authentic identity through revelation and freedom" (96). However, Jun Do/Commander Ga does not develop an "authentic identity." Tellingly, Dawes is unable to even attach a name to "the protagonist." The vehicles do correspond to Jun Do/Commander Ga's propulsion up the North Korean social ladder, but this is still within the society that functionally denies him an authentic identity. Instead, the sea is the central motif relating to identity.

Simultaneously in open flux and bounded, the sea stages a physical and conceptual site of tension between the freedom of becoming and the constraint of striation. Still early in the novel, Jun Do's first mission as a kidnapper involves crossing the Sea of Japan in a fishing vessel. The water becomes the stage whereupon the predatory North Korean state violates national boundaries with Japan, but it also holds promise and allure for those wishing to defect. Deleuze and Guattari's conceptual pair of the smooth and the striated help explain this dual nature. In the penultimate chapter of *A Thousand Plateaus*, they explain "the smooth and the striated" in the following way: "Smooth space is formed by events and

haecceities [. . .]. occupied by intensities, wind and noise, forces, and sonorous and tactile qualities [. . .]. Striated space, on the contrary, is canopied by the sky as measure and by the measurable visual qualities" (479). Striation involves a "scientific" measuring according to objective models, whereas smooth space is the realm of magnitudes, continuums, and fuzzy logic according to relations, comparisons, and correspondences (as I read it, these correspond to the authors' conceptual pair of *reterritorialization* and *deterritorialization*: striation is an effect of a (re)territorialization and smooth space comes about in a deterritorialization). They spend a section expounding these concepts according to "the maritime model." They write that the sea is both "the archetype of smooth space" and "the archetype of all striations" (480). While there is a "nomadic system of navigation based on the wind and noise, the colors and sounds of the seas" (479), "only the States were capable of carrying it [a gradual striation gridding the smooth space of the sea] to completion, of raising it to the global level of a 'politics of science'" (480). The ocean is dangerous, not only physically, but politically. The *Junma* lowers its DPRK flag during their missions (Johnson 40, 71). They investigate the group of American, Russian, and Japanese voices they hear on the radio. This international cohort turns out to be playing chess in space (79), but the sea is important enough for maintaining national hegemony—claims of striations—that they assumed these voices were aboard a submarine and "up to no good" (48).

On the personal level, Jun Do almost achieves a sense of belonging with his crew aboard their ship, the *Junma* (78). Relaxing with the crew on the hatches, he bonds with them over a silently shared view. "They never stared toward North Korea in the moments like these—always it was east, toward Japan, or even farther out into the limitless Pacific" (77). They are oriented toward a view of freedom, which is not really a country (whether Japan or

the US) but something "even farther out." It is the smooth space of "the limitless Pacific." He fails to find a family among the crew, but he continues to equate the sea with freedom. Wanda, an American agent, asks if Jun Do/Commander Ga "feels free": "How to explain his country to her, he wondered. How to explain that leaving its confines to sail upon the Sea of Japan—that was being free" (154). Earlier, Jun Do describes being on the water. "When you're out of sight of the shore," he said, "you could be anybody from anywhere. It's like you have no past. Out there, everything is spontaneous, every lick of water that kicks up, every bird that drops in from nowhere. Over the airwaves, people say things you'd never imagine. Here, nothing is spontaneous." (108). A page earlier, Jun Do remembers the Orphan Master's watch and how he used it when he "ran their [the orphans'] entire lives, from dawn to lights out, as he farmed the boys out to clean septic tanks or to be sent down shafts on bare ropes to drain oil stumps" (107). The rigidity of clock-time's regulation of duties, identities, and every moment is followed by the completely open possibilities of being "out of sight of the shore." The Dear Leader describes the countervailing striation thus: "Do they [the Americans] not know that on my *soil* they play by my rules? Do they not know that when their wheels *touch the ground* they are beholden to me" (325, emphasis added).

However, the becoming promised by the sea is hazardous. "Voyaging smoothly is a becoming, and a difficult, uncertain becoming at that" (Deleuze & Guattari, 482). Defections fail, and the promises of a blissful retirement for dutiful citizen-sailors are empty. Heroes (and sometimes their fabricated stories) are made while voyaging, but to be caught in a lie is fatal and not even heroes are safe. Personal becomings succeed, fail, and always intermingle with the State. All these tensions meet in the novel's voyage of the lady rowers. Dawes notes a US literary tradition wherein "ships at sea and travel by boat have functioned both as

symbols of ‘lighting out’ for freedom [. . .]. The human rights novel explores this literary inheritance by depicting the ship as a vehicle of movement that never arrives” (99). The journey of the two “lady rowers” crossing the ocean, at first tangential to the plot, is threaded throughout the entirety of the novel. Mentions recur throughout the book and continue until the final pages.

Along with another rower traveling with her, the American who rows in the dark makes her first appearance on page 41. Jun Do hears her broadcasts while roaming through different stations, and he ingratiates himself to the crew of the *Junma* by updating them on the rowers’ journey around the world. The crew becomes fascinated by her and the other rower. At one point, the rower in the dark, in her nightly broadcast, says she believes that humans would one day grow “flippers and blowholes, that humanity would become one again in the oceans” (Johnson 54). She figures the ocean as a plane of possibility in her vision of becoming-animal. Later broadcasts indicate that the rowers are in distress. Jun Do inquires into their fate while in Texas, and the Americans tell him the boat was found empty, bloodied, and partly burned (149). Only one of the rowers survives. She is picked up by a North Korean vessel. Accounts differ on what happened to the other rower, Linda. The Dear Leader suggests the surviving rower killed her friend. The rower herself tells Ga that Linda was shot while firing flares at their captors in self-defense (231). Eventually, the Dear Leader gives the rower back to America as a diplomatic gesture. This exchange allows Commander Ga to cause a distraction and have Sun Moon and the children escape with the Americans (432–433). The novel ends with a propaganda broadcast rewriting what happened during the exchange.

The lady rower's rescue/capture by North Korea shows the failure and even impossibility of absolute deterritorialization. The freedom of being alone in the ocean's smooth space is unsustainable—it has to give way to striation eventually. The failure comes at a high price. But when her return becomes a diplomatic gesture between States, a sliver of possibility is opened up and Sun Moon and her children are able to defect. This is not the boundless promise of the sea's smooth space, but the rowers do, in the end, allow Sun Moon and her children to cross a threshold into a new life and, in doing so, give Jun Do/Commander Ga a new sense of identity.

The abrupt transformation of Jun Do into Commander Ga increases in meaning when paired with Han's thoughts on thresholds and borders. On the one hand, the event amounts to the vanishing of the border that separates the person "Jun Do" from the person "Commander Ga." The stealing of Commander Ga's identity is not a ritualized transition guiding the pro-social development of an individual, such as a coming-of-age ritual, wherein change is controlled and preserves continuity between that individual's previous role and the next phase in their evolution. Here we see how Johnson subverts the *bildungsroman* genre to comment on the repressiveness of North Korean society—perhaps an anti-*bildungsroman* that reveals the impossibility of personal development. The protagonist does advance in his "education" in being able to navigate society, but not through communal channels of "growth" or "maturation" that characterize functioning societies. There is no transition—the change of identity is a blur. The whiplash-inducing immediacy and strangeness of it all makes the point that, in a society that has made the public total, *personal identity does not matter*. The ease with which Jun Do assumes Commander Ga's life and station suggests that there is nothing to mark their difference—once he literally steps into his shoes, he is as much

Commander Ga as their previous wearer. The novel unfailingly treats the character as "really" Commander Ga and no longer Jun Do. The first half ends by announcing that "nothing further is known of the citizen Pak Jun Do" (175). Here "citizen" marks a *role* rather than a *person*. Later on, "[t]his isn't even Commander Ga," the interrogator/narrator says (196), and then two sentences later the interrogator's narrative voice refers to him as just that. He might as well be. The extreme suspicion and totalization of transparency ironically makes what is "Other" about one person versus another disappear.

On the other hand, the novel is able to use this swapping of identities to allow a deeper dimension of otherness to emerge. Here the chronotope of the novel—its use of space and time—allows this singular effect that the genre of "information" is unable to approximate. Philosophical approaches to the self can help clarify the complexity of this narrative strategy. The abrupt change from "Jun Do" to "Commander Ga" recalls, in a heightened way, Jean-Paul Sartre's notion that the principle of identity (a = a) does not apply to human identity. From another perspective, G. W. Leibniz proposes that every Monad is subject to change (prop. 10) but that one ought only to call "Souls" those Monads "in which perception is more distinct, and is accompanied by memory" (prop. 19). As a genre, the novel is singularly equipped to utilize this antinomy of identity because it typically does not present events as self-identical but as changing within time and space.[12] The novel maps a sequence of memory, memory being a constitute of identity. On the contrary, as information, a description must abridge the subject such that it is explainable as one thing and not

[12] Film, I would say, is less equipped to achieve radical depictions of identity because the body of the actor/actress establishes continuity as the "base material" of the genre's representational power. However, there are likely some films that have attempted to complicate the genre's representation of identity: Luis Buñuel's final and groundbreaking film *That Obscure Object of Desire* (1977), wherein the lead character is played by two different actresses for no diegetic reason, is likely the first and most distinguished example of a radical filmic technique of portraying identity.

another.[13] In *The Orphan Master's Son*, the protagonist *is* Jun Do, and the protagonist *is* Commander Ga. The positivity of this dual identity also suggests a converse negativity—the protagonist *is not* Jun Do, the protagonist *is not* Commander Ga. The novel dramatizes this. When he firsts receives his subject, the interrogator vacuum-tubes to his superiors an initial report on the imposter: "Is not Commander Ga." Immediately a response is returned: "Is Commander Ga" (Johnson 184). The interrogator expects he will discover the truth of Ga's real name, but when the interrogator offers Commander Ga a pen to write his name on his body (an exterior manifestation of identity) before execution, Ga refuses: "I don't even know what name I'd write" (410). In insisting upon the veracity of its own mutable surface, the contradiction of the novel's surface content suggests a supersensible dimension for the protagonist's consciousness. This eludes what Byung-Chul Han calls the "quantified self" or a commercialized "authenticity." Without the ability to collapse or exteriorize (because such exteriorization would violate the law of non-contradiction) the identity of Jun Do/Commander Ga, the reader is unable to take Commander Ga (or, retroactively, Jun Do) as self-identical with himself or as authentically informational. Johnson's radical narrative strategy suggests an atopic Other.

The interrogator begins to grasp this, but not fully. He is too beholden to his own rationalizations of his interrogating. His confession is to assuage his guilt, looking for

[13] Byung-Chul Han writes: "It is narrativity that distinguishes [memory] from storage, which simply works additively and accumulates [. . .]. Things in a junkshop simply lie next to each other; they are not stratified. Therefore history is absent. The junkshop can neither remember nor forget" (*Transparency* 32). In a logic of presentation, identity risks becoming "junk": self-identical, static, and inert. This quote from Han also sheds light on *The Orphan Master's Son*'s approach to propaganda. Dr. Song counsels Jun Do that the "story is more important than the person. If a man and his story are in conflict, it is the man who must change." Narrativity, then, also can become despotic by enforcing a presentation of identity upon a person. Jun Do characterizes North Korea in accordance with a society of transparency: "It's the most straightforward place on earth" (Johnson 154). And the rapid enforcements of roles upon citizens in the novel shows how they are, indeed, treated like tools—or "junk." As Comrade Buc says ominously of the long-lived Dr. Song, "you're only as safe as your last success" (126).

absolution from whoever is his reader, standing as a permanent record. His is not a political confession, but a spiritual one, and motivated by a desire to write into permanence an absolution. “Only my own story concerns me now,” he tells Ga (409). He likens his work to a “science” (180). As an interrogator, he believes that he can “discover the inside of a subject” (184). He says his department writes the biographies in the third person “to maintain our objectivity” and reluctantly uses the word “I” in his account, even as he is continually self-obsessed. To quote Gilles Deleuze: “Repressive forces don’t stop people from expressing themselves but rather force them to express themselves. What a relief to have nothing to say, the right to say nothing” (quoted in Han, *Psychopolitics* 84). Commander Ga says: “I told you everything, as best as I was able. I may not know who I am, but the actress is free.” (411). For the interrogator, his job remains incomplete—he cannot believe that Sun Moon escaped. He is able to understand that his biography does not fully contain Ga, but he does not understand why.

The Orphan Master’s Son, finally, is about stories. More than anything, it is about their unreliability and ultimate insufficiency to fully encapsulate their subjects. The narrative techniques work to keep the reader both invested in the story but also off-balance and struggling to get control of what is happening. The propaganda even involves the recounting of the “Best North Korean Story” (Johnson 193). For stories are also a means of control. “Public life and public man are by their very essence *open, visible* and *audible*” (Bakhtin 123). The interrogator says, “When you have a subject’s biography, there is nothing between the citizen and the state” (Johnson 181). The private is made completely public and transparent. In *The Orphan Master’s Son*, stories are a matter of life and death. Jun Do’s ability to interiorize and believe his fake story of a shark attack keeps him alive (88), and

when his group fails to negotiate with the Americans, “the three concocted a story to mitigate their failure” (162). Dr. Song says: “the story is more important than the person. If a man and his story are in conflict, it is the man who must change” (122), and this supports the interrogator’s logic that he can create a “single, original volume that contains the person himself” (181) and preserve in the library (“a sacred place” [187]) this person, who can then be discarded. The books are never read; no visitors are allowed. Only occasionally will the propagandists mine “feel-good” material from these records of enemies of the state (187). “[W]e’re story takers, not storytellers” (187). Contrary to this, the novel attempts to show in the character of Jun Do/Commander Ga how to resist this capture within a written record, a discourse of “authenticity,” that is just as much a concern for the critical appraisal of the novel of human rights as it is a thematic concern of Johnson’s novel. Ga says to Sun Moon’s children, referred to in the novel as “the boy” and “the girl”: “A name isn’t a person [. . .] Don’t ever remember someone by their name. [. . .] It’s you that matter, not your names. It’s the two of you I’ll never forget” (379). The completion of a story is framed as violent—when the interrogator completes a book, the subject is electrocuted. In contrast, Ga remains nameless to the end, his story never completed (409–10), but he saves the lives of three people. Following Jacques Derrida, we can say the difference is between “the end of the book and the beginning of writing” (6). The reader is also denied an authentic character, one they can fully figure out. Jun Do is never heard from again after he enters the prison camp. Commander Ga dies, his biography unfinished, replaced with an absurd propaganda broadcast detailing his final moments that will overwrite the public memory of him forever. There will be no more written trace of the citizen Jun Do/Commander Ga, but a sense of a

singular person lingers on. Here is the achievement of *The Orphan Master's Son*; a nameless imposter, he can nonetheless be mistaken for no one else.

Chapter 4: Conclusion and Notes Toward a Concept of Aesthetic Faith

> *I am human, and I think nothing human is alien to me.*
>
> —Terence, *Heauton Timorumenos*

> *Each heart knows its own bitterness, and no one else can share its joy.*
>
> —Proverbs 14:10, NIV

In the previous two chapters, I analyzed *The Sympathizer* and *The Orphan Master's Son*. Both novels are self-aware texts that employ complex strategies of narration and representation. In Chapter 3, I focused at length on the differences between the two in order to illuminate the distinctiveness of *The Orphan Master's Son*, which I felt has been overlooked by literary critics. Here, I want to highlight some of the ways in which these texts are similar. Both are US novels, Pulitzer Prize winners, and deal with issues of human rights. The average American reader would be unfamiliar with their respective settings (the aftermath of the Vietnam War for both Vietnam and the US Vietnamese diaspora community and North Korea under Kim Jong-Il) and can be expected to approach the novels looking for both aesthetic pleasure and to learn about experiences outside their own. The unfamiliar setting creates problems similar to those theorized by scholars and authors of postcolonial (and world) literature. How can these novels, hyper-aware of their readers' gaze and the pull of what the market says is easily consumable, preserve their integrity and autonomy and not commercialize or crassly "use" their characters' experiences? The desire for cultural "authenticity" participates in a logic of presentation that threatens to compartmentalize and

generalize the cultural Other. Indeed, Byung-Chul Han (never one to mince words) titles one of his chapters "the terror of authenticity" (*Expulsion* 19). Identity is a perennial concern of the novel as a genre and becomes central and particularly fraught in the novel of human rights. James Dawes notes that authors seek an elusive balance "between the need to illuminate atrocity and the duty to avoid long-term harm through the pernicious exclusions of generalizations" (112). To that end, both Viet Thanh Nguyen's and Adam Johnson's novels place the search for identity, its truth and authenticity, in the foreground of their narratives. Both protagonists are in positions where they are denied the ability to form a stable identity. In *The Sympathizer*, this inability is because the protagonist is a spy infiltrating the highest levels of his Vietnamese/US opponents. A spy at this level is one who is, by nature, denied self-fashioning because the spy must engage in a combination of simulation and dissimulation so that he can pass unnoticed by appearing authentic while also extracting information and passing it on. This results in the protagonist being a traitor to one cause and too compromised and contaminated by the enemy for the leaders of the other. In *The Orphan Master's Son*, the protagonist is denied an identity because, growing up in an orphanage and in a country that has sought to eliminate the private, he has no opportunity to move through the societal rituals of growth and development. Rather than being able to change or adapt, he must move from role to role to survive. This leads to his stealing the identity of a top-ranking commander. Both protagonists are simultaneously insiders and outsiders. Neither "fits in," and neither is self-identical. Both are simultaneously victims and perpetrators. The reader must find it difficult to choose whether they should only condemn or pity them. The characters in both novels switch roles and identities and cross multiple borders; *The Sympathizer* has scenes in the US and Vietnam, and *The Orphan Master's Son* has scenes in

North Korea, the US, and Japan. Like their identities, there is a porousness and an antagonism between national boundaries. In their endings, escapes occur at the denouements of each novel. Elements of tragedy and hope mark the endings. The protagonists, each essentially nameless by their own account, have their minds and their individuality evacuated—the unnamed narrator through trauma and Ga through electrocution designed to deindividuate its victims (though in his case it is fatal)—but end with an orientation toward community—the boat people and family. These are remarkable similarities and could doubtless sustain further investigation. For our purposes, I will conclude by comparing how the novels utilize confessions.

The confession—in its religious, political, and personal uses—is a means of constituting identity. Foucault calls it one "one of the most highly valued techniques for producing truth" (59). The first epigraph for chapter 2 bears repeating here: "One confesses—or is forced to confess. When it is not spontaneous or dictated by some internal imperative, the confession is wrung from a person by violence or threat; it is driven from its hiding place in the soul, or extracted from the body" (59). While I have detailed how the use of confession differs between *The Sympathizer* and *The Orphan Master's Son*, the confession appears in both as a means of trying to extract as well as produce "the truth" of the protagonist's identit(ies). The confessions are meant to test whether the confessants *are who they are* and (as fiction) produce them as characters. The assumption of the confessions is that the characters are *not* singularities. The unnamed narrator of Nguyen's novel is measured against devotion to Ho Chi Minh's revolution and the protagonist of Johnson's novel is measured against the identity of Commander Ga.[14] In this way, the confessions work to

[14] Of course, both novels' uses of the confession are more complex than just this. *The Sympathizer* has *two* confessors who respectively represent the "religious" and the political motive of confession (and the narrator's

thematize "authenticity," the production of truth, and narrative power. They also stage a sort of "cat-and-mouse" relationship between the confessor and confessant in an analog of how these strategic novels attempt to negotiate the often fraught relationship with the reader. Ultimately, the novels use the confession not to produce a "truth" of identity but to allow a sense of an atopic otherness to emerge from confessions that are contradictory and irreconcilable—the dual [lack of] identity of Jun Do/Commander Ga; the unnamed narrator's metamorphosis from "I" into "we," to offer just a few examples. Rather than acting in accord with a logic of presentation, the novels gesture toward what is unrepresentable and cannot be figured out or pinned down.

Figuring what is unrepresentable, as if in *chiaroscuro*, is how these novels deal with the problem of the public versus the private. The confession straddles a line between the public and the private. The way it is expressed and its function of measuring the private against some external standard recall what Bakhtin writes on the classical forms of autobiography and biography. As Bakhtin explains, these genres draw on an "exterior real-life chronotope in which the representation of one's own or someone else's life is realized either as verbal praise of a civic-political act or as an account of the self" (131). He continues that "under the conditions of this real-life chronotope," the subject's "life is laid bare (that is,

---

background with communism and Catholicism accord with the dual interrogators). The commandant represents the political confession. He is concerned that the unnamed narrator writes the proper communist slogans and propaganda (Nguyen 312–320). The Commissar (Man, an old friend) wants the unnamed narrator to confess to doing "nothing" and allowing a defenseless fellow agent to be brutalized: a "sin," making this a "religious" confession. In the finale of the novel, it is revealed (during a confession involving the two confessors, the confessant, and a cloud of witnesses) that the unnamed narrator had, thanks to a thoughtlessly-written "sentence" moved Man/the Commissar to kill his father (a priest) during an actual religious confession (359). *The Orphan Master's Son* has two *confessants*, one of which is also the confessor. The interrogation of Commander Ga is meant to discover his true identity and how he committed a supposed murder. On the other hand, the actual first-person confession given belongs to the interrogator himself. He, the perpetrator, chooses to give this confession. His is motivated more by the "religious" confession.

As we can see, the roles in the dyadic relationship that constitute a confession—the points on the grid—are stable in neither novel. There is overlap, mixed motivations, and bewilderment. The novels use the modes of confession to produce confusion as much as truth.

made public)"[15] (131). In my analyses and theoretical orientation in the previous chapters, I have taken Stephen Best and Sharon Marcus's "Surface Reading" into account. I have sought to demonstrate that looking at the play on the "surface" of a text can still result in compelling understandings of literature—however, in some ways, "surface reading" is a misnomer. The dichotomous visualizations in discussions of critical method today—looking "at" versus looking "through"—suggest that the literary text is two-dimensional. But novels create worlds through their employment of chronotopes—representations of time and space. Thus, the novel is more properly visualized as having a concave space behind its surface. The surface creates a sense of an interior. There is a zone of permeability between the chronotope of the novel and the chronotope of the real world. We must not "confuse the author-creator of a work with the author as a human being [. . .]. But it is also impermissible to take this categorical boundary line as absolute and impermeable" (Bakhtin 253). To doubt the reliability of a narrator, for example, is not to look beyond the novel, for the very act of doubt engages in accordance with the form and world of the novel. This engagement is a form of *aesthetic faith*.

I will close this thesis by sketching a brief outline toward a concept of aesthetic faith.[16] I draw this concept from Friedrich Heinrich Jacobi's discussion of *Glaube* [*belief* or

---

[15] M. M. Bakhtin sees the classical autobiography and biography as stemming from the encomium: "This idealized form is nothing but an accumulation of all the attributes adhering to a given profession" (136). In this, we see, there is a lack of inwardness. An interesting connection can be made with the stance of Søren Kierkegaard's narrator, Vigilius Haufniensis, that "Greek art culminates in the plastic, which of all things lacks the glance" (107). The Greeks, he says, lacked a fully-developed conception of spirit and the instant's relation to eternity. "Nothing is as swift as a twinkling of the eye, and yet is commensurable with the content of the eternal. [. . .] A glance is therefore a designation of time, but mark well, of time in the fateful conflict when it is touched by eternity" (107). Skipping ahead a few centuries, Byung-Chul Han, quoting Emmanuel Levinas, writes of "the 'countenance' that 'at once gives and conceals the Other.' The 'countenance' stands diametrically opposed to the 'face' that holds no secrets" (*Agony* 16). The glance and the countenance serve to disclose otherness. I analyzed this idea's expression in *The Sympathizer* in Chapter 2.

[16] A more complete discussion of this concept would involve the following: 1) an example of its opposite, *aesthetic bad faith*, which I would plan to do through an analysis of Sigmund Freud's *Dora: An Analysis of a Case of Hysteria*. 2) an analysis of a fascinating passage at the close of Immanuel Kant's "Analytic of the

faith] from his *David Hume on Faith, or Idealism and Realism, a dialogue*. Responding to a critique by Moses Mendelssohn, Jacobi argues that sensible evidence cannot be proved to be trustworthy—things may appear as being outside of us, but that they are not mere appearances and do in fact have an independent external existence cannot be established beyond a doubt. He therefore says one must take their sense-impressions on faith and says that such personages as Thomas Reid and David Hume have used the word in the same manner (Jacobi 266). His dialogue continues on to discussions of the self.

> Strictly speaking I cannot make a representation of it [the substantial form of organic being] at all, for the peculiarity of its being is that *it remains distinct from every sensation and representation*. It is what I properly call "myself," and I have the most perfect conviction of its reality, the most intimate consciousness of it, since it is the very source of my consciousness and the subject of all its alterations. The soul must be able to distinguish itself from itself, *become external to itself*, in order to have a *representation* of itself. Certainly we have the most intimate consciousness of what we call our "life." But who can grasp it in a representation?" (Jacobi 316)

Here Jacobi argues that the self cannot be represented. Once it is represented, it has been externalized and is distinct from itself. As the basis of sensation, consciousness cannot be made sensible. We know what consciousness is like because we experience it and recognize

---

Beautiful" wherein he compares the reaction of a listener based on whether they know a bird's song originates from a bird or is simulated by a human. He writes that this is likely a confusion between the bird and the song, but herein we see the operation of aesthetic faith and its shattering. 3) An engagement with Roland Barthes's important essays on the author, "The Death of the Author" and "From Work to Text." 4) From here, one might begin to connect the concept further. Following from Barthes's death of the author, we might instead posit a "hiddenness of the author," which could be connected to the structure of dreams (the one dreaming is "outside" the dream). 5) Barthes's essay on the death of the author is clearly tied to a theological conception of the author. Here Gianni Vattimo's reinterpretation of the hermeneutic tradition via the concepts of *kénōsis* and *caritas* (and vice versa) could significantly reframe Barthes's approach. Yi-Ping Ong's existentialist poetics of the novel, where the reader and the author must disappear during the reading experience, has already laid the groundwork for this approach.

it as distinct from things in the world. Jacobi's understanding of the self and the impossibility of representing it presage similar observations by Jean-Paul Sartre (*Being and Nothingness* [1943]), Ludwig Wittgenstein (*Philosophical Investigations* [1953]), and Thomas Nagel ("What Is It Like to Be a Bat?" [1974]). Drawing on G. W. Leibniz's concept of the Monad, Jacobi argues that, since "the [element of] indivisibility in a being is what determines its individuality, i.e. it makes the being into an actual whole" (294), therefore:

> Human art cannot produce *individuals*, or any *real whole*, for it can only put things together, *and hence the whole arises from the parts instead of the parts arising from the whole*. Moreover, the unity that it does produce is only an ideal one. It does not lie in the thing produced, but outside it, in the intention and the concept of the artist. The soul of a thing of this sort is an alien soul. (Jacobi 294)

Jacobi here draws a theory of representation and mimesis. The parts in a work of art create an ideal whole. There is a relation between the representation and the intention of the creator (this is not a determinative relation). Suzanne Keen has pointed out that many enthusiasts of literature "are too ready to erase their own contribution, giving all the credit for impact away to the books themselves" (24). We see that the experience and reaction to a text—and the reactive effect of a text—is conditioned within a community of readers. Again, we return to use-value within Wittgensteinian language-games. If, as I argued in the first chapter, novels are able to effect a loosening of concepts, it is equally true that the use of a novel within a community of readers can loosen one's concept *of* a particular novel and reappraise one's reaction to a text. For the purposes of this discussion, what is important to note is the interaction between the real world and the novelistic world. We can connect another observation of Bakhtin's to Keen and Jacobi: "In the completely real-life time-space where

the work resonates, where we find the inscription or the book, we find as well a real person [. . .]. Therefore, we may call this world the world that *creates* the text" (253). From this world, all aspects of the represented world are fashioned.[17]

When representations are taken as the actual, there is misapprehension. From Jacobi, we can understand Han's horror in the face of a society of transparency. "The society of transparency is the society of information. [. . .] [Information] amounts to positivized, operationalized language" (*Transparency* 39). Consciousness, that which is authentically human, cannot be represented. It cannot be positivized or operationalized. When it comes to a representation, one can only say of consciousness that it is not there. Reading Han alongside Jacobi clarifies the former's resistance to transparency—the human in its essential otherness cannot be made transparent.

Han approaches the confession with suspicion, because a "dialogue is not a staging of mutual exposure" (*Beauty* 64). However, we can respond with Bakhtin: "Even had he [the author-creator] created an autobiography or a confession of the most astonishing truthfulness, all the same he, as its creator, remains outside the world he has represented in his work" (256). *The Sympathizer* and *The Orphan Master's Son* use the confession to make just this point. While Bakhtin writes about the author as a way to explain how the novelistic chronotope creates a literary world that is different from the chronotope of the real world, readers take the same approach to characters in a fictional work. We believe (or suspend our disbelief) in the characters because we *believe* in "the intention and the concept of the artist." We may not know the specific intention (nor, as Wimsatt and Beardsley rightly point out, can we flatter ourselves that we have figured out the author or, without supporting evidence, his or her intentions), but we have faith that its origin is human and therefore intelligible in some

[17] See also Roland Barthes's "The Reality Effect."

way. This in no way ignores the social aspect of literature.[18] Henry Louis Gates, Jr.'s 1991 essay, "'Authenticity,' or the Lesson of Little Tree" is useful here.[19]

> Death-of-the-author types cannot come to grips with the fact that a book is a cultural event; authorial identity, mystified or not, can be part of that event. What the ideologues of authenticity cannot quite come to grips with is that fact and fiction have a reciprocal effect on each other. However truthful you set out to be, your autobiography is never unmediated by literary structures of expression. (Gates A1)

Here, Gates points out the flaws on both under-emphasizing and over-emphasizing the author's intentions. Gates's second observation nearly rhymes with Bakhtin's: "However truthful you set out to be, your autobiography is never unmediated by literary structures of expression." Likewise, the supersensible nature of one's own or another's consciousness is never outside of the social, but exists within it and receives its content from it. Yi-Ping Ong demonstrates this in *The Art of Being*, first by removing descriptive passages to show the unintelligibility of the narrative and the characters reactions without them and then by examining the ways in which certain novels represent a character's autonomy by leaving decisions inscrutable or using unfinished works of art to thematize "becoming." These practices work, I argue, to produce aesthetic faith. The readers' experience of the real world,

---

[18] I see my approach as being consonant with Toril Moi's (2009) synthesis of feminist texts and ordinary language philosophy in "'I am not a woman writer': About women, literature and feminist theory today." This article likewise deals with the tension between the social and the individual's internal world. The antinomy between writing "as a woman" and writing from Woolf's "wedge-shaped core of darkness" asks for a resolution via this aesthetic faith—a synthetic approach to social and discursive identity and the supersensible and singular experience of the self. As Moi wraps up in her essay, "A novel or a poem or a play, or a theoretical essay for that matter, is an attempt to make others see something that really matters to the writer. [. . .] In this gesture there is a hope – not certainty – that perhaps others may come to share her vision, if only for a moment." Her final line: "Literature holds out the hope of overcoming scepticism and isolation." See also the quote from Jacques Derrida below.

[19] A fuller treatment would also deal with the connection Henry Louis Gates, Jr. makes with Alan Turing's views on machine intelligence. This would likely push the discussion of authenticity into the realm of *qualia*.

of the sensible intimations of supersensible consciousness, becomes transferred to the characters in the fictional work.

This permeability between the world of the text and the lived world gains salience in regard to the novel and empathy. Aesthetic faith, I suggest, allows the possibility for the two worlds to permeate. In Kant, the aesthetic experience of beauty is due to form's "purposiveness without purpose." In a society wherein the self has become operationalized, there is "no capacity for relationships with others that might be *free of purpose*" (Han *Pyschopolitics* 2). There may be many reasons why one chooses to read a novel, but once one becomes immersed in a novel, it becomes free of purpose. I suggest that the way novels use narrative strategies and both their generic form and specific content to represent consciousness[20] and its imbrication in the social can be a worthwhile hermeneutic endeavor. Both *The Sympathizer* and *The Orphan Master's Son* end by deferring a conclusion. The subject is not "discovered," and there are still questions to be answered. But even though the protagonists elude identity, they do at the end grasp toward *communitas*. Whether or not this amounts to "nothing" or not, surely the hope is that the typically intensely private experience of novel-reading will seep into the sphere of the public. If it does, it is to be hoped the reader is able to empathize not with a class or type of person, but instead to be able to recognize otherness as atopic. To quote Jacques Derrida:

---

[20] There are many approaches one can take within this hermeneutic, and it need not be excessively individualistic. In F. H. Jacobi's *David Hume*, he writes that the *I* and the *Thou* must be present simultaneously for the individual to be conscious (277, 295). G. W. Leibniz writes of the Monad: "Now this connexion or adaptation of all created things to each and of each to all, means that each simple substance has relations which express all the others, and, consequently, that it is a perpetual living mirror of the universe" (prop. 56, see also props. 62, 67, 70–72, and 83 in Leibniz's delightfully strange treatise). More recently, René Girard, Jean-Michel Oughourlian, and Guy Lefort have proposed an "interdividual psychology" (see, for example, Girard's *Things Hidden Since the Foundation of the World* or Oughourlian's *The Genesis of Desire*). Thus, there are many approaches to the self one might take.
A specific example of a literary-philosophical approach that I believe fits within this hermeneutic has been practiced in Ruth Porritt's 2010 article, "Surpassing Derrida's deconstructed self: Virginia Woolf's poetic disarticulation of the self."

> You cannot address the other, speak to the other, without an act of faith, without testimony. What are you doing when you attest to something? You address the other and ask, "believe me." Even if you are lying, even in a perjury, you are addressing the other and asking the other to trust you. This "trust me, I am speaking to you" is of the order of faith, a faith that cannot be reduced to a theoretical statement, to a determinative judgement; *it is the opening of the address to the other*. (Derrida 22, emphasis added)

There is uncertainty in this "trust me," an uncertainty that is not prompted by the "quantified self" of Big Data. The novel as a genre is uniquely able to represent the human in a way that suggests atopic otherness, the uncertain, and *The Sympathizer* and *The Orphan Master's Son* are exemplary in this respect. We have seen how these two works deal with the demands of the human rights novel and the sophisticated literary strategies they use to subvert and surpass a consumerist impulse toward presentation and "authenticity." As it continues in its interminable crisis, the humanities are often asked to justify themselves. In answer, and against an operationalized logic of transparency and the consumable, the poetics of the novel are able to represent their subjects in such a way that they do not merely educate or transmit information, but their aesthetics work to create a pocket of deterritorialization within a non-instrumentalized readerly experience. It is this that both Adam Johnson and Viet Thanh Nguyen's novels do so well.

Works Cited

Bakhtin, M. M. *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*. Edited by Michael Holquist. Translated by Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist. University of Texas Press, 1981.

Barthes, Roland. "The Reality Effect." *The Rustle of Language*. Translated by Richard Howard, University of California Press, 1989, pp. 141–148.

———. "The Death of the Author." *Critical Theory: A Reader for Literary and Cultural Studies*, edited by Robert Dale Parker. Oxford University Press, 2012, pp. 83–87.

———. "From Work to Text." *Critical Theory: A Reader for Literary and Cultural Studies*, edited by Robert Dale Parker. Oxford University Press, 2012, pp. 115–119.

Best, Stephen, and Sharon Marcus. "Surface Reading: An Introduction." *Representations*, Volume 108, Number 1, 2009, pp. 1–21.

Borges, Jorge Luis. *Collected Fictions*. Translated by Andrew Hurley. Penguin, 1998.

Buñuel, Luis, dir. *That Obscure Object of Desire*. 1977. Film.

Chihaya, Sarah. "Slips and Slides." *PMLA*. Volume 133, Number 2, March 2018, pp. 364–370.

Chong, Sylvia Shin Huey. "Vietnam, the Movie: Part Deux." *PMLA*, Volume 133, Number 2, March 2018, pp. 371–377.

Dawes, James. *The Novel of Human Rights*. Harvard University Press, 2018.

Deleuze, Gilles, and Felíx Guattari. *A Thousand Plateaus*. Translated by Brian Massumi. University of Minnesota Press, 1987.

Derrida, Jacques. *Deconstruction in a Nutshell*. Edited with a Commentary by John D. Caputo. Fordham University Press, 1997.

———. *Of Grammatology: Fortieth Anniversary Edition*. Translated by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak. Johns Hopkins University Press, 2016.

Foucault, Michel. *The History of Sexuality, Volume 1: An Introduction*. Translated by Robert Hurley. Vintage, 1978.

Freud, Sigmund. *Dora: An Analysis of a Case of Hysteria*. Collier, 1963.

Gates, Jr., Henry Louis. "'Authenticity,' or the Lesson of Little Tree." *New York Times Book Review*. Nov 24, 1991: Sec 7, p. A1. 1991.

Girard, René. *Things Hidden Since the Foundation of the World*. With Jean-Michel Oughourlian and Guy Lefort. Translated by Stephen Bann and Michael Metteer. Stanford University Press, 1987.

Goyal, Yogita. "Un-American: Refugees and the Vietnam War." *PMLA*, Volume 133, Number 2, March 2018, pp. 378–383.

Han, Byung-Chul. *The Transparency Society*. Translated by Erik Butler. MIT Press, 2015.

———. *Saving Beauty*. Translated by Daniel Steuer. Polity, 2017.

———. *The Scent of Time: A Philosophical Essay on the Art of Lingering*. Translated by Daniel Steuer. Polity, 2017.

———. *The Agony of Eros*. Translated by Erik Butler. MIT Press, 2017.

———. *Psychopolitics: Neoliberalism and New Technologies of Power*. Translated by Erik Butler. Verso, 2017.

———. *The Expulsion of the Other: Society, Perception, and Communication Today*. Translated by Wieland Hoban. Polity, 2018.

Huggan, Graham. *Marketing the Margins*. Routledge, 2001.

Jacobi, Friedrich Heinrich. *David Hume on Faith, or Idealism and Realism, a dialogue*. In *The Main Philosophical Works and the Novel* Allwill. Translated by George di Giovanni. McGill-Queen's University Press, pp. 253–338.

Johnson, Adam. *The Orphan Master's Son*. Random House, 2012.

———. "'The cruelest psychological experiment ever cooked up': Author Adam Johnson on North Korea." Interview with Chico Harlan. *Washington Post*, March 7, 2014. https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/worldviews/wp/2014/03/07/the-cruelest-psychological-experiment-ever-cooked-up-author-adam-johnson-on-north-korea/.

Kant, Immanuel. *Critique of Judgement*. Translated by James Creed Meredith. Oxford World's Classics, 2008.

Keen, Suzanne. "Novel Readers and the Empathetic Angel of Our Nature." *Rethinking Empathy Through Literature*, edited by Meghan Marie Hammond and Sue J. Kim. Routledge, 2014, pp. 21–33.

Kennedy, X. J., Dana Gioia, and Mark Bauerlein. *Handbook of Literary Terms: Literature, Language, Theory*. Pearson, 2005.

Kierkegaard, Søren. *The Concept of Anxiety*. Translated by Alastair Hannay. Liveright/W. W. Norton, 2014.

Latour, Bruno. "Why Has Critique Run out of Steam? From Matters of Fact to Matters of Concern." *Critical Inquiry*, Volume 30, Number 2, 2004, pp. 225–248.

Leibniz, Gottfried Wilhelm. *The Monadology*. Translated by Robert Latta, 1898. https://www.plato-philosophy.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/07/The-Monadology-1714-by-Gottfried-Wilhelm-LEIBNIZ-1646-1716.pdf.

Miller, D. A. *The Novel and the Police*. University of California Press, 1988.

Moi, Toril. 2009. "'I am not a woman writer': About women, literature and feminist theory today." *Eurozine*, June 12, 2009.

Nagel, Thomas. "What Is It Like To Be a Bat?" *The Philosophical Review*, Volume 83, Number 4, Oct 1974, pp. 435–450.

Nessly, William. "Plotting Colonial Independence: Intra-Asian Conflict in the Novels of Richard Kim." *MELUS: Multi-Ethnic Literature of the U.S.*, Volume 43, Number 2, 2018, pp. 53–77.

Nguyen, Viet Thanh. *The Sympathizer*. Grove Press, 2015.

Nussbaum, Martha C. *Poetic Justice: The Literary Imagination and Public Life*. Beacon, 1995.

Ong, Yi-Ping. *The Art of Being: Poetics of the Novel and Existentialist Philosophy*. Harvard, 2018.

Oughourlian, Jean-Michel. *The Genesis of Desire.* Translated by Eugene Webb. Michigan State University Press, 2010.

Porritt, Ruth. "Surpassing Derrida's Deconstructed Self: Virginia Woolf's Poetic Disarticulation of the Self," *Women's Studies*, Volume 21, 1992, Number 3, 323–338.

Prabhu, Anjali. "*The Sympathizer*: A Dialectical Reading." *PMLA*, Volume 133, Number 2, March 2018, pp. 388–395.

Rabelais, François. *Gargantua & Pantagruel*. Translated by J. M. Cohen. Penguin, 1955.

Ragussis, Michael. *Acts of Naming: The Family Plot in Fiction*. Oxford University Press, 1987.

Rody, Caroline. "Between 'I' and 'We': Viet Thanh Nguyen's Interethnic Multitudes." *PMLA*, Volume 133, Number 2, March 2018, pp. 396–405.

Sartre, Jean-Paul. *Being and Nothingness*. Translated by Hazel E. Barnes. Washington Square Press, 1984.

Shevlin, Eleanor F. "Cartographic Refrains and Postcolonial Terrains: Mariama Bâ's Scarlet Song." *MFS Modern Fiction Studies,* Volume 43, Number 4, 1997, pp. 933–962.

Song, Min Hyoung. "Viet Thanh Nguyen and the Scholar-Public Intellectual." *PMLA,* Volume 133, Number 2, March 2018, pp. 406–412.

Tran, Ben. "The Literary Dubbing of Confession." *PMLA,* Volume 133, Number 2, March 2018, pp. 413–419.

Wittgenstein, Ludwig. *Philosophical Investigations.* 4th ed. Translated by G. E. M. Anscombe, P. M. S. Hacker, and Joachim Schulte. Wiley-Blackwell, 2009.

Xiang, Sunny. "The Ethnic Author Represents the Body Count." *PMLA,* Volume 133, Number 2, March 2018, pp. 420–427.